

## WHAT IS A THEATRE LABORATORY?

*By Janne Risum*

In 1905 Stanislavski and Meyerhold opened the first pioneering stage laboratory of this experimental kind.

"But in what form and where were we to realize our dreams? First of all they demanded preparatory laboratory work. For this there was no place in the theatre with its daily performances, its complex duties and its stringent budget. We needed a special institution, which Meyerhold aptly named "theatrical studio". This was neither a full-fledged theatre nor a school for beginners, but a laboratory for the experiments of more or less mature actors." (Stanislavski, *My Life in Art* 1926)

For the rest of their lives both were to continue on their own such a laboratory - or studio - activity, which permits an independent, continuous and systematic experimental work with the means of expression of the actor, uninterrupted by the normal time limit and result orientation of preparing a performance. They considered it to be a historically vital task - and so an absolutely necessary complement to their stage productions - in this way to explore the basics of the various traditions of acting and to develop modern ways of acting from the most essential devices of the art of the actor. Through their apprentices this laboratory approach has been passed on for instance from Vakhtangov to Grotowski and Barba, or by those pupils of Stanislavski who took their own version of it to the USA. In France Copeau was a pioneer. In 1916 Craig, Copeau and Stanislavski even planned to start an international studio cooperation, but had to drop it due to the subsequent radical changes in Russia. After the Second World War the laboratory approach to theatre work has grown to become a trendsetting innovation with countless offsprings all over the globe, and with such other major European innovators as Decroux, Brook, Mnouchkine, or Kantor.

The CTLS studies the aspects of this development. However it has so many simultaneous, paradoxical, and widely ramified aspects, that even though some family patterns are evident, it would be ridiculously reductive to look for a simple genealogical tree. The danger the other way round is not to be able to see the wood for the trees. Therefore the CTLS starts by posing a strictly analytical question: what is the technical artistic meaning of the term laboratory, and does a theatre laboratory

tradition exist which could be defined objectively by a category of historiography? That is, to which degree do theatres using the laboratory approach or defining themselves as laboratories actually share activities or values?

One pertinent question is that of context. Thus the policy of Stalin is the immediate context, when Stanislavski announces in 1935:

"Our main task is to create a theatre laboratory, a theatre of great masters, a theatre of model devices of the actor's mastery. Such a theatre must serve as the pinnacle, to which all other theatres aspire. We must make the highest demands on such a theatre and give it the greatest resources. But the laws of eminent mastery, the laws of profound realistic art, are not the privilege of high-ranking theatres, on the contrary, all amateur circles, young workers' theatres, and studios can and must study them." ("October and the Theatre", *Sovetskij teatr* 10/1935).

To throw some light on all this the CTLS will host an international symposium with invited speakers, *Why a Theatre Laboratory? Risks and anomalies in Europe 1898-1999*. We have chosen to look at the activities of some central theatre innovators from this angle and to do so in an international research perspective. We have so invited a group of theatre scholars from different countries to speak, who are specialists in the subjects which they are going to examine. Together, the speakers will thus throw light from many sides on a series of central and in many ways related aspects of the question. We might of course have invited many more qualified scholars, not to speak of theatre practitioners with long experience in the field of what they consider to be theatre laboratory work, also in many countries. However this is beyond our capacity on this one occasion.

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