

VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD

By Béatrice Picon-Vallin



Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) is a leading figure and one of the greatest directors of the 20th century. Rejecting the theatre of his time, and confronted by Stanislavski who opened the way to re-materialising the stage by focusing on a realist environment and psychology, Meyerhold puts into practice his dematerialisation which privileges the invisible and the world of dreams, while at the same time opening up onto a political and thought-provoking theatre. He takes part in some of the most radical theatre adventures: symbolism, constructivism and the Russian revolution. Executed in 1940, this communist artist who, according to Vakhtangov, “provided the roots for the theatre of the future”, disappears from the Soviet and European scenes.

From the 1970's this indefatigable and daring experimentalist is progressively restored to his rightful place. His works, abounding with fertile contradictions seem to be split by the schism that the 1917 revolution represented, but their coherence is linked to a very high esteem for the art of theatre and to the will to elaborate a complex and poetic scenic language.

From Realism to Symbolism

Born in 1874 in Penza into a Russian German family and endowed with a solid musical education (he played violin) Meyerhold, who had take part in amateur theatre in his home province, abandoned his law studies for the theatre. He was awarded a place at the school of the Moscow Philharmonic Society in 1895, were he was a student of Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, who in 1898, brought him into the Art Theatre

he had just founded with Konstantin Stanislavski. A noteworthy character, he played such parts as Johannes (*Lonely Souls* by Hauptmann), Malvolio (*Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare) and Treplev (*The Seagull* by Tchekhov). He soon distanced himself, both on a political level, as he was close to the revolution intelligentsia he had frequented since Penza, as well as on an aesthetic level because he was critical of the painstaking reproduction of reality as practised by Stanislavski.

In 1902, Meyerhold left the Art Theatre and founded the Brotherhood of New Drama in the provinces. Here he produced about 160 plays, from Tchekhov to Maeterlinck, via Przybyszewski, Ibsen and Wedekind. He was not only an actor, but also translator, teacher and director. After having used the experience acquired with Stanislavski, he moved on to focus on the plastic and rhythmical elements as well as on the suggestive function of scenic imagery.

In 1905 he was called back by Stanislavski who seemed to have exhausted the possibilities of naturalism when he became aware in 1904, of the failure of his method to stage Maeterlinck. Meyerhold opened with him a Theatre-Studio and together with the young painters, Sapunov and Soudeikin, he hopes to take up the gauntlet of symbolist dramaturgy. The pictorial order commands the direction, and the actors have to express their inner dialogue through the plastics of their movements and the rhythm of a slow and precisely articulated diction. But *The Death of Tintagiles* conceived in this way did not satisfy Stanislavski, giving rise to another break-up between the two researchers which coincided with the first Russian revolution.

It was at the Vera Komissarjevskaja's theatre, in Petersburg, that Meyerhold pursued, in 1906-1907, this radical experimentation on the scenic space and the acting inspired by Fuchs' and Craig's books, and following in the footsteps of the poet Briusov who, since 1902, had talked of "useless truth" referring to the imitation of real life on stage. The stage becomes an Impressionist painting, a bas relief, a circular space or an empty place structured only through lighting effects. The mise-en-scène is inspired by Memling or Goya (Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice* in 1906, Andreyev's *The Human Life* in 1907). With Blok's *The Fairground Booth* (1906), Meyerhold conceived a specific theatre space, that of the mountebank's stage and masks. Originally linked to symbolist dramaturgy, this research into "convention" became the method of a creator in search



of the laws of a “theatrical theatre” implying the activity of the spectator who is regarded as a “fourth creator”.

A Multidirectional Activity

Dismissed by Kommissarjevskaia who was disappointed by her acting results Meyerhold was appointed to the Imperial Theatres (1908-1918). Considered the “ideal actor” by Eisenstein who was his student in 1922, it was there that he interpreted his last role, although he continued to satisfy his desire to act by using demonstration to direct his actors. With abundant resources at hand, he created some fabulous productions with the stage designer Alexander Golovin, his alter ego. His “traditionalist theatre” method is neither nostalgic nor restorative: for Molière's *Don Juan* (1910) he studies, re-interprets, and synthesises the style of a period and of an author with the help of elements taken from the great theatre traditions, both Italian and oriental: proscenium, masks and *kurombo* (the visible stage hand in Kabuki). In *Tristan and Isolde* (1909) he reflected upon the notion of the total Work of Art while reading Appia and all of Wagner. He then directed one of the first modern operas in which the singer/dancer developed a plastic pantomime in relation to the music. Gluck's *Orpheus* (1911) marks the realisation of a harmonious union of all the arts. This is a period of multidirectional activity for Meyerhold. Research on classical dramatic and lyrical genres is paralleled by an interest in minor genres - circus, cabaret (*Columbine's Scarf*, a pantomime by Schnitzler, 1910) - or new genres like the cinema *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1915, *A Strong Man*, 1916. Together with Bakst and Fokine, he directed *Pisanelle* by D'Annunzio at the Chatelet Theatre in Paris (1913).

The Grotesque

Meanwhile, under the Hoffmannian pseudonym “Doctor Dapertutto” Meyerhold opened his own Studio (1913-1917). Unlike Stanislavski, who had been focusing on affective memory since 1912, he plunged his students into the heart of theatre's memory (theoretical and practical research on the commedia dell'arte) and strived towards polyvalent actors who were both jugglers and musicians. This work was described in his Studio's magazine whose title derived from Gozzi's tale *The Love of Three Oranges*, published in one of its issues. In the third part of his book *About Theatre* (1913), Meyerhold defended “fairground theatre” and put forward the concept of the *grotesque*: synthetic theatricality based on contrast, dissonance, switches

from the familiar to the strange in order to restructure the relationships between all the arts involved on the stage, and thus engender a new way of looking at daily life. The actor builds for himself an artificial body, organised in time and space by thought as well as plastic and musical culture. “The art of theatre rediscovers the art of form which it had lost” stated Meyerhold, who believed, like Pushkin, that its essence excluded verisimilitude.

October in the Theatre

The revolution allowed him to engage with new audiences whose presence alone could transform the theatre. After the magnificent *Masquerade* by Lermontov (1917), a performance which was the fruit of years of hard work, Meyerhold left the Imperial Theatres, joined the Communist Party, and directed *Mystery-Bouffe* by Mayakovsky (1918). At the head of the Direction of the theatres of Petrograd and later of Moscow, he introduced the programme “October in the Theatre”: the negation of an apolitical attitude and of psychological realism, the support of self-active companies, measures to integrate workers into the theatre, and the Mayakovskian aesthetic of the stage as a “magnifying glass”. Demoted for wanting to declare “civil war” on the theatre, Meyerhold resigned and it was at the R S F S R Theatre No. 1 that he implemented the principles of “October in the Theatre” with manifesto-performances. His pre-revolutionary decorativism was purified through the asceticism of a theatre-forum (*The Dawn*, adapted from Verhaeren, 1920), of the workshop and circus (*Mystery-Bouffe*, second version, 1921). Meyerhold allied himself with the poetic and plastic avant-garde, was close to the LEF theories (Left Front of Art), advocated the removal of the curtain and painted decors, the precise organisation of the space, the use of raw materials and committed actors who could be a theatre worker and tribune. For Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) there was an “acting workbench” - a scenic machine-tool - a constructivist non-figurative device, set in the middle of a bare stage. It was made up of platforms, steps, ramps and wheels. Here the actors in their overalls demonstrated their “biomechanical” training which was evocative of the ideologies of the time (productivism and Taylorism), as well as of the traditional roots of a theatre of movement. The aims were mastery of rhythm and balance, awareness of the mechanics of the body, decomposition of each movement into the components intention-action-reaction, (according to Pavlov's reflex theories) and a constant relationship with the partner. In the image of a Utopian new human being, efficient and organised, the actor was also the advocate or the attorney of his character. In this

acting system, all psychological states are conditioned by physiological processes and physical constructions according to William James' theories. The text was submitted to a re-writing, cut up in episodes which re-actualised and gave weight to its arguments (*The Earth in Turmoil* adapted from *La Nuit* by Martinet, 1923). The stage underwent a "cinification" itself with *The Forest* (1924) an adaptation of Ostrovski's text in which Meyerhold directed his actors towards a model of Chaplinesque acting. The same was the case with *D.E. (Give us Europe!)* by Erenburg and *The Tunnel* by Kellermann, (1924) with its and rapid movement of rolling panels which constitute the dynamic set.

Towards Musical Realism

After the huge success of *The Warrant* by the young Nikolai Erdman (1925), came Meyerhold's work of art: *The Government Inspector* adapted from Gogol (1926). In this fifteen-episode adaptation, "musical realism" was refined into a complex scenic score, requiring very skilled actors, for which the laboratory-performance, *Bubus, the Teacher* by Faiko (1925), had established the technical basis. The music became a "co-construction" of the performance. Meyerhold collaborated with the great composers of his period: Gnessin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev. After having banished painting from the stage, Meyerhold could reintroduce its active principle through a *mise-en-scène* based on "scenic composition". He named himself "author of the performance", but it was without altering the text that he directed Mayakovsky's *The Bed Bug* and *The Bath House*. (1929-1930). In 1930, the Gos TIM (Meyerhold's State Theatre) went on tour to Germany and Paris.

In the nineteen thirties, with the rise of Stalinism, Meyerhold witnessed his authors being persecuted (Erdman, Tretyakov). He explored in depth the polyphonic musical structure of the performance (*The Lady of the Camellias* by Dumas junior, 1934 and *The Queen of Spades*, opera by Tchaikovski, 1935). In 1936, he was one of the targets of the campaign against formalism. He defended himself publicly, but to no avail. Accused of being a "foreign theatre", in a country where Socialist Realism was triumphant, the Gos TIM was closed in 1938. Stanislavski welcomed his former student into his Opera Studio, but his death deprived Meyerhold of all protection. Arrested in 1939, he was shot on 2nd February 1940 in Moscow as a spy and a Trotskyist. His aesthetic rehabilitation was slow and the conditions of his death were only known in 1988.

Meyerhold was attuned to the conflicts of a troubled era. He gave them shape in a non-mimetic theatrical language, by working directly on scenic material in

which words are only one element. Each sign possesses multiple facets which mirror and focus the complex stage relationships between literature, music, painting, movement, vocal art, and cinema. Whilst imposing the seal of his personal view, where the theme of destiny which dominated the nineteen-tens was followed by the tragi-comedy of imposture, Meyerhold sought a specific style for each author he directed.

In the beginning he was open to European plays that he introduced into Russia, then later his repertoire privileged national dramaturgy, reinterpreted according to a “fantastic realism”. Through the theatrical treatment he gave to classical texts, he contributed to the emergence of a new Soviet dramaturgy. His theatre does not seek to be a reflection of life, but to take part in its transformation. It is founded on the associative interaction between the performance and the audience. If Stanislavski represents the paternal founding figure of modern theatre, Meyerhold reinvents the artist, the inventor, and the revolutionary. His work is intimately linked to the Utopian adventure of 1917, embodying its foreboding, elation and disenchantment. We have as yet to uncover all its treasures.

Translation: Claire Carre
