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VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD: HIS THEORY OF BIOMECHANICS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold can be numbered among the theatrical innovators of the early decades of the twentieth century. He revolted against the so-called *new naturalism* in theatrical art. Consequently, he experimented with new forms, styles and techniques which he considered indigenous to a theatre of *presentation* rather than *representation*; to one of *theatricality* rather than *illusion*. The results of his experimentation helped to create what has been termed the "new movement," characterized by the forms and styles of constructivism, expressionism and surrealism.

Meyerhold's influence upon the development of this new movement in theatre involved his constant search for style and unity in theatrical production. Unquestionably, Meyerhold was a true experimentor; with each production he totally redefined his concepts of theatre, in an effort to find the perfect style and the appropriate mode of expression for his theatrical ideas. During his career (from 1897 to 1939) there appeared two common elements upon which he based much of his experimentation and which provided his most noteworthy contributions to the new theatre movement. These elements were constructivism and biomechanics. It is this latter concept which forms the basis of this

study.

This paper intends to describe Meyerhold's theory of biomechanics and, subsequently, to analyze any apparent comparative influences between that theory and his concept of constructivism. Superficially the two concepts may seem unrelated; constructivism involves a scenic style of production, and biomechanics, a style of acting. The hypothesis here is that Meyerhold utilised the elements of constructivism as he evolved his biomechanical theory of acting.

Organisation

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The period under investigation is from 1915 to 1930, but since the study is primarily descriptive in nature, chronological reporting has not been attempted except when important or necessary.

Meyerhold's relationship to contemporaneous and historical thought is described in Chapter One. The extent to which contemporaneous and historical concepts influenced his theories of biomechanics and constructivism is limited only to that which he himself admitted or to that which can be firmly substantiated. Among the contemporaneous influences upon his theories were the political and industrial revolutions of Russia after the turn of the century, with the new interest in the collective mass and the glorification of the machine and the tools of technology; the scientific experiments of Ivan Pavlov dealing with reflex psychology; and the symbolist movement in the fine arts. Contemporary theatrical theories also influenced Meyerhold. Edward Gordon Craig's theory of the

actor as an "Über-marionette," Adolphe Appia's designs for stylized, plastic stage settings and Max Reinhart's interest in a classical form of theatre affected the theatrical theories of Meyerhold. The futurist, cubist, and constructivist movement in the arts provided an immediate stimulus for the development of biomechanics and constructivism. The direct historical influences upon Meyerhold's theories include the Classical theatre, the Commedia dell'Arte and the Oriental theatre.

Meyerhold's theories of constructivism and biomechanics, as they relate to the art of theatre, are discussed separately in Chapter Two. Also described is the practical application of these theories to his rehearsals and productions. The form which these theoretical concepts actually took upon the stage, the "acrobatic" acting in, around, through and upon the multi-leveled constructivistic settings, is described, primarily from first-hand accounts of those who witnessed or took part in the performances.

In Chapter Three the comparative analysis is drawn between Meyerhold's concepts of constructivism and biomechanics. Although he borrowed freely from his contemporaries and from the historical theatre to bring constructivism and biomechanics onto the Russian stage, he constantly sought for unity and harmony in the various constituents of theatrical production. There exist, therefore, many parallels and extensions between Meyerhold's theories of constructivism and biomechanics. The relationship between these two concepts forms the subject matter of this chapter.

Chapter Four contains the conclusions drawn from this study. That Meyerhold drew from sources other than his theory of constructivism in formulating his biomechanical acting style is evident. An analysis of the comparative influences between these two theories indicates, however, that Meyerhold probably utilized the elements of constructivism as he evolved his theory of biomechanics. Rather than terming Meyerhold a "constructivist," perhaps he should be considered during this period more as a "structuralist," which might encompass a broader view of his concepts of theatrical presentation, not the least of which was biomechanics.

A glossary containing definitions and descriptions of terms used throughout this study is located in the Appendix. Only those definitions which either need clarification, require a point of view, or which are necessary to the understanding of the study have been included. Pictorial evidence illustrating Meyerhold's use of biomechanics and constructivism is also found here.

Sources

The published writings, interviews and correspondence of Meyerhold are invaluable sources of reference. Of equal importance are the writings of those who worked with him in the Russian theatre and of those who came from Europe and America at this time to study the activities of the Russian stage. Alexander Bakshy, Huntly Carter, Norris Houghton, Nikolai Gorchakov and Marc Slonim are among these notables who gained first-hand knowledge of Meyerhold's activities and wrote extensively

about his theatrical ventures. The most significant writings of Mr. Bakshy provide good source material for uncovering Meyerhold's early stages of development. His main contribution, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage, was written prior to Meyerhold's development of constructivism and biomechanics, however, and some of his conclusions "are often conjectural and open to the charge of being interpreted in a too subjective manner,"[1] as he himself admits. Huntly Carter provided the first comprehensive post-Revolutionary view of the Russian theatre through his book, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia, published in England in 1923. He later published The New Spirit in the European Theatre and The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre, 1917-28. Although some of his material tends to be repetitive and the first book appears to have been hastily written and published,[2] Mr. Carter's research appears to be generally thorough and accurate. He made several trips to the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1928 and observed Meyerhold's work during most of his development of constructivism and biomechanics. Norris Houghton spent six months in Moscow attending the rehearsals of the well-known theatre companies in 1935. In Moscow Rehearsals he gives a broad sketch of the Russian theatre which is vividly detailed and informative. In dealing with Meyerhold's theatre, his greatest contribution is in de-

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[1]Alexander Bakshy, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage (London: Cecil Palmer and Hayward, 1916), p. xix.

[2]The book contains an unusual number of errors, incorrect spellings and misprints.

scribing the rehearsal situation, the actor-director relationship and the training of actors. Nikolai Gorchakov observed Meyerhold's work when a student of Vakhtangov after the Revolution and a student of Stanislavski during the 1920's and 1930's. Although his book The Theater in Soviet Russia does not conceal his biases or his violent outrage against the communism of the late 1930's, it gives an inside view into Meyerhold's career and makes use of many rare, well-documented sources. Marc Slonim, born and educated in Russia during the time of Meyerhold's career, may be one of the most authoritative critics of Russian literature writing today. Russian Theater From the Empire to the Soviets, a product of four years of research, gives a comprehensive, highly objective, well-documented view of the Russian theatre. His book is particularly useful in describing Meyerhold's production style. Meyerhold has written two books, On the Theatre (1913) and Reconstruction of the Theatre (1930), in addition to numerous essays, lectures and correspondence which have been published in Russia. Portions of these books and articles have been translated and published in English and are found in the Tulane Drama Review, The Drama Magazine, and Cole and Chinoy's Directors on Directing. Other valuable sources are P.A. Markov's The Soviet Theatre and "The Actor and the Revolution," which give an account of the Russian theatre by one of its leading practitioners; the article, "Meyerhold at Work" in Theatre Guild Magazine, written by Herbert J. Biberman, a former pupil of Meyerhold's; Joseph Macleod's The New Soviet Theatre, which gives an account of the Russian stage during the late 1930's; Leo Wiener's The Contemporary Drama of

Russia; John Martin's article, "How Meyerhold Trains His Actors"; and Ben W. Brown's book, Theatre at the Left.

There are many notable sources which discuss theatrical constructivism, too numerous to be mentioned here. Sheldon Cheney provides excellent material on this subject.

In addition to the published material, three unpublished theses concerning Meyerhold were used, primarily for securing further sources of information on the subject.[3]

A great deal of duplication in material was found in the many sources consulted. Where contradictions, differences of opinion or discrepancies occur, every effort will be made to extract a composite of information.

Limitations

This study will be limited by its subject matter. As a regisseur, Meyerhold was a "man of the theatre," in complete command of all his elements of theatrical production. Constructivism and biomechanics provided a foundation upon which he built many of his productions.

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[3]Jon T. Powell, "The Major Aspects of the Directorial Philosophy of V.E. Meyerhold" (unpublished Master of Science thesis, Department of Speech, University of Oregon, 1956), also helped in establishing the relationship between Meyerhold and other contemporary innovators in theatre. Caroline Louise Shields Rojo, "V.E. Meyerhold's Early Theories on Theatre and Directing, 1900-1917" (unpublished Master of Arts thesis, Department of Theatre and Speech, Tulane University, 1960), deals with Meyerhold's career prior to his development of constructivism and biomechanics. Ross Cirrincione, "Vsevolod Meyerhold and His Theory of Constructivism" (unpublished Master of Arts thesis, School of Arts and Sciences, The Catholic University of America, 1964), treats the origin and development of Meyerhold's scenic constructivism.

The elements of production studied here are described only as they directly relate to this foundation. Meyerhold's use of musical structure in his productions or his ideas concerning costuming, for example, could provide, in themselves, other bases for research.

Such a study is further limited in dealing with only a part, some fifteen years, of Meyerhold's career. Little or no mention will be made about his early years at the Moscow Art Theatre, his artistic disagreements with Stanislavsky, his venture into symbolism and short-lived partnership with Vera Komisarjevskaya; nor is there discussion of his latter years filled with political troubles, which culminated in the charges brought against him and his mysterious disappearance.[4] His

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[4]Meyerhold joined the dramatic section of the Moscow Philharmonic in 1896 under Nemirovich Danchenko. He served as an actor in the Moscow Art Theatre from the time of its formation in 1898 until 1902. Dissatisfied with the structure, management, and lack of artistic freedom under Stanislavsky, he favored a more symbolic approach to theatrical production. He and ten other dissatisfied actors left the company and toured the southern Russian provinces until 1905. In 1903 he spent a year in Italy in which he was introduced to the old Commedia dell'Arte techniques. During this period he realized in part the aims of the "conditional," symbolic theatre. In 1905 he was invited back to the Moscow Art Theatre to be in charge of its Theatre Studio, where he experimented with symbolic acting and staging. The Studio was closed the same year, due in part to artistic differences between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky. In 1906 he formed a new acting company and began a mystical, religious approach to his productions. Later that year he formed a partnership with the actress Vera Komisarjevskaya, and directed productions at her theatre in St. Petersburg. Here he developed marionette-like acting techniques and statuesque staging. He also traveled to Berlin at this time and was influenced by Max Reinhart's productions. In 1907 he was discharged because of his unusual staging ideas and his manner of direction. From 1909 to 1917 he served as a director in the two Imperial theatres in St. Petersburg, the Marinsky and the Alexandrinsky. Here he used such elements of the Greek and Commedia dell'Arte theatres as the mask, improvisation, pantomime and the grotesque, showed an influence from the Oriental theatre in his

introduction of constructivism to the Russian stage takes place between 1915 and 1920, closely coinciding with the development of biomechanics. From this point the present study observes Meyerhold's career until the early 1930's, when he began to abandon constructivism and biomechanics for political reasons.[5]

Other limitations are that the writer is not familiar with the Russian language. Also, some source material tends to suggest bias regarding Meyerhold's innovations. Theodore Komisarjevsky, the brother of Vera Komisarjevskaya, who worked with Meyerhold at his sister's theatre, for example, wrote that he

possessed no real ideas of his own about "new" productions. He was

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staging techniques, revitalized the Russian opera, made the actor central in importance, operated a studio theatre and a cabaret theatre, published a theatre magazine and formulated the bases for his later theories of constructivism and biomechanics. During the 1930's the Communist Party began to adopt "socialist realism" as the official Soviet style of presentation and to condemn "formalism" in art. Meyerhold attempted some reconciliation with this ambiguous style, returning to a more realistic and symbolic style of staging. In 1937 he was branded "the father of formalism" on the Russian stage and his theatre was closed. Stanislavsky invited him to work in the Studio Theatre of the Moscow Art Theatre and Communist officials began relenting in their attacks upon him. In June of 1939 he was invited to speak at the All-Union Convention of theatre directors and was expected to recant his mistakes. He delivered a stirring speech in which he rejected the silly accusations made against him, defended his right to experiment, and rejected socialist realism as "frightful and pitiful." Juri Jelagin, Taming of the Arts (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1951), contains an interesting account of this speech. Three days later he was arrested and disappeared, presumably to a Siberian labor camp, and was never heard from again. His actress wife, Zinaida Raikh, was found brutally murdered in her apartment soon after his arrest. The new, modern theatre which was planned for Meyerhold during the early 1930's was never built.

[5]See footnote above.

> merely very adept at putting other people's theories into practice, and as he was a temperamental man and a good talker he was able to rouse enthusiasm in his collaborators and even make them supply him generously with their ideas.[6]

Mr. Komisarjevsky's bias regarding Meyerhold is apparent. He continued:

> What he did, and still does, is merely to adapt each play to some trick of production or to some idea of a stylised painted or architectural decor or constructions . . .[7]

An irate American theatre critic visiting Russia in 1928 said:

> The fourth night the much overrated Meyerhold (whose direction resembles an old movie projected at ten times its normal speed) presented his staccato thespians in a miserable thing called Woe to Wit.[8]

Following a conspicuous twenty-year absence of Meyerhold's name appearing in Soviet theatre writings, V. Komissarzhevsky wrote in 1959:

> However, in his creative search Meyerhold was guilty of many grave and dangerous errors. His urge to present a play in his very own original way led frequently to some highly gifted, though controversial, productions, such as that of Ostrovsky's Forest and Gogol's The Inspector-General, in which he gave an exceedingly free interpretation of these classical Russian masterpieces. All too frequently the sparkle of the producer's touch, his passion for the spectacular, and the actor's outward plastic expression overshadowed the veracity of the human character portrayed by the playwright. But alongside formalistic errors and delusions, Meyerhold's performances were imbued with the realistic poetry of his unconventional theatre.[9]

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[6]Theodore Komisarjevsky, Myself and the Theatre (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1930), p. 75.

[7]Ibid., p. 79-80.

[8]Hirschfeld, "Dramatic Russia," Stage, (May, 1937), p. 65.

[9]V. Komissarzhevsky, Moscow Theatres, trans. Vic Schneierson and W. Perelman (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), pp. 39-40.

Other indications of bias may be cited but have been merely noted and considered by the writer. For example, P.A. Markov's book, The Soviet Theatre, although a good source of information, was written as the result of a request made by its publishers to prominent Soviet officials that they prepare a book describing and explaining the Soviet system and method of theatrical art.[10]

The Value of This Study

The writer hopes that a clearer understanding of Meyerhold's artistic aims and endeavors in reference to biomechanics and constructivism will be realized as a result of this study. The understanding of these theories seem to provide a link with the architectural staging techniques of the new stagecraft and the avant garde theatre of today.

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[10]Victor Gollancz, "Publisher's Advertisement," The Soviet Theatre, P.A. Markov (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), p. 3.

CHAPTER I

MEYERHOLD'S RELATIONSHIP TO CONTEMPORANEOUS AND HISTORICAL THOUGHT

Meyerhold fought conservatism in theatrical art after leaving the Moscow Art Theatre. Then, when the Bolshevik Revolution succeeded, he wholeheartedly embraced the doctrine of socialism and became a leader in developing the post-Revolutionary Soviet theatre.

The new government wished to find methods of reaching the mass of people, of educating them in the principles of socialism. Meyerhold provided a venue through his "October Theatre." This organization was in part the result of a government order which called for all theatres to fight any non-political or counter-revolutionary tendencies in bourgeois art. Under Meyerhold's command the country was divided into "theatrical districts," into which "storm trooper" theatre companies were sent:

> . . . their function was to take the field with merciless energy and destructive fury against the old theatre, quite in the spirit of the "militant communism" of the period. It was they who, in their contempt for all artistic impulses, developments, and nuances, replaced the old repertory by unadorned propagandist plays. The stage was used by them as a forum for political fighting speeches, or for mocking at the bourgeois opponent. Meyerhold tried to prove that the function of the theatre as a means of political agitation was in no way unnatural or new. Richard Wagner had made a similar attempt in his early days, and the French theatre, at the end of the eighteenth century, was transformed into a pulpit for preaching the

> new gospel, and ceased to be the home of art. What at that time could not be communicated to the public by means of books, polemical writings, and journals, was put upon the stage, so as to be certain of making the strongest possible impression.[1]

The Revolution gave Meyerhold a new outlook on the theatre. It apparently reaffirmed many of his theoretical ideas. He expressed a renewed interest in the collective mass for which his plays were presented when he said:

> The purpose of the theater is not to show a completed art product but much more to make the audience participants in the action. The fluid should not flow only from stage to public, but should also flow in the other direction.[2]

This interest in reaching the audience and making it an essential part of the production stimulated his desire for producing a popular, spectacular entertainment. These ideas separated his theatre from the Moscow Art Theatre.

> In this new theatre for the new masses, let us turn away from all that the theatre of the old regime offered us, said Meierhold. The Moscow Art Theatre asked its bourgeois audiences to forget that they were in a theatre and to imagine that they were living through the experiences with the artists. We ask you to remember always that you are in a theatre. Since we don't for a moment imagine that we are living through these experiences which we depict on the stage, there's no reason for you to imagine it either. See: this is the back brick wall of the stage; this is the way we change our scenery--for this is only scenery, don't think for a moment it's real. We have thrown away our curtain especially so that you may see that, and so that we may feel that you are close to us--no barriers here. We actors are not extraordinary beings apart, we are people like yourselves. We dress as you are dressed. We are just as concerned

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[1] Rene Fülöp-Miller, The Mind and Face of Bolshevism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 164.

[2] Thomas H. Dickinson, The Theater in a Changing Europe (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937), p. 6

> as you are in what is going on outside this building. When we hear any fresh news from Sahara or Odessa, we'll let you know. Now let us get on with the play, for we have some exciting things to tell you. We exist, you know, only to talk to you and to help you face this new life we share together. And by the way, that is not sunlight that floods our stage; you know as well as we do that it is night outside and that the light is only electric. Therefore you see? This is where it comes from. There's no point in hiding it and pretending, is there?[3]

Through this bold honesty with the audience is seen the functional use of the theatre and the actors which is characteristic in constructivism and biomechanics. Huntly Carter pointed to this influence from the functional, propagandistic theatre:

> The concept of a functional theatre dedicated to social service and used to assist in solving the problems dictated by collective necessities stimulated two formative tendencies, Construction and Bio-mechanics, or methods of socialising the setting and the actor, and uniting the two.[4]

Besides the functional and propagandistic values of the theatre, Meyerhold also recognized its entertainment value. As Joseph Macleod points out, he thought that proletarian rule meant proletarian life: which, in turn, meant proletarian entertainment in the theatre.[5] The new mass audience gave Meyerhold free license to adapt the entertainments of the masses to the theatre. Elements from the circus and the music hall could be seen in his biomechanical approach to acting.

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[3]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 90-91.

[4]Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28) (London: Brentano's Ltd., 1929), p. 67.

[5]Joseph Macleod, The New Soviet Theatre (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1943), p. 98.

When biomechanics and constructivism became firmly entrenched in his approach to production, the influence of the Revolution could be seen in his company. The actor became an expression of the "mass man," and he became the most important tool for the expression of the aims and ideals of the new Russia. Hallie Flanagan found these ideas inherent in the organization of the company:

> To spend day after day in Meierhold's theatre watching rehearsals and productions is to come closer to the truth about Communism than one can come through reading many books. For here is a group living, working, thinking together, not individualistically, but for the good of the State.[6]

The industrial revolution brought about dynamic changes in the Russian arts. It was a significant influence in the development of constructivism and biomechanics. A glorification of the machine as the supreme creation and saviour of man, an increased interest in technology and mass production, and a renaissance in the various fields of science were characteristic of the industrial revolution. How did all this affect Meyerhold's theory of constructivism?

> He rightly saw that erections of wood, and iron, and steel express the spirit of the mechanical age upon which the world has definitely entered. Machines, technology and action are the outward manifestations of the spirit. He realised that the common folk could be assisted by machines to become healthful, vigorous, and to understand and enjoy much of the liberation that had come to them. And he concluded that these new objects arising out of the new conception of social life were the very things to influence human beings. Hence his pre-occupation with machine and industrial-like structures which should serve to intensify and complete the dynamic

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[6]Hallie Flanagan, Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre (New York: Conard-McCann, Inc., 1928), p. 114.

intention of each production.[7]

The geometric principles upon which he based his constructivism revealed the machine as a symbol of the new age of mechanical and scientific industrialism. He sought unity or harmony in the manner of the engineer, that is, by the application of the laws of economy and by mathematical calculation.[8] He brought the tools of technology into the theatre (wood, glass, brick, steel) and used them as structural symbols of the modern age. Scenically he glorified the functional and the practical.

> A tractor, a motor-cycle, typewriters and telephones, --all the symbols and instruments of mechanized industry--are the familiar properties. If, as he sometimes does, Meyerhold uses an old-fashioned piece, it is simply to caricature the society in which its protagonists live.[9]

The mechanized symbols of the industrial revolution, then, were his scenic properties. But Meyerhold also regarded the actor as a mechanized symbol of the Machine Age. John Gassner wrote:

> "Bio-mechanics" extended the concept of the machine to the actor; he was regarded as a machine composed of many efficient parts. Physical vigor, rather than individuality and inner sensitivity, was stressed in his performance.[10]

His biomechanically-trained actors proudly served as "cogs in a machine-

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[7]Carter, op. cit., p. 52.

[8]Macleod, op. cit., p. 69.

[9]Babette Deutsch, "The Russian Theatre of Today," Theatre Arts Monthly, IX (July, 1925), pp. 538-39.

[10]John Gassner, Producing the Play (rev. ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), p. 86n.

world that was to save them."[11] The precision and efficiency upon which this acting style was based can be likened to that of a carefully-tuned machine.

This machine-like precision and efficiency in biomechanics is due partly to the influence of Taylorism in Russia. (See Glossary of Terms). As a product of the Machine Age, Taylorism made an impact upon Soviet industry. The Gastev Institute for the Scientific Organization of Work and the Mechanization of Man was established to study the principles of Taylorism. Rene Fülöp-Miller reported:

> This institute works on the lines of the Taylor experimental investigations in America, but with the idea that the new Bolshevik man of the future can be produced here. On entering the building, you find here a number of investigators engaged in fixing the general maximum output capacity of the human organism, and there, in a psychological-technical laboratory, other people, who are trying to ascertain how much energy is used in every movement, and how this movement can be made in the most economical way. The "balance of energy" is fixed as exactly as possible, and efforts are made carefully to ascertain the optimum periods both of work and rest. The "exact psychological working cadence" has already been discovered; the effects of various physiological and psychological stimuli are exactly studied, and all "micro- and macro-motisms" are determined with the utmost exactness. Precision in the investigation of the energy of the organism here celebrates rousing triumphs.[12]

Meyerhold was not only aware of the economic principles of Taylorism, but he intentionally used them as part of the formula for biomechanics. No one is more efficient, economic, precise, and disciplined in his movements than the acrobat, and Meyerhold's acrobatic actors were no

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[11] Macleod, op. cit., p. 11.

[12] Fülöp-Miller, op. cit., p. 301.

exception.[13]

The industrial revolution also influenced Meyerhold's conception of the actor as a "worker." He dressed all his biomechanical actors alike, in blue-denim overalls. Stressing scenes of menial labor such as cleaning fish and ironing, the worker-actor was glorified as the symbol of the new age.

> He thought that, in a nation with a proletarian dictatorship, the task of the theater would be to present the ideal person of the new period on the stage. The new person would be a fine model of a human being, whose motions and labor processes were clean-cut and skilled. This would be the human being at work. The theater would have to infect the audiences with a craving to imitate this dextrous and well-organized hero of the age.[14]

Finally, the new discoveries in science had their effect on biomechanics. Mathematics and geometrics became factors to consider for the biomechanical actor. Thrust out onto the constructivist setting, he became a "man in space" and had to use the three-dimensional structural elements around him. The sciences of physiology and psychology were involved in biomechanical training:

> Bio-mechanics was the study of the physiologic and psychologic laws that govern the actor's body as a normally functioning mechanism, so that its every gesture and movement might be utilized with the greatest efficiency on the stage.[15]

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[13]Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in European Theatre (New York: George H. Doran Co., n.d.), p. 246.

[14]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 203

[15]Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, and Louis Lozowick, Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930), p. 197.

The study of anatomy, muscular control and centers of balance of the body was a valuable asset to the biomechanical actor.

The influence of psychology upon biomechanics came primarily from Ivan Pavlov's experiments with the conditioned reflex. Just as Pavlov used the sound of a bell to condition the reflexes of animals, Meyerhold trained the biomechanical actor to respond to external stimuli. Motivation for action became a mental or nervous process rather than an emotional one. Norris Houghton describes the essential difference with this example:

> The Moscow Art Theatre actor had said, "I make these movements because my feelings force me to." The biomechanical actor says, "I make these movements because I know that, by making them, what I want to do can be most easily and directly done."[16]

Meyerhold adapted Pavlov's discoveries to acting. Biomechanics was based in part on the principle that life is primarily a physiological condition, and that man is simply a highly developed animal. Contact with man's environment is maintained through his elaborate and sensitive nervous system, which reacts automatically to environmental influences.[17] His emotional life, thought by others to be the core of man, or his immortal soul, is merely a collection of these impressions in his nervous system, just as a feeling of pain is the result, for instance, of pricking a finger. The actor, then, did not seek a

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[16]Houghton, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

[17]John Martin, "How Meyerhold Trains His Actors," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII, No. 2 (November, 1930), pp. 27-28.

particularly rich emotional life, but strove for a rich sensory life. All his labors endeavored to keep his body alert and agile and his nervous responses keen.[18] Meyerhold shows this Pavlovian influence when he speaks of biomechanics in the following manner:

> A necessary and special trait in actors is their ability to respond to stimuli applied to their reflexes . . . The stimulus is the ability to fulfill an assignment received from the outside through feelings, motion, and language. To coordinate the reactions to stimuli is what constitutes acting. The separate parts of this are the elements of acting, each of which has three stages: 1) Intention; 2) Accomplishment; 3) Reaction. . . . Intention is the intellectual perception of the assignment received from the outside (from the author, the dramatist, the director, or on the initiative of the performer himself). . . . Accomplishment is the series of volitional, mimetic, and vocal reflexes. . . . Reaction is the lowering of the volitional reflex in accordance with the realization of the mimetic and vocal reflexes. The volitional reflex is prepared to receive a new intention and proceeds to a new element of acting. . . . The actor must be able to respond to stimuli. The reflex stimulus is the process of reducing the perception of a task to the minimum ("the ordinary reaction time"). . . . A person who possesses the necessary ability for reflex stimuli can be or can become an actor; he can fulfill one of the roles in the theater in accordance with his natural and physical talents. He can be given a position that is determined as appropriate by the stage functions.[19]

Biomechanics, then, as well as constructivism, had a scientific background. They showed the influence of Taylorism and industrial psychology, aimed at eliminating waste in human labor and industry; of Pavlov's reflexology, a theory of reflex action; and, also, of behaviorism, which attempts to cut out mind and introduce muscular perception

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[18] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

[19] Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 202.

and speech.[20]

Meyerhold was influenced by the symbolist movement in the arts early in his career. His theories of stylization, conventionalism, "statuesque" staging and "practicables" are products of his early symbolic staging techniques. It is logical that pre-Revolutionary theories of symbolism should influence his post-Revolutionary constructivism and biomechanics. As early as 1907, for example, Huntly Carter reported that Meyerhold was "smitten by the idea of different stage levels."[21] Later, this was to become an essential part of biomechanical acting and constructivistic settings. Mr. Carter also believed that his emphasis upon "practicables" in 1908 was probably the starting point in his theory of biomechanics.[22] There was a certain resemblance in the plastic, rhythmic and geometric movements of "practicables" to the later gymnastic movements in biomechanics. The cold, metallic, recitative speech of the actors also appeared in both "practicables" and biomechanics.

Further, if one of Meyerhold's aims in his Symbolic theatre was to break down the barrier between the stage and the audience and to make the audience a co-creator of the production, he certainly held the same values in his constructivistic and biomechanical theatre.

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[20]Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28), p. 70.

[21]Huntly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), p. 61.

[22]Ibid., pp. 63-64.

The symbolists relied a great deal on abstraction. Meyerhold's symbolic stylization aimed at abstraction in the acting technique and in the scenic form. He would later value these same aims, but would arrive at them through different techniques of acting and staging.

Meyerhold's theories also reflect an influence from his European contemporaries.[23] Many of the Russian innovators, including Meyerhold, were attracted by the three-dimensional plastic settings and geometric designs formulated by Adolphe Appia. Like him, they treated the stage as an architectural problem.[24] The three-dimensional, geometric design of constructivism was partly the result of this influence.

The leading Russian directors also were impressed by Edward Gordon Craig's theories. They often quoted the following passage from Craig's The Mask (1908): "The actor must go, and in his place must come the inanimate figure, the super-marionette."[25] One can readily see the extent to which Meyerhold applied this philosophy to his biomechanical theory.

> In Meyerhold's theories and practice the actor was not a free agent; his role was reduced to fulfilling the assignment given him by the director. There was no room for an actor's individuality in Meyerhold's scheme. One is left with the impression that he always

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[23] Jon T. Powell, "The Major Aspects of the Directorial Philosophy of V.E. Meyerhold" (unpublished Master of Science thesis, Department of Speech, University of Oregon, 1956), provides, in Chapter I, a brief summary of the theories of Meyerhold's contemporaries and their possible influence upon him.

[24] Marc Slonim, Russian Theater From the Empire to the Soviets (New York: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 207-08.

[25] Ibid.

> cherished the idea of a marionette or a docile performer in a mask. The live actor had for him a purely functional, not creative, value.[26]

Max Reinhart influenced Meyerhold in 1907. Reinhart revitalized Meyerhold's interest in the Classical theatre and gave him a new concept of the actor as the supreme interpreter of the play. Both he and Meyerhold had been searching for a true form of dramatic communication.[27] In biomechanics several elements from the Classical theatre were utilized, as will soon be described, and the actor was of central importance to the dramatic communication of the production.

The most immediate influence upon Meyerhold's formulation of biomechanics and constructivism was probably the cubistic, futuristic and constructivistic movements in painting, sculpture, and literature. (See Glossary of Terms). Sheldon Cheney wrote on the origin of constructivism:

> Most of us who are interested particularly in the theatre forget that Constructivism came into art, as a word and as a mode, not in connection with the stage but as an attempt at an independent studio form of creative expression. The Russian Constructivists designed models out of machine materials, steel, armor-plate, glass, copper, wood, wire, wheels, springs; and these they exhibited along with Cubist pictures and sculptures. They were complex constructions that unquestionably achieved some aesthetic form or rhythm, because to change a fulcrum or to shift a wooden arm or displace a brass cylinder destroyed the quality that gave the work its appeal. Such exhibitions were frequent in the days immediately following the great war (some critics laid it to the general war madness); and at least one monumental example, the design by Tatlin for the Third Internationale memorial in Moscow, achieved wide publicity--and might

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[26] Ibid., p. 281.

[27] Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia, p. 60.

have served as a perfect model for a Constructivist stage setting.[28] These constructivistic, cubistic and futuristic sculptures and paintings, he went on to say, must have influenced the theatre directors, since, in Russia, they frequently attended the art exhibitions. In studying the independent constructions, they must have realized that such structural designs would make "wonderful things to act upon!"[29]

Another reason for using these designs in the theatre was perhaps the scarcity of materials after World War I. In the article, "What is Constructivism in the Russian Theatre?," the author pointed out that the revolution of constructivism in the theatre took place at the very moment when Russian officials refused the theatres the necessary decorative materials. There was a lack of linen even for garments, and it was impossible to import dyes from Germany. The theatre lost its scenery and had to shed other superfluous details.[30] The article described the reaction of the theatre:

> One material only was now the possession of the theatre. Even war could not destroy the great Russian forests. The stage, having lost its scenery, began to use architectural methods. With simple but erect forms of unpainted wood, the stage forced to the very front the human figure of the actor. And the actor's figure danced and skipped over platforms, stairs, through arches.[31]

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[28]Sheldon Cheney, "Constructivism," Theatre Arts, XI (November, 1927), p. 860.

[29]Ibid.

[30]"What is Constructivism in the Russian Theatre?," The Drama, trans. Boris S. Glagolin and William Gleon, XX (May, 1930), p. 242.

[31]Ibid.

During his early period of theatrical symbolism Meyerhold was influenced by many historical forms of theatre. By 1912 he had found a style of folk theatre which was reminiscent of the Greek mimes, the old Roman comedy of masks, the medieval histrion-jongleurs, the old Russian zanies, the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, the wandering actors of England and Spain, and the folk theatre of Japan and China. Edwin Duerr listed the distinguishing features of Meyerhold's folk theatre:

> (1) Independence from literature and gravitation toward improvisation; (2) the prevalence of movement and gesture over the word; (3) the lack of psychological motivation in acting; (4) a rich and trenchant comic quality; (5) easy transitions from the lofty-heroic to the base and the ugly-misshapen and comical; (6) the spontaneous combination of ardent rhetoric with exaggerated buffonade; (7) an effort at generalization, synthesizing of the characters by singling out sharply a given feature of the character, leading thus to the creation of conventional theatrical figures--masks; (8) the lack of any differentiation of the functions of the actor; the coalescence of the actor with the acrobat, jongleur, clown, juggler, mountebank, songster, fool; (9) the universal technique of acting conditioned by this versatility, built upon the mastery of one's own body, upon an innate rhythmicality, upon an expeditious and economical use of one's movements.[32]

Most, if not all, of these characteristics could be found in the biomechanical acting of his later productions.

Probably the greatest influence came from the ancient Greek theatre, the Commedia dell'Arte and the Oriental theatre. After the Revolution, Huntly Carter reported, Meyerhold's conception of theatre held that it was a "social temple," with characteristics resembling the

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[32]Edwin Duerr, The Length and Depth of Acting (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 446.

great open-air mass theatre of the early Greeks.[33] Meyerhold's belief that the audience should share and participate in the performance was also characteristic of the Greek tradition, as was the obvious theatricality in the style of acting. In regard to staging, Meyerhold said in 1906 that the architecture of the Classical theatre was what the contemporary stage needed: no decoration, three-dimensional space and statuesque plasticity.[34] Although his later constructivist stage was not completely without decoration, he used three-dimensional space and statuesque plasticity to their very limit.[35]

Biomechanics utilized many of the techniques of the Commedia dell'Arte. As a method of actor-training, biomechanics was built upon a series of improvisations; as a style of acting it contained much buffoonery and grotesquery. Characters were archetypes; at times very stylized. Pantomime was a basic characteristic of biomechanics. Physical movement, Meyerhold felt, was the basis of acting. He said early in his career, "The words spoken from the stage are only patterns woven on the canvas of the movements."[36] Just prior to the formulation of his

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[33]Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia, p. 68.

[34]Leo Wiener, The Contemporary Drama of Russia (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1924), pp. 136-37.

[35]Kenneth Macgowan, "The Living Scene," Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre, ed. Edith J.R. Isaacs (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1927), p. 152.

[36]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Booth," The Drama, trans. Alexander Bakshy, VII (May, 1917), Part I, p. 211.

biomechanical theory he asserted an even stronger position with respect to physical movement. He stated:

> Motion is the most powerful means of expression in creating a theatrical presentation. The role of motion on the stage is more important than the role of the other elements in the theater. If it were deprived of words, acting attire, footlights, the coulisse, and the playhouse, and retained only the actor and his skillful movements, the theater would still be the theater. The audience learns the thoughts and motives of an actor through his movements, gestures, and grimaces.[37]

Meyerhold's ideal was the actor who was a mime, a juggler, a dancer, a comedian, and an acrobat. Therefore, he attached the greatest emphasis to physical training, to the development of the physical body, voice and movements.

Still another adaption from the Commedia dell'Arte used by Meyerhold was the mask. Although the biomechanical actor did not wear a physical mask, he created a "social mask" by revealing the essence of a character through particular and individual rhythms in his speech, motions and gestures. This was termed "sociomechanics." (See Glossary of Terms).

Meyerhold was fascinated by the Oriental theatre. He used the precise and measured gesture with emphasis upon the arms and hands just as the Oriental theatre did. Many of the symbolic stage devices and techniques he used were frankly Oriental.

> In his book, "On the Theatre," written in 1912, it appeared that the Japanese technique was exercising an influence on him. Later he explained to his students the meaning of the Japanese stage and

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[37]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 412.

> technique. From time to time since he has shown in his spectacles and plays that he has continued strongly under the influence of Japanese technique.[38]

Huntly Carter told how Meyerhold proposed to take his company to Japan to demonstrate how he utilized Japanese theatrical ideas.[39] Meyerhold himself said that when he first saw a Kabuki performance he understood all that he had read about it, and he found many of his own theatrical laws and ideas merely corroborated.[40] The Oriental influence upon biomechanics appears to have been extensive. Nikolai Gorchakov wrote: "It was no accident that Inkinshinonov, a Mongol connoisseur of the Asian theater, was one of the founders of biomechanics in Meyerhold's Theater and one of its best teachers."[41]

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[38]Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28), p. 221.

[39]Ibid., pp. 221-22.

[40]Andre Van Gyseghem, Theatre in Soviet Russia (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1943), p. 24.

[41]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 204.

CHAPTER II

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND BIOMECHANICS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Meyerhold's adoption and development of an entirely new and different scenic style did not mark an abrupt juncture in his career, after which he was to change his aims and ideals and discard his previous theories. Rather, his development of constructivism showed a change in the nature of the symbols used to express his theatrical theories. While his techniques and methods of scenic expression were drastically altered, he still held basically to the same aims and ideals as in the past. A basic tenet of Meyerhold's philosophy throughout his career was one in which he quoted Schopenhauer:

> "A work of art can function only through the imagination. Therefore a work of art must constantly arouse the imagination, not just arouse, but activate." To arouse the imagination "is a necessary condition of an esthetic phenomenon, and also a basic law of the fine arts. It therefore follows that an artistic work must not supply everything to our senses but only enough to direct our imagination onto the right path, leaving the last word to our imagination."[1]

Scenically Meyerhold had tried many styles to "arouse and activate" the

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[1]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "From On the Theatre," Tulane Drama Review, trans. Nora Beeson, IV (May, 1960), p. 136.

imagination of the audience. He had tried ornate, decorative scenery which captivated them; he had tried flat undecorative screens which merely provided a diffuse background for the action. His entire career, in fact, rested upon a search for a unifying symbol or style to communicate the highest form of dramatic expression to the imagination of the audience.[2]

Previous to World War I Meyerhold sought this perfect medium of expression in the theatre of the past. His early experiments with the conventions of the Greek theatre, the Commedia dell'Arte, the Oriental theatre and the marionette theatre seem almost like an obsession to bring about a modernized version of these historical forms. With the introduction of constructivism, however, Meyerhold, for the first time, looked to the present age for his symbols and conventions of theatrical expression.

Machinery, technology, science and industry--these were the external manifestations of the age. But Meyerhold was interested in expressing the internal spirit, the symbols of the age, in order to stimulate and activate the imagination of his audience. Energy, activity, precision and dynamism expressed the internal spirit, or the "inner reality" of the modern age, as did geometry, structural design, plasticity and utility. These were the concepts expressed in Meyerhold's con-

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[2]Huntly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), p. 52.

structivism.[3]

Utility was the basic premise of Meyerhold's structural settings.[4] Decorative or esthetic qualities were entirely replaced by pure functionalism in the early designs, since constructivism was a reaction against such decor. It was for this reason the backstage wall of the theatre was bared, the lighting instruments were placed in full view of the audience, and the proscenium arch was torn down. The later constructivist designs had more esthetic appeal in their abstract, sculptured lines and angles.

Meyerhold also wanted to express the spirit of the new social order after the Revolution. He could not accomplish this with the old forms of painted scenery, finished sets and beautiful draperies. He did not want the spectator to interpret a play in the same way as he had done before the Revolution. Instead of individual conflict, social struggle and conflict should be seen. An entirely new theatre was needed which employed entirely new forms, in order to dramatize the drastic political and social changes in post-Revolutionary Russia.[5]

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[3]Louis Lozowick, "Theatre Chronicle, V.E. Meyerhold and His Theatre," Hound and Horn, IV (October-December, 1930), pp. 97-98.

[4]Sheldon Cheney, Stage Decoration (New York: The John Day Company, 1928), p. 134.

[5]Hallie Flanagan, Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1928), pp. 114-15. Meyerhold was a political opportunist. He used his political beliefs and influences to further his artistic aims. See Rene Fülop-Miller, The Mind and Face of Bolshevism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), pp. 163-65, 175; Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28) (London: Brentano's Ltd., 1929), pp. 49-51, 66-67; John J. Von Szaliski, "Lunacharsky and the Rescue of Soviet Theatre," Educational Theatre Journal, XVIII (December, 1966), p. 415n.

New concepts in the use of stage space were introduced by constructivism. Meyerhold did not see the stage as being a platform; he saw it as a cubage. With constructivism the available stage space could be utilized to a greater extent than ever before. The acting area not only included width and depth, but added the dimension of height. The placement of levels and planes to act upon was limited only by the sight lines of the proscenium arch, and freedom of movement now included all three dimensions. Upon such a setting the energy, activity and dynamic qualities of the modern age were realized.

The materials used for the constructions (corrugated metal, wood, bamboo, glass) were used for emotional effect in forms which expressed, rather than concealed, their use. The stark simplicity of the constructions indicated the technical environment in which the new humanity would grow. "Our artists must throw down the brush and compass," Meyerhold declared, "and lay hold of the axe and hammer for the shaping of that new stage which must be the pattern of our technical world."[6] The stage, to Meyerhold, was a workshop for dramatic effects.[7]

Constructivism gave Meyerhold a stage setting that was symbolic, theatrical, functional and dynamic; it fit perfectly into his theory of an audience-centered, conventional theatre. Such a setting assisted his

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[6]Kenneth L. Graham, "Meyerhold and Constructivism in the Russian Theatre," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXIX (April, 1943), p. 185.

[7]Alexander Bakshy, "Ten Years of a Revolutionary Theatre," Theatre Arts Monthly, XI (November, 1927), p. 874.

educational and propagandist aims as well as serving as a vehicle for pure, high-spirited, proletarian entertainment.

As with constructivism, Meyerhold did not completely overthrow his pre-Revolutionary acting theory when he introduced biomechanics onto the stage. It can rather be considered a natural result of the evolutionary process of his theory of acting. Quite early in his career he began to regard the actor as the "visual symbol of poetic thought."[8] Under the influence of the historical theatre he began to emphasize the physical skill of the actor. Pantomime, gesture and movement became the bases for communication in his symbolic theatre. "The modern actor," he said, "refuses to understand that the purpose of the mime is to lead the audience into the realms of imagination and to entertain it on its way by his technical brilliance."[9] The spirit of frank theatricality was well established in Meyerhold's acting theory at this time. Concerning this theatricality, he wrote:

> The public comes to the theatre to see the art of man. But what art is there, when one walks on the stage as one really is? The public expects make-believe, acting, craftsmanship, and gets, instead, either life, or a slavish imitation of it. Does not man's art on the stage lie, in that, throwing off the garments of the surrounding world, he cleverly selects a mask, chooses a decorative garment, and gives the public a display of his brilliant technique--now as a dancer, now as a plotter (as at a masquerade) now as a simpleton of

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[8]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 86-87.

[9]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Booth," The Drama, trans. Alexander Bakshy, VII (August, 1917), Part II, p. 427.

the Old Italian Comedy, now as a juggler?"[10]

The actor began to take on new dimensions of expressive skill as statuesque staging and practicables were used. All his life Meyerhold regarded the theatre as a temple. The stage was the "Holy of Holies" and the actor was the "High Priest," the highly sensitized instrument for the dramatic communication of the "truth" in life. With the advent of biomechanical acting he still believed in stylization and in communicating the inner spirit or activity in life, but no longer was this spirit proceeding from individualistic sources. It was now originating in the new collective world order. It was not the spirit of Maeterlinck, but the spirit of Marx; the spirit of the faith, standards and new values of modern communism.[11]

For Meyerhold, then, the position of the actor changed. He was no longer a wage-earning slave, a living lie, or a clown. He was a citizen, a worker, a social politician. His job was to construct a reflection of the new collective life, and for this he must be brain and body disciplined. He must understand his place in the class struggle as a social and political being, if he was to effectively communicate to his audience.[12]

The communicative expression of biomechanical acting demanded forcefulness, precision and an immediate effect on the audience, for the

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[10] Ibid., p. 429.

[11] Carter, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

[12] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

actor embodied all the qualities for which the modern man must strive. He must give dynamic action to his stage environment, become part of it, and show his mastery and control of it. The biological plasticity of man--the grace, suppleness, adroitness and musicality of his basic, functional movements--was the key which led to a glorious future for mankind.

Emotional acting had no place in Meyerhold's theory. Herbert J. Biberman, a student of the biomechanical training system, reported the following:

> He destroyed all ideas within them as to the sanctity of personal feeling and substituted their feeling for the whole play or the whole scene, as including other actors and other material elements surrounding them. He sniled at the precept of feeling for an actor and reiterated a new precept; namely, that it was not an actor's province to feel but to make the audience feel. He instructed them in the principles back of his theatre which made their own emotions no longer sufficient. They must study the emotions of those about them and the emotions of the audience, and they must do, not what they wished to do, but what they must do, to take their place in the all important role.[13]

Emotions were the nemeses of the biomechanical actor, who had to remain in complete mental and physical control at all times.

By all indications, Meyerhold wanted the audience to react emotionally, rather than intellectually, to this style of production. The audience was not allowed to empathize with the characters because there were no individual characters--instead, there were highly skilled actors who resembled archetypes. The emotional response desired by

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[13]Herbert J. Biberman, "Meierhold at Work," Theatre Guild Magazine, VI (January, 1929), p. 29.

Meyerhold, it seems, was a sympathetic one rather than an empathetic one. (See Glossary of Terms). The esthetic distance of the audience was maintained by the frank theatricality of the production, as Eugene Vakhtangov indicated when he said, "For Meyerhold a performance is theatrical when the spectator does not forget for a second that he is in a theater, and is conscious all the time of the actor as a craftsman who plays a role."[14] Although he wanted them to share and to participate in the play, Meyerhold never wanted the audience to forget who they were or where they were. His theatrical techniques constantly reminded the audience of these facts.

In 1914 Meyerhold produced The Unknown Woman (The Stranger), by Alexander Blok. In it the first construction was used.[15] The play was essentially produced in a symbolic style with an emphasis upon the grotesque elements. In the second act the actors constructed a non-realistic bridge by joining wooden pieces they carried in from the wings. It served purely as an apparatus for acting, a functional device with no decorative value. An astronomer observed a falling star from this bridge

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[14]Marc Slonim, Russian Theater From the Empire to the Soviets (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 185. This writer could find no support for John Gassner's contradictory inference that Meyerhold wanted to break down esthetic distance by getting his audience "worked up." See John Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1956), pp. 104n-105n.

[15]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 72.

(a stagehand with a lighted torch at the end of a bamboo pole made a circle of fire, and another stagehand in the opposite corner extinguished it in a pail of water). The influence of the Oriental theatre was seen in the painted canvases and bamboo canes that served as the decor and in the Chinese children who regaled the audience during the intermissions by scattering oranges among them.[16]

Meyerhold's theatrical activities were often interrupted by the war and the Revolution which followed. During the early years of World War I he had planned a production called Fire, for which he had written the scenario himself. He planned to use a constructivistic, industrial motif in the staging, but the play was never produced.[17]

The 1918 production of Vladimir Mayakovsky's Mystery-Bouffe, the 1920 production of Emile Verhaeren's The Dawn and the 1921 production of Mystery-Bouffe indicated Meyerhold's permanent adoption of constructivism and biomechanics into his production style. The first production of Mystery-Bouffe was an outdoor propagandist spectacle. The acting was farcical, boisterous and exaggerated. Marc Slonim reported:

> The painter Malevich put on the boards a huge blue hemisphere representing the terrestrial globe and some cubic forms intimating the Ark. The hell was a gothic green-red hall; the paradise, a gray cardboard construction with multicolored clouds; and the promised land, a structure of machines. The actors, not very good ones, recited in a monotonous psalmody but they often succeeded in getting across the punch lines to the public.[18]

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[16]Slonim, op. cit., p. 221; Gorchakov, loc. cit.

[17]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 73.

[18]Slonim, op. cit., p. 264.

Meyerhold returned to Moscow in 1920 after his "October Theatre" experiences and produced The Dawn in a semi-cubist style, with ropes, cubes, mobiles, red and gold circles and shiny metal triangles as a setting. The actors stood on cubes in roughly painted gray clothing and recited metallically as the cold voices of the chorus rose from the orchestra pit.[19] Meyerhold stripped the theatre in an effort to break down the old forms; the play was rewritten by him to meet the needs of the moment; an attempt was made to bring the stage and the audience into closer communion; actual sailors mingled onstage with the actors; a military orchestra joined the theatrical orchestra for the singing of the "Internationale"; the climax of the production was the reading of an actual telegram from the field of battle announcing Smilga's victory over General Wrangel.[20]

The 1921 production of Mystery-Bouffe saw an abstract constructive setting of many levels and a huge half-globe representing the earth. Costumes were made out of pieces of newspaper, and a clown interrupted the dialogue with his farcical antics.[21] The footlights and the fronts of the boxes were removed, and the action was carried to the boxes by means of connecting the auditorium with the stage by planking.[22]

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[19] Ibid., p. 266.

[20] Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, and Louis Lozowick, Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930), pp. 196-97.

[21] Slonim, op. cit., p. 267.

[22] P.A. Markov, The Soviet Theatre (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), p. 76.

The first production to rely completely upon constructivistic settings and biomechanical acting was Crommelynck's The Magnificent Cuckold, produced by Meyerhold in 1922. The setting was a mill, complete with wheels, rolling discs and windmill sails. One large wheel symbolized the hero's emotional state, and would rotate at varying speeds, depending upon the intensity of his feelings.[23] In Voices of October the authors vividly described the production as follows:

> Curtains, wings, foot-lights, and backdrop were removed. Against the background of the bare wall of the theatre building with its exposed brick work, one could see a simple construction by Popova consisting of wheels, platforms at various levels, stairs and ladders to serve as springboard for the actors' movements. The stage director and even the stage hands were occasionally in full view of the audience, and the actors wore plain working overalls of blue denim. The actors were without make-up; their speech was a sort of standardized syncopated recitative. The entire action of the play proceeded by acrobatic movements up and down the ladders, through the doors and around the skeleton construction with a zest and rapidity that kept the audience in constant tension.[24]

Buffoonery, farcical numbers and musical surprises filled the production. In the third act a brilliant jazz orchestra was introduced. Gorchakov reported that it was as if a band of lively, mischievous comedians had taken the stage in battle, and, in unrestrained happiness at having the space of an open stage around them, had transformed the wasteland of the stage and the naked constructions into a living, dynamic environment.[25]

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[23]Gorchakov, op. cit., pp. 199-200.

[24]Freeman, Kunits and Losowick, op. cit., pp. 197-98.

[25]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 204.

His next production in 1922 was The Death of Tarelkin, by Alexander Sukhovo-Kobylin. Meyerhold wanted to show in this production that a construction could bear the same relationship to the actors as it did to circus performers. The designer, V.F. Stepanova, aided him in sharpening his constructivistic technique. The constructions, resembling the devices and contraptions used by circus performers, were covered with a thin, neutral white paint, and were strictly utilitarian. The furniture could be adapted to different shapes to suit the needs of the play, and was used for different tricks during the course of the action such as clowns might perform in the circus. When an actor sat on a piece of furniture, he might be tossed into the air by a spring in the seat, or a torpedo would explode under him, the chair would fold up into a board, and a policeman would jump out like a jack-in-the-box.[26] Marc Slonim described the farcical action:

> The actors displayed marvels of agility, and did clownish numbers. Wearing blue-striped overalls, they all struggled with objects which suddenly came to life, fell to pieces, jumped into the air, or exploded thunderously. There were also shots, flights across the stage on steel ropes, and circus properties with magic surprises.[27]

The 1923 production of The World Upside Down[28] could be described as a pageant of the Revolution. Mass action, confused shouting and chaotic activity vividly reflected the spirit of the first few months of

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[26] Ibid., pp. 204-205.

[27] Slonim, op. cit., p. 268.

[28] This title, Zemla Dybom, has also been translated The Earth Rebellious, The World on End, The Earth Upreare, The Restive Earth, Earth On Its Hind Legs, and Earth Prancing.

the Revolution.[29] Trucks, motorcycles and bicycles were on the stage, as were whole detachments of Red soldiers marching with full combat equipment, including small cannons. In the center of the stage stood a large, stationary and adaptable construction, which resembled the outline of a cantilever bridge flanked by two towers. Two moving structures suggested trenches, and a reaping machine suggested the machinery of peasant life. The setting reportedly served an agitational purpose.[30] Huntly Carter described the agitational speech used by the biomechanical actors in this production:

> The words must be spoken by placing the accent on the vowels, not on the consonants. This draws attention to the phonetic expression and produces atmosphere. It has the further effect of separating the speech from declamation and the singing method used at some of the advanced academic theatres, for instance, the Moscow Kamerny. The result obtained is called semaphore speech. This means a form of speech which flashes out phrases like poster phrases, giving them a finished rhythmic appearance of their own. The method of delivering the text is determined by the agitational effect which the actor must think of first of all. Just as an experienced political speaker carefully weighs those sentences which he wishes most to influence his audience [sic].[31]

In this production Meyerhold used a cinema screen for the first time, projecting slogans and pictures and indicating the changes of episodes.[32]

A modified form of constructivism was seen in Meyerhold's 1924

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[29]William Henry Chamberlin, "New Trends in the Theatre I--Russia," The Forum, LXXII (October, 1924), p. 523.

[30]Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28) (London: Brentano's Ltd., 1929), p. 78.

[31]Huntly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), p. 78.

[32]Lozowick, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

production of Ostrovsky's The Forest. The settings, by V. Fedorov, included no backdrop or painted scenery, but consisted of a simple, hanging, bridge-like, winding road, rising from the foreground to the back of the stage on an incline, to a height exceeding the human figure. Grotesque and colorful costumes were used as well as realistic properties. An effective method of accentuating character was introduced by associating an individual with an object which was characteristic of his personality. Certain rhythms in speech, gestures and pantomimes were also given to the characters, which served as their leitmotif. Menial labor was glorified; physical action included shaving, cleaning rifles, hanging laundry, swinging around a maypole, exercising on a trapeze and playing the accordian. This popular Russian instrument lent a folk rhythm to some of the episodes of the play. The actual fruit, kitchen utensils, and living pigeons stood out in bold juxtaposition with the purely conventional settings and costumes.[33]

Several innovations appeared in The Destruction of Europe (D.E., Give Us Europe) in 1924. Three slabs of cinema screen hung above the stage upon which were projected captions and quotations from newspapers and speeches which explained the action on the stage.[34] The designer, Ilya Schlepyanov, invented a system of panels which moved on rollers, thus permitting a rapid change of scenery. During a "chase" scene,

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[33]Ibid., p. 101.

[34]Valona Pilcher, "The Theatre of the Revolution," Theatre Arts Monthly, XI (April, 1927), p. 269.

spotlights were flashed around chaotically and the panels began twirling around in different directions, creating an almost unbelievable, dynamic picture. Sidney Beshet's Negro Band, the first jazz band to appear in Moscow, performed in the production. Pantomime was used extensively; some ten and fifteen minute episodes were exclusively in mime.[35]

The introduction of "preacting" into biomechanics in the 1925 production of The Teacher Bubus is noted in the Glossary of Terms. Marc Slonim described the production:

> This time he experimented with a closed stage: the boards on which the actor moved were circumscribed by a pavilion made of bamboo canes which rustled and stirred. The objects were real, and some of them, such as carpets, were quite luxurious; a fountain was used as a symbol of lavishness. But the main innovation was the music: Bubus was staged as a dramatic symphony, accompanied by forty-six excerpts from Liszt and Chopin; long pauses between dialogues had a musical intent, and each performer had his own rhythm of speech and movement, almost a melodic line. The tempo of the whole performance was slowed down, and silence before speech had a definite, impressionistic "preacting" value.[36]

Meyerhold used a revolving stage in Nikolay Erdman's The Warrant (Mandate, The Credentials) in 1925. A system of concentric circles rotating in opposite directions aided him in this animated exhibit of wax museum-like characters. These moving circles were used to "drive" the actors and the properties from the rear of the stage to the foreground. Groups of actors in frozen poses used them to disappear in a fog; sometimes the circles split groups of characters in two, one

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[35]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 209.

[36]Slonim, op. cit., p. 271.

remaining downstage while the other exited into the wings.[37]

Meyerhold had his assistant, Fyoderov, produce Tretiakov's Roar China! in 1926. The action took place on the deck of a ship, a wharf and a body of water in between. Herbert J. Biberman described the effective use of contrast in this production:

> Counterpoint or contrast Meierhold employs not only as between two scenes apart in space but, probing each single scene deeply, he unearths the contrast within it which reveals living contrapuntal emotion. In Roar China a revolutionary mob is meeting. In the tensest moment, when the audience is taut, a moronic lamp-seller calling his wares aloud in a shrill imbecilic voice enters, carelessly pushing his way through the excited group. The audience roars with laughter, only an instant later to realize that stupidity of the masses is a shrill voice impeding progress. Meierhold deliberately broke the action here to reveal the heat of action. He destroyed the flow of the scene, because he could pick it up again a more tragic thing. In the same scene, while disastrous things are plotting, he focuses light and attention on a noisy biscuit baker. Against this accented area the plot must work the more intensely. Because of its combat against the commonplace course of life, it takes on a profounder significance. In this manner Meierhold fashions emotion after an almost physical three-dimensional design.[38]

The climax of Meyerhold's career came with his production of The Inspector General (Revizor) in 1926. The entire production was based on a sonata structure with each improvisation a variation on a common theme. Louis Lozowick described the production:

> The Inspector General was divided into fifteen episodes within which Meyerhold contrived to lay bare the viciousness, the empty triviality, the fawning sycophancy, the animal lust of Gogol's grotesque but true world. The settings comprise fifteen doors of red, glossy lacquer arranged in a semi-circular line. Two small platforms of trapezoid shape are propelled during intermission--one

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[37] Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 211.

[38] Biberman, op. cit., p. 28.

> at a time--by a motor over rails leading from the central doors. A third platform is lowered from the top. Upon the few square meters of these platforms episodes of the most elaborate composition are mounted with numerous actors and accessories. Music has now become such an integral part of the performance that Meyerhold calls it "musical realism." Choruses, solos, refrains: pauses, dialogues, replicas; even incidental noises of bottles, knives etc., are made part of one symphonic harmony. The acting . . . borrows certain procedures from the cinema and the guignol. Thus the wife of the Revisor in the scene of her romantic day-dreaming is suddenly faced with the heroes of her imagination, scraping uniformed gallants. Their stiff wooden gestures, their leaping from closets, proclaim their kinship with the guignol, while their appearance in response to the woman's thought is clearly a cinematic convention.[39]

Martha Bradshaw describes a drunk scene which was performed as a waltz-like dance. During the bribery scene, all the doors are opened simultaneously, and the officials thrust out their hands full of banknotes.[40]

The final scene was described by Gorchakov:

> In the concluding episode they froze in rigid, distorted poses. The lights went out for a few seconds, and when they came on again the audience saw not actors but mannequins in the same ridiculous poses, mannequins whose costumes had been removed. With this closing chord, Meyerhold for the first time revealed his secret to the audience. For him, the world still possessed the young passions of symbolism. Even in the "proletarian dictatorship" the world struck him as merely an exhibit, a collection of benumbed puppets who were the playthings and victims of Fate.[41]

With The Inspector General, Meyerhold's constructivism appeared to be fading, as more and more realistic stage properties were used. In Griboyedov's Woe to Wit (Wit Works Woe), produced in 1928, the highly

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[39]Lozowick, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

[40]Martha Bradshaw (ed.), Soviet Theatres 1917-1941 (New York: Research Program on the U.S.S.R., 1954), pp. 47-48.

[41]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 214.

stylized setting was a mixture of constructivism and romantic realism. The acting was also a combination of stylization and romantic realism. Two sets of endless staircases, partly dressed and partly naked, adorned the stage. There were pillars of the Empire period and real doors, but the windows were shadows. There were beautifully ornamented wall screens showing their hinges, crooked draperies and handsome chairs. The action was retarded by the huge staircases upon which entrances and exits were made. The idle aristocracy was portrayed by grotesque caricatures, yet individual sentiment appeared in scenes between the hero and the princess. The China silk front curtain revealed the actions of the stage and property men; when the play began it opened at the sound of a gong.[42]

Meyerhold tried similar innovations in his following productions. Vsevolod Vishnevsky's The Last Decisive, Yura Olesha's List of Good Deeds, Y. Gherman's Entry and Ilya Selvinsky's The Commander of the Second Army all contained a modified form of constructivism and biomechanics. By this time, however, Meyerhold was engaged in a period of transition, which had originated in his staging of Mayakovsky's satires The Bug (The Bedbug) in 1929, and The Bath (The Bathhouse) in 1930. Writing about these two productions, Nikolai Gorchakov described this transition:

> For the first time he rejected the risky experiments and the "leftest" innovations that had characterized his directing. He seemed to be afraid lest any innovations in form eclipse the irate satire. Instead of using stunning tricks, he merely concentrated everything that he had discovered earlier and had verified in the theater of satire. He

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[42]Hazel Abbott, "The Soviet Theatre--Acting and Staging," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXIII (October, 1937), pp. 437-38.

> refused to hire set designers and worked out primitive and symbolical stagings for himself. His directing centered on the character itself, and he caricatured the Bolshevik bureaucracy and the narrow-minded Soviet office workers as devastatingly as he could.[43]

One of Meyerhold's most outstanding productions was his last. In 1934 La Dame aux camelias (Camille), by Dumas, contained scarcely a trace of biomechanics and constructivism. The easy, refined and limpid impressionism of the production almost carried him back to the Moscow Art Theatre style he had left in his youth.[44]

Perhaps Meyerhold's constructivistic and biomechanical productions can best be described by the furious and dynamic activity they generated. The audience would be kept in a constant state of excitement and tension in such a theatre as H.W.L. Dana described:

> The gong rings with a hard metallic clang. It is like the beginning of a prize fight. The searchlights shift and focus on the brightly lighted ring. They're off! The fight is on! We lean forward from our seats high up in the amphitheatre and look down on what is going on below. Instead of a single combat between two boxers, we find the whole stage seething with activity. There are dramatic struggles between groups of actors, clashes between masses, between classes. Actors excitedly rush up and down inclined planes, flights of stairs, scaffoldings, constructivist towers. The stage is vertical as well as horizontal. The action is in three dimensions. The stage itself acts, shifts, changes. Revolving disks turn in one direction with outer rings circling about in the opposite direction, wheels within wheels. Platforms slowly rise and fall. Searchlights play madly round about. Moving picture projectors flash wild scenes on the walls, on the ceiling. Music, brass bands, screeching radio, drums and guns rend the air asunder. The whole great circle of spectators is caught up in the excitement. It is a circus gone mad. Yet we are given bread as well as circus. There is edification,

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[43]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 220.

[44]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 344.

meat, meaning, method in the madness.[45]

The actors in such a production needed to be trained more so than rehearsed.

In the biomechanical training sessions men and women alike were taught, first of all, to box. The conflict within a play resembled the conflict in a boxing ring to Meyerhold, with its firmness of stance, its alertness, its exchange of thrusts and its continuous physical give and take. Many of the exercises resembled this type of action. An attitude resembling an animal about to pounce--the head forward, shoulders up, arms bent either with open hands or clenched fists--was almost typical. At times the attitude of the actor resembled the fine relaxation of an animal, unihibited by complicated intellectual or emotional processes and able to concentrate his muscular energy only where he needed it. This was evident in the supple knees and ankles of the performers and the loping ease of their strides. Some exercises were variations in this stride, after which the actors came to a complete halt easily and quickly on signal. Other exercises were more acrobatic in nature. At a given signal during a march around the room, the lighter members of the class lept, with apparently little effort, upon the backs of their co-workers without pause, and executed certain variations of balance while poised upon their shoulders. This exercise was similar to a vaudeville trick,

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[45]H.W.L. Dana, "Meyerhold's New Theatre," New Theatre, II (January, 1935), p. 10.

the fundamental difference lying in the fact that these tricks were not ends in themselves, but means to an end. Still other exercises were pantomimic. One, for example, had a man with an imaginary knife stealthily pursuing a woman; he stabbed her, she fell, he lifted her rigid body to his back and hauled her away. This exercise was based upon purely muscular and gymnastic premises, yet emotional attitudes inevitably developed of themselves during its progress. All of these maneuvers were accompanied by music, which set the tempo, suggested phrasing and accent, and provided a continuous background of nervous stimulation. The signal to begin an exercise, a sudden bending of the knees followed by two rapid and vigorous hand claps, was given by all the participants so that they could work in unison.[46]

There were gymnastic exercises of all kinds; running, climbing, jumping and tumbling. He taught his actors how to live in the form of a design; how to move in a circle, a square or a rectangle. He introduced rhythm to support and give meaning to movement. A group of touring Japanese jugglers were invited to his studio to teach his actors the secrets of their art.[47] The purpose of such exercises according to Meyerhold was not, for example, to interrupt a monologue by having the actor pick up some balls and start juggling; but rather, to develop the wrists of the actor, just as ballet dancing strengthened and developed

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[46]John Martin, "How Meyerhold Trains His Actors," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (November, 1930), pp. 26-27.

[47]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 70.

his legs.[48] Lee Strasberg was impressed by the flexibility and agility of the body, speech and mind of Meyerhold's actors. He said the acrobatic training "made the actor ready to act without at the same time making him a good actor."[49] Meyerhold described each exercise as a little melodrama, with each movement giving the actor a sense of performing on the stage. Asked by Harold Clurman how long it would take a person to learn biomechanics, Meyerhold nonchalantly replied, "One winter . . . It is not very complicated. In fact, it is simple."[50]

The rehearsal situation was a fascinating performance, for Meyerhold could not help but play every part. He composed every gesture, invented every piece of business (at which he was a master), and pointed the vocal inflections for his actors. His own personal gestures and thoughts were apparent in every actor by the time of the performance.[51] Morris Houghton reported that

> he uses actors, as he himself says, as a sculptor models his clay, working with them to get various textures which will create various effects, as does the sculptor. Therefore the actor who is most malleable becomes his best actor. Ilinski, for instance, is considered by most people to be Meierhold's best actor today. Ilinski

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[48]Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, Directors on Directing (rev. ed.; Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1963), p. 56.

[49]Robert H. Hethmon (ed.), Strasberg at The Actors Studio (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), pp. 382-83.

[50]Harold Clurman, "Conversation with Two Masters," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIX (November, 1935), p. 876.

[51]Yuri Zavadsky, "Conversation With a Young Regisseur," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXV (September, 1936), p. 728.

> is to my mind not a great actor at all; he simply has a remarkably pliable face and body with which Meierhold may do what he pleases, a perfect "dead pan" which the director may fill with meaning or empty at will.[52]

Meyerhold did not direct a play, he orchestrated it. The various episodes into which he divided his plays were based on musical structure, rhythms and moods. The acting was integrated into the music used in the productions by correlating spoken phrases with musical bars, syllables with notes, and breaths with rests. At times his direction was related to the biomechanical exercises, as Biberman reported:

> Meierhold does not say to an actor, "You are a drunken man." He says, "You are a man whose body is off center and out of balance. You are more subject to the immediate laws of gravity. Your movements are either larger or smaller than those of a normal man, and your mind is either ahead or back of your body, they do not meet." Here was no drunken quasi-realistic reeling. Here was a dance movement of a body after a mind and a mind after a body, which never stepped beyond the credible, yet completely transcended the realistic to become real.[53]

Biberman also reported that Meyerhold's direction was not completed when the performance arrived. It was not a rare sight, he said, to see him walk down the aisle during the performance and lean across the footlights, watching his actors or giving instructions to the musicians, then saunter back to the foyer.[54]

Norris Houghton thought that individual intelligence was not allowed in Meyerhold's actors since he himself supplied all of it, yet

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[52]Houghton, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

[53]Biberman, op. cit., p. 52.

[54]Ibid., p. 29.

it must have taken genius to even imitate him.[55]

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[55]Houghton, op. cit., p. 103. [Note: Pictorial evidence illustrating many of the productions and biomechanical exercises described in this chapter are found in Appendix II.]

CHAPTER III

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND BIOMECHANICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Biomechanics, in both its theory and practical use, had much in common with Meyerhold's theory and use of constructivism. It has been previously noted that many of the same influences affected the development of both the scenic style and the acting style. The political, industrial and scientific developments in Russia, the symbolist movement in the arts the theories of various contemporaneous theatrical innovators, the futurist, cubist and constructivist movements in the arts and Meyerhold's interest in the various forms employed by the historical theatre all affected the development of both constructivism and biomechanics.

In order to appreciate a comparison between these two theories, it is necessary to understand Meyerhold's objectives regarding his theatrical style. Huntly Carter stated his primary aim:

> All his life he had had a vision of an antecedent principle of unity in the theatre. He was aware of an agency by means of which a perfect union between all the visible objects and agents of interpretation and representation and the audience could be attained. He made it the business of his life to attain this unity.[1]

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[1] Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28) (London: Brentano's Ltd., 1929), p. 48.

The objective Meyerhold sought, then, was a style which unified the audience with all the agents of communication on the stage, and a style which, likewise, unified the various objects and agents of communication themselves. It was undoubtedly with this purpose in mind that he maintained strict control over the acting, settings, lighting, costumes and music used in his productions.

Biomechanics was designed to achieve a harmony[2] between the human agent of communication and the inanimate objects and symbols of communication. Andre Van Gyseghem reported that one of the important lessons that biomechanics taught the actor was how to coordinate his own body with other people on the stage, with the properties he handled and with the scenery upon which he acted, so that he became a plastic part of a harmonious whole.[3] That Meyerhold's actors achieved a harmonic relationship with the setting was evidenced in the nature of the physical action on the stage.

> Gestures are not curved and gentle; they are sudden and angular. Here, again, the sharp angularity--the squareness and straightness of machinery--which Meyerhold believes to be the geometric key-note of modern life, is reproduced, harmonizing with the vertical and rectilinear patterns of the settings. The old gracefulness, the slow and rounded movement, and harmonious groupings of yielding, curved poses, are abhorred. There are the rigid lines of the out-

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[2]Harmony and unity are used interchangeably here, for the sake of convenience. Strictly speaking, Meyerhold could not obtain unity between the various agents of communication because each is a different medium of expression. What he actually sought, then, was a theatrical style which brought all the elements of communication into harmony with one another.

[3]Andre Van Gyseghem, Theatre in Soviet Russia (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1943), p. 29.

> stretched arms, of straight, horizontal, vertical or diagonal poses forming an organic relationship with the settings.[4]

The style of acting, then, resembled the style of setting. The sharp angularity of movements and gestures, the rigid lines of the human figure and the geometrical poses captured by the actors communicated the same essential "spirit" as did the constructions. The geometry, precision, plasticity and dynamism which Meyerhold believed to be the internal spirit of the Machine Age could be expressed only through the organic relationship of the actor with the setting.

The very structures upon which the actors performed required agility and perfect control of body and mind. In negotiating the ramps, platforms, ladders and slides, fear of injury taught the actor to become skillful in his movements about the stage. A new kind of "truthfulness" in movement was required of the actor on a constructivistic setting, for he had to develop the agility, the dexterity and the precise sense of timing of the aerialist and the acrobat.[5] Thomas Wood Stevens, who acted in the first fully constructivist production given in America by a director from the Meyerhold Theatre, described the life of the actor under constructivism as "a high-pressure affair"[6] of incessant motion

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[4]"The Queerest Theatre in the World," Current Opinion, LXXVII (August, 1924), p. 203.

[5]"What is Constructivism in the Russian Theatre?," The Drama, trans. Boris S. Glagolin and William Cleon, XX (May, 1930), p. 242.

[6]Thomas Wood Stevens, The Theatre from Athens to Broadway (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), pp. 223-24.

and activity.

The biomechanical laws, then, which gave the actor a feeling for space, time and rhythm and which made him a perfect theatrical mechanism, were entirely suited to such a setting. Together they reduced the art of theatre to its professional substance--to the skill of the actor--and transformed the theatre into a kingdom of dynamics.[7]

The subject of biomechanics, according to Meyerhold's official definition, was not merely to find active laws for the actor's movements, but was to find laws for these movements within the framework of the stage.[8] (Italics mine.) Biomechanics must be based upon the sculptured, structural principles of acting because "he believed that the form and pattern of the actors' motions and gestures should embrace the basic value of the stage."[9] The dynamic structures, built to glorify the functional and the utilitarian, were but skeletons by themselves. They needed actors who glorified the functional and the utilitarian, who gave the structures a dynamic quality and who provided the structures with flesh and blood.

> Since Meierhold had long sought unity between actor and setting, he was further delighted with the dynamic constructions of this new art which were in closest harmony with his theories of bio-mechanical movement, for bio-mechanics bears the closest possible relationship

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[7]"The Art of the Theatre in New Russia," Russian Review, III (August 15, 1925), p. 340.

[8]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 38-39.

[9]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 70.

to functional movement.[10]

Functional movement upon a functional setting--Meyerhold's desire to communicate the "inner spirit" or "internal reality" of a play by frank, theatrical means was achieved through this harmonious action created by the biomechanical actor using the constructivistic set. An example of this achievement was related by Norris Houghton after seeing The Magnificent Cuckold:

> The cast races and tumbles about the stage, turns somersaults and cartwheels--and all for a purpose. I can suggest this purpose by describing the entrance of the lover. At another theatre there would be a knock at the door, the man would enter, see the object of his affection, move toward her with eager steps, smile and take her in his arms. They would both "register" joy at the meeting. Meierhold places the lady at the foot of a tin slide, the lover climbs up a ladder to the top of the slide, scoots down it, feet first, knocks the lady off onto the floor, and shouts something that sounds like Russian for "Whee!" Thus does Meierhold express the effect of an eager lover meeting his mistress. The spirit of the scene is established directly by this completely abstract action.[11]

Such an action reveals Meyerhold's use of external stimuli to evoke the symbolic values he saw within a play. It also illustrates the dependency of biomechanical acting upon a constructivistic setting.

In the industrial, machine-like structures Meyerhold revealed the spirit of the times. Biomechanics also served this same purpose with functional, machine-like movements and a glorification of the labor process. Society, to Meyerhold, was the huge, moral machine; the actor was an essential component of this machine with movements to correspond;

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[10]Houghton, op. cit., p. 92.

[11]Ibid., p. 20.

the constructivistic setting was an essential component of the actor; that which was to be extracted or communicated by both was the machine spirit, the spirit of the present age.[12]

Just as the nature of the acting depended upon the constructivistic setting, so the nature of the constructions depended upon biomechanics. Barnard Hewitt pointed out the fact that since no illusion or decoration was needed, Meyerhold could build structures which were selected and arranged entirely upon the basis of the pattern of movement necessary to the biomechanical expression of the play.[13] This would account for the fact that each new constructive setting Meyerhold built had no resemblance to previous designs. Each new design during this period was an innovation. Depending upon the type of physical action required to communicate the "inner spirit" of each play, the settings underwent radical changes in order to confora to each biomechanical constitution. Thus, when Meyerhold's overdeveloped gift of imagination envisaged a play according to its biomechanical expression, the setting could be constructed on the basis of the gymnastic stunts and physical movements to be performed by the actors.

It was vital that the setting be integrated with the physical action of the performers since it provided motivation for their actions throughout the play. Within Meyerhold's concept of acting as the ful-

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[12]Huntly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), pp. 71-72.

[13]Barnard Hewitt, Art and Craft of Play Production (Chicago: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1940), p. 172.

fillment of an assignment received from an external source, a trapeze, for example, could provide such an external source from which the actor received an assignment. His performance on the trapeze would, in turn, stimulate the desired emotional reaction in the audience. The setting, then, was an indissoluble part of the acting process.

> Indeed, the actor is more dependent upon his surroundings in this system than in any other, and is able in return to make the stage and decor play a more vital part than they are generally able to do. Hence the great variety in the mounting of the plays of the Meyerhold repertory is not only for the effect upon the audience, as with expressionism, constructivism and what not, but is also for the assistance to the actors.[14]

A constructivistic set can be viewed as a special workbench built for each new production; a structure designed to aid the actor in all of his movements. The objects on the stage served the actor just as the workbench served the worker in a factory. And just as a worker finds on his workbench only those objects that he needs, objects which aid him, so the construction on the stage served the same purpose.[15]

Just as a naturalistic acting style was in complete harmony with the naturalistic scenery at the Moscow Art Theatre, the biomechanical acting style was in complete harmony with the constructivistic scenery at the Meyerhold Theatre. Through the organic relationship established between the setting and the style of acting, Meyerhold enjoyed a theatre

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[14]John Martin, "How Meyerhold Trains His Actors," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (November, 1930), p. 29.

[15]R. Ben-Ari, "Four Directors and the Actor," Theatre Workshop, I (January, 1937), p. 69.

which was less limited and more expressive than life. It enabled him to reach out beyond the confines of tradition and external reality, where he sought to unearth the absolute realities of life. Through the complete utilization of these instruments, he endeavored to endow life upon the stage with fuller implications than any individual's senses could perceive in life itself. To Meyerhold this was not merely the prerogative of the theatre, but was the very reason for its existence.[16]

If constructivism provided the workbench for the actor, biomechanics provided the tools he used to construct the spirit of the new Russian life. Upon such a stage, John Gassner admitted, only an acrobatic acting style was appropriate.[17] It was apparent to Meyerhold, also, that it would be this style of setting alone which would complement his biomechanical actors.[18]

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[16]Herbert J. Biberman, "Meierhold at Work," Theatre Guild Magazine, VI (January, 1929), p. 25.

[17]John Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1956), p. 197.

[18]Houghton, op. cit., p. 92.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Biomechanics and constructivism complemented one another as means to a common goal. Each was a vital part of Meyerhold's theory and style of theatrical communication. Many producers and directors believed that the mechanistic movement in theatre art involved only the scenic elements of production. In the development of biomechanics Meyerhold went all the way and applied this concept to the human instrument, the actor. Biomechanics *is* constructivism, to Meyerhold, employed in a different medium of expression, yet retaining its same aims, ideals and qualities, and capturing its same spirit of life. The leaders of the mechanistic movement recognised this fact immediately after his production of *The Magnificent Cuckold* in 1922. They declared:

> In the theater, constructivism united constructive furnishings—such as the decor, the props, and the costumes—designed to show things themselves, or at least their models, with "constructive" gestures, motions, and pantomimes. This last was the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meyerhold; the actors were organized according to rhythms.[1]

There were, to be sure, other sources of influence which affected the

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[1]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 201.

development of the biomechanical theory. The strong comparative relationship between Meyerhold's theories of biomechanics and constructivism indicated that he also probably utilised his concepts of constructivism as he formulated his biomechanical acting theory.

After considering Meyerhold's basic approach to production and his unique style of theatrical expression between 1915 and 1930, this writer believes that the term "constructivist" is too restricted to be applied to Meyerhold's production style and does not adequately denote his achievements. The scenic constructions were only a part of the "constructivism" Meyerhold employed in his production techniques. A broader, more comprehensive term such as structuralism might be applied to his overall production design during this period.

The term structuralism need not be limited to a definition of the scenic style of production, but can include the entire mise-en-scene,[2] as well as Meyerhold's basic approach to play production. The sculptured, architectural, and "structural" principles upon which constructivism and biomechanics were based have been previously noted. In order to realise his esthetic goals it was necessary for Meyerhold to completely "restructure" the written form of the dramas he used. The alterations not only included dialogue changes but involved the addition and deletion of characters, events and entire scenes. It was necessary for Meyerhold to become the author of the production in order to bring the events of the

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[2]The mise-en-scene is the overall visual production scheme or design. It refers to acting, scenery, costumes, properties, stage lighting and other elements involved in theatrical production.

play into harmony with his highly individual style of production.[3]

Structuralism becomes even more applicable to Meyerhold's style when one considers his use of musical structure. Examples have been shown how rhythm and musicality were used by the biomechanical actors. In composing his entire mise-en-scene Meyerhold applied the laws of musical construction. Indeed, the further he proceeded into biomechanics and constructivism, the more clearly he realized that the musical faculty was the real foundation of his revolutionary style.[4]

Constructivism defines only Meyerhold's scenic mode of production; structuralism, an all-inclusive term, is able to define his overall approach to theatrical production.

> Meyerhold is the world's master when it comes to outlining the structure of a production with firm, original strokes. Every Meyerhold mise-en-scene can be analyzed as it was composed, since it was composed with laws as exact as those of music.[5]

If Meyerhold had not been forced to curb his theatrical experimentation during the 1930's, biomechanics and constructivism may have remained basic to his theatrical approach. Late in his career he expressed his vision of the theatre of the future:

> The reconstructed theatre, using every technical means at its disposal, will work with film, so that scenes played by the actor on stage can alternate with scenes he has played on screen. Going further, a dramatic production could become a kind of revue in

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[3]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 189-190.

[4]P.A. Markov, The Soviet Theatre (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), p. 73.

[5]Yuri Zavadsky, "Conversation With a Young Regisseur," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXV (September, 1936), p. 728.

> which the actor uses dramatic, operatic, and film methods, as well as those of the ballet dancer, acrobat, gymnast, clown.[6]

Implied here was a modified biomechanical and constructivistic approach to production and an intensification of "structural" techniques.

The innovative momentum which Meyerhold infused into his biomechanical and constructivist theories bore heavily upon the evolution of the concept of structuralism. The man and his work stand as a vivid example of an important phase in the composition of the new stagecraft movement.

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[6]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "Two Lectures: From Reconstruction of the Theatre (1930)," Tulane Drama Review, trans. Margorie L. Hooven II (Fall, 1966), p. 186.

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APPENDIX I

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Biomechanics: Biomechanics (sometimes called "bio-dynamics") was the name given by Meyerhold to his method of training actors. It has also come to mean the actual acting style Meyerhold's actors used in his productions. Under this system the actor acquired the necessary skill for his profession through a study of the movements of people and animals. The subject of biomechanics was an attempt to find active laws for the actor's movements within the framework of the stage. Serving this purpose, experiments were made by Meyerhold in drawing schemes for the movement and style of acting, its exact definition and regulation, considering all the possible needs of the actor. The results of the application of biomechanics were a superbly-trained body, a well-functioning nervous system, correct reflexes, vivacity and exactness of reaction, and perfect physical control of the body. Biomechanics gave a general feeling for space and time and the coordination of movements with each other. The actor used his intelligence and his facility for music.[1] Used to its fullest extent, biomechanics as an acting style was a highly abstract, non-illusionistic, mechanistic and gymnastic method of presenting the essence of man in contemporary society. Emphasis was upon pantomime, physical gesture and movement; at times the voice was used purely as an instrument of sound, at others it was stylized and used as a vocal gesture, just as a hand is used for a physical gesture. The acting was sculptured, geometrical, rhythmical, economic and disciplined. Acting was considered the process of the fulfillment of an assignment received from an external force and consisted of three parts: the preparation of the action, the action itself, and the reaction.[2]

Meyerhold began developing biomechanics shortly before World War I and continued to develop the system, which he used in con-

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[1]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 38-39.

[2]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 202.

junction with constructivist settings, throughout the 1920's. It received official recognition in 1921, when Meyerhold and his colleague, Dershavin, founded the "higher State-controlled workshops" (G.R.V.M.) for the study of biomechanics.[3]

Constructivism (or Constructionism): Constructivism was a movement in literature and the visual arts which was originated in Russia by the poet Gastev prior to World War I.[4] Greatly influenced by cubism and futurism, it was the avant garde form used by such painters and sculptors as Tatlin, Gabo, Pevsner, Rodtchenko and Lissitzki.

Constructivism was anti-pictorial, presentational, functional, abstract and anti-decorative in the usual sense of the word. Meyerhold introduced the style to the stage prior to 1920 and used it in conjunction with his biomechanical acting style.[5] In the theatre it was characterized by an unadorned stage setting of bare, structural frameworks such as scaffolding, ladders, ramps, slides, platforms, arches and stairways. These skeletonized structures were made of wood, metals, glass, wire, concrete or other materials of industry. Constructivism was born of the desire to rid art of its decorativeness and to glorify the functional, the utilitarian. It was a product of the industrial revolution, of the influence of the machine.[6] The first constructivistic designs were stiff, crude and harsh in their lines (constructivists scorned esthetics): later they became more pleasing to the eye, more instinctively designed, with greater attention placed upon spatial composition.[7] As a theatrical style of production it flourished during the 1920's and 1930's in Russia. Its decline in popularity was probably due in part to the fact that few, if any, plays were written for this style of production, and the Soviet government condemned such

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[3]Rene Fülöp-Miller, The Mind and Face of Bolshevism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 173.

[4]Alexander Bakshy, "Vsevelod Meyerhold and the Soviet Theatre," The Dial, LXXXIV (January, 1928), p. 25.

[5]Kenneth L. Graham, "Meyerhold and Constructivism in the Russian Theatre," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXIX (April, 1943), p. 183.

[6]Sheldon Cheney, "Constructivism," Theatre Arts, XI (November, 1927), pp. 858-860.

[7]Ibid., p. 863.

formalistic productions in favor of socialist realism during the late 1930's.

Conventionalism (or Conditionalism): As used here, conventionalism means the activity or spirit attributed to an actuality. This activity or spirit is abstracted by the director, who conditions all the objects and agents of representation and interpretation with it.[8] Conventionalism implies the use of symbolism, since a convention is not concerned with the external appearance of an actuality, but the inner meaning, spirit or idea it represents. The spectator in the conventional theatre must accept the spirit of the conventions, and by doing so, is drawn into a subtle but conscious alliance with the performer who is playing to him.[9] Most of Meyerhold's work involved a conventional style. In his early symbolical theatre he used many of the conventions of the ancient Greeks, the Commedia dell'Arte, and the Oriental theatre, among others. Through his later conventional stage settings of constructivism and his acting style of biomechanics, Meyerhold sought the activity or spirit of modern man in the Machine Age and modern man in the socialist state.

Cubism: Cubism, as a formalistic style of production, emphasized planes and geometric forms. It was an important influence upon constructivism.[10] A notable difference between cubism and constructivism lies in the fact that cubism was used as a pure form, a static form, rather than as a functional, dynamic form. It had no representational, social, ethical, didactic, religious, sentimental or rationally logical function, and was used to evoke purely esthetic reactions.[11] Its emphasis upon geometric form might be characterized by costumes with enormous hats, tubular sleeves and cylindrical skirts, which would necessitate puppet-like angularity of movement.[12] The leading stage exponents of cubism in Russia were probably Alexander

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[8]Huntly Carter, The New Spirit in the Russian Theatre (1917-28) (London: Brentano's Ltd., 1929), pp. 54-55.

[9]Houghton, op. cit., p. 68.

[10]Allardyce Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre (4th ed. rev.; London: George G. Harrap and Company, Ltd., 1958), pp. 206-207.

[11]Houghton, op. cit., pp. 162-163.

[12]Thomas H. Dickinson, The Theatre in a Changing Europe (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), p. 162.

Tairov and Madame Exter.

Empathy: The empathetic response is a deep emotional response in which the participant, experiencing a particular emotion, injects this same response into another personality. It is the projection of an emotional response into another personality, and attributing to that personality the same response the participant experiences. The empathetic response occurs below the conscious level of awareness and involves a strong identification with another personality.*

Esthetic distance (or Artistic detachment): Esthetic distance implies an esthetic experience in which the participant retains his own identity at all times. The participant is not emotionally involved, but is intellectually detached from the esthetic object or experience.*

Formalism: Formalism is a general theatrical style which has many different descriptions and definitions. It usually denotes a stylized, theatrical setting which is subordinate to the unenclosed playing area. In acting it implies a sculptural, ritualistic style, stiffness of action and speech and a depersonalization of character. It usually has high esthetic aims, is obviously artificial and is highly structured. Constructivism is usually considered a formalistic style, and was condemned as such during the 1930's in Russia.[13]

Futurism: Originating in Italy as a mechanistic stylization in painting during the first decade of the twentieth century, futurism was brought to the stage as a style of production under the leadership of the poet F.T. Marinetti, his pupil, Depero, and Enrico Prampolini.[14] This movement represented the glorification of mechanical force and sought inspiration in utilising the characteristics

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[13]John Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1956), pp. 165-67; John Gassner, Producing the Play (rev. ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), pp. 85-86.

[14]Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre, p. 95.

*Definitions so indicated are based upon the writer's general knowledge. They can be substantiated in the following sources: Class notes in Theory of Dramatic Production, University of Oregon Theatre Department, Fall Term, 1966 (in the files of Mr. Horace Robinson); Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre; H.D. Albright, Wm. P. Halstead and Lee Mitchell, Principles of Theatre Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955).

of the machine in its esthetic design.[15] In Russia futurism was mainly an outgrowth of Russian literature. Its pioneers were Victor Khlebnikov and Boris Pasternak, who urged the conception of the poet as workman and artisan.[16] On the stage futurism was probably best expressed by Tairov and N.M. Foregger. The latter presented the sounds and movements of the city, industrial gestures and machine dances.[17]

Illusion: Illusion, here, refers to an artistic effect which creates the appearance of a quality when that quality is actually known not to exist. In an illusionistic production the audience willingly suspends its disbelief and creates an artificial and temporary truth about that which it is witnessing. Such truth may be of reality, or of unreality. An illusion of reality is usually sought in the representational form of theatre, but not in the presentational form.*

Practicables: By practicables, a term used in the Russian theatre, is meant the sharply emphasized and clearly defined lines and contours of the body and limbs, as in Greek sculpture. Meyerhold used the principle of practicables early in his career in conjunction with statuesque staging, and his emphasis upon it was perhaps the starting point for his theory of biomechanics.[18] In emphasizing the lines and contours of the body, Meyerhold used a precise, stylized and abstract pattern of movement which was symbolic and rhythmical. The precise, "carved out" gestures and plastic movements were designed to suggest the inner feelings and attitudes from which they originated.[19]

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[15]Sheldon Cheney, Stage Decoration (New York: The John Day Company, 1928), p. 103.

[16]Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, and Louis Lozowick, Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930), pp. 12-13.

[17]Marc Slonim, Russian Theater From the Empire to the Soviets (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 300.

[18]Carter, op. cit., pp. 62-64.

[19]Vsevolod Meyerhold, "From On the Theatre," Tulane Drama Review, trans. Nora Beeson, IV (May, 1960), pp. 145-46.

Preacting (or Fore-play): Preacting was a technique Meyerhold introduced into his biomechanical acting style in 1925 in the production of The Teacher Bubus. He used it frequently thereafter. In preacting the actor, before delivering a speech, let the audience understand his position and the struggle of his spiritual experiences by mimicry and gesture.[20] There were, therefore, long pauses between speeches filled in with pantomime in order to bring out the "inner life" of the character. Preacting showed the transition of the actor from one situation to another and prepared the audience for a more correct and sharper perception of that which followed the preacting. It was based on the laws of human conduct in life. Many times a person prefixes his words with a short "overture" of gestures and short pantomimes that transmit the sense of what he wants to say. Constructed on short rhythmic bits, the actor would pause motionlessly after performing them. The other characters would also freeze into the numbness of preacting before moving or speaking, as if they were trying to listen to something before moving. Used to a considerable extent, the text could merely furnish the sense of the pantomime to follow.[21] Meyerhold never claimed to have invented the technique, but said that he first saw it used by A.P. Lenski, a famous nineteenth century actor at the Maly Theatre in Moscow.[22]

Presentationalism: Representationalism and presentationalism are the two general forms of theatrical production. The presentational form, practiced by Meyerhold, is anti-naturalistic and makes no attempt at producing the illusion of reality or actuality upon the stage. Life is not "represented" but "presented" with the frank admission that the theatre is a theatre, the actor is an actor, and that the theatrical devices used are, plainly, theatrical devices. The presentational form is an audience-centered form, and the actor admits its presence by focussing his attention out beyond the proscenium arch and into the audience area. The presentational form assumes that there are other ways of expressing "truth" or "reality" besides showing a "mirror-like" depiction of life. It aims at showing the essence of life's experiences, rather than photographing the experiences themselves.*

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[20]Martha Bradshaw (ed.), Soviet Theatres, 1917-1941 (New York: Research Program on the U.S.S.R., 1954), p. 45.

[21]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 210.

[22]Bradshaw, loc. cit.

Representationalism: Representationalism is one of two general forms of theatrical production. This form, as opposed to presentationalism, attempts to produce in the audience the illusion of reality or actuality in what they are witnessing. The experiences of life are reproduced upon the stage by means of depicting natural behavior and environment. No direct contact or acknowledgement is made of the audience's presence; the focus of attention of the actors remains entirely within the proscenium arch on the stage. Representationalism, as with presentationalism, is never a pure form.*

Socialist realism: In Russia socialist realism was adopted by the Soviet government during the 1930's as the official style of theatrical production. As a very general theatrical style, it was loosely defined as the artistic expression of the new life and the building of the socialist state.[23] It appeared to be a highly eclectic style borrowed from many sources. There could be forms suggesting a filled-out constructivism, a simplified naturalism, occasional use of non-realist color, and some formal arrangements borrowed from the space stage and expressionism. It seemed that practically anything could become socialist realism so long as it was not too definitely or completely another style, and so long as it expressed a positive, forward-looking view of the new life and the building of the socialist state. On the whole, however, it called for a kind of simplified representationalism. It generally demanded concrete representations. Anything that was non-representational, abstract, formalistic, or purely esthetic was condemned.[24] The Marxist interpretation of art had always been that it must be a part of life, that it must express and be a weapon in man's long struggle to build the socialist state. Socialist realism stood for everything Meyerhold abhorred. Although he tried to soften his radical approach to production by turning to a more realistic and symbolic style, the advent of socialist realism brought about Meyerhold's downfall, as it did with many other artists during the 1930's in Russia.[25]

Sociomechanics: A term referring to the biomechanical acting style.

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[23]Houghton, op. cit., pp. 163-64.

[24]Ibid., pp. 164-65.

[25]Norris Houghton, Return Engagement (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp. 97-98.

there is little agreement as to its exact definition. H.W.L. Dana refers to sociomechanics as the mechanics of a group of actors, as opposed to biomechanics, which was the mechanics of the individual body.[26] Markov and Von Szeliski reveal that Lunacharsky, playwright and Commissar of Education in Russia after the Revolution, suggested to Meyerhold that he call his (biomechanical) method of training actors sociomechanics, since it was intended to collectivize the physical characterizations of the actors by training them in such a way as to demonstrate their class qualities when on stage.[27] As used here, sociomechanics, a technique Meyerhold used within his biomechanical acting style, was the practice of using "rhythmic masks" which revealed the essence of a character through the individual and particular rhythms of his speech, motions and gestures.[28] Each actor was given certain emphasized physical characteristics which made him an archetypal character.

Statuesque staging (or Relief staging): In his early symbolic theatre Meyerhold became interested in emphasizing the importance of the actor, in giving him the predominant position in the performance, where he could communicate more directly with the audience. For this he turned to statuesque staging, which consisted of techniques used to make the figure of the actor stand out like a statue with the entire power of expression focussed upon him. This theory followed from the assumption that if the actor can be freed from the bondage of decorative scenery, he can share with the audience the task of realizing the subject of the play.[29] In addition to using practicables, Meyerhold accomplished this technique by bringing the actor down onto the forestage where he had a great deal of playing area and where he was close to the audience. Flat decorative scenery or screens were used as a background, which

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[26]H.W.L. Dana, Handbook on Soviet Drama (New York: The American Russian Institute for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union, Inc., 1938), p. 22.

[27]P.A. Markov, The Soviet Theatre (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), pp. 73-74; John J. Von Szeliski, "Lunacharsky and the Rescue of Soviet Theatre," Educational Theatre Journal, XVIII (December, 1966), p. 417n.

[28]Gorchakov, op. cit., p. 210-11.

[29]Alexander Bakshy, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage (London: Cecil Palmer and Hayward, 1916), pp. 64-66.

made the actor stand out in relief against the more inconspicuous scenery.[30] Statuesque staging was reminiscent of the Greek stage, and similar techniques were used by Georg Fuchs and Max Reinhart. Meyerhold declared its importance to his general style: "The human body and the accessories surrounding it--tables, chairs, beds, and dressers--are all three-dimensional, and therefore a theatre where the actor is the most important factor must be based on the plastic arts and not on painting. A plastic statuesqueness should be fundamental to acting."[31] With Meyerhold statuesque staging was just a step away from bringing the actor down into the auditorium to draw the audience into the ecstasy of religious performance, and, yet, just another step away from biomechanics.

Stylization: Stylization implies a harmony between the various elements of theatrical production (settings, lighting and sound effects, acting, costumes) with the essential spirit or "tone" of the play. All the elements of production are designed to fit the mood of the play.[32] During Meyerhold's early period, when he used statuesque staging, practicables and monotonous, recitative speech in order to reveal the "inner mysteries of life," he can be said to be using symbolic stylization. To Meyerhold stylization was to display by all expressive means the internal synthesis of a given epoch or phenomenon, to reproduce its concealed characteristics such as exist in the deeply concealed style of any artistic work.[33]

Symbolism: Symbolism has always been used in the theatre. As a conscious style of production, however, it began in the late 1800's. Symbolism was opposed to real or literal truth; it favored poetic or spiritual truth. It was concerned with the expression of abstract internal reality rather than concrete external reality. The audience

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[30]Huntly Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), p. 59.

[31]Meyerhold, op. cit., pp. 146-47.

[32]Cheney, Stage Decoration (New York: The John Day Company, 1928), p. 47; see also Sheldon Cheney, The Art Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917), pp. 154-55; Bakshy, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage (London: Cecil Palmer and Hayward, 1916), pp. 60-61.

[33]George Freedley and John A. Reeves, A History of the Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955), p. 541.

must use its imagination in inferring whatever is implied on the stage, and the illusion of a spiritual reality must take place. The audience, then, was an integral part of the creation alongside the dramatist, the actor, and the director. Conventional symbols were used which aroused the imagination. Material objects and characters represented immaterial or abstract ideas based upon the power of association. Mood or atmosphere was often mystical, ritualistic. External action stimulated conceptual thought.[34] Meyerhold deliberately used symbolism throughout his career. His productions prior to the First World War most readily conformed to the aims and ideals of the symbolist movement.

Sympathy: A sympathetic response is one in which the participant expresses an emotional response of understanding or agreement with the attitude of another personality in relationship to life standards.*

Taylorism: Developed early in the century by an American industrial engineer, Frederick Winslow Taylor, Taylorism is an application of the economic principle of the maximum effect attained by the minimum means. It is a system of promoting the greatest efficiency in industry by reducing the worker to an energy-saving automaton. Economy is sought in the absence of waste in human energy and material effects. Taylorism asserts that before a bricklayer begins to lay bricks, he is trained to regulate and govern his movements so that he will be exact to an eighth of an inch. Two influences become apparent when studying Meyerhold's theories: 1) movement in acting which prevented wasted energy and was based upon regulation and control of precise movements and gestures, and 2) the construction of new theatrical settings and properties which also conserved energy, and which were built on rational, structural and architec-

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[34]Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1956), pp. 97-109; see also Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 95-96; Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1962).

tural principles.[35]

Theatricality: Inherent in the presentational form, theatricality frankly admits the medium of theatre as a creative art form. The effectiveness of the theatre as a form of art consists in using the medium as it is, rather than concealing what it is. To conceal the theatre as being a theatre is to nullify it as being an individual art form.[36] Techniques and devices which are "theatrical" are those which have no particular relationship to the reality of ordinary life, but which are used to express and enhance the particular art form of the theatre.

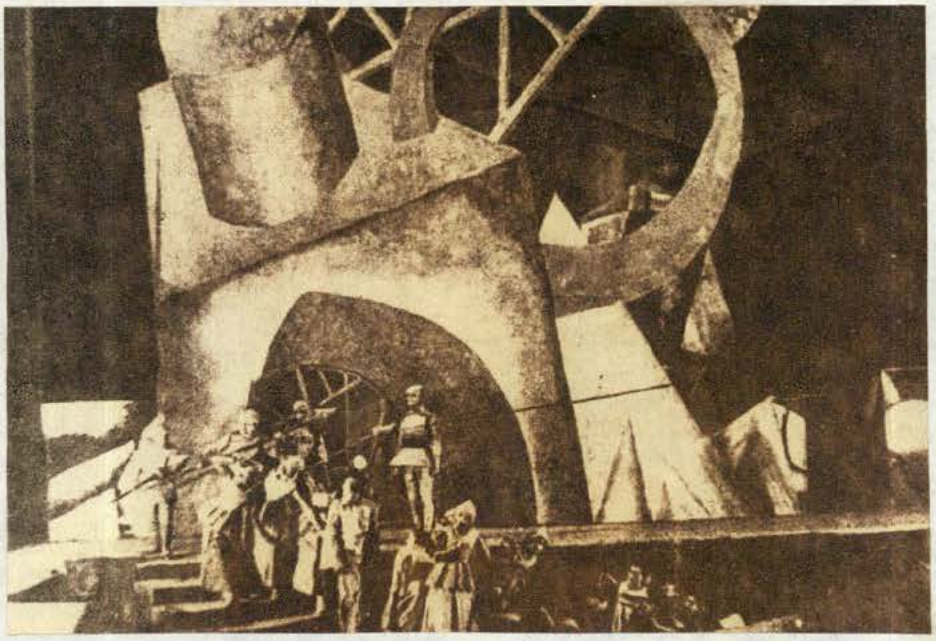
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[35]Carter, The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia (New York: International Publishers, 1925), pp. 277-78; see also Carter, The New Spirit in the European Theatre (New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d.), pp. 245-46; Fülöp-Miller, op. cit., p. 301; Frederick Winslow Taylor, Scientific Management (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1947).

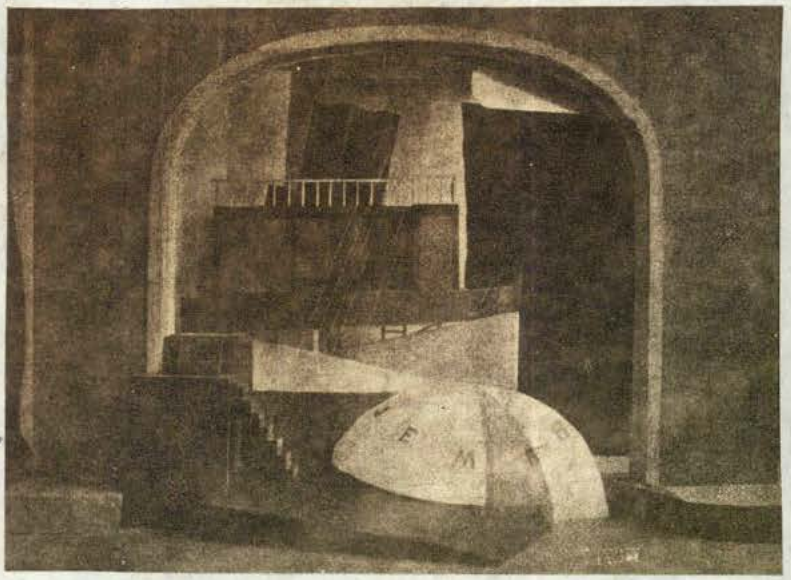
[36]Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre, pp. 141-42.

APPENDIX II

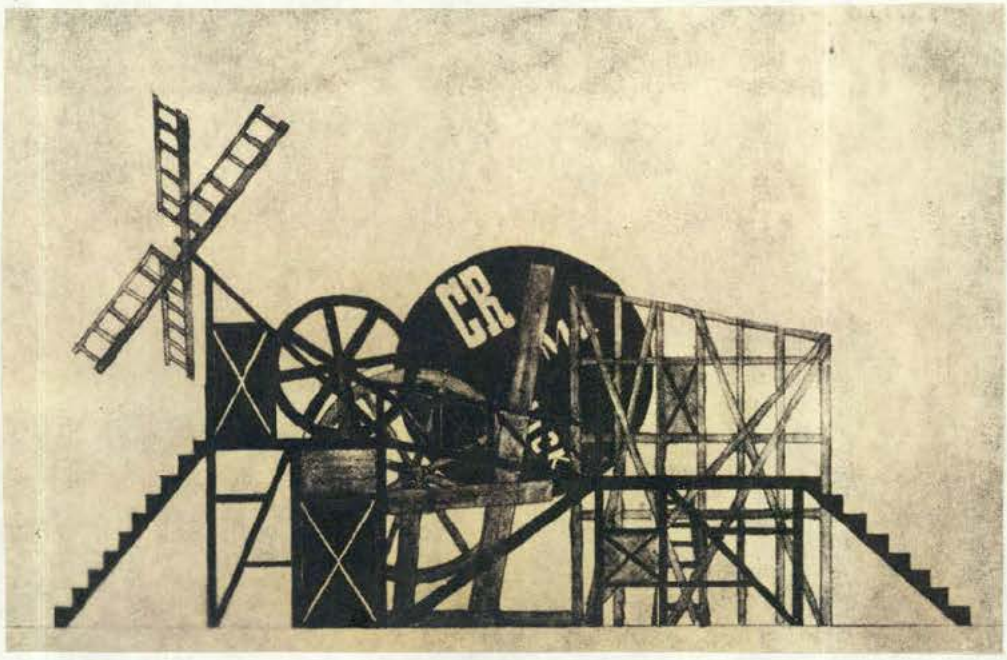
PICTORIAL EVIDENCE



1. Meyerhold's semi-cubist setting for The Dawn (1920).

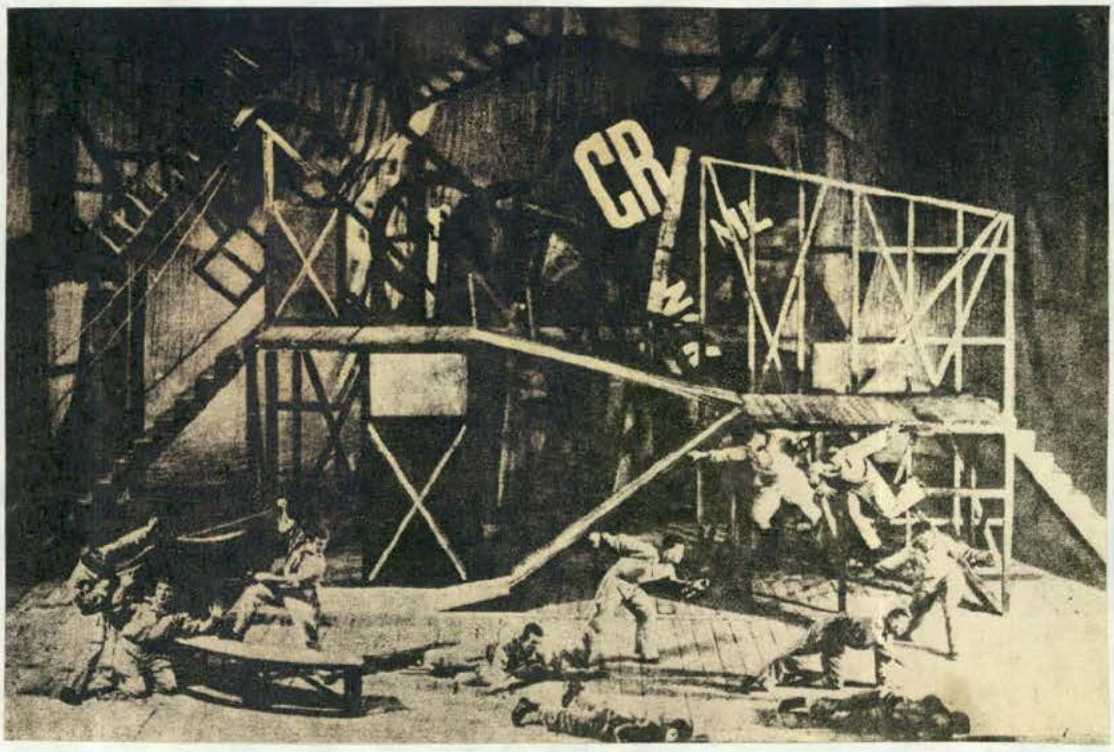


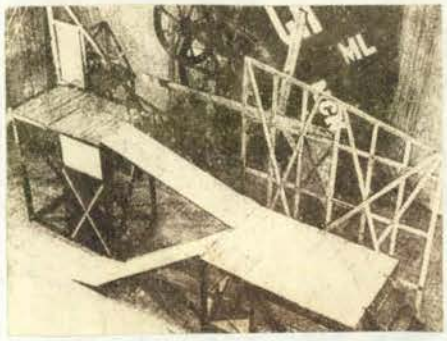
2. A model of the setting for Mystery-Bouffe (1921).



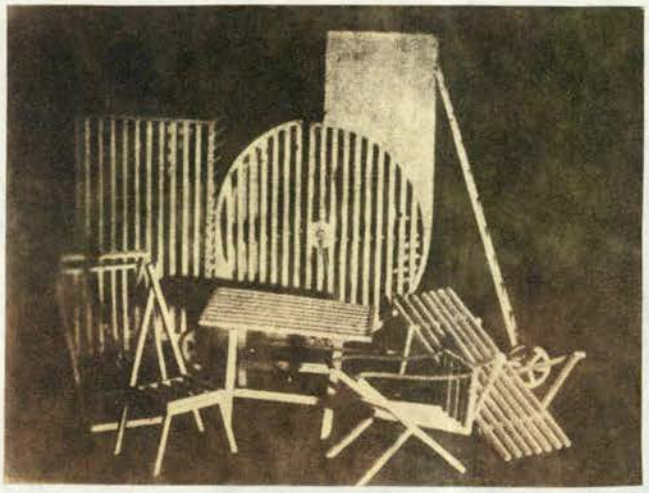
3. A model of the setting for The Magnificent Cuckold (1922).

4. The production of The Magnificent Cuckold (1922).



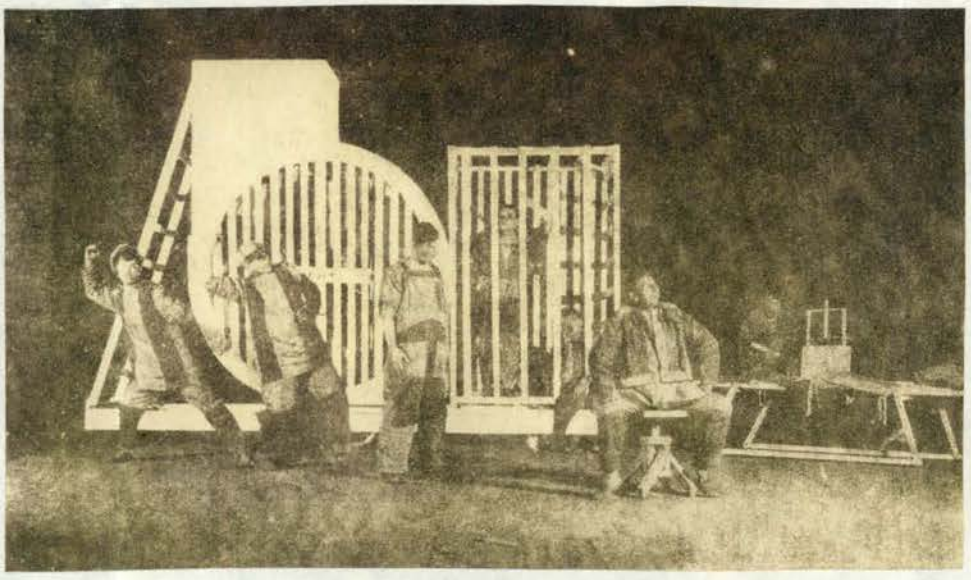


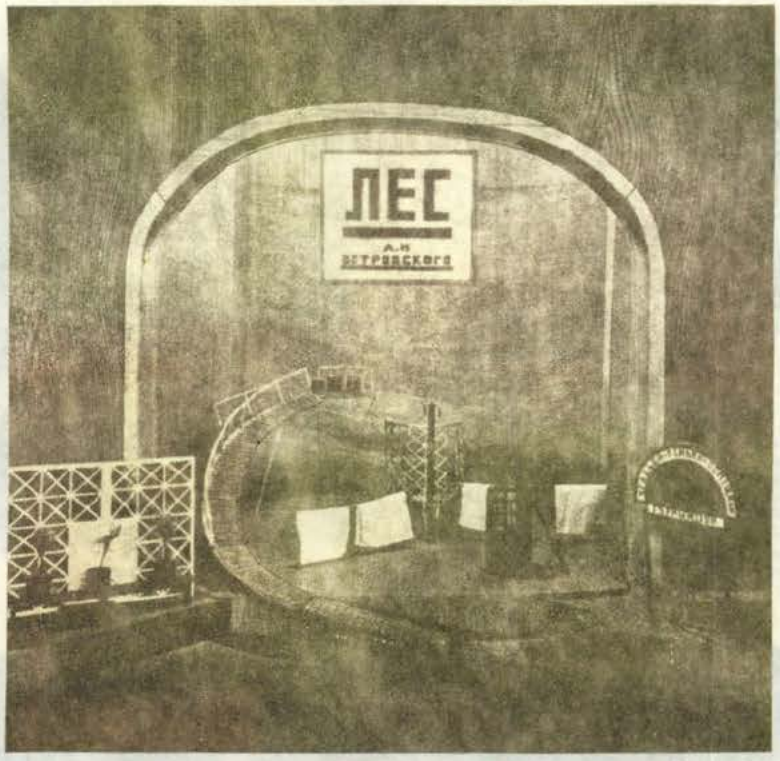
5. The Magnificent Cuckold.



6. The setting for The Death of Tarelkin (1922).

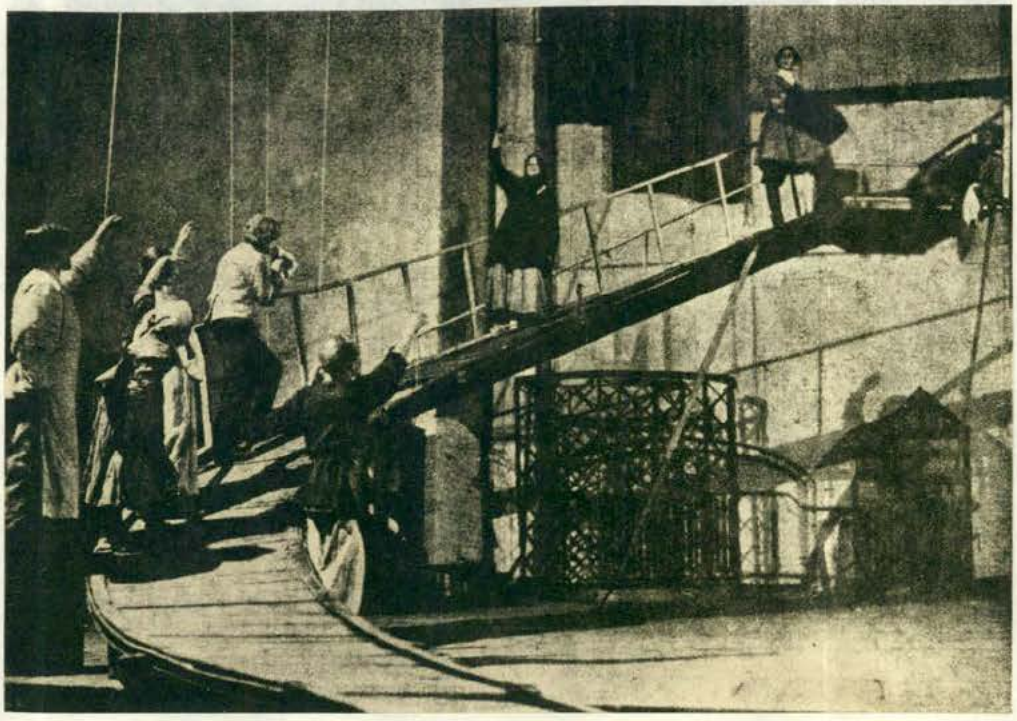
7. The production of The Death of Tarelkin (1922).

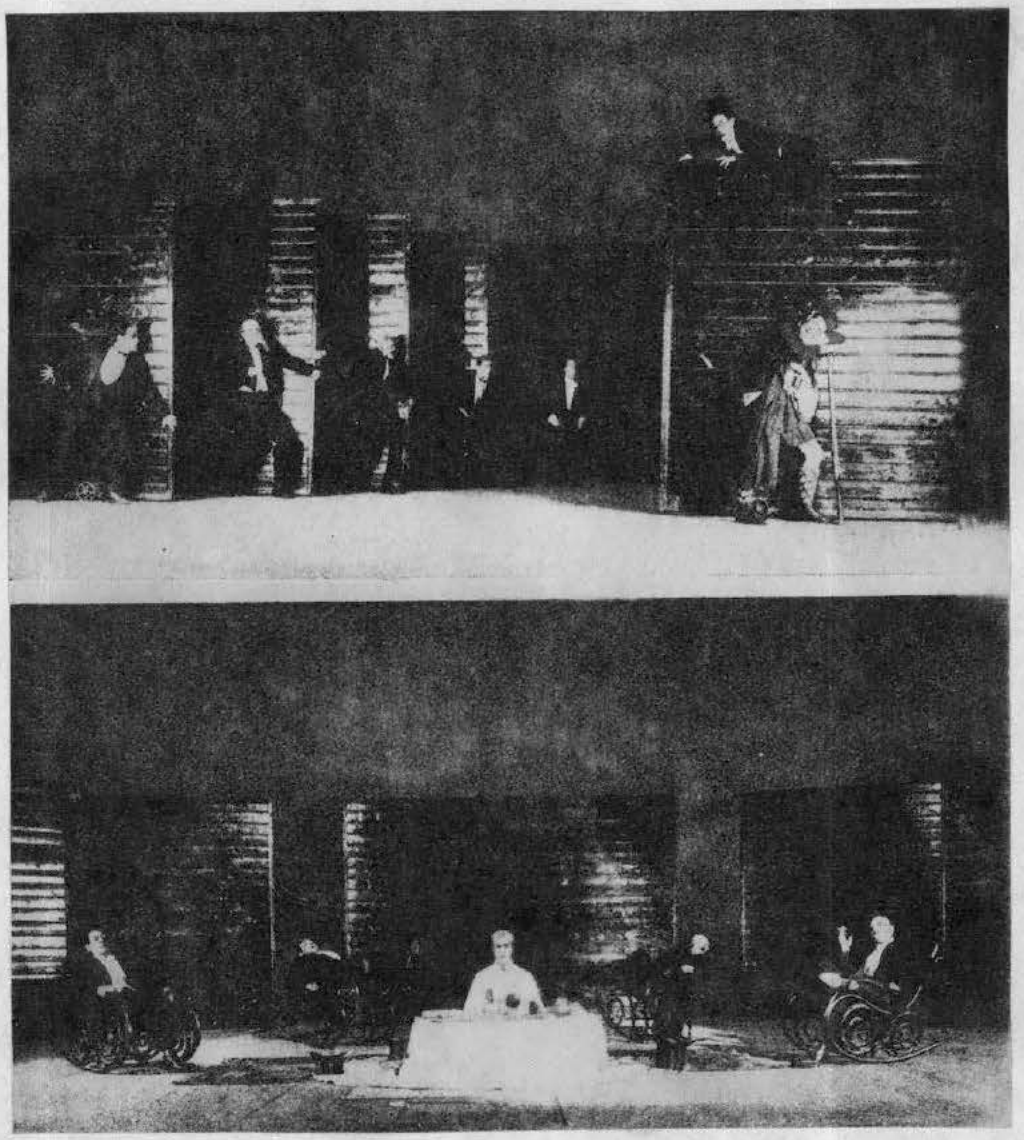




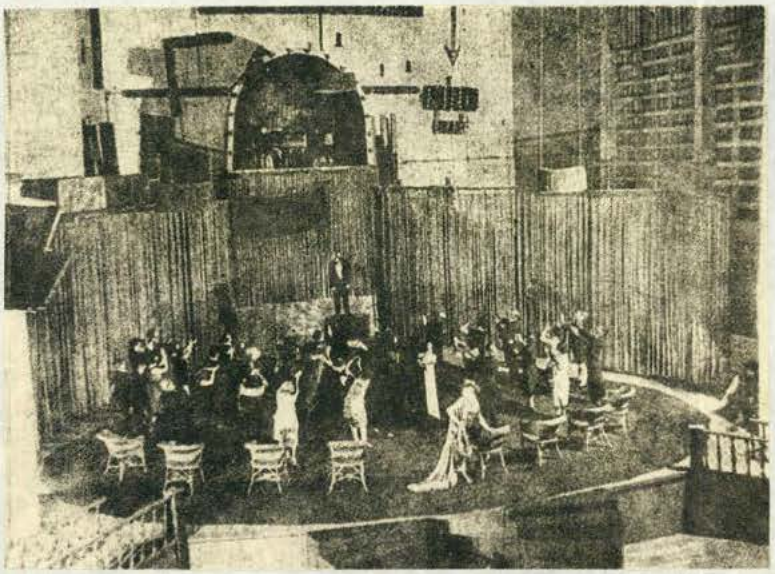
8. A model of the setting for The Forest (1924).

9. The production of The Forest (1924).



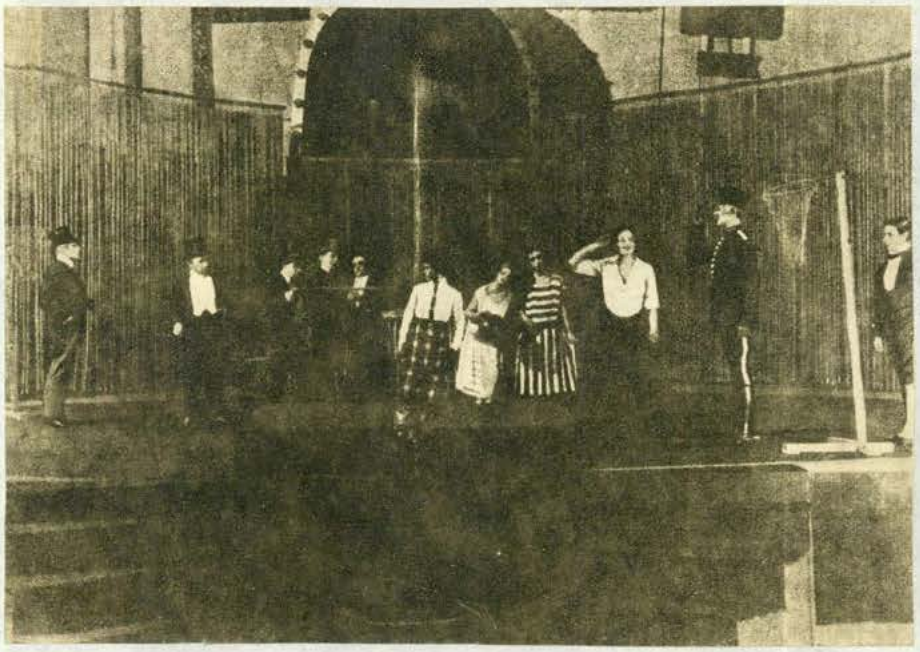


10. Two scenes from The Destruction of Europe (1924). The first illustrates a Chaplinesque "chase" scene.



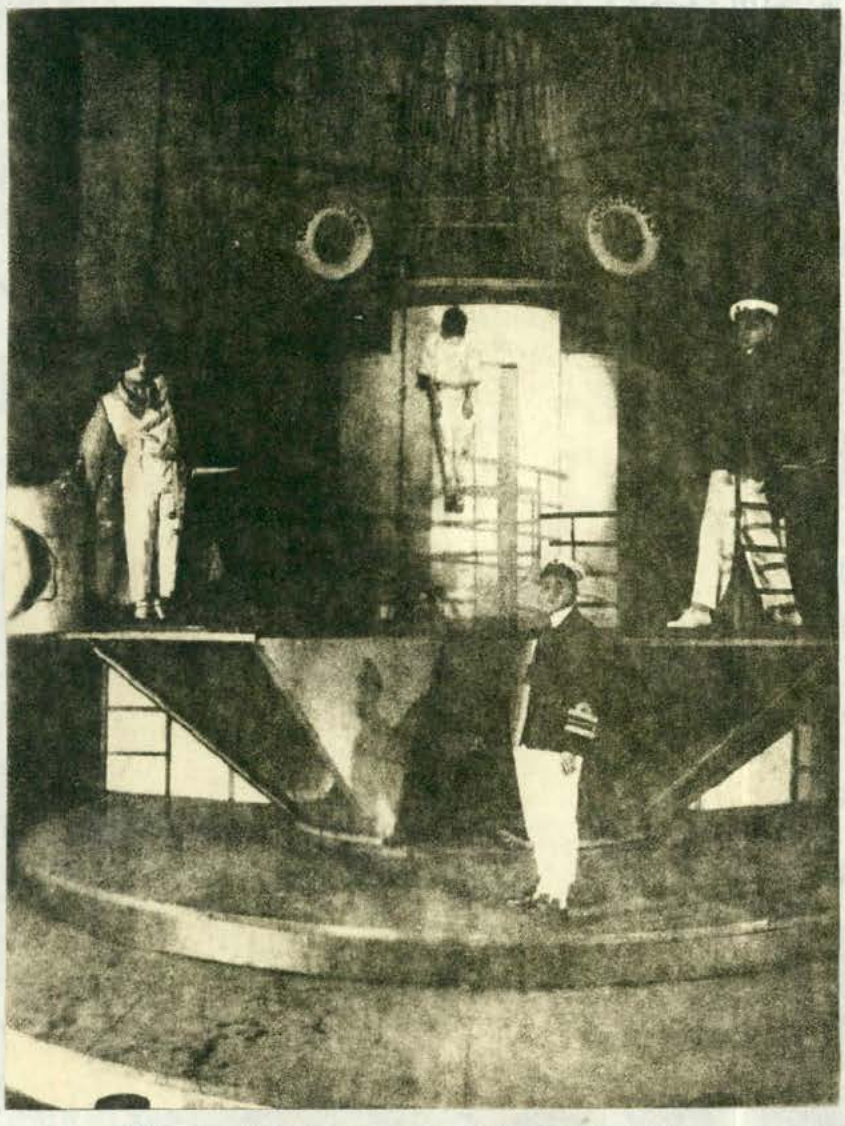
11. A scene from The Teacher Bubus (1925). A pianist is located in the upper cubicle.

12. The fountain and the bamboo canes are visible in this scene from The Teacher Bubus (1925).

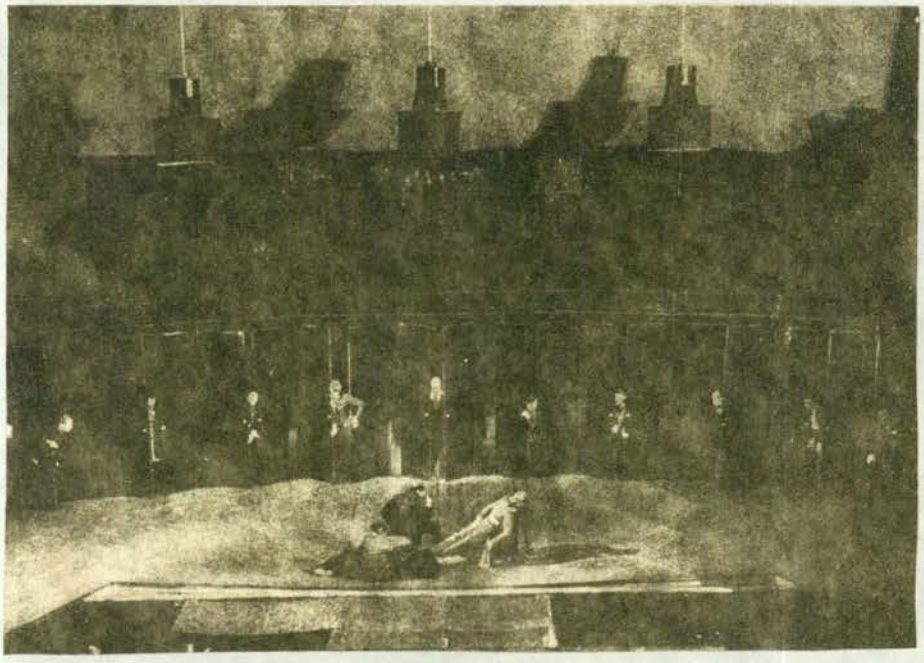




13. In Meyerhold's production of The Warrant (1925), the actors were brought downstage by means of a revolving stage. Here the action is carried into the pit.



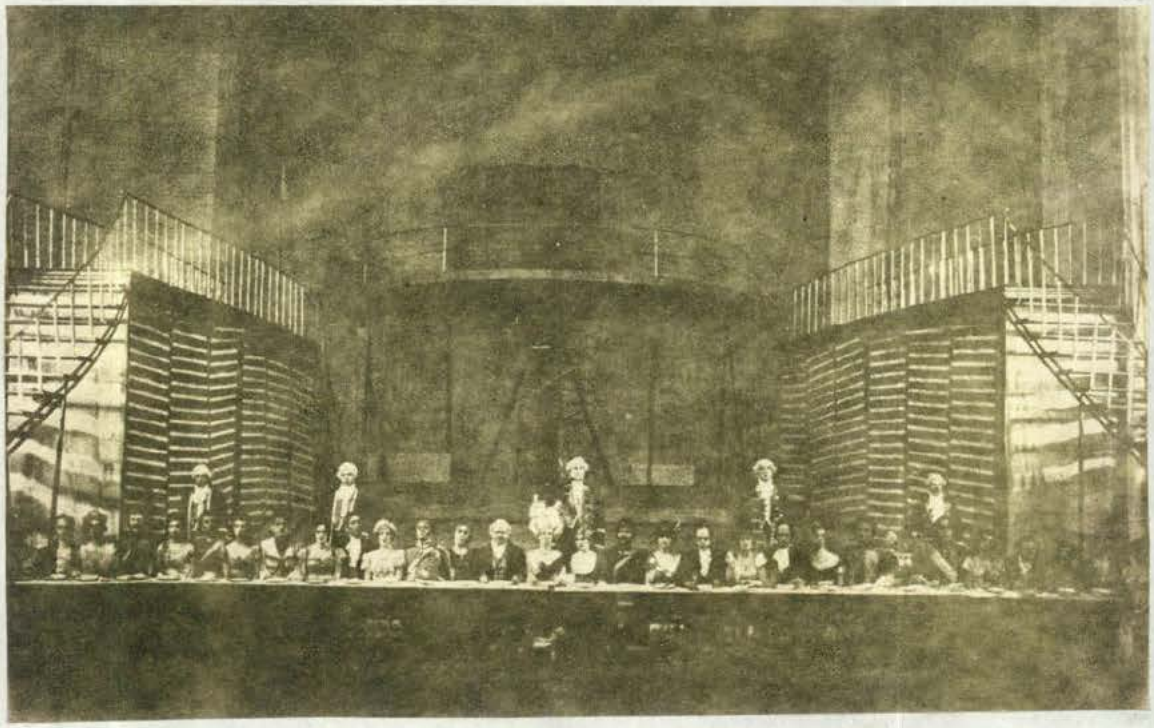
14. The battleship Cockchafer in the production of Roar China! (1926).



15. The semicircular doors in the bribery scene of The Inspector General (1926).

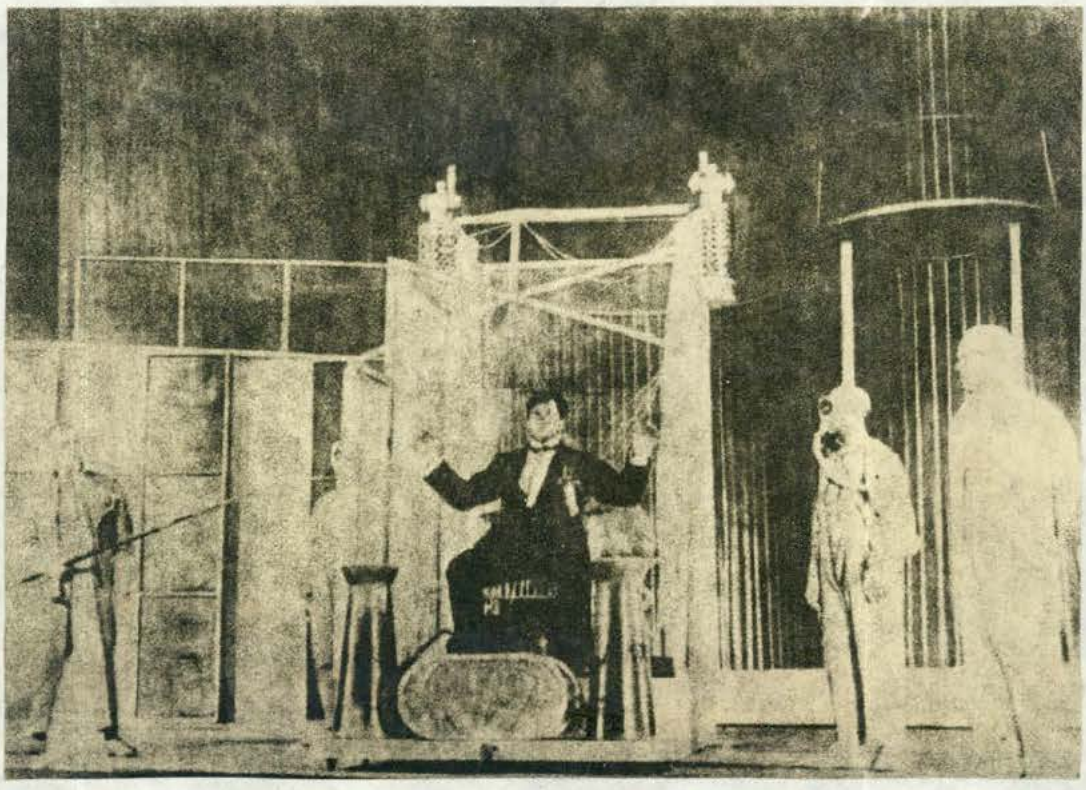
16. An elaborate scene in The Inspector General is played on a small platform not unlike a Greek exostra.

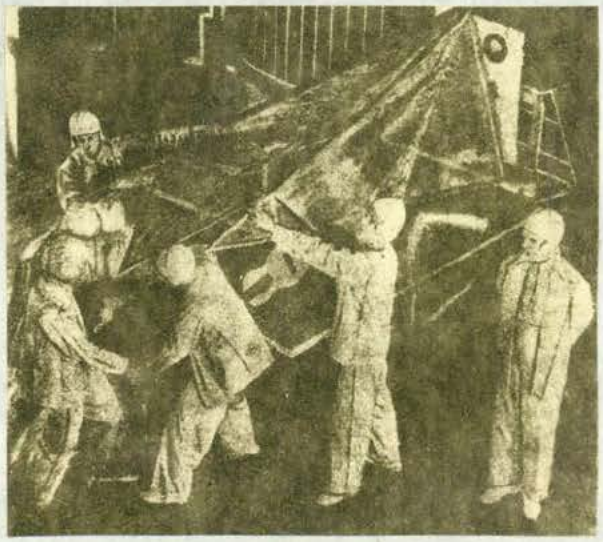




17. The banquet scene in Woe to Wit (1928).

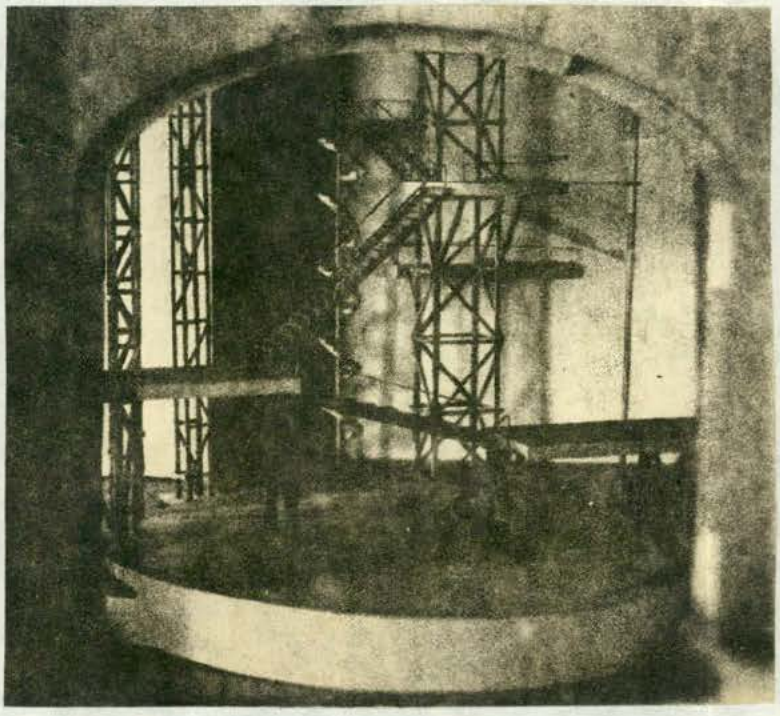
18. This scene from Meyerhold's production of The Bug (1929) takes place in 1978.





19. The Bug (1929).

20. A model of Meyerhold's setting for The Path (1930).





21. Pantomimic conflict is presented in this biomechanical exercise.

22. Dance-like techniques are employed in this biomechanical exercise.



23. Gymnastic stunts performed upon the backs of fellow actors during a training session.



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1. Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 176-77.

2. P.A. Markov, The Soviet Theatre (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), p. 80.

3. Sheldon Cheney, Stage Decoration (New York: The John Day Co., 1928), Plate 118.

4. George Altman, Ralph Freud, Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, Theater Pictorial (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1953), Illus. 409.

5. Gorchakov, loc. cit.

6. Sue Ann Wilson, "The Contemporary Theatre of the U.S.S.R.," The Drama, XX (December, 1929), 71.

7. Gorchakov, loc. cit.

8. Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (September, 1936), 696.

9. Babette Deutsch, "The Russian Theatre of Today," Theatre Arts Monthly, IX (July, 1925), 543.

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11. Gorchakov, loc. cit.

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13. Ibid.

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20. Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (September, 1936), 696.

21. Gorchakov, loc. cit.

22. Ibid.

23. John Martin, "How Meyerhold Trains His Actors," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (November, 1930), 26.

Typed by Cathlene A. Flom