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Tracing/Training Rebellion: Object Work in Meyerhold's Biomechanics

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Pre-actⁱ

Lying in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts in Moscow (RGALI) is a nine-page document entitled Programme of Biomechanics, Meyerhold Workshop (1922). Though modest in size, it is an unashamedly ambitious programme, which sought to redefine acting in a post-revolutionary context and to place performer training in Russia on a par with science. 'The task of the biomechanical laboratory is to work out through experimentation a biomechanical system of acting and of actor's training' (Hoover 1974: 314), the document claims, setting out a dedicated model of Practice as Research, seventy years before the term became common place in the UK.

Meyerhold's subsection, Acting, carries the following rather opaque entry:

$$A1 = n \begin{array}{c} \diagup \text{o} \diagdown \\ \end{array} r$$

Where:

n = namerenie or 'intention'

o = osuschestvlenie or 'execution', 'fulfillment of intention'

r = reaktsia or 'reaction', 'return to initial position'.

(Hoover 1974: 313)ⁱⁱ

Eight-five years later, and in the hands of a new generation of biomechanics practitioners, the terms have changed slightly (to otkaz, posil and tochka)ⁱⁱⁱ but the fundamental structure of an actor's work is still described as a three-part 'cycle' including an intention, (explicit or not), an action (the result of the intention being realized in some way) and a reaction (a momentary catching

of one's breath before moving on to the next cycle). In common with much of biomechanical (and Modernist) thinking, this structure operates at a number of levels – from the micro-gestural to the macro-textual – underpinning the training processes of each individual actor as well as the overarching dramaturgical choices of the director.

Though obscure and without any specific context, Meyerhold's quasi-scientific formula is crucial to an understanding of his practice in the 1920s, a practice which is so often hailed as the launch-pad of the modern era of directing and noted for the respect it gave to an audience's complex contribution to the making of meaning (Leach 2004: 99). In the documentary archive of Meyerhold's signature productions in the period, there are several remarkable evocations of the works: Nick Worrall's description of The Government Inspector (1972), Alma Law's of The Magnanimous Cuckold (1982) and of Woe to Wit (1974) and Llewellyn Hedgbeth's of DE (1975). But although these documentary essays celebrate the inventiveness and dynamism of Meyerhold's vision and offer fine, scene-by-scene detail of the productions, they avoid one nagging question: how did the actors realize this vision? If the training of Meyerhold's actors was so central to his work as a director in this period, how can one trace this training back into the practice? And what is the best mechanism for doing so?

Tracing

Despite its clear associations with the movement of Constructivism, Meyerhold's production of Fernand Crommelynck's Magnanimous Cuckold is often spoken of as the practical explication of the Futurists' 'rebellion of the objects'. Writing thirty years apart, Nick Worrall (1973) and Spencer Golub (2004) both highlight the director's use of stage objects as rebelling 'against their environment and their [own] fixed meanings' (Worrall 1973 [2002]: 62) and, in turn, link this iconoclasm to the immediate cultural and political climate. As part of Futurism's assault on Naturalism, objects needed to be liberated from their role as quotidian adornments of the stage and set in conscious, dynamic interplay with their surroundings. At the same time, their

denotative, first level meanings were to be destabilised and allowed instead to embrace a wide range of readings, 'half way between function and symbol' (1973 [2002]: 62). For Golub, the production's aesthetic, 'echoed prerevolutionary futurism's declamatory voice, shouting: "Down with metaphysics! Down with dead stage decor"' (2004: 186). Worrall, on the other hand, sees the actors' work as a kind of 'conjuring, where objects acted in a manner which rebelled against logic' (1973 [2002]: 62). But beyond extensive descriptions of the famous stage-machine-set, designed by the Constructivist Lyubov Popova, there is no clear indication in either of these essays of how this magical manipulation was achieved.

Retaining Futurism's obsession with 'the machine', but emphasising function over symbol, Constructivism brought industrial materials and sensibilities into the cultural sphere and as such it was absolutely in tune with Meyerhold's post-revolutionary philosophy of theatre; economy of means, utilitarianism and a celebration of productivity were shared tenets at the time. Displaying a particular sensitivity for the actor in three-dimensional space, Popova's set comprised two wooden platforms of different heights, linked together with a ramped bridge and accessed by steps on either side. There were slides, revolving doors and a set of three wheels at the back of the construction which turned at different parts of the performance, both punctuating and reacting to the emotional score of the piece. With the countless movement opportunities the set afforded the actors, Popova's design was a relative playground for the company and critics have highlighted how this child-like aspect contrasted with the dark and potentially scandalous treatment of jealousy and infidelity in Crommelynck's play.

But reading beyond the set and its fluid semiotic, the objects used in the production did not immediately conform to this idea of 'rebellion'. The main strategy for destabilising their meanings was to enlarge them and thus to defamiliarise them from their immediate context. As Alma Law relates:

Estrugo's writing equipment and the Nursemaid's dustpan and shoe polish were of deliberately exaggerated proportions...[whilst] some

objects...were simply mimed into existence as part of pantomime études.

(Law 1982: 67-9)

Whilst this enlargement of the stage properties added to a sense of grotesque exaggeration and enhanced the childlike aesthetic, it did not, of itself, constitute a liberating of the objects' potential meanings. Instead, it was the manner in which these objects were manipulated which constituted the real magic – and that, it shall be argued, related to the way the performers had been trained.

The Programme from the RGALI archive, gives an indication of what object training the company of actors working on Cuckold received. Meyerhold's curriculum for the academic year 1922-3 details sporting activities with objects ('throwing of the disc, the spear, the shot put'), biomechanical aspects of object work ('coordination with the stage space, one's partner and the stage properties') and gymnastic or circus-inspired exercises ('balancing a ball', 'juggling wands', 'balancing...a wand with the foot') (Hoover 1974: 311). These exercises, though differently expressed in the early days of Communist rule, had, in turn, their precursors in the studio Meyerhold ran before the Revolution in 1913 on Troitskaya street. Here, the emphasis was on commedia dell'arte, taught by his collaborator Vladimir Solovyov, but with a similar focus on acrobatics, gymnastics and stage technique. One student, Alexander Gripich, gave details of the classes:

From Solovyov's classes...we mastered the podus decaricus – the basic movements obligatory for the figures of the Italian comedy of masks....We devoted much practice to ways of walking, leaps, bows and blows with a stick and to the use of the hat, cloak, rapier, lance, lantern and other devices.

(in Moody 1978: 864)

By the academic year 1916-17, these exercises had coalesced into an ideal programme for Meyerhold's students which included as the basic course of

study: technique of stage movement, practical study of the technical aspects of production (including hand props), basic principles of Italian comedy, traditional devices of the seventeenth and eighteenth century theatres and musical recitation in drama (Braun 1991: 153).

Part of the backdrop to the Cuckold performance, then, includes a ten year history of training led by Meyerhold and his collaborators. Common to all the techniques used by him is a fascination with popular theatre forms, improvisation, and explicit theatricality – or what he might call 'antics appropriate to the theatre'. Much of this history is well known, of course, but what is less obvious is the thread of activity here which relates to work with sticks; from the earliest experimentations in the St. Petersburg studio, to the 1922 Programme, there is the constant of the 'wand' – a term which captures accurately both the shape and form of the object and the prestidigitation needed to wield it with effect.

The stick is important for two related reasons: firstly, because it brings together a number of Meyerhold's training sources – sport (the javelin, the foil), circus (the baton, the juggling club), commedia (the slapstick), silent comedy (Chaplin's cane); and secondly because the stick constitutes a kind of ur-prop in biomechanics - it is an object which carries all the associations of those disciplines but none of the baggage, an object which speaks to the performer as much as it does to the audience, an object which, in terms of the development of biomechanics, increasingly speaks for all other objects: the prop of all props, if you will. Because of this, the use of sticks remains a central part of biomechanical training today, a technical regime which is no better illustrated than in the work of master practitioner, Alexei Levinsky (1995). Levinsky's classes are made up of three clear sections: tap dance, work with sticks and *étude* work, an interconnected set of exercises which moves from the the actual manipulation of objects to the imaginary wielding of absent weapons - used in four out of five of the extant *études*. A snapshot of these techniques is offered below as a virtual workshop (with annotations), designed to illustrate some of the unseen applications of this training legacy and to offer one possible route into Meyerhold's production work.

Training

Exercise 1: Stick balance

Take a metre length stick of wood, of medium weight and strength. Place the stick on the palm of your right hand, keeping it flat. Make sure that your knees are soft and ready, not locked out. Let go of the stick with your left hand and begin to balance it with your right. Focus all your attention on the top of the stick. You will need at first, perhaps, to move your feet to compensate for its movements, so be led by the stick and dance in time with it. Work to bring the stick under control but enjoy also where it leads you. Don't forget that others are in the same space, trying to do the same as you. Now repeat this exercise on your left, ensuring once again that all the steps are in place: flat palm, soft knees, attention on the top of the stick.

Here, the stick is acting as an index of your own balance as a performer, it is reading you and reflecting back your centre of balance. Gradually, over days and weeks of returning to this exercise, the movement needed to keep the stick vertical is reduced and the object develops a haunting sense of stasis. This is a sign of a developing and hidden 'technique' - it can only be achieved by practising the art of balance repeatedly. The static stick conceals numerous micro-changes being performed by you in the act of balancing; like all technical studies, the virtuosity of this exercise only becomes recognisable through its absence – as a shadow behind the observable act.

Move the stick and place it on your right elbow. Once again, let go of the stick and work to keep it upright. Follow the will of the stick with compensating movements but slowly work to bring it under control. Swap elbows and repeat. Try to balance the stick on your right knee with your leg bent. Repeat with the left leg. Now move the stick to the chin, to the forehead, to both shoulders and finally to the foot, keeping it at least six inches off the floor. Note the hierarchy of challenge in this progression of balancing exercises and note also a potential tendency to rush the final stages as (perhaps) you deem them 'impossible' and therefore pointless.

Move the stick back to your right palm.

In all likelihood, the stick will appear to have changed; it can now be balanced for longer and with less movement around the room from you. By incrementally 'raising the bar' with the later balancing exercises, the first exercise has become easier to perform, irrespective of how well you might have been able to balance the stick on your shoulder or your foot. This is embodied knowledge development, analagous with the learning processes in bike riding, but intensified into a workshop experience. And, like learning to ride a bike, once the knowledge has entered the body it is never truly forgotten. The newly balanceable stick is first evidence of what Robin Nelson (2006: 113) calls: 'Practitioner Knowledge' and its related terms: 'Tacit Knowledge, Embodied Knowledge, (Phenomenological) Experience or Know-how', in his triangular model of PaR.^{iv}

Exercise 2: Stick throw

Working in a circle with a leader, experiment with throwing the stick from one hand to another. Hold the stick half way down its length and catch it in the same place. At first the stick might feel threatening – it is a hard and potentially damaging object – but as the exercise continues, the rhythm, set by the leader and followed by the whole group, will take over from the effort of throwing and lend the activity a sense of lightness, even pleasure.

Now place the stick in your left hand and throw it to the right but with a half twist. Hold it almost at the end of its length, about three inches in, and aim to catch the stick at the same point at its opposing end. When anyone drops the stick the class stops abruptly, at the insistence of the leader; you wait until each stick is retrieved and the whole class can recommence.

The responsibility for accurate throwing and catching thus becomes collective. Though simple, this is an important ensemble exercise in trust, laying the foundations for more developed and complicated work, which might (for reasons of safety) absolutely depend on common understandings, for trapeze

artists, for instance, or tumblers. In all cases, rhythm is the defining factor, the means by which direct and unarticulated understandings are communicated. In this exercise, rhythm is directly related to the biomechanical triplet described in the 1922 Programme: Intention (prepare to throw), Execution (throw), Reaction (pause before the next throw).

Exercise three: Extension to stick throw

Stand in pairs, facing each other about 1.5m apart and with a stick in each of your right hands. Begin to toss the sticks vertically to each other. Throw from the right and catch with the left before passing the caught stick to yourself. Repeat, sending the stick on a rectangular journey between you and your partner. Begin to absorb the collective rhythm established between the two of you, so that the sense of effort is decreased and the 'intention-execution-reaction' structure is progressively located in the body not the head.

Mix up the materials in the exercise – play in different directions, with two umbrellas, small hat-stands, pass standard lamps or stools between you. Enlarge the number of participants to four, then six, then more still. Develop the exchanges into a repeatable étude with a simple scenario, and with a new consideration for an audience.

Thus the work with sticks has built from individual skills development to small ensemble improvisations and études, directed increasingly at a spectatorship. Viewed over many months, it is the kind of development Meyerhold's students underwent in the Troitskaya studio in Petersburg, culminating in the 'First Evening of Interludes, Études and Pantomimes' performed on February 12 1915:

Street Conjurers. A pantomime in the manner of a Venetian popular show of the late eighteenth century...The pantomime was performed on two levels, the proscenium and the elevated main stage. The latter was occupied by the principal conjurer, together with his assistant and his acrobat...Properties: a curtain held by proscenium servants and serving as a backcloth for the juggling scene, a mat for the acrobat; a

basket containing the juggler's equipment: a magic wand, a flying butterfly, a golden orange, a magic veil, a collapsible stick, a tambourine, two plates, a little violin with a long bow...two rapiers, a fan, a rose...

(Braun 1991: 150)

Here, in microcosm, is the practical root of biomechanics' play with objects – partly improvised theatre based on popular theatre traditions, using a cache of emblematic props and imbued with a powerful, if ironic, sense of magic. As the work evolved to respond to the post-revolutionary environment, particularly for troupes of amateur workers contributing to Meyerhold's 'October in the Theatre', the training developed a more efficient approach, eliminating objects or props and enabling a rudimentary biomechanics to be delivered in ill-equipped or non-theatre spaces. The post-perestroika list of extant études, taught by pupils of Meyerhold's co-deviser, Nikolai Kustov, highlights this absence of actual objects: Throwing the Stone, Shooting the Bow, Stab to the Chest and Leap on the Chest, all tell micro-narratives of acts of aggression but these are estranged by a purposefully ironic lack of weaponry. Instead, as with the Cuckold production, the objects of the exercises are 'mimed into existence':

Exercise four: Stab to the Chest étude

In pairs again, stand about 10m apart. One of you is 'active', the other 'passive'. The passive participant slowly yields to you as you walk towards him, offering his chest and bending backwards like a tragic limbo dancer. As the active performer, you glide sideways towards your foe, crossing one leg over the other whilst reaching for the imaginary dagger tucked into your belt. Once you have met, you embrace your partner, towering over him and supporting his back with your left forearm. At the same time, your other hand prepares to deliver a death-blow; poised momentarily above him, you abruptly stab down with your fist, letting your victim sink to the floor.

This fragment of a pair étude illustrates how the études build on the work with wands. Firstly, it is subject to the same rhythmic underscoring as the stick

work: each action is broken down into its constituent 'intention', 'execution' and 'reaction',^v in keeping with the 1922 programme. Indeed, the étude as a whole might also be thought of in the same terms, with the long approach as the 'namerenie', the stabbing itself, the 'osuschestvlenie' and the concluding return to normal as the 'reaktsia'. Secondly, the unspoken understanding begun in the larger class is intensified in this exercise, as each action is negotiated between the pair, in consort and in the moment. Thirdly, the dexterity with external props inculcated in the balancing and throwing exercises is now given freer rein as the task shifts to creating, not just manipulating, the object which binds the pair together.

Viewed as such, it is no coincidence that the Stab étude was devised at the same time as The Magnanimous Cuckold was staged at Meyerhold's Actor's Theatre – its variant, the Leap on the Chest was, famously, incorporated into the production, adapted from the Sicilian tragedian Giovanni di Grasso, but here imbued with a spirit of comic mayhem rather than portentous tragedy. The techniques encapsulated in these simple exercises were at their most explicit in the Cuckold production, where training processes blurred at times with performance choices. Later Meyerhold productions utilised the wand and étude work in a far more complex and sophisticated way, including the masterful manipulation of objects in the Government Inspector (1926).

One short example must suffice:

Like a time machine [the moving platforms] brought to modernity an immobile picture of a past age – its objects, mahogany furniture, porcelain, bronze, silk brocade – and the people of a bygone time...a fop, drunk à la Hoffmann, romantically thin, brings a cigar with a somnambulistic motion to his tired mouth. Pieces of heavy and juicy melon are diced into a bowl. Enchanted objects, swaying slightly, float through the hands of the hypnotized servants.

(Rudnitsky 1981: 391-2)

Of course, Meyerhold's pursuit of a dark realism in Gogol's play was aesthetically in sharp contrast to the polysemic Cuckold: in short, his use of objects in The Government Inspector was much less stylized. But there is still an unmistakable and virtuosic fluidity to the way in which props were handled in this piece, emphasized by the dreamlike quality in many of Meyerhold's directorial choices and clearly informed by a training regime which prioritized balance, rhythm, collective understanding and material dexterity.

Reaktsia – return to initial position

Such 'enchanted' theatricality, evidenced in Meyerhold's most famous production, does not of course come from simple stick exercises or études alone, nor is the heightened expressiveness of an Ilinsky, Babanova or Zaichikov in The Magnanimous Cuckold explained away through a few juggling exercises. But the brief examination here of some of the most fundamental exercises with objects does serve to illuminate aspects of the production history which otherwise remain unspoken. Igor Ilinsky has called Cuckold 'the most significant of all [Meyerhold's] productions' because of the way it 'displayed most eloquently his system of biomechanics' (Braun 1998: 184) and yet the connection between the training and the productions remains largely implicit in the production analyses. To give one example: many of the key reviews of the production quote the critic Alexei Gvozdev and his article IlBaZai (the composite of Ilinsky, Babanova and Zaichikov). In this review Gvozdev: 'marveled at the sympathetic unity of the collective movement of the three actors, which was completely synchronized' (Worrall 2002: 69) and celebrated their 'amazing partner sense' (Rudnitsky 1981: 307). Such remarkable unity clearly builds upon a range of training techniques, including, as we have seen, the étude work; part of IlBaZai's training was also with the ur-prop of the stick or 'wand', demanding the kind of collective responsibility and rhythmic responsiveness described above. Indeed, it may not be overstating things to suggest that the polysemic quality of the objects in the early post-revolutionary work – their rebellious multivalency, described by Golub – had little to do with the design of the props themselves. In Cuckold,

as I have noted, they were simply enlarged or mimed and in Death of Tarelkin they ‘functioned so capriciously that the young performers lost all confidence in them’ (Braun 1998: 186), even though they had been created specially by Popova’s constructivist colleague, Varvara Stepanova. The object ‘conjuring’, which Golub identifies arguably had more to do with the actors’ hard-won skills in prop manipulation, the basis for which has been suggested here.

To return to Meyerhold’s oblique algebra from 1922: how does it help us understand better the production record as it stands? At a practical level, as indicated in the Training section of this essay, the intention-execution-reaction structure underpins all the activity of the workshop - by regulating the throwing of the sticks and by shaping étude and improvisation work. But, more significantly, the tripartite formula dynamises the stage space itself. There are other articulations of this idea (Braun 1991: 198, 201), but none of them indicate the centrality of the execution (o) in the way the 1922 Programme does, held, as it is, in explicit tension between the intention (n) and reaction (r).

$$A1 = n \begin{array}{c} \circ \\ / \quad \backslash \\ \quad \quad r \end{array}$$

In placing emphasis on the execution in this way, the action itself is constantly highlighted, ironised or estranged. As the end of one cycle always presupposes the beginning of the next, the energy of a Meyerhold production is continually moving forward, inviting its spectatorship along for the ride. This bracketing of action determines a self-presentational, meta-theatrical style of performance, as well as a rigorous and carefully defined score for each of the actors. In short, it creates the space, night after night, for magic to be exercised.

Notes

ⁱ According to Meyerhold, 'pre-acting prepares the spectator's perceptions in such a way that he comprehends the scenic situation fully resolved in advance and so has no need to make any effort to grasp the underlying message of the scene' (Braun 1991: 206).

ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, Meyerhold offers no explanation of 'A1' in the programme, although the term is used in other documents of the period to mean the thinking half of the actor or 'the artist who conceives the idea', whilst A2 is the 'doing half' (Braun 1991: 198).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Pitches (2003, chapter 4) for definitions, of the otkaz, posil and tochka.

^{iv} Nelson proposes a triumvirate of knowledges at work within Practice as Research contexts: Practitioner Knowledge in dynamic tension with Critical Reflection and Conceptual Framework.

^v For visual details of this breakdown, see Bogdanov (1997).

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