

Katie Normington

## Meyerhold and the New Millennium

In this article, Katie Normington outlines the increasing interest in Meyerhold's work and assesses previous applications of his methods to contemporary production work. She goes on to consider how working as movement director for Red Shift Theatre Company's adaptation of Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby*, enabled research into the application of Meyerhold's system of Biomechanics. Rehearsals for *Bartleby* combined actor-training and text rehearsals so that the Stanislavskian-trained actors gained ownership of biomechanical principles and could apply aspects to their independent exploration. This article analyzes the results of the work, and concludes that Meyerholdian techniques developed a physical architecture for the performance which, even during an arduous tour, maintained the clear shape and rhythm of the production. The use of principles such as *rakurs*, often neglected within present-day experimentation, proved to be essential in providing actors with a sense of composition and an awareness of their bodies in space. However, aspects such as facial expression and emotional excitability require further investigation. Katie Normington is Senior Lecturer in Drama at Royal Holloway, University of London.

BECAUSE it has seemed strange in an age dominated by the naturalistic acting styles associated with Stanislavsky, Strasberg, and their followers, the virtually limitless potential of biomechanics has long been obscured. Perhaps it will become apparent again in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Leach, writing about Meyerhold's system of actor training, notes that his methods seemed antithetical to the modes of acting determined by followers of Stanislavsky. This is not to suggest, as has often been the case, that Stanislavsky and Meyerhold's training ideas should be seen as diametrically opposed. There are some similarities between Meyerhold's modes of training and the development of the 'method of physical action' that Stanislavsky initiated in his later life.<sup>2</sup>

Meyerhold never laid down the tenets of his biomechanical training, but he assigned student Mikhail Korenev to prepare material for a planned theatre encyclopedia. The documentation makes clear that biomechanics is 'the law of actor movement in stage space, the working out by experimental means of a scheme of training exercises and acting devices based on exact calculation and regulation of actor behaviour on the stage'.<sup>3</sup>

Is there anything in Robert Leach's claim that Meyerholdian biomechanics may become

a viable actor training method during this millennium? The work of the Russian director, assassinated under the Stalin regime in 1940, was obliterated from his own land for much of the last century. But interest in his methods in Britain, Europe, and America has continued to develop.

The current fascination with Meyerhold's work is mainly due to two factors. First, the rise of physical theatre and dance theatre within contemporary theatre practice finds much of interest in Meyerhold's principles. Second, the increased freedom following the demise of communism has allowed Gennady Bogdanov and Aleksei Levinsky, two former students of Meyerholdian actor Nikolai Kustov, to make his training accessible to western practitioners and academics.<sup>4</sup>

It is through both these two routes that my personal interest in Meyerhold has found shape. In 1998 I attended Bogdanov's course on biomechanics hosted by the International Theatre Workshop in London.<sup>5</sup> I have subsequently applied this training to my teaching of Masters students on programmes in Physical Theatre and Performance Studies. Then in January 2004 an opportunity arose to investigate the application of these methods within a professional theatre context, when,

during a sabbatical, I worked on Red Shift Theatre Company's revival of *Bartleby*.

Red Shift, a medium-sized touring theatre, was co-founded by artistic director Jonathan Holloway in 1982. The company, which is funded by Arts Council England, frequently present adaptations through a style that is visually and physically based. *Bartleby*, based on the novella by Herman Melville, was adapted for the stage by R. L. Lane and first presented by the company in 1996. The story, set on Wall Street in the 1850s, tells of the disruption of a firm of legal scribes by the arrival of Bartleby, 'who prefers not to' do anything. His breakdown and evident homelessness leads to an imprisonment in the city's 'Tombs', where he refuses to eat and eventually dies. *Bartleby* opens itself to various allegorical readings: a Christ-like journey through the wilderness, or the demise of the mentally afflicted within an unsympathetic community.

I hadn't set out with the idea of utilizing Meyerhold's training when I initially took on the job of movement director. During the course of pre-production discussions the similarities between the stylized movement required for the chorus of the three scribes and Meyerhold's grotesque compositional style became apparent. Eugenio Barba reflects that Meyerhold utilized a level of dramaturgical organization which 'plunge[d] the spectators' senses and understanding into an unexpected void that condenses and disorients their expectations'.<sup>6</sup> Frequently the scribes' inner reactions to a situation regarding *Bartleby* needed to be embodied in an expressionistic movement.

Thinking about the stylized compositions that the production required I was reminded of the photographs of Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* and of Nick Worrell's description of the company, 'caught in a moment of life, mostly in grotesque attitudes, standing, kneeling, gesturing, grimacing. It was as if death had come to each, unexpectedly, as he might to victims of a volcano disaster just unchipped from a preserving mound of lava.'<sup>7</sup> The scribes at their desks bitterly working while snidely expressing their resentment of *Bartleby* seemed similarly lava-bound.

## Previous Experiments

Prior to rehearsals I was mindful of other experiments that had recently taken place with regard to applying Meyerholdian principles to production work. In particular I considered the work of Jonathan Pitches and Anthony Shrubbsall at Northampton University outlined in *Studies in Theatre Production* (1997), and that of the Phoenix Ensemble, New York, documented by Jane Baldwin in *Theatre Topics* (1995).

The Northampton production of *The Government Inspector* utilized biomechanical training that the director had gained with Levinsky. Lecturer Jonathan Pitches, who played Khlestakov, was interested to see 'what, if any, convergence I might find between biomechanics and Stanislavsky's system'.<sup>8</sup> The rehearsal process entailed two hours of biomechanical training followed by three hours of text-based rehearsals, a model based upon Levinsky's own approach at the Moscow Experimental Studio.

Pitches and Shrubbsall utilized a full range of biomechanical training, which included stick work, footwork, and the *étude* 'throwing the stone'. They found that the exercises engendered rhythm, balance, spatial awareness, and receptivity within their ensemble. The vocabulary of the *étude* became increasingly useful within rehearsals as a shared language, and enabled a shorthand between director and actor. The use of the *étude* provided the physical technique for Pitches to move between the 'different masks' of Khlestakov with an agility 'which allowed me to avoid a retreat into casual psychology'.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most illuminating moments is Pitches's description of his performances. During opening night he cut two pages from the last scene of Act One and as a consequence found himself abandoning the physical score and drifting back to his reliance on Stanislavskian technique. The following night he returned to the 'rhythmical and gestural pattern of the *étude*' and felt equipped to deal with the hasty mental and physical shifts that the role required.<sup>10</sup>

Another report of the training and application of biomechanics is that undertaken at

Tufts University in 1993. Jane Baldwin provides a detailed account of the workshop process led by Gennady Bogdanov and Nikolai Karpov. Their methods were later applied to Phoenix Ensemble's production of Mayakovsky's play *The Bathtub*, directed by Ivan Popovski, a recent graduate of the Moscow theatre school, GITIS (Russian Academy of Theatrical Art).<sup>11</sup>

Baldwin carefully details the four-week long training period at Tufts University. She notes how the sessions began with extensive full-body warm-ups which aimed to increase flexibility, balance, and co-ordination. The second stage of the workshops progressed to spatial exercises that both developed a kinesthetic sense of the body within space, and created a sense of presence for the actor. The third section of the classes moved to object work, usually with sticks and balls. This area of work fostered partnering skills, co-ordination, balance, focusing the attention outside the body and moving with objects. The final stages of the class work involved studying Meyerhold's *études*, which again promoted a sense of rhythm, of partnering, precision, physical control, and emotional transition.

Unfortunately Baldwin's account of the application of Meyerholdian training to the production is somewhat scant. She does raise some issues such as the differences that faced method-trained actors in preparing roles through movement rather than psychology. Baldwin notes that the actors developed 'an almost directorial awareness of composition'.<sup>12</sup> The use of choreographed moments of the *études* within the production was similar to that of the Northampton experiment.

As the rehearsal period of *Bartleby* approached, I was aware of certain issues that had to be addressed. From my knowledge of previous applications of Meyerholdian techniques I was confident that this method would prove fruitful, but I had two overriding concerns: the lack of time that could be given to training; and how to integrate training and rehearsals, which are essentially two very different activities.

The director and I agreed that the movement training would take place two mornings

a week during a four-week rehearsal process. In practice the sessions extended themselves to two full days. Given the time limitations, it was more useful to establish 'principles' of Meyerhold's work that could be applied to the performance work. In fact, this is the approach favoured by Bogdanov when he works with groups for short periods of time: 'We create a foundation of biomechanical principles on which contemporary actors and directors can build their work'.<sup>13</sup>

### The Rehearsals: the Acting Cycle

The elements that I chose to work with were: the basics of the acting cycle; the dactyl, and a fragment of the 'stab in the chest' *étude*; and object work. Most importantly I was concerned that these exercises were applied to the text and that the movement training was not seen as separate from the other rehearsal work.

Meyerhold's acting cycle, as taught by Bogdanov, has three clear stages: *otkaz*, which is the preparation stage – in effect a type of refusal or anti-movement that precedes the actual movement; *posil*, the sending, or the passage/pathway to the action; and *tochka*, a point in space, or *stoika*, a stance or position – the last two terms are used interchangeably – and the cycle is completed as a new *otkaz* is conceived from the *stoika*.<sup>14</sup> An exercise to introduce the cycle was initiated using abstract movements while walking around the rehearsal space. During the next few movement rehearsals this cycle was built upon to incorporate some of the nuances.

*Tormos*, or delay, has the effect of putting a brake on the movement of the *posil*. The actors found this helpful in defining stages of the overall movement. The final aspect we worked with, *rakurs*, though often missed by academics, proved to be the most essential.<sup>15</sup> *Raccourci*, a term also used, is concerned with placing the body on a plane or angle, making it appear three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional. The actors adopted this final concept very receptively; and the sculptural, compositional sense that it imbued in them shaped their work on stage. The enactment of *raccourci* within the acting cycle was less



The use of *rakurs* allowed the actors to develop an awareness of the use of composition and plane. Ralph Bolland as Bartleby with the scriveners Adam Dunseath and Chris Porter. Photo: Gerald Murray.

clear, though. Often the shaping of the body into its sculptural plane seemed to form another part of the cycle; a new unit appeared. Though the actors liked this because it gave them time to think about the next cycle, it also muddied the enactment of the cycle.

The application of the acting cycle to the text was very successful. During the first movement session I selected a few scenes that incorporated reactions to a significant event. I outlined the core action of the scene and selected two or three lines of dialogue that summed up the moment. Through applying the cycle in this way, the chorus of three scriveners (Stanislavsky-trained) were able to produce large physical reactions. The use of the different stages of the cycle gave them a structure that could be applied to externalize their responses.

It was also evident that the principles of the acting cycle were being accepted and utilized by the actors independently. At the second movement workshop one actor rep-

orted that the cycle had been useful within the intervening text rehearsals. The scriveners spent much time on stage miming the act of copying a legal document. The actor found that applying the cycle forced him to visualize the work he was copying and to be accurate as he wrote it. This observation is similar to one made by an actor on the Tufts University course: 'The whole question of concentration has taken on new meanings for me. There is an intensity, an absoluteness of concentration, that I have never encountered in actor training.'<sup>16</sup>

### The Dactyl and *Études*

Meyerhold used the dactyl, a movement based on the rhythm of the poetic metre of one long and two short feet, at the beginning and end of his training exercises. There are numerous contradictory descriptions of the movement sequence, and it can be best witnessed being performed by Levinski at a workshop in Cardiff documented by Arts

Archives.<sup>17</sup> What is significant is its manner of execution. It is initially performed on a count of '*ee ras dva*' ('and, one, two'), and then executed in silence.

The exercise engenders a sense of rhythm within the participants. It was noticeable the first time we performed this movement that there was little synchronicity within the group, but by the second workshop the group awareness of listening to one another was vastly improved. However, there are numerous exercises that can be used to achieve the same effect, and I am not claiming that this is specific to Meyerhold's training.

During early rehearsals we studied an exercise that Bogdanov uses which mimics the essence of an *étude*. The *études* themselves are extremely complicated and take hours of preparation in order to execute. Bogdanov extrapolates the core of the 'Stab in the Chest' *étude* in which one actor approaches their partner, raising the knife in their hand, and stabs them. The other partner slowly tilts backwards from the pelvis until the moment of the penetration of the knife, when they drop backwards to their full extent.

The exercise draws upon a number of Meyerholdian principles: the use of *otkas*, the *posil* and the *stoika*, and the use of *tormoz* and *rakurs*. It is significant because it is an exercise in how physical stimulation can create reflex excitability – the two actors feel hatred, fear, etc., as a result of adopting the positions. The exterior form gives way to an emotional form. It is a demonstration of Meyerhold's belief that 'all psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes'.<sup>18</sup> The actors also commented on the degree of focus it brought to their partnering: the timing between each pair had to be precise or the moment of the stab was lost. This was something they wished to take to their stage relationships.

### Object Work

The set for Red Shift's production of *Bartleby* comprised four large stainless-steel desks that could be wheeled around when up-ended, and four high, ladder-backed metal chairs. These pieces formed the scenery for

the locations of the script: Standard's law offices on Wall Street; his new premises; a stairwell; and the 'Tombs' where Bartleby was finally incarcerated.

The expressionistic qualities of the performance were enhanced by the repeated changes in the perspective from which the action was viewed. At one point, the desks revolved so that the audience saw the scene from the rear of the offices, at other points the desks became increasingly tilted to mirror the disarray of both Bartleby's mind and the effects of his behaviour on Standard's office. At all times the actors were responsible for shifting the 'scenery'.

Jane Baldwin describes how the object work undertaken at Tufts resulted in the development of skills including rhythm, coordination, and moving through space with an object. In the movement sessions we extended the use of the acting cycle from abstract movement to moving the desks and chairs. It was important that all scenery changes were performed with ease and conducted in character.

### *Raccourci*

The use of the acting cycle here clearly gave the actors a sense of purpose and precision; also, less expectedly, it brought into play another of Meyerhold's preoccupations. It became increasingly important that these tasks were executed with ergonomic efficiency – and so we stumbled upon Meyerhold's interest in Taylorism. As Braun points out, the use of the industrialist's ideas produces 'an absence of superfluous, unproductive movements; rhythm; the correct positioning of the body's centre of gravity and stability'.<sup>19</sup> These were almost exactly the qualities that were needed for the scene changes. Perhaps the only variant was the positioning of the centre of gravity. Because each actor performed the movements as their character, they utilized varying centres of gravity.

The principle of *raccourci* became increasingly important to the rehearsals. The use of sculptural composition was an idea that could be applied by the actors and directors to any moment on stage; and the more we





The acting cycle enabled the performers to pay attention to small detail and work with a clear focus and concentration. Adam Dunseath, Chris Porter, and Edward Max as the scribes. Photo: Gerald Murray.

worked, certain rules of composition were revealed. These laws seemed equally applicable to both the moments of greatest stylization and those of 'naturalism'. The use of compositions on stage using strong diagonal lines and triangles was most effective. Here the establishment of a clear plane seemed to allow for the whole stage picture to embody the notion of *rakurs*. Similarly, the isolation of different parts of the body helped to create the necessary sculptural effect.

For example, an actor's head might turn but his body stay in its original plane, or the hands might react without the head noticing what was occurring. This disjunction of the body could be executed to varying degrees: on a large scale for the chorus, and in minute form for the more 'naturalistic' characters of Bartleby and Standard. Even the scribes were able to use this principle in subtle ways; while copying at their desks the angles of their long steel pens were adjusted to emphasize their alienation with the hand and arm.

The principle of *rakurs* seemed tied into finding the rhythm of each sequence. Where

choral actions were performed, it was important that a rhythm helped the sculptural compositions. Another set of compositional rules developed that were based on the alliance between composition and rhythm. Group movements worked best when they were performed using devices such as a seesaw mechanism or choral canons. Thus reactions to Bartleby were executed with the scribes forming their positions one after another; the seats at their desks formed a diagonal which swept upstage; and their bodies fell into positions which were contorted both individually and as a group. At other moments their response to a situation seemed best reflected in a seesaw action, one actor lurching forward, another recoiling. The rhythm of this reaction had to be carefully timed in order to show the conjunction between the two responses.

But these moments were not always easily found within the rehearsal room. For the psychologically trained actors this type of work often felt alien. The expressionistic responses required were sometimes blocked be-

cause 'it isn't what my character would do'. As the work continued the actors acknowledged that the physical biomechanical methods made demands that were quite different from the methods of textual interpretation they were used to. Instead they had to engage with the notion of reflexivity; they had to respond to a physical position with a physical reaction.

### Masks

As Jonathan Pitches points out, Meyerhold's idea of working with masks did not mean utilizing the literal object. Instead his actors wore a facial mask constructed from the actor's own facial muscles. This is a concept that is evident in Grotowski's work, too. Photographs of *Akropolis* show the faces of the actors frozen in their expressions.<sup>20</sup> The use of the immobile facial mask both enhances the expressivity of the physical body and crystallizes an emotional response; and,

as Pitches notes, these can often be opposing forces.<sup>21</sup> The issue of facial masks arose through text rehearsals: what should happen to the actors' faces during the stylized sequences? With this in mind, the movement sessions began to explore the use of the face.

Our initial work aimed to develop a flexibility of the facial muscles and 'warm up' the face as a mode of 'heightened' expressivity. Initial games of 'pass the face' led to mobile tableau work where we experimented with keeping a set facial mask while letting the body express a reaction to the given situation. The actors admitted that much of their energy had been placed in generating changing facial reactions during the stylized parts of the text. Now that we had immobilized that, they were able to make their bodies more responsive.

But as this work was applied to text rehearsals, the problem of the actors' faces remained. As director Jonathan Holloway observed, the faces seemed to pass from a



A problem arose as to how to retreat from stylized sections back to more conventional text playing. Scriveners Chris Porter, Adam Dunseath, and Edward Max surround Standard, played by David Keller. Photo: Gerald Murray.

stage of 'acting' to 'non-acting'. While they were engaged with the text their facial responses were very pliable; once they undertook a stylized sequence their frozen masks seemed to enhance their status as caricatures. Although the work on facial masks helped to develop the actors' physical abilities, we never really found a solution to the limitations of the expressivity of the frozen face.

### Problems

The issue of facial expressions was one of a number of problems that became apparent as rehearsals progressed. At the beginning of one movement session, an actor commented that during the text rehearsals he had felt 'stuck' during the stylized sections. He could perform the heightened reaction, but once this had reached its fullest point he questioned how he could get back to the text. The heightened responses had become like a moment of *tormoz*: the action was suspended while the 'choreography' of the stylized section was performed. How could he return from this point to drive the action forward?

His question was revealing, because it showed the degree to which the notion of the acting cycle had been lost. Within Meyerhold's cycle the moment of arrival also signals the preparation for the next cycle. We spent some time working with living tableaux, looking at abstract reactions and working out how the cycle could continue to enable the performers to return to their starting points. The revision of the acting cycle and the application of differing rhythms for each cycle helped the actors to find ways of crossing the boundaries between stylization and naturalism. But this concern showed the problem of combining such styles. In order to make the material work smoothly, the concept of Meyerhold's cycle needed to be applied to the whole work.

Meyerhold pointed this out: 'Even in the pauses you must maintain the tempo of the dialogue.'<sup>22</sup> The actors were increasingly able to make use of this concept. The so-called naturalistic moments might also be played by utilizing the cycle, although it may not be so externally apparent.

### Conclusions

Because this production of *Bartleby* was a revival, it has been possible to look back at the video of the previous production and to compare the outcomes of the application of a Meyerholdian method. There are a number of differences that are clearly apparent, but it is difficult to attribute these solely to the influence of Meyerhold, since the company of actors was also different, Jonathan Holloway's direction had probably changed during the intervening years, and theatrical fashions have certainly altered.

However, the differences are very noticeable. In the recent production the characterizations are far more physically based, and movements are bolder and more expressionistic. All the actors showed a precision of movement that was lacking in the original production; in the 2004 production their actions were focused and motivated, and had a rhythmic quality to them. The stage composition within the latest production was far more effective; the actors were rarely on the same plane as each other, their bodies were often angled, and they were able to play scenes at great distances from one another. Critics noted that there was a strong sense of ensemble; the influence of the partnering work was apparent.

Watching the production of *Bartleby* when it was both in the middle and towards the end of an arduous six-week tour revealed other dimensions related to the application of Meyerhold's work. To my surprise the movement sections of the production never lost their shape; the actors had extended some sections, but a focus and tightness was consistently evident. The motivation of actions remained strong and clear. Sections of the show that still relied on Stanislavskian techniques seemed less stable in comparison; often the rhythm of those parts was very variable within each performance, whereas the Meyerholdian text maintained a clear dynamic. It proved that:

A theatre built on psychological foundations is as certain to collapse as a house built on sand. On the other hand, a theatre which relies on *physical elements* is at very least assured of clarity.<sup>23</sup>



The experiment proved to me that Meyerhold offers much for the new millennium. In particular, the effect of *rakurs* on the actors' spatial awareness and the composition of the action was intriguing – a reminder that 'the ability to position one's body in space is a fundamental law of acting'.<sup>24</sup> The creation of a rhythmically shaped performance piece was very inspiring. There were other dimensions that I felt were not satisfactorily explored, notably the use of a physical text to create emotional excitement – a facet that previous experiments have managed to tackle.

It would be thrilling one day to have the luxury of time to make a performance piece that created a physical outline for each scene: a system which engaged firstly with corporeal responses to the text, and then elaborated this through application of the words. But it was noticeable within rehearsals that I could only get through a couple of pages of script during an afternoon; about a fifth of the proportion that traditional rehearsing produced. It may still take many years of this millennium to find just what Meyerhold can offer.

## Notes and References

1. Robert Leach, 'Meyerhold and Biomechanics', in A. Hodge, ed., *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 53.
2. Critics have been careful to point out the essential differences in the systems. See Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics* (North Carolina: McFarland, 1996), p. 5–6.
3. Mikhail Korenev, 'The Biomechanics of Vsevolod Meyerhold', cited in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*, p. 133.

4. It is Kustov who modelled the photographs of 'Shooting the Bow'. See Mel Gordon, 'Meyerhold's Biomechanics', in P. Zarrilli, ed., *Acting (Re)Considered* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 85–107.

5. For video documentation of these workshops, see *Meyerhold's Biomechanics and Rhythm*, 6 volumes (Exeter: Arts Documentation Unit, 1999).

6. Eugenio Barba, 'Grandfathers, Orphans, and the Family Saga of European Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XIX, No. 2 (May 2003), p. 113.

7. Nick Worrall, 'Meyerhold directs Gogol's *Government Inspector*', *Theatre Quarterly*, II (1972), p. 94.

8. Jonathan Pitches, 'The Actor's Perspective', *Studies in Theatre Production*, No. 16 (December 1997), p. 99.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

11. Jane Baldwin points out that there is an irony in Bogdanov's teaching at GITIS since the school was founded under the auspices of Meyerhold. See Jane Baldwin, 'Meyerhold's Theatrical Biomechanics: an Acting Technique for Today', *Theatre Topics*, V, No. 2 (September 1995), p. 183.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

14. I am using the terms taught by Bogdanov – spellings of these seem subject to wide variation within academic sources.

15. Robert Leach interprets the term as 'silhouette'. See Leach, 'Meyerhold and Biomechanics', p. 41.

16. Quoted in Baldwin, 'Meyerhold's Theatrical Biomechanics', p. 186.

17. Alexsei Levinski, *Meyerhold's Biomechanics: a Workshop*, video (Exeter: Arts Documentation Unit, 1997).

18. Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. Edward Braun (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), p. 199.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

20. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1968), plates 9–12.

21. Jonathan Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 59.

22. A. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks . . . Meyerhold Rehearses*, trans. Alma Law (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997), p. 104.

23. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 199.

24. A. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, p. 108.