

THE GESTURE AND THE BODY: RETHINKING SOME OF THE BASIC APPROACHES TO ACTING IN THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE

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Abstract: This paper examines some of the basic creative and receptive principles formulated by the historical theatrical avant-garde regarding gestuality and the physical behaviour of actors. It considers the relationship between the historical establishment of the directing profession and the development of interest in gesture, as well as the relationship between gesture and theatrical performance in today's media reality. The aim, given the limited length of the article, is to outline the tendency to think of gesture and the body in ready-made formulae, distorted by the multimedia convergence that both theatre production and theatre pedagogy suffer from. A survey of theatrical practices of the past allows us to consider the purity of the actor's performance as a function of theatrical direction and performance as a complete artistic fact.

Keywords: gesture, body, actor, modernity, theatrical avant-garde, media.

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Introduction

My motivation for turning to the historical theatrical avant-garde and attempting to re-examine some aspects of its legacy is both personal and related to my work as a director and researcher. It lies in the radical drive of modernism, which has repeatedly aroused my admiration, to reform stage aesthetics and theatre in general by conceptualizing the understanding of theatrical performance in terms of a specific (stage) language. This language should be created by the director of the performance with his own lexemes and ultimately offer the audience the construction of a new world. (Ubersfeld, pp. 10-19) The purpose of this mental and aesthetic operation was to preserve the value of theatrical performance from the falseness of the already obsolete performative form (the actor's *emploi*, the universal decoration, the declamatory speech and the learned gestural score), which had inevitably become an anachronism, devoid of content, with the advent of modernity.

In this case, my words of admiration come much more from my experience as a director than from my work as a researcher. But it is as a researcher of the history of theatre from the director's perspective that I would like to add that articulating the global processes described above (and their consequences) in the present is already particularly difficult. I think this is evident from both a creative and a receptive point of view. In my opinion, this is due to the increasingly complex world of images (and their transfer to the stage) in today's mediatized society. On the one hand, this visual world functions mainly thanks to the double conditioning of the theatrical – we perceive a theatrical act as an action or presence that has a distinct bodily characteristic, is intentionally charged with signs/meanings, and

is performed in a dedicated space. In short, theatricality is increasingly present in real life and less and less able to be structured in stage space. It's worth asking, however, whether our modernist colleagues didn't make similar observations at the beginning of the last century?

Specifically, my text addresses the creative act, the pedagogical approach, as well as the possible reception of the physicality of nowadays' performer's stage presence, by using theatrical practices and training that were discovered almost (or more) than a hundred years ago. If the modernists were outraged by the outmoded forms and the lack of aesthetic courage, if they attacked the bourgeois attitudes towards the art of theatre that turned it into escapist commercial entertainment, what are we left with? What have they left us? Are we not already living at a time in which theatrical convention is in decline at the expense of (multi)medial simulations of reality?

A text of this kind cannot answer all these questions, nor does it need to. The task I have set myself is to explore (as far as I can) the processes that have formed the aesthetic grounds for interest in gesture, and how its use takes on different artistic dimensions. My basic hypothesis is that it is the most primary authentic manifestation of the theatrical. At the same time, however, I think that nowadays we are too gullible in accepting statements that have become empty of content – what is psychological theatre, what is theatre of gesture, what is epic theatre, what is genre?, and so on. This situation certainly brings us closer to our Modernist colleagues of more than a hundred years ago. The main practical problem that concerns me is: how can we be sure that the content we load into certain theatrical intentions today is not simply disconnected and alienated from reality, since we live in a world in which it is already difficult to distinguish reality from images produced by the media? How can we know that we are producing real aesthetic phenomena and not simulacra?

The arguments that what the text focuses on are real and not imaginary processes, I find not only in the hyper-medial environment, which is expanded and inflated to infinity by new digital phenomena (platforms, methods, technologies), but also in the cognitive attitudes of audiences, which are changing under the influence of media convergence. This offshoot of the theme is very interesting, but unfortunately the limited size of the text does not allow me to pay enough attention to it, so I will only highlight the reasons that characterize the trends. Last but not least, one of the main arguments is that a phenomenon as concrete and immediate as gesture, which should be the object of the director's control, often falls under the radar of stage language and is left to chance.

Therefore, the main focus of the text lies on how to understand the general propositions about the theatrical gesture as a fundamental production of theatrical

corporeality, from the legacy of the great names of the theatrical avant-garde such as K. S. Stanislavski, V. Meyerhold and B. Brecht, and their forerunners in the exploration and practical isolation of gesture as a stage sign. On the one hand, it is a process of understanding how something that has a primary physical charge and the potential of individual actorly expression becomes a performative act with a high degree of abstraction. On the other hand, what I am trying to address here is both the creative and the receptive problem of the individual creative act of the actor, an act incorporated into a collective work, shaped under the authorship of the director, with a predetermined set of signs/codes that must turn it into a kind of language. In this narrative, the director occupies an essential position, not only because the author of this text is a director. The main research approach of the text is deductive – it seeks to take the global problem as a starting point in order to find its concrete manifestations. In this case, my practice as a director and my ongoing research interest in its historical validation and exploration inform some of the approaches.

Reality and simulation

More than 40 years ago, Baudrillard argued that reality is not self-evident, but a matter of analogy and interpretation – like a pervasive virus that adapts to its carriers. Because of this peculiarity of reality, historical and political phenomena often do not correspond literally, either geographically or historically. All this, together with contemporary complex multimedia, social and political processes, further distorts our perception of what appears real to us and what we legitimize as real. We should therefore stress that simulation and simulacrum apply with particular force to theatrical performance because the simulacrum is a conceptual model that replaces the real with signs of the real (Baudrillard, 1995, pp. 16-19). Theatre functions anyway as a simulation machine for images, situations, etc. This is its game. All of which brings us immediately to J. F. Lyotard's proposal in his essay "La dent, la paume" ("The Tooth, the Palm") for an energetic theatre that would abandon any position of power that has been familiar from bourgeois attitudes to dramatic theatre and replace the stage world with an iconography similar to contemporary performance and dance (Lyotard, 1976).

Of course, the relationship between theatre and reality can be manifold: mimetic, dialectical, associative, simulacrum, etc., depending on what the theatrical work itself legitimates as true. As I have already said, the realization of this relationship requires a space in which bodies act. The space is the processor that validates the algorithm of each physical action. This is why, in a certain sense, this relationship (between the world of theatre and reality) is made up of various

dialectical paradoxes, based on the fact that theatre constantly transfers, even literally, images from reality to the fictional space of the stage – in physical space, on the surface of the stage, they are objectified and thus become an artistic fact. (Denchev, 2023, pp. 27-39)

The encoding of these actions in space transforms the gesture from an action into a message. Our task is not to focus on the semiotic analysis of the possibilities of interpretation, but to bring to the surface that part of the processes that emerged in the historical theatrical avant-garde and developed the iconography of the actor's presence precisely through gesture. At the same time, we cannot ignore the historical fact that, throughout its history, theatre has suffered all kinds of influences from the visual media, starting with painting, which at one point, thanks to Sebastiano Serlio during the Renaissance, also became theatrical (Denchev, 2023 p. 78), but also from the new discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as photography and cinema. Nevertheless, theatre remains (perhaps) the last art form that cannot be observed by means of any medium (except for archival purposes). As the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann argues, it is the art that continues to be based on the authentic encounter between performers and audience, sharing the same space, breathing the same air (Lehmann, 2006, p. 17). That is: bodies being together.

The body as the basic material of theatricality

The claim that the corporeal is the basic building material of theatricality can only be understood in depth if it is complemented by the notion that, historically, actor training as we know it in its contemporary forms (namely as a conscious tool of theatre pedagogy and the various languages of the stage) developed after the emergence and establishment of the directorial figure in its contemporary sense. Until modernity, theatrical performance was conceived as an illustration of the literary text, and drama and performance were seen in relation to the Hegelian view of the harmonious unity between form and content (Denchev, 2023, pp. 35-38).

Space is important in these processes insofar as actors' bodies are exposed in it. Therefore, I would say that in classical theatre it functions as a place of the fabula, dominated by the logos, i.e. by the written language, expressing linguistic reflexes that are pre-established in the collective memory. This space is not particularly concerned with the actor's body and corporeality as theatre studies and directing have understood them since modernity. Even before the three-dimensional set of naturalism, gradually introduced by Antoine and Otto Brahm, the corporeal was seen here as part of the pictoriality of the world rather than as an individual form of presence. (Denchev, 2023)

Naturalism does indeed overemphasize the physical – the authenticity of smells, of speech, the quest for material verisimilitude (real tears, real food on stage, real smells, etc.), but at the same time it does not fully develop acting through the prism of authentic presence. I use the naturalistic aesthetic to illustrate one of the first attempts to emancipate the theatrical from the literary, with Antoine and Brahm's refusal to stage classical drama and concentrate entirely on the new naturalistic drama of their time. The later development of the individual gestural presence is due to K.S. Stanislavski. In this case, however, naturalism achieved something very important, which is fully valid for all theatrical performances today: the body is important for the space to the extent that the subject is defined by the corporeal.

This is why my attention is focused on the theatrical avant-garde – this is the period during which we find for the first time an explicitly heightened interest in the corporeal. It is modernity that shifts the focus from logocentrism, i.e. from the textual world, to the idea of instrumentalizing the various components of the theatrical spectacle (and above all the actor's body) in an attempt to turn them into expressive tools subordinated to a certain aesthetic, social and even political goal (Piscator, Brecht), i.e. to establish them as artistic suggestions that can be accessed through certain established creative paths. The body thus becomes a central theme not only for contemporary theatre practices, but also for directorial theatre (Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Grotowski, Kantor, Brecht, etc.).

For this reason, the body was central to many directors of the historical theatrical avant-garde, such as those mentioned above, but no less influential were the pedagogical attempts of Dalcroze, Delsarte, and Sergei Volkonsky. The theoretical interest in the corporeal is initially found in the desire to isolate the smallest building block (lexeme) of the actor's presence, and in the search for an analogue one arrives at the gesture. The main credit for this goes to the Prague structuralists, but also to Gordon Craig, Filippo de Tomazo Marinetti, Oscar Schlemmer, etc. However, the theorists Veltrusky, Bogatyrev and Mukarzhovsky left a strong mark on the understanding of the actor's body and object, considering the body and gesture as part of a new stage language (Veltrusky, 1964, 83-91).

Even in my own work, before I knew the genesis of these ideas, I intuitively focused on actor with the idea that I had to free them from the constraints of their own body, whether I was working on classical or contemporary dramaturgy. Thus, my personal interest in the body has focused on the effort to weave the actor's limitations into the fabric of the performance – as examples, I would use my productions of Molière (*Misanthrope*) and Shakespeare (*Twelfth*

Night), but also authors such as Mika Myllyaho (*Chaos*), Maja Pelević (*Orange peel*) and others (see the pictures accompanying the paper). In *The Misanthrope* (Image 1), I used a specific choreography that stylized the physical movements based on the characters. I used the same approach in *Twelfth Night* (Image 4), while in *Chaos* (Image 3) and *Orange Peel* (Image 2) I searched for gestural score, outside the theatrical plot.



Image 1: Le Misanthrope by J.B. Molière; directed by Petar Denchev ; Alceste – Ivaylo Draganov, Filint – Yulian Petrov, Woman – Eva Danailova.
2014 “Class” Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria. Photography © Chavdar Kaldiev.
Source: personal archive.



Image 2: Orange Peel by Maja Pelević; directed by Petar Denchev.
Liliana Chomova – She 1, Vittoria Nikolova – She 2, Nadya Keranova – She 3.
2020 “Vazrajdana” Theatre, Sofia.
Photography © Ivan Abadjiev. Source: personal archive.



Image 3: Chaos by Mika Myllyaho, directed by Petar Denchev.
Actresses: Toni Toncheva, Maria Eneva, Simona Todorova, Milenka Sotirova,
Ekaterina Lazarevska, Vanina Yordanova.
2023 State Dramatic Theatre “Geo Milev” Stara Zagora, Bulgaria.
Photography © Ivan Donchev. Source: personal archive.

The appearance of the director and the actor's body

The emergence of the director as a professional figure in the theatre of the new era fundamentally changed not only the attitude towards the creative process and the organization of the performance, but also towards the actor and his training, to dramaturgy and its interpretation. The birth of the director marked a completely new stage in the aesthetic organization of performance and in the conceptualization of the various components of performance as significant and important, not merely as details of the making of theatre. It is a kind of practice of the theatrical toolkit, concentrating power in the hands of one person who is supposed to be the inspiration of the performance. (Nikolova, 1995)

The role of the director thus dethrones the playwright as the main inspirer of the performance. And then places the director in the role of interpreter and the author of the stage language. A pioneer in this respect was George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, head of the Meiningen Ensemble, whose main inspiration was painting. Germany at the beginning of the 20th century provided a strong platform for the development of visionaries in the field of directing, such as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator, while in parallel, in Russia, K.S. Stanislavski, who led his own theatre company, also gradually emancipated himself into the modern role of director. (Nikolova, 2000)

As a director, André Antoine searched for a stage language for naturalistic drama in France. Gordon Craig also played an important role in establishing directing as a professional field in the theatre; although most of his work went into plans and projects, he had several celebrated accomplishments (one of which was in collaboration with C. S. Stanislavski in *Moscow Art Theatre*). Craig himself was also concerned with the need for a new type of actor, with habits different from those of the European actors of his time. He was interested in body language and rebelled against the strong literary presence in the theatre. (Osanai, 1968, pp. 586-593)

At the beginning of the 20th century, Rudolf von Laban's system of dance training (strongly influenced by Delsarte and Dalcroze) appeared, which had a very strong influence on expressionist theatre after the First World War and on the formation of body language (Nikolova, 2000). Antonin Artaud also contributed both to the development of interest in gesture and the body and to radical attempts to reform theatrical aesthetics. Influenced by Eastern traditions, he left a legacy of chaotic manifestos that have a more metaphorical value (Nikolova, 2007, p. 102).

To understand the true interest for, and value of gesture, its evolution as an instrument of instruction and expression, and its systematization and description, we must first consider the practical contribution of François Delsarte (1811-1871). Evans stated that although Delsarte started out as a singer, improper

training destroyed his vocal abilities. In 1839, he started teaching singing at the Paris Conservatoire, attempting to make sense of his negative experience. He named his method Applied Aesthetics. Among the improvements he worked on were the codification of verbal and physical expression as well as his studies of the emotional influence on human movement. He spent a great deal of time examining individuals from various social, ethnic, and age groups in an effort to figure out how to find a way of expressing emotion, thought and imagination. It is no coincidence that he was a major influence on American dance in the late 19th century, and later on Laban. (Evans, 2008, pp. 44-56) It should be mentioned that there has been precedent for Delsarte's system. It is heavily influenced by *Johann Jakob Engel's work Practical Illustration of Rhetorical Gesture and Play*, which was first released in the late 1700s. The book functions as a sort of language of gestures meant to represent the emotions and interior states of the reader. As a writer, Engel suggested theatrical movements with utilitarian meanings (Roach, 2005, p. 76).

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) also brought his musical background to theater. His efforts were motivated by a desire to make rhythmic technique instruction easier. In an attempt to comprehend why his students struggled with rhythm and how to organize their learning, Dalcroze concentrated on the seemingly paradoxical capacity of one of his pupils to subconsciously mimic his teacher's rhythmic gestures. He started investigating the phenomena of the body's reaction to rhythm in this way. His major goal was to substitute real musical knowledge for formal technical comprehension in the classroom. The three equally significant components of the approach he created were improvisation, solfège, and eurythmics. His views were not well welcomed during his time at the Geneva Conservatory, which felt that the approach was too radical. Dalcroze established his own school and carried on refining his intricate ideas of rhythm, movement, and physical expression after being dismissed from academia. His major goal was to free the body's expressive potential. Carl Orff's method of teaching music was greatly influenced by his "system" (Evans, 2008, pp. 44-56).

It is crucial to recognize that body language and gestures played a significant role in early 20th century Expressionist drama. The Expressionists were captivated by the body because they believed that mankind had lost touch with the true essence of the world, leading individuals to create only misguided reflections of themselves. A novel theatrical language needed to be created (Styan, 1981). Most of the avant-garde efforts were aimed at meeting the new demand for authenticity in the modern era. Some of these efforts deliberately emphasize the body and gesture, occasionally without any prior notice. This originates from the inherent existence of life within the theater, specifically involving the actor and their physical self. However, in the

beginning of the 20th century, gesture has now significantly involved in efforts to bring about change in a logical and concrete manner; it is being examined, observed, and put into practice; it is an essential artistic aspect of an actor's portrayal, equal in importance to speech (Nikolova, 2000).



Image 4: Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare, directed by Petar Denchev, Jester: Kadri Habil, Olivia: Elena Natsaridou. 2015 State Dramatic Theatre "Sava Ognyanov" Ruse, Bulgaria. Source: personal archive.

The Legacy of Stanislavski and Volkonsky

The instrumentalization of gesture as part of the development of the art of acting also goes through the creation of the psychological school of training and the imposition of realism as the leading theatrical style of representation. Speaking of Stanislavski, we must not forget his legacy as a theatrical reformer, because the system of work and training he left behind is not only the first methodical and comprehensive study of the actor's work on the role, but also a dynamic study of the relationships between dramaturgy and actor, actor and director, performance and audience. His work contains a strong humanistic impulse to create a theatre whose aim is the artistic understanding of the world. He is also one of the directors most curious about the diversity and logic of the art form. He tried different stage approaches with opera and poetry, and took a keen interest

in music and literature. At the time of his work, the systems of Delsarte and Dalcroze had gradually moved from the periphery of the theatre to become an important tool for the education and training of actors in Europe, and the United States of America. In a more global sense, one could say that gesture and the actor's body are now a conscious part of the theatre's toolkit.

Sergei Volkonsky (1860-1937), the individual responsible for spreading the influence of Delsarte and Dalcroze in Russia, oversaw the Imperial Theatres from 1899 to 1901 and was a prominent supporter of the arts in Russia, with connections in Europe. He was a student of Dalcroze and advocated for both systems until he left the country in 1921. Prior to Volkonsky's profound fascination with these concepts and the creation of his own interpretation to advance them, actor and director Yuri Ozarovsky (1869-1924) experimented with them earlier, but significant impact was only felt post-1910, when both systems became popular in Europe.

In 1913 Volkonsky published *The Expressive Person*. The bibliography included extensive references to Jakob Engel and François Delsarte, quoted in various languages. He himself claimed that this was a manual for the actor according to Delsarte, rather than an exposition of the system itself. One of the rules he laid down is that there is a right gesture that corresponds to the feeling it is supposed to convey (Volkonsky, 1913). A very clear example of the encroaching influence of semiology at this time – Volkonsky's idea (in line with Delsarte) was to make a connection between the internal state as signified and the gesture as signifier. Moreover, Volkonsky himself called his system semiotics. Volkonsky's book, as described by Rose Whyman in her *The Stanislavsky System of Acting: Legacy and Influence in Modern Performance*, categorizes different positions and movements of body parts and what they express.

He also formulated a number of other rules, such as the “rule of combination of individual gestures” and “the rule of consistency”, which were intended to determine the natural development of movement and were drawn against various natural laws, such as the laws of mechanics and gravity (Whyman, 2008. pp. 125-126). Volkonsky's influence was interpreted differently by theatre practitioners at the time and later. Some, such as Meyerhold and Mikhail Chekhov, welcomed the idea of the language of gesture and its symbolic plan, of stylization to the necessary minimum (Meyerhold).

It is likely that what Volkonsky learned from Delsarte and Dalcroze and what he learned from Stanislavski influenced some tendencies in his systematization of the work on gesture. But it is noticeable that the very rules that Volkonsky formulated then underwent transformations in his method of simple physical actions. We should not forget that Stanislavski's great contribution and ambition

was to achieve a performance so vivid that it merged the actor with the character. Compared to today's trends and situations, it can be seen that the simulacrum as a phenomenon would've been impossible at the time of Stanislavski and Volkonsky, mainly because the sign cannot replace the signified. They both considered the art of acting as an inextricably linked system with the nature of dramaturgy, communication with the audience, building a kind of theatrical ecosystem.

In Chapter VI of his well-known essay *The Work on the Self in the Creative Process of Experience*, also known as *The Actor's Work on the Self*, Stanislavski describes an incident from a study étude he participated in as an actor with his colleagues. The chapter is named "Releasing the Muscles for a Reason". He explains that during the development of the stage étude, there was a tragic moment for him as a performer, and in order to conquer the hesitation that arises in his performance, he looked for external assistance – the goal was not to confine the performance. He pushed an object without glancing at it, only to realize later that it was a glass ashtray. The harder he struggled to convey his intentions, the more forcefully he pushed the glass item. Initially, the action was entirely spontaneous and resulted from his own internal acting pressure. The procedure went on until the glass broke in his hand and blood flowed out. (Stanislavski, 2008, pp. 119-120)

This case illustrates very well the importance of working on gesture, not only for the planning of physical actions, but also for giving them meaning. Stanislavski described a kind of empirical experience that made him understand the importance of gestures and their meaning-making for acting performance. One of the main contributions of his system is precisely the discovery of muscle release and the importance of training the actor's body. The system also deals with the invention of stage language, the search for an understanding between dramaturgy and its animation on stage. In his autobiography, Stanislavski referred to himself as someone who lacked the initial physical attributes for the stage and who made a conscious and deliberate effort to discipline himself and his body to make it fit for the stage. He was also the first theatre practitioner to attempt a dynamic and dialectical exploration of the relationship between actor and audience, between actors as stage partners, between actors and space, and the interaction with dramaturgy as a literary text and the means of reading it.

In his contribution to the anthology *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, David Magershak describes Stanislavski, born in Moscow in 1863 at the beginning of his directing career, as an autocratic director who abhorred stage artificiality. But what did Stanislavski mean? When he speaks of his abhorrence of fakery, he is actually referring to the accumulated external techniques of acting, systematically handed down from actor to actor, which archaic theatre pedagogy has preserved as external markers for the expression of different characters and states of mind

(Magarshack, 1968, pp 2019-2020). Despite his popularity with the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski was much criticized in Russia at the time. And his views were shaped not without the help of Delsarte and Dalcroze. The impact of the publication of Saussure's *A Course in General Linguistics* in 1916 reached Russia. However, these ideas were taken up in very different ways by the theatre practitioners of the time in Russia (Stanislavski and Meyerhold).

It was Stanislavski's interest in verisimilitude, in the inner, psychological side of the creative process, that linked him to the systems of Delsarte and Dalcroze, which he knew from Volkonsky. Unlike Meyerhold, who used these systems to explore the meaning and modelling of gesture, Stanislavski sought his own ways of disciplining the actor's technique and body. In his work, Stanislavski believes that the actor's body as a whole is a stunted apparatus that needs to be shaken out of its lethargy in order to function in the conditions of the stage, just as musicians develop their senses (Whyman, 2008, p. 111). In the same spirit, a century earlier, Denis Diderot asked whether the art of acting differed in any way from the art of sculpture, painting or music. Stanislavski asked himself this question intuitively at the beginning of his career and studied Diderot much later. However, the idea of the actor's body and voice as an instrument has a double meaning and posed problems for Stanislavski and his contemporaries, since the main problem was how to incorporate physical mechanics and full psychological consciousness into the creative work.

As can be seen, Stanislavski's multifaceted and multi-layered work takes gestures seriously; as a director, he strove to create believable stage realities rather than to conceptualize his work as stylized paintings. In the accumulated falsity of the past, he glimpsed something of the simulacrum of the present. In doing so, he embraced the idea that the physical and mental state of man and his manifestations in space and time form an inseparable whole. In this sense, gesture is taken very seriously in his practice, experience and research, even if he does not focus his attention entirely on it. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that in the so-called method of physical actions as part of his system and exercises, he demands that the actions be performed exactly, without commenting on them, without embellishing them or sealing them with frivolous acting. This in itself is related to his belief that there is no sharp division between the conscious and the unconscious, that the psyche and the physique of man are related in a term he calls "psychophysics". Working on physical action is therefore about figuring out the hidden meanings of the conscious and the unconscious, making a connection between a character's physical world and his inner problems.

Biomechanics

Meyerhold's artistic interest lies in exploring different theatrical forms and conventions beyond naturalism and realism. He was not concerned with the reproduction of life, but with the potential of theatre to reveal inner worlds through the means of music and plastic movement (Braun, 1998). Although Meyerhold and Stanislavski are often contrasted in theatre history as opposing figures, particularly in the means and form of theatre they created (as well as in the training of actors), it should be remembered that both shared the philosophy of revealing the emotional and expressive potential of the actor.

Meyerhold's work spanned a very wide field, including the exploration of Elizabethan theatre to circus, musical theatre, pantomime and Eastern theatrical practices. He was one of the first European directors to turn to Japanese and Chinese theatre. In his attempts to overcome the literariness of theatre and return to the primary elements – the mask, gesture and movement – he developed an avant-garde authorial approach, in line with the ideas of body language, the stylization of stage language, its reduction to a sign (symbol). Because of this ambition and the strong relationship he needed to create, he turned to body language. With regard to gesture, he went to the extreme of stylization in his search for symbolic suggestion, in opposition to the realist traditions, thinking of stage movement as a hieroglyph, a stylized image that can have a percussive and immediate suggestion (Pavis, 2002, p. 109).

Meyerhold also used various stage innovations; such as bringing the stage down to the level of the audience, collaborating with avant-garde artists in set and costume design, trying to escape naturalistic motifs and increase the emotional potential of the stage space. He also experimented with new ways of organising stage movement – staging multiple scenes with wordless action and organising actors in unusual combinations. As mentioned above, Meyerhold was strongly influenced by Eastern theatre, and in particular by the receptive strategy of Japanese Kabuki. In his work, he attempted to create an analogous system for the Soviet audiences of the 1920s. Synthesizing the experience he could gain from Japanese theatre and adapting it to his own means of expression, he arrived at the idea of movement as hieroglyphic (Pavis, 2002).

What attracted his interest was the possibility of externalizing emotions in a concentrated way and controlling the actor's inner state through the rhythm and movement of the body. The basis of acting technique in Kabuki is dance, which at its core is a conscious selection of gestures that carry a precise meaning. Kabuki translates words into gestures and dynamic body positions. What also impresses Meyerhold is that the audience is somehow part of the performance

– many plays are inspired by everyday events, thereof the spectators can identify themselves directly. The aim is to bring the theatre closer to the political and social environment of the time. In general, Meyerhold wants to use the symbolic (semiotic) position assigned to the actor in Eastern theatre, as well as the space itself, to involve the audience in the performance. The term he uses for his approach to training actors is “biomechanics”. According to Galina Morozova, at the beginning of the 20th century the word “biomechanics” did not exist in Russian theatrical terminology. Meyerhold began to use this term during his work at the State Higher Directing Workshops in 1921 (Morozova, 2006, p. 31).

Meyerhold’s approach as a director and theatre educator provided a very detailed elaboration of how actors should work with their body as a psycho-physical tool. Perhaps what was most fascinating about the biomechanical actor’s training that he developed was the level of integration between pure physical/body training and its application to specific stage tasks that Meyerhold himself posed as a director. Physical training was a part of each individual biomechanics course. The objective was always to establish a connection with the mind and senses in order to train the actor’s body to think similarly to how classical conditioning reflexes operate. Even the most basic workouts designed to enhance physical abilities like strength, agility, coordination, balance, flexibility, and endurance are meant to be incorporated into cognitive functions.

It cannot be denied that Meyerhold’s reformist streak also had political overtones, and had it not been for the Revolution of 1917, he would not have worked in the system of state power that gave him great influence – Meyerhold was appointed to head the Petrograd Theatre Department of the People’s Commissariat of Education. Despite this role, and the very different political assessments of his love of stylized theatre in defiance of the conventions of realism and naturalism, his contribution to the development of thinking about gesture and the actor’s body is undeniable. As well as directing his personal creativity and preferences towards a theatre that saw gesture and space as signs/characters/symbols, he also left behind a series of exercises that have been detailed and used in actor training to this day – these include the biomechanical exercises “Refusal”, “Dactyl”, “Archery”, “Slapping”, etc. The exercises themselves contain acrobatic elements, and it is imperative that they are performed to the smallest detail, otherwise they are practically unfeasible; and when performed, they automatically trigger the biomechanical laws in the body (Maneva, 2013, pp. 54-56).

After his execution in 1941, even after Meyerhold’s formal rehabilitation by the Military Collegium of the Soviet Supreme Court in 1955, his practices and methods remained in the shadows and received little publicity. This is largely due to the fact that they acquired an almost mythological reputation as

a result of the stigma attached to his name following his execution; fortunately, some of his collaborators and students were still alive in the late 1970s to pass on the practical knowledge. Many of Meyerhold's views, exercises and public pronouncements have a tendentious avant-garde character in their search for stylization, conventionality and the achievement of a universal language and knowledge of the body. We can conclude that Meyerhold's ideas and explorations had their largely ideological antecedent in Gordon Craig's actor-as-super-puppet, and their later continuation in the theatrical laboratories that emerged in Europe in the 1970s.

Gestus

The complex and contradictory phenomenon of Bertolt Brecht's aesthetics can only be understood if we begin by agreeing that there are too many popular misconceptions surrounding his theatrical practice. Gesture as a theatrical phenomenon and its physical manifestation, together with its socio-political nature, occupies an important place in Brechtian theatre. It thus appears as an integral part of *gestus*, which can be understood as a performative model for epic theatre. However, thinking about *gestus* goes beyond the bodily manifestation of the gesture, and approaches a semiological understanding, but in a social sense – as a dialectical system of relations of theses and antitheses between characters, which are realized by actors who have an awareness of the roles they play.

In contrast to the aforementioned names and their professional biographies, Brecht began his theatrical career as a writer without any prior stage practice. If the other two, Stanislavski and Meyerhold, developed their interest in gesture and movement out of their awareness of the need for a new stage language, for immediate effect in the expression and training of actors (and their bodies), Brecht sought gesture as the production of dramaturgy in the actor, as a pre-coded human action in the play, as the code of the role. However, Walter Benjamin argues that epic theatre is a theatre in which gesture is the raw material (Benjamin, 1998). Benjamin's point is that gesture is primordial to people's behavior, multi-layered, and indicative of their position and place in society, their intentions and habits; it is also a social marker.

Many of the famous names of Expressionism can be identified as Brecht's literary forerunners – Frank Wedekind's cold style is an acknowledged influence, as is his sympathy for Hauptmann's plays. Although Brecht was not a naturalist, nor could his plays be performed in the naturalistic style of Antoine's (or Otto Brahm's) theatre, he was strongly influenced by naturalism. Eric Bentley, in his book *The Playwright as Thinker*, even describes him as a functional naturalist

(naturalist as an approach) because, as a playwright, he insists on dealing with objectified social facts (Bentley, 1987).

In any case, Brecht himself does not ask his actors to play as in Antoine's or Otto Brahm's theatre. In his work, he insists on breaking the conventions of theatrical illusion. As a playwright and director, he combines approaches from different literary movements and theatrical conventions. These approaches, according to Walter Benjamin, correspond to the new technological forms of the time – cinema and radio. Brecht does not insist that the audience follow the story from the beginning; what is important is that they do not get lost from the moment they start watching.

Eric Bentley identifies four periods in the development of Brecht's theatrical art: the first, the 'apprenticeship', when he picked up the problems of the theatre where Strindberg and Wedekind had left them, only to reinvent his own form. It was during this period that he wrote *Baal*, *Drums in the Night* and *A Respectable Wedding*. To help him in this task, he studied and adapted Chinese and Spanish plays, as well as Elizabethan theatre, and by the end of the 1920s he had written several impressive plays. His second period was sarcastic, with social satire – *The Three Penny Opera*. Bentley refers to the third phase as mature, with Brecht already able to combine different dramaturgical forms and approaches in his plays (*Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*). And the last, the fourth, he defined as moralistic – Brecht went on to write *The Good Man of Szechwan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, as well as *The Irrepressible Rise of Arturo Ui* (Bentley, 1987).

After failing to complete his education (he studied philosophy, literature and medicine) at the end of the First World War, Brecht became a playwright and stage director at the *Munich Chamber Theatre*. It was also during this period that he became fascinated by Marxist theory. As Rumyana Nikolova argues, Brecht drew on Marxist plays because of his desire to emphasize the interpretive nature of theatre and the way in which it should contribute to changing the world. The system of characters and events in his plays is therefore dialectical. Brecht organises his performances around the fabula, for him the actor is important as a narrator (Nikolova, 2007, pp. 87-88).

Brecht opposed his epic theatre to the narrowly defined theatre of Aristotle. He renounced Aristotle's catharsis and the extraction of emotions from the audience through a process of identification. Epic theatre implies an awakening sense of wonder, but not empathy. Put simply, instead of the audience identifying with the character, they are asked to learn to be amazed by their circumstances. Brecht's relationship to gesture has a semiological dimension, as well as a physical one. In his practice, the so-called gesture first reflects the development of the fable as a narrative for the audience.

The *gestus* must reveal a specific aspect of the character – to tell about his social relations, the effectiveness of his behavior, interpreted from a dialectical point of view. The *gestus* must not be a cliché, a rubber stamp or an easily recognizable superficial code. The actor has to work on it, to arrive at the *gestus* as a concrete bodily behavior, and in fact to adhere to a selective realism. Brecht's position on gesture, and on all acting behavior, can itself be described as rational. Although he does not deny empathy as a process of working with actors, he does not seek it as the end result of his work; he seeks a rationalized effect in which characters must be built in relation to a dialectic with others, i.e. in constant reaction to others. This is not so much about a particular acting technique as it is about a specialized approach to reading events and their stage 'writing' and integrating actors into this system.

Brecht required actors to construct their roles dialectically, and this is his basic approach to directing; he also insisted on a stage where the actor must look at the character from the outside, step back from it and recall the doubts and surprises he had in exploring it. He was primarily interested in the rational impact of his performances, which is why, as many researchers have noted, he would not give up many different approaches that were effective in his work.

There is some reason to argue that *gestus* is an ideologized actorly gestural presence that refers simultaneously to speech activity, to physical presence, and to the relationships and interrelationships of characters as structures in drama. According to Brecht, language is not only a social fact, but also a bodily presence, but in the sense of a coherent system of gestures, so that it fulfils its aesthetic purpose constantly and immediately. For Brecht, gesture and theatre only make sense as a socially significant construct, as a structure that must have its own aesthetic and social function.

Conclusions

I am going to make a very bold statement here. The contemporary media viewer who finds himself in the theatre or in any other place where he can witness a theatrical performance, sometimes experiences a painful inability to connect with the images and the action of the presented reality. The media constantly disseminate a certain set of visual cues, which change but are fundamentally opposed to classical theatrical perception, i.e. the principle of imitation/action. But the multi-channel nature of multimedia, the constant flow of information or the tendentious media dramatization of certain issues (wars, violence, poverty, natural disasters) leads to a kind of emotional alienation, to an impossibility of identification as a consequence of information overload. In addition, the lack of

chronology in media design and the insufficient level of literacy of the audience lead to a decline in the tradition of storytelling. This leads to a kind of alienation from the means of theatre and thus to the decline of some classical genres and their attempts at preservation.

Fragmented thinking and worldviews are built on the paradigm of consumerism, and all rituals of personhood and initiation can now be publicly accessed, shared and exposed to an unlimited number of viewers/ readers/ consumers. This is why the efforts of many theatre artists and reformers of the past can often be undermined by the attempts of contemporary artists to reach audiences who live in theatricalized reality and mediated art at all costs. This, in effect, confirms the simulacrum hypothesis that established theatrical models tend to break down and be disrupted in attempts to negotiate them when theatrical culture is replaced by media culture.

The expressiveness of gesture as part of human movement, as part of social life, and as an object of education and training, is paramount to acting expressiveness. The historical legacy only demonstrates that the development of body language is part of the integral development of theatrical approaches, but these are almost always linked to a critical attitude towards reality – something that media reality erases as an intention. Verbal theatre has a tremendous opportunity to work with language, but also with gesture, which very often has a much more intense effect on communication in issues related to age, gender, social situation than language itself. Knowledge of the practices and views of theatre's past can only help us to navigate within the increasingly narrow confines of unified and fragmented models of perception, and to work honestly to communicate our staging intentions.

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