

British Theatre Guide

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Meyerhold on Theatre

Translated and edited by Edward Braun

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While Stanislavsky and Brecht might be the first two names that come to mind when theatre theory is discussed, not far behind is the former's Russian compatriot Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Meyerhold cut his spurs with Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre at the turn of the last century, although from the very start, he seems somewhat ungrateful at having what should have been the dream opportunity to learn his art from the great master.

Rather than steeping himself and his work in tradition, this young man seemed far keener to experiment and set up an avant-garde company that would challenge not only established practice but also the opinions of viewers, actors, writers and other directors.

From the very start, Meyerhold sought to pursue extreme ideas, for example avoiding naturalistic stagings even where these seemed to be the best way of presenting plays.

This approach was inevitably controversial and he and Stanislavsky soon had a falling out, as he did with so many others, particularly playwrights when faced with what they saw as the destruction of their much-loved works.

On the other hand, as with the auteurs who thrive in today's diverse theatrical landscape, many will come to worship at the feet of a man whom they regard as a genius.

His career included collaborations with the likes of Shostakovich and the leading performers of his day, while he drawn sources as diverse as Shakespeare, Pushkin, Tolstoy and Bulgakov. In passing, he even provides a fascinating early analysis of the value of Charlie Chaplin's films.

Perhaps the most significant ideas that Meyerhold propagated were an avoidance of realism, the use of music and rhythm to override the text and the introduction of a theory that he named "biomechanics".

Even today, some readers may come to the conclusion that this man was a crackpot, while others could see him as something not far short of a deity. While the ideas of the Russian might seem old hat, devotees could possibly identify significant likenesses between his work and contemporary productions by directors such as Ivo van Hove.

Sadly, the see-saw life that great artists so often suffered under Soviet regimes was his undoing. While Stalin at one point seemed to be a great fan, eventually Meyerhold fell into disfavour and was executed, largely for sticking to his artistic guns.

In any event, this fourth edition of a seminal work compiled by Edward Braun will present as good and wide a portrait of the great man as anyone could wish for. It is part biography, part criticism,

and a good proportion is drawn from Meyerhold's own writings, which together build to give a good idea of how he thought about life, the universe and the stage.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)