

Physical theatre: The Slap

Introduction to Biomechanics

So this session is to introduce you to the principles of biomechanics. We'll look at some of the history. We'll look at some of the influences. And we'll look at some of the practical details in relationship to biomechanics generally and ultimately to the etudes specifically.

So when was biomechanics invented? Well there are two answers to that question. The first is a formal one. The second one is a practical one. Biomechanics formally was invented after the revolution in 1922. And we have evidence of this in a document in one of the Moscow archives called Programme of Biomechanics. In that document, which is six or seven pages long, there's an incredibly detailed set of historical and theoretical ideas alongside some much more pragmatic and practical ideas.

But Meyerhold didn't invent biomechanics after the revolution solely. In fact as early as 1913 he was drawing on influences from popular theatre, Commedia dell'arte and also the Oriental theatre in a studio he had in Saint Petersburg. And that was the birth of biomechanics.

So why was biomechanics necessary? Well for Meyerhold biomechanics was an answer to what he considered to be a problem with the theatre that existed before his innovations. And that problem was the Theatre of Naturalism, most commonly associated with his teacher mentor Konstantin Stanislavsky. Although I think it's fair to say the Stanislavsky was interested in more kinds of theatre than just naturalism.

Even during his time working with Stanislavsky in the late 19th and very early 20th century, Meyerhold had a problem with naturalism. And he wrote an essay which determined a new form of theatre called the Theatre of Stylisation. That was way back in 1906 and before biomechanics was invented. But ultimately biomechanics was the vehicle for realising that Theatre of Stylisation. There are five key principles associated with stylisation. The first is the emphasis on the actor. Not on the text, not on the subtext, but on the physicality of the performer.

The second relatedly is associated with the spectators imagination, Meyerhold believed that the imagination of the spectator was nullified by naturalism and that his theatre would revivify it. The third is a theatre of plasticity and expression which is absolutely delivered by biomechanics. The fourth is a theatre of rhythm underpinning all of his work.

The fifth and final principle is thinking of theatre as a construction, as an artifice rather than pretending to be real. So to produce this new kind of theatre, this Theatre of Stylisation Meyerhold needed a new kind of training, and ultimately that was biomechanics. A training based on physicality not on psychology.

So why did Meyerhold call his training biomechanics? Well the first important thing to note is that he didn't always call his approach to physical actor training biomechanics. Before the revolution he used a much more general term scenic movement. But then something happened in 1917 which led him to rethink his articulation of his training, and he moved to using this term biomechanics.

Now we can see that term used in other disciplines. For instance in sports psychology, where biomechanics means the careful measurement and the constructed thinking about a living organism.

For the athlete that means a training which leads to efficiency and lack of injury. For Meyerhold it wasn't the athlete he was working with, it was the actor.

Meyerhold took his approach to this science of biomechanics very seriously with his collaborators in the early 1920s. And we can see this in that document Programme of Biomechanics from 1922. In that programme he talks about two sides to the work of the actor, the theoretical and the practical. And we are of course, working in the same way. For the theoretical he was interested in what he called A Study of the Animal Organism. A very interesting way of discussing the work of the actor.

He was looking to objectify the laws of acting. And he had three key principles, the laws of space, the laws of movement and the laws of what he called reflexivity or the responsiveness of the actor. These will be core principles that we look at when we move to the practical engagement with the biomechanical etudes.

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