



Introducing the études

So, how were the études taught and by whom? Well, I've said already that the études were devised after the revolution, but there's an important precursor in a studio that Meyerhold was leading in 1913. There, there were three parallel classes taught by Mikhail Gnesin on musicality, by Meyerhold himself on movement, and by, importantly, Vladimir Soloviev, who was teaching Commedia dell'arte.

If we look at those three classes, we can get a strong sense of the priorities Meyerhold was bringing forward in his teaching in 1913. After the revolution, Meyerhold formalised those three classes into what we called biomechanical études, fusing the past influences with the present influences of industry, as we've been looking at earlier. At first, there were many tens of études, and we can tell from their titles the kinds of theatre that Meyerhold was interested in. There was "Leap on the Back," "Slap on the Face," "Blow on the Nose," "Juggling," "Playing with a Stick," "Horses," and "The Fool."

And if we think about those titles of études, we can get a sense of the genre that Meyerhold was playing with in devising his training. I'm listing those étude titles on the screen. And you might just have a read of them. Perhaps pause the video and think what kind of images come to mind when you look at these titles. What sort of theatre was Meyerhold devising with this training? And if you were to break down one of those titles into separate actions, what would they look like? You might want to discuss this on the forums.

These études were taught and practised not just by Meyerhold alone, but by a range of collaborators. He worked with Valery Inkizhinov, with Mikhail Korenev, and with his own daughter, Irina Meyerhold. In the 1920s, as I've mentioned, there were a number of études. But later on, they were slowly reduced and formalised. And it's often been speculated that the person behind this formalisation was Nikolai Kustov, who joined Meyerhold's theatre in 1930. So we move from a wide range of improvised, unclear, imprecise, playful forms, to quite formalised études by the end of the 1930s.

So how are the biomechanical études taught today? Well, Nikolai Kustov plays an important part in this story. After 1938, Meyerhold's theatre was shut

down. He was imprisoned and finally executed on trumped-up charges of espionage. After that, his name was erased from all theatre documents and theatre history for many decades. In fact, it wasn't until the early 1970s that it was even possible to talk about biomechanics and Meyerhold again. And even then, there was some suspicion around his name.

Nikolai Kustov kept an embodied understanding of biomechanics for all of that period. He arrived in the Theatre of Satire in the 1970s, and taught an extracurricular class with a group of about eight in the evenings. There, he taught five classical etudes-- "Throwing a stone," "Shooting the Bow," "The Leap to the Chest," "The Stab to the Chest," and the etude we're looking at, "The Slap."

Out of those eight students, two went on to teach themselves biomechanics. And they are Alexei Levinski and Gennadi Bogdanov. And they are still teaching this form all over the world, and particularly in centres in Moscow, in Berlin, and Perugia.

So if we were to talk of a vertical tradition in the terms that we've been looking at, we might say that Meyerhold was at the top, Valery Inkizhinov, Mikhail Korenev, and Irina Meyerhold were in the second generation. Kustov then transformed and refined and formalised those etudes, teaching them to Gennadi Bogdanov and Alexei Levinski. And we now have students of those two students, people like Terence Mann, for instance, or Claudio Paterno, who are continuing that tradition.

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