

Meyerhold's Biomechanics and Its Importance in the Art of the Actor

Otilia HUZUM*

Abstract: Vsevolod Meyerhold, theater director of Russian origin, descendant of Stanislavski's school and part of the Russian succession, breaks away from his mentor's methods and sets out to experiment with movement as a means of scenic expressiveness. Thus, he lays the foundations of biomechanics, a concept that imposes itself in the way of theatrical expression. Biomechanics brings to the fore mechanical movement and bodily expression, the precision of movement and the body as an artistic instrument, principles that offer a different vision to contemporary theater and that find their place even in the traditional one. Thus, the movement theater appears, in which the actor's body becomes the main means of communication, and words are often replaced by gestures and physical expressions. Furthermore, in Meyerhold's theatre, gestures are accompanied by their own symbolism, and understanding this is essential for the actor in order to express his character's dramatic intentions in an authentic and effective way. At the same time, we mention that biomechanics has become ubiquitous in physical theater and contemporary dance, demonstrating the interdependence between the actor's body and the action environment, but also the fundamental role of movement in expressing emotions and inner conflicts.

Key words: biomechanics, body, movement, actor, theater, language, gesture

Introduction

Biomechanics is a system of physical education and expression of the body, proposed by the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold in the first decades of the 20th century, and represents a defining moment in the development of modern theatrical art. Within this theory, the actor's body is transformed into an instrument of artistic expression capable of conveying not

*Associate Professor PhD. habil., Theatre and Music Faculty, West University from Timișoara;

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

only the intentions and emotions of the character, but also deep meanings, all based on the entire informational baggage proposed by the director's vision or the dramatic text under study. Meyerhold's biomechanics focuses on the interdependence between movement, gesture and expression, being a revolutionary concept in the training of actors, more precisely in understanding the stage interpretation process.

The present study proposes a research that will succinctly develop notions regarding: the principles of biomechanics and the importance of the concept in the actor's art. More precisely, we will address ideas related to: the time points in which the concept appeared, movement as a language, physical training and bodily expression, the dramaturgy of the gesture, the relationship between the body and space, the stimulation of the actor's imagination and biomechanics - a concept with a major impact in the transformation of modern theater.

1. Milestones in time

The historical context of the beginning of the 20th century presents the Russian theater as being in a continuous search for new forms of artistic expression, given the influences of avant-garde movements defined by constructivism and futurism. Meyerhold, trained at Stanislavski's Russian school, departs from the ideas of the psychological theater experienced with his mentor and influenced by the Vitruvian body of Leonardo da Vinci, by the researches of François Delsarte or by certain studies of experimental psychology or the theory of mechanics, he becomes a pioneer of the theatrical revolution, approaching a deeper relationship between actor and movement. In fact, through his research, he announces the appearance of the action theater that marked the 70s. Biomechanics thus becomes a training system for actors, which allows precise control of the body and its movements; everything based on the mathematical proportion of the human body and the laws of movement in space, elements with a defining impact in the preparation and preparation of the body for organic, clear and effortless artistic expression.

Vsevolod Meyerhold develops his theory about biomechanics based on the influences of the constructivist theater, an artistic trend that had a major impact on the art forms of the 20th century; more precisely, the inspiration derives from Russian futurism and surrealism founded by the painter Kazimir

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Malevich. As a complement, we can also mention the manifestation of the current in the Romanian space, referring to the group formed by Ion Vinea, Ilarie Voronca, Stephan Roll, entities coagulated around publications such as *Contimporanul*, which were looking for new forms of artistic expression or other visions of identity definition, dictated by avant-garde currents.

In the theater, the constructivist principles were based on the idea of simple sets and an open stage, where the actor and the space become a whole, a synthesis between the human body and the environment in which the artistic act takes place. This vision departs from the rules of the traditional theater, where the setting favors the illusion of a closed space, and is oriented towards an openness with a role in the behavioral modeling of the actor's action. Thus, the scenography leaves the static area and transforms depending on the movements of the actors and the dramatic context. The artist detaches himself from the setting, which in the past he had the obligation to interpret, and becomes, together with the scenography, an integral part of the theatrical act as a whole. In the newly created space, the traditional idea of an actor interpreting the words is cancelled, because the attention is directed towards the continuous interaction with the game environment, and the movements will not be correlated only with the text or with the profile of alterity, but also with the entire scenography which has become an extension of the body in motion; the performer, thus, being the one who influences the playing space producing an inseparability between one's own being and the setting. Moreover, even a simple gesture or change of position and attitude gives another meaning to the setting; a simple object of props or scenography can be transformed into a symbol. In this way, the setting leaves the static meaning, becoming a means of approaching some themes and emotions that outline the entire show. We can claim that, through the ideas promoted, Meyerhold's biomechanics becomes a tool through which the actor learns the control of movements and physical expressions, with the aim of becoming an integral part of the environment of the artistic manifestation space, creating a unique dynamic that derives from a relational interdependence.

2. Movement as language

The technique of movement in Meyerhold's biomechanics is equivalent to a rigorous physical training, which helps the actors to explore the geography

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

of their own body, to become aware of their capacity for expression in order to create meanings. This process involves a particular control over balance, gravity, body tension and the coordination of different parts of the body, with the aim of perfecting the execution of precise movements, which transpose not only the immediate intention of a gesture, but also the general state of mind of its character. The principles on which biomechanics is based find their counterpart in: movement precision, mechanical movement and bodily expression and the body as an artistic instrument.

The starting point of our research is movement as a language in Meyerhold's biomechanics, where action is perceived not only as a means of portraying an activity, but also as a possibility to convey the complexity of the character's emotions and inner thoughts, because each gesture or fact, in itself, has a deep meaning, and the actor must understand and master it in order to be able to express not only the words, but the entire essence of the role. At the same time, Vsevolod Meyerhold claims that movement is much more than a simple means of illustrating actions or making scenes more dynamic, it becomes in the act of theatrical creation an essential principle both for understanding and communicating the inner reality of the character, as well as for expressing the essence contained in everything that alterity can mean. But movement doesn't just mean action. The presence of the actor, even in an apparently static sequence, is part of the physicality, because he, through the inner monologue, remains part of the stage narrative. „The actor remains on stage not because, in the absence of the scenes, he has nowhere to disappear, but because, assimilating the meaning of the break, he continues to take part in the stage action. This break highlights the emotion born from the light, from the music, from the bright accessories and from the parade costumes.”¹ As a form of emotional and intellectual expression, in the vision launched by the Russian director, the artist's body goes beyond the stage of a simple vehicle subordinate to words. It becomes a tool of emotional and intellectual communication. Thus, the performance based on the principles of biomechanics, that is, on all the complexity derived from movement and physical action, no matter how small or subtle it may be, has a deep meaning. Movements are not only complementary to the text or action, but are included

¹Elvin Bernstein, *Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în secolul XX – I de la Caragiale la Brecht*, Editura Minerva, București 1973, pag. 211

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

in defining the character's feelings and thoughts. For example, a simple movement of raising the arm is not only a physical action, but can express a state of frustration, triumph or even resignation, depending on the emotional context in which it is placed. Do not confuse the concept itself with training to perform a choreography, because the actor, during the training period, learns to be aware of each gesture and each change of position, since each change can reflect a different shade of the inner state. Instead of relying solely on lines to convey thoughts and feelings, Meyerhold's actor will use his body to make these emotions and intentions clearer, stronger and more direct.

Another aspect that we want to bring to your attention refers to the fact that the gesture, in biomechanics, becomes a monverbal code, which contains a deep meaning. In contrast to traditional theatre, where words play the main role, in this approach, gestures are seen as an autonomous language, capable of speaking directly to the audience. For example, a large gesture can signify a state of exuberance, while a restricted and compact gesture can suggest anxiety or insecurity. In other words, gestures have symbolic meaning, one that does not depend on the words, but only on the way the movements are made. So, during the study, the performer is taught to build his gestures paying attention to every detail, because a step or a lift of the arm are no longer just trivial physical movements, but become carriers of meaning. It is important for the actor to understand not only how to make each movement, but also what message it sends, what is the meaning. For example: defensive gestures such as clutching the arms to the chest can express the character's vulnerability, and a forced smile or laugh can express an incongruity between the character's intentions and his emotional reality.

When we refer to actor and character, we automatically include these entities in the stage space, with the aim of following the interaction of the movement of identity and otherness within a defined perimeter. In Meyerhold's theater, the actor is not a static entity standing on the stage, but a moving organism that continuously interacts with its environment. The actor's body becomes part of the theatrical space, and his movement can transform the relationship with the set, with other actors and with the audience. So movement is not just an action in itself, but becomes a way to influence the perception of the whole scene.

The mission of the performing artist is to use the space, conventionally or unconventionally, depending on the creative inspiration of

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

the imagination, moving quickly through the stage or adopting extremely tense positions, with the aim of composing rhythms and modes of action capable of impacting the message of the piece that reaches the audience. The conclusion - the interaction between the actor and the space thus becomes another way of the language of movement, which cannot be understood only through the physical movements themselves, but also through their context, a fact that leads us to argue that Meyerhold opens new horizons in the understanding of the stage interpretation process, and his actor is not only a carrier of lines, but a translator of the emotions and inner thoughts of the character through the language of movement. The technique thus becomes a powerful tool in the actor's art, a means of creating an authentic connection between the audience and the theater stage.

3. Physical training

In the composition of the technique, the physical preparation of the actor is of particular importance, the body becomes similar to a machine or can be equivalent to a musical instrument that must be tuned. Emphasis is placed on exercises that develop flexibility, body strength, and body coordination in order to perform precise and synchronized movements precisely to eliminate the constraints of natural physical limitations. The flexibility of the body does not only refer to the ability to do stretching exercises, but to the ability to quickly adapt to any requirement of the scene, to execute movement that expresses a wide range of feelings and intentions. The form of early training includes the removal of muscle tension until the release of any form of stiffness, with the aim of restoring fluid actions, in harmony with the stage task, which opens the possibility of forming a vocabulary of vast and diversified bodily expression.

Another previously mentioned element is strength, translated as the physical strength of a body, but not in the sense of the ability to lift weights, but directed towards a rigorous control over muscle groups and the way in which they collaborate within a gesture or action. Moreover, let's not understand control as a physical activity, but we mean a conscious domination of emotional intensities that, most of the time, can tarnish the accuracy of a movement, creating confusion or ambiguous situations. Essential in biomechanics are broad movements, with broad and expressive gestures,

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

which, at times, may seem exaggerated to the audience accustomed to a more naturalistic style. We mention in this context and the epic gesture becomes a large and energetic movement capable of conveying an emotion much more clearly. It requires continuous physical training, because during the interpretation the dozens of exercises carried out during the training should not be visible. Exhaustion and physical limitations fracture the message and restore a tormented determination to still reach the end, but one lacking in authenticity. If, Arthur Schopenhauer, in the volume *The world as will and representation* advocated in favor of the inner force seen as a vital engine in the triggering of creative forms, in the present case biomechanics is nothing but a harmony between the interior and the force of expression of the exterior, with the aim of contributing to the truthfulness of the artistic acting act.

But not all the elements that make up the act of creation are presented in an individual form, as separate parts of the technique used. Coordination, synchronization and fluidity of movements become essential aspects of physical training, which allow the actor to perform precise movements in accordance with the stage tasks. When we talk about coordination, we refer to those abilities to integrate the different parts of the body in a unitary movement, and for harmonization it is required to have developed the balance and the perception of the playing space. The road involves many exercises to improve in order to have that natural and efficient flow on stage. We exemplify through the so-called practice of symmetrical movements which consists in synchronizing the arms and legs in alternative movements, rhythmically repeating fast or slow sequences or composing rhythm changes. Such an exercise develops perfect coordination, so that the actor can create the illusion of a natural and spontaneous movement, even if it is long studied and, subsequently, controlled with great precision. Over time, after long study, the movement becomes organic, so truthful and natural, that even the one who performs it no longer feels the effort put in to obtain the final form. Everything thus becomes harmonious and in accordance with one's own interior.

We do not eliminate the groups from the context of the debate, because, on stage, we meet the collective character within which the artists collaborate; band members aiming to convey a unified and coherent message. So, the stylistic unity in acting must provide, for the whole group, the knowledge and use of the same technique and the same means of acting expression.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

When we discuss the artistic act, we inevitably refer to the man who creates art and to the phenomenon of creativity, which in the case of the concept called biomechanics become a whole only through interdependence with physical training. We become obsessive in emphasizing the fact that physical training is not reduced to a technique that promotes movement in general, but, in essence, is a means of releasing creativity; flexibility, strength and coordination favoring the appearance of a wide range of expression possibilities, the ability to respond immediately to changes in rhythm, energy or direction, imposed by the director or the stage situation. Physical training, therefore, not only improves the actor's performance, but also allows him greater creative freedom, removing the limits imposed by his own physical disabilities. So, physical training not only supports the technical process of theater, but also contributes to the artistic development of the actor, giving him a well-prepared body capable of performing a wide range of expressive movements.

4. The gesture component of the bodily expression in the dramatic intention

The debate aims, this time, to analyze the symbolic gesture, a non-verbal code that favors a more subtle communication than that offered by words. Going beyond the limits imposed by the verbal language, transforms the bodily expression, implicitly the gesture, into a form of autonomous communication through which moods, thoughts and intentions are transmitted with much more subtle meanings and with a much stronger emotional impact. It should not be understood that words become unimportant in the artistic act, but the Russian director wants to emphasize the lack of subordination existing between the two forms of communication. From his point of view, in a show based on concepts of biomechanics, the words are only a part of the totality of the theatrical act, while the gesture becomes a language in itself, one capable of making the transfer to those experiences that cannot be fully reproduced by verbal language. Movement and gesture, in themselves, allow the actor to transcend the barriers of language and touch a side of the universal human experience. If living takes priority over the word, thinking that what we feel is much more important than what we say, then we realize that the gesture also becomes more powerful than the words. In fact, judging by the order of actions

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

in communication, the gesture is born from authentic experience, and the word has the quality to support and complete the message, to emphasize or underline, once again, a state of affairs.

The dramaturgy of the gesture becomes an essential element of the construction of the character! When we refer to the dramaturgy of the gesture, we extrapolate the discussion to the creation of the actor, an act that appeared as a result of the dramatic text, a space loaded with information, messages and psychological features, indispensable elements in the creation of alterity. Referring to this way of thinking, the dramaturgy of the gesture plays a fundamental role in the creation, because each gesture, from the most insignificant and barely perceptible to a large movement of the body, must be carefully chosen and have a clear meaning in relation to the character's intentions and conflicts. Gestures are not simply physical additions dictated by the piece's text, but are interdependent with it, complementing it and giving it depth. Thus, the dramaturgy of the gesture becomes an extension of the verbal one, and both forms of communication work together to build the entire reality of the performance.

Actor, creation, character, show, but let's not lose sight of the recipient of the artistic act - the public. The gesture, as a form of non-verbal communication, defines the dynamics of the relationship between the audience and the actor, becoming a link, a means, through which the states and inner conflicts of the character are transmitted, without being explained through text. In this way, the non-verbal becomes a bridge between the mind and soul of the audience and the depths of symbols and meanings transmitted by the actor.

We pause and wish to pay attention to a detail of the creative element, with reference to the stimulation of the actor's imagination, which becomes an expression of the thoughts, conflicts and emotions of the character at work and which coordinates the movements and gestures in a disciplined and controlled way. Stimulating the actor's imagination detaches the body from the condition of a physical instrument with a role in execution and propels it towards the depths dictated by the text, the director's vision or one's own sensibilities, because every movement and gesture must be in harmony with the character's thoughts, emotions and intentions. Thus, creation as a product of imagination and improvisation becomes the *sine qua non* of art. „When an actor does not improvise in his role, he proves that he has stopped

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

progressing”², becoming only a reciter and an executor of established and mechanically learned movements. If, according to Constantin Stanislavski, the creative imagination must be activated in the intimate creative laboratory, in the context of biomechanics imagination becomes an act oriented towards physicality, towards the construction of movements and gestures with dramatic significance. The proposal involves a high level of discipline or self-discipline, where the actor not only learns to control every movement, but must become aware of every detail of his body in order to use it for creative purposes. Specific biomechanics exercises develop a variety of movements and gestures that can be applied in various dramatic contexts, becoming tools of the imagination, which the actor can use to reproduce the inner conflicts of the character. For example, an actor playing a character in conflict with himself might use tense movements, and through these the viewer can feel and understand more deeply the character's internal dilemma. Thus, the actor is not just an executor of a predetermined score, but an active creator who continuously invents movements that can reflect not only the external characteristics of the character, but also his deepest feelings. Every gesture must be a reflection of the character's thoughts and emotions, and this process of translating the inside to the outside requires a great deal of imagination and bodily flexibility on the part of the actor. The idea is also supported by Peter Brook, who develops the idea of scenic truth, that is, the invisible, to be made visible through the interpreter of the body. The theme arouses interest because it is also taken up by Yoshi Oida who, after his meeting with Peter Brook, coagulates in his experiments the features of Japanese theater with European ones, demonstrating the importance of movement in the artistic act. launched by director Peter Brook. We can say that biomechanics becomes a center of interest and study, because it proposes a release from any form of constraint so that the movement is made with intention and awareness, and the actor must control his body and master his every gesture in order to apply it precisely in creating the desired impact. This discipline not only allows him to execute complex movements, but also helps him stay focused on the dramatic goal, maintaining the balance between physical expression and the essence of the character. „The actor knows the reason why everything that surrounds him

² Vsevolod Meyerhold, apud Valentin Silvestru, *Meyerhold despre improvizație*, în Revista „Contemporanul”, nr.14/1964

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

was conceived in a certain way, and not another; he does not ignore that he is a product of theatrical art; therefore it transforms and becomes itself a product of art.”³

In conclusion, Meyerhold's biomechanics emphasizes the importance of bodily expression, in which gesture is seen as its own language, loaded with symbolism and capable of directly communicating the states and conflicts of the character. Thus, in the performance, it becomes a fundamental part of the theatrical act.

5. The contributions of biomechanics to the transformation of modern theater

Biomechanics significantly influences the development of modern and contemporary theater, becoming an important source of inspiration for a number of directors and choreographers around the world. The concept is defined as a beginning of movement and physical theater, arousing the interest of famous groups and bands, of which we only mention Pina Bausch and Teatro di Nuova Avanguardia. Pina Bausch, known for her creations in the Tanztheater (dance theater), brought together dance and theater in a completely innovative form. The movements of the body, with a deep emotional charge, are as important as the words, and the performance becomes a story told through movement, with the help of bodies interacting in a space with a strong dramatic meaning. The Pina Bausch theater reflects, in many ways, Meyerhold's ideas regarding the importance of gesture and the relationship between actor and space or body and stage. Teatro di Nuova Avanguardia, an Italian troupe known for its innovative approaches in the direction of physical theater, had the same interest, which experimented with forms of amplified physical expression, where the actors are not just role players, but real interpreters of their own bodies, so that the body became, in their study, a communication tool of the artistic message. From this perspective, the theater abandons the status of the place of words and becomes

³ Elvin Bernstein, *op. cit.*, pag. 210

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

a space where movements, gestures and physical actions are the central elements of the narrative. But the influences of biomechanics do not stop there, but penetrate into traditional shows or contemporary performance, having an impact on modern theatrical art and on the way the human body is used on stage. The concept of the open stage and the interaction between the actor and the space led to a redefinition of how the set and the actors collaborate. Contemporary theater directors increasingly experimented with the minimalism of the set and prioritized the use of the body to create meaning, as required by the constructivist theater proposed by Meyerhold. Choreography did not remain inert either, but performances that combine dance, physical movement and theater as forms of unified artistic expression appeared.

Conclusion

Through the contribution of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the theater becomes a collective act, in which the human body and the scenery come together to create a complete and integrated artistic experience.

In essence, biomechanics remains an essential pillar of contemporary theatre, continuing to inspire performing arts professionals. The importance of this theory lies not only in its impact on the development of acting techniques, but also in the way it redefines the relationship between actor, audience and stage. Through his concept, the Russian director managed to transform the actor's body into an artistic instrument of great depth, in which every movement and gesture has a special symbolic and emotional value. Moreover, biomechanics contribute significantly to stimulating the actor's imagination, giving him a wide set of movements and gestures that can be used to express the essence of a character. It develops not only physical skills, but also a deeper understanding of the relationship between body and emotions, between intention and action. This perspective challenges the actor to overcome the physical and creative limits of his own body, and through discipline and self-control, using the studied instruments, to be able to create an authentic theatrical performance.

We conclude that biomechanics not only revolutionized the theater of its time, but became a continuous source of inspiration for directors and choreographers around the world, profoundly influencing the development of modern and contemporary theater. His concept continues to be relevant in

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

today's theatrical explorations, where physical movement and bodily expression are used to convey complex messages that transcend the limits of verbal language, and where the body becomes an essential means of communication between artist and spectator. „The role of movement is greater than that of other theatrical elements. (...) Our actor says to himself: Since I know that the scenographic background of my stage is made up of overviews, that its boards extend the hall and that everything is subordinate to the music, I cannot ignore what I must be when I enter the stage. Since the viewer will perceive my playing simultaneously with the pictorial and musical background, my playing will be only one of the components of this ensemble with a transmissible function, so that the sum of the elements of the performance has a precise meaning.”⁴

Bibliography:

Bernstein, Elvin: *Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în secolul XX – I de la Caragiale la Brecht*, Editura Minerva, București 1973.

Brook, Peter: *Spațiul gol*, traducere de Marian Popescu, Editura Unitext, București, 1997.

McAuley, Gay: *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader*, London Routledge, 2012.

Meyerhold, Vsevolod: *Biomechanics: The Dynamics of Performance*, Moscow Art Theatre Publishing, 1966.

Oida, Yoshi; Marshall, Lorna: *The invisible actor*, Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 1997.

Pavis, Patrice: *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, Toronto University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Lumea ca voință și reprezentare Lumea ca voință și reprezentare*, vol I-III, traducere de Emilia Dolcu, Viorel Dumitrașcu, Gheorghe Puiu, Editura Moldova, Iași, 1995.

Stanislavski, Konstantin: *An Actor Prepares*, Methuen London LTD, 2006.

Stanislavski, Constantin: *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, traducere de Lucia Demetrescu și Sonia Filip, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1951.

PERIODICALS:

Valentin Silvestru, *Meyerhold despre improvizație*, în Revista „Contemporanul”, nr.14/1964

⁴ *Idem*, pag. 212