

Early Creative Experiment of Meyerhold Under the Influence of Maeterlinck

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Abstract

Meyerhold, as a disciple of Nemirovich-Danchenko early on, was appreciated by Stanislavski for his play of Ivan IV in "Vasilisa Melentyeva". Meyerhold joined the troupe of Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Academic Music Theatre in 1889, by then Stanislavski had already brought Maeterlinck's plays to Moscow, influenced by the two, Meyerhold began creative experiments of symbolist drama in 1903, Meyerhold and his new drama club rehearsed a series of symbolist dramas including Maeterlinck. Taking the closure of the drama *Stukia* as a milestone, Meyerhold's symbolist drama experiments were divided into two phases: before his parting ways with Stanislavski in 1905, when he left the Vera Komissarzhevskaya Theatre in 1907. These early experiments had a profound impact on the conditional drama he made later.

Keywords

Meyerhold; Maeterlinck; Stanislavski; Symbolism; Conditional Theatre.

1. Introduction

In the 1880s, symbolist poetry was all the rage in France, symbolist theorists and poets such as Mallarmé and Villiers noticed the possibility between symbolism and drama, but it was Maeterlinck who truly brought symbolist drama to the stage with his "Princess Maleine" published in 1889, afterwards, he proposed the symbolist drama theory of "The Tragic in Everyday Life" and the practice of "static drama" in *The Treasure of The Humble* and his other essays, his artistic proposal was not only a rebellion against the traditional drama that was popular in France at that time, but also a break with naturalist drama.

Stanislavski was one of the first dramatists to introduce Maeterlinck and symbolist drama to the Russian drama circles. With the establishment of art theatre and Stanislavski's naturalistic artistic path, he gradually realized that there were irreconcilable differences between symbolism and the performance methods of art theatre. As a student of Danchenko and Stanislavski, as soon as Meyerhold came into contact with Maeterlinck and symbolist drama, he was immediately attracted by the new artistic style and ideas, whether at the *Stukia* of Povarskaya or the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre, he vehemently opposed naturalism and was eager to explore a new form of drama with his acting and directing talents. During the first decade of the 20th century, Meyerhold moved between Moscow, Kherson, and St. Petersburg, while he performed Maeterlinck's "The Deceiver", "Monna Vanna", "The Death of Tintagiles", "The Miracle of Saint Anthony", "Sister Beatrice", "Pelléas and Mélisande", and some other small dramas, he collaborated with Stanislavski twice and then parted ways, ultimately breaking away from naturalism completely, in "On the History and Technique of the Drama", he formally proposed the initial concept of his own "conditional theatre" in 1907[1].

2. Attempts During the Period of Art Theatre

At first Meyerhold wanted to be a tragic actor, He met Nemerovich-Danchenko through the introduction of Yekaterina Muent, he imitated Stanislavski's line method in the performance of

"Othello" at the Hunter Club, performed Othello's monologue in front of the Senate and soon entered Danchenko's theater art class. At this time, what first made Meyerhold famous was his talent and ability as an actor, he admired and imitated Alexander Pavlovich Lensky, although he was listed as an assistant director during his performance at Bensa, Meyerhold was not yet interested in directing art, he was "training himself for the noble duty of an actor," however, the excessive melodramas and vulgar comedies performed at the Imperial Theatre began to bore Meyerhold. The performances of Stanislavski and the Art and Literature Association he led injected new blood into the Moscow theater circles, amateur actors at the Hunters' Club on Vozdvizhenka reflected Danchenko's natural and life-like pursuit of performance, meanwhile, the name of Maeterlinck also appeared in Russian[2]. In 1897, after the meeting between Stanislavski and Danchenko that changed the history of Russian drama, the plan to establish a new art theatre was born, Stanislavski watched Meyerhold's performances in "Vasilisa Melentyeva" and "Old Love," as well as subsequent performances in "The Shopkeeper" and the seven roles he played in his graduation performance, the proof of the latter actor's talent is the silver medal of the drama art class. Meyerhold joined the art theatre troupe in 1898.

During his stay at art theatre, Meyerhold's fascination for Stanislavski grew with the passage of time, but his acting career was not smooth. When deciding on the actor candidate for the Tsar in "Tsar Feodor," Stanislavski found that Meyerhold performed well in "Powerful Parts" but lacked creative imagination in "Mild Parts", Danchenko insisted that Feodor should be played by Moskvina. Meyerhold's voluntary resignation from the role of Feodor might be the beginning of his disagreement with Stanislavski, he could only play minor parts in art theatre's performances until the troupe began rehearsing Chekhov's "The Seagull," Meyerhold was given the role of Treplev. Stanislavski's bold and highly creative directing style once again shocked him, the stage arrangement of "The Seagull" was unconventional and even rebellious, for example, when Nina recited her monologue, almost all the characters were sitting by the footlights, all persons turned their back on the audience, this was an original and unprecedented. Chekhov personally watched the rehearsal, "The Seagull" caused a sensation in Moscow when it premiered, the main young actors of art theatre gained fame throughout Russia, but Meyerhold remained unknown, however, he had already accepted the naturalistic tendency of art theatre's, pursued the authenticity and credibility of the stage representation of life scene, the highest goal of art was to break away from false conventions and express the truth of life[3]. At this time, the neurotic, sharp, satirical, and extreme style of Meyerhold's performance caused the alarm of Danchenko and Stanislavski, he became isolated due to his dissatisfaction with the distribution of roles, the selection of scripts, and the stance of the theater leadership, Chekhov brought "Three Sisters" to the theater, although Meyerhold was still charmed by Stanislavski's unconventional directing technique, the latter's strict rehearsal style made him feel "hatred" emotionally.

The differences in ideas soon emerged, Meyerhold was eager to change life through art, the theater leaders were calmer and more restrained, the emotional art that Stanislavski believed in was regarded by Meyerhold as negative, mediocre, and insufficient. The outbreak of real-world problems intensified the differences between the two, in 1901, social unrest brought about a great change in the literary world, while reading the works of Hauptmann, Henry Bataille, D'Annunzio and Maeterlinck, Meyerhold discovered Gorky's novels and was immediately attracted by them, Danchenko was worried and unhappy about this, the art theatre did not choose to rehearse Gorky's "Urban Petty Bourgeois", but Danchenko's own play "In Fantasy", the booing during the performance made Stanislavski start to doubt Meyerhold who was dissatisfied with the script, after various experiences, Meyerhold failed to become a new shareholder of art theatre and chose to leave Moscow for Kherson.

3. New Drama Club and Return to Art Theatre

In Kherson, Meyerhold obtained a municipal theatre where he began his directorial work, in order to make money, he promoted the "stage arrangement of art theatre", recorded the stage arrangement, backstage sound effects, decorative details, and other similar things of the art theater for reproduction in the future, Meyerhold was the pioneer of this stage reproduction. Several years later, he said that he "began blindly imitating Stanislavski... and never dared to transgress the bounds." [4] During the theatre's performances, Meyerhold gradually realized that the naturalism principle of art theatre could not be applied in all situations, constrained by reality, his directorial approaches, which were contrary to the principles of art theatre, broke the artistic illusion of realistic action, but had a special significance. Meyerhold performed Maeterlinck's "The Deceiver" while on tour and began planning to perform more of his works. In 1903, the Kherson troupe was renamed the New Drama Club, and the review article of capital's press said it was a new direction that parted ways with naturalism. Meyerhold's strong interest in symbolism prompted him to rehearse Pushkin's "The Snow" and Maeterlinck's "Monna Vanna", but the Kherson audience objected to the new direction, Meyerhold decided to take the drama troupe to other provinces. During the tour season, the dramas that adhered to the principles of the art theatre were successful, while the new symbolic dramas failed. Meyerhold persisted in his path, his directorial skills began to mature, the theater troupe boldly chose dramas, changed rehearsal methods and took other innovative measures, this news soon reached Moscow. Stanislavski was dissatisfied with Moskvina's performance in the rehearsal of "The Ghosts", Kherson was discussing the results of Meyerhold's tour achievement of other provinces, there was a bitter controversy about whether to invite the New Drama Club back to the art theatre, and the opportunity to return to the art theatre came [5].

In 1902, Stanislavski also realized that the theatre needed something new, he thought about some artistic forms that could express "noble emotions, world sadness, mystery of life, and eternity". He even performed three Maeterlinck's short plays on the stage of Moscow Art Theatre, but the performances got "hostility and indifference" from the audience. Meyerhold and Stanislavski simultaneously yearned for symbolism and Maeterlinck, they established a new theatre on Povarskaya Street in 1905, which Meyerhold named the Stukia Theatre (meaning "drama laboratory"), at a fan conference in May, Stanislavski talked about how the "young" drama troupe should "make a concentrated effort to fulfill their main task - to renew the drama art with new forms and methods of stage performance." According to him, the new Stukia creed was realism on stage, "scenes of daily life are outdated, the era of non-realistic stage has come..." [6] The two explored the experiment of applying symbolic aesthetic principles to drama, their first goal was to rehearse Maeterlinck's "The Death of Tintagiles". While European drama innovators were still enamored with romanticism, Meyerhold boldly chose to direct with different approaches from Stanislavski, he aimed to show the imagination and resulting illusions in Maeterlinck's script, in setting and stage division, Meyerhold abandoned the performance on the front of stage and covered the stage with gauze, prepared to perform in a narrow stage area, young painters designed a general and poetic "Impressionist setting" that was completely different from naturalism for Meyerhold. Meyerhold also discovered new performance methods from Maeterlinck's static drama, he wanted the actors' movements and postures to match the mysterious and melancholic musical rhythm, thus, the actors' movements were instructed to become semi reliefs, Meyerhold carefully required them to remain still and turn to the audience at specific times and positions, the lines were to sound cold, and he heavily used pauses and monologues to achieve silent stillness and common chorus, everything was new for the theater and the actors.

Stanislavski, Gorky, Knebel, and Danchenko watched a scene of "The Death of Tintagiles", except for Danchenko, the others were all impressed. Moscow strike in 1905 changed the fate

of this symbolist drama, the chaotic October made all theater performances stalled, afterward, although art theatre resumed performances, Stukia's public performance missed the best opportunity, on the final rehearsal day, the sad and dim atmosphere of "The Death of Tintagiles" clearly did not suit the surviving Moscow, Stanislavski uncharacteristically announced the suspension of the rehearsal, on October 24th, Stanislavski invited Meyerhold over and told him that Stukia was closing[7]. Outwardly this failure seemed to be due to bad luck, but from the perspective of artistic ideas and aesthetic pursuits, Meyerhold's pursuit of novelty was completely antithetical to Stanislavski's requirement for symbolism based on psychology and reality, although the latter was still seeking stage methods for handling symbolist drama, Meyerhold had realized that art theatre could not break away from the tone of life and naturalism and chose to leave.

4. Period at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre in St. Petersburg

The failure of Stukia strengthened Meyerhold's determination to continue exploring, he reassembled the members of "New Drama Club" in Tiflis and began performing, Meyerhold began to try to argue with the audience through drama and surprise them, during Tiflis' performance season, the New Drama Club's performances became provocative and aggressive, "The Death of Tintagiles" was finally performed, the stage arrangement remained as planned in Stukia, the setting was changed to the style similar to that of Beoklin, as Meyerhold wished, the premiere was successful. Meyerhold wanted to create dramas that pursue "spiritual height"[8], and his ideal of creating dramas like Maeterlinck's and Ibsen's coincided with the ideas of Komissarzhevskaya, she immediately invited Meyerhold to St. Petersburg. In August 1906, Meyerhold began rehearsing "Sister Beatrice" and "Hedda Gabler" at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre, during the rehearsal of the latter, Meyerhold considered the relationship between the painting setting and the script, he requested that the design had nothing to do with real-life scenes, was illusory and poetic, and had no hanging objects, making the stage look like it was between two canvases, this was revolutionary in the Russian drama circles, the attempt to handle Ibsen in Maeterlinck's way was fiercely criticized among the audience, but "Sister Beatrice" was a huge success, this symbolic script was perfectly suitable for Meyerhold. In order to achieve illusion like high platform, Meyerhold continued the semi-relief performance of "The Death of Tintagiles", and the stage divisions were further stylized to be smaller and narrower, the dramas of Maeterlinck, known for their high symbolism, condensed language and static poses, were directed by Meyerhold, reflected generality, lofty poeticism and contradictory tragedy, the protagonist's experiences echoed the crisis of the Russian society, and the performance of Komissarzhevskaya also attracted the audience's attention, causing a sensation in St. Petersburg.

Afterwards Blok's "Puppet Show" was rehearsed, Meyerhold discovered the exposed conditional theatre of the drama, the directorial ideas of the comprehensive theatre began to take shape, what was needed was a greater breakthrough in symbolist artistic means. Meanwhile, "The Miracle of Saint Anthony" was also rehearsed, but Meyerhold was no longer satisfied with the relief performance and static drama, in "Puppet Show", for the first time he created a structure where music, dance and poetry alternated, complemented and intensified each other, he abandoned the stage design of "Sister Beatrice" and used a small stage on a large one, brought the playwright's role in the script to the empty space between small stage and large stage, occasionally appeared to break the fourth wall, Blok used clowns and sarcasm to expose the mysterious illusion of symbolism, while Meyerhold saw the possibility of the conditional theatre and true theatricality in the highly controversial success of performance. Meyerhold began to continue exploring symbolist drama and new creative practice in a way that deviated from Maeterlinck's artistic ideas, his enthusiasm for innovative drama caused him

to overlook Komissarzhevskaya's inadaptability, "Puppet Show" was so controversial among the audience without her role, while "The Tragedy of Love", "The Comedy of Love" and "The Wedding of Zobeida"[9], featuring Komissarzhevskaya, on the contrary, the performance effect was mediocre.

In 1907, Meyerhold, who had not yet perceived the potential contradiction between them, quickly devoted himself into writing "On the History and Technique of the Drama", according to his concept, this article included his whole artistic program and rich experience gained from performances and direction in various places, as well as an attack on the naturalism of the Moscow Art Theatre, this was his first attempt to state his ideas for reforming drama ideas and the principles of conditional theatre in writing[10]. The symbolist drama experiments that Meyerhold conducted during his stay at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre directly determined the maturity of his later artistic style and earned a reputation in the Russian drama circles, as a leader of theatrical reform, he got established in the drama circles.

5. Conclusion

Meyerhold's whole early creative experiments were inseparable from the influence of Maeterlinck, in the fourth section of "On the History and Technique of the Drama", he wrote: "Through the performance of Maeterlinck's tragedy 'The Death of Tintagiles', this first experimental theatre, in my opinion, was very close to the ideal conditional theatre, I thought it was not redundant, because it revealed the process of creating a script according to the needs of the director, actors and stage designer, and expounded the experience gained."

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