

Béatrice Picon-Vallin

# MEYERHOLD

THE MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD



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**MEYERHOLD, *THE MAGNANIMOUS CUCKOLD***  
**INTRODUCTION BY BÉATRICE PICON-VALLIN**



**1922** was an important year for the history of European theatre, one that may still be underappreciated. That year, after *The Dawn* (1920) and *Mystery-Bouffe* (1921), *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was the third manifesto of Moscow's "Theatrical October" proclaimed by Meyerhold. Far from being a swansong of theatre, it became a statement of new theatrical possibilities and demands. In Moscow, then the epicentre of the Soviet Revolution, Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* unveiled a new Constructivist and biomechanical theatre, entirely based on movement and a mastery of the stage space and time. It is the result of a collaborative effort between the staging and acting studios of the Theatre-Workshop, bringing together young performers, some already with professional experience but more often students handpicked at audition, at a time of his life when Meyerhold was teaching and researching full-time. In the play, the Meyerholdian theatrical language hinges on the revelation of all its scenic, gestural and sound constituents in their most elemental form and their expressive synthesis through swift, fast-paced and collective action.

## A RADICAL MANIFESTO

*The Magnanimous Cuckold* is premiered three days after the production of Ibsen's *A Doll's house*, adapted by Meyerhold as *Nora*. It is performed on a stage without any curtains, hosed down with water and "littered" with assorted frames from the theatre prop department, scattered or flipped upside down (clearly showing their inventory numbers) by Meyerhold's students, including Sergei Eisenstein for whom the experience would prove indelible. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* should

not be analysed in negative terms as an "attempted premeditated murder of theatre". In fact, after *Nora* having paved the way by doing away with illusionist settings, wings, painted canvases and props, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was a true manifesto in three key aspects.

Scenically, it was the first play to use, in lieu of a traditional stage set, an arrangement of scenic elements, designed and built as a "construction" by avant-garde artist Lyubov Popova. Popova had been one of the five artists featured in the 5 x 5 = 25 Constructivist exhibition in the autumn of 1921, and was invited by Meyerhold to be guest instructor of his stagecraft studio. Biomechanics emerged as a teaching acting method for the "new" actor, based on "physical" rather than psychological<sup>[1]</sup> considerations; its methodology

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[1] Cf, Meyerhold V. 'The actor of the future and biomechanics'. In Braun, E. 2016. *Meyerhold on Theatre*. Translated and ed. with a critical commentary by E. Braun, 4th Edition. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, p. 243-246.

Example of a biomechanical exercise: "Students line up in two rows, one half-step away from each other, facing each other diagonally, legs symmetrically aligned, standing on their toes, bodyweight evenly distributed on both legs (boxer stance).

1. Total *otkaz* of the striking actor (leaning towards the receiving partner).
2. Punch (no contact) and backward leaning of the receiving partner.
3. Small *otkaz*, punch and taking the strike.
4. Moving students striking with the other hand."

Meyerhold V. [Translation from French] 'Le laboratoire biomécanique'. In Picon-Vallin, Béatrice. 2009. *Meyerhold, Écrits sur le théâtre. Tome 2 (1917-1930)*. Translation, foreword and notes by Béatrice Picon-Vallin. TH20. Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, p. 98. *Otkaz* (literally "refusal") is an essential concept of biomechanics. Defined in 1914 in the Saint Petersburg studio, it is both a component of the fragmented main action sequence (separation from the preceding movement, and preparation for the next movement) and the opposition to the collective movement (backward movement before forward, flexion before standing).



applied through demonstration and performance<sup>[2]</sup>. Ultimately it is an ideological manifesto, likening actors to workers, the creative process fruit of their toil, and of conscious production, on a stage-cum-factory, and the acting process itself a model of proletarian behaviour, that of a new man in a new society, efficiently managing his relationships with space, objects and with others.

The staging construction for the *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is without a doubt one of the least expensive in the history of theatre, with its rough lumber stage, and only a handful of props coloured not with paint but with soot or red stage makeup. As stage costumes, all actors are dressed in the same common blue canvas coveralls (*prozodejda*) workers wear. While the experimental performance's ascetic quality certainly reflected the group's extreme poverty - all had to work outside the theatre to support themselves - it was nonetheless deeply rooted in the same fundamental principles that made their production so radical.

While a resounding public success, the play also stirred political scandal. The choice of the play is hotly debated: even editorials praising the production as revolutionary condemn the play as a bad bourgeois joke. Detractors tear both text and staging to shreds for their "decadence", with it being the work of a Party member adding insult to injury. Accusations fly: bestiality, filth, pornography, sadism, profanation of art and love. Actors are called "pitiful baboons", frauds and savages, Hottentots crawling on each other's backs, somersaulting

and slithering on stage<sup>[3]</sup>, with the most scathing opinions often those of artistically and morally conservative communists. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissariat for Education, joins the outrage: "I feel shame for audiences who laugh like beasts at the sight of slaps, pratfalls and obscenities"<sup>[4]</sup>. He later retracts and makes amends for his statements. In response, Meyerhold castigates those detractors as "Tartuffes of communism and Cuckolds of Morality"<sup>[5]</sup>.

Defending the production are poet V. Mayakovsky, cutting-edge theatre scholars (A. Gvozdiev) and theorists of the avant-garde (O. Brik) and of "productivism" (A. Gan, A. Arvatov). These theorists champion a new vision of art, not as a representation but as a systemisation of life: art must be produced and not passively consumed, as art must be integrated into daily life as a transformative and ordering force. All highlight the performance's programmatic character. Some talk of pure, unadulterated laughter, refreshing as "mountain air", and of the "artistic joy" it exudes by showing instead of instilling the experiences of impulse and action, where everything is explicitly defined and things are called by their name. Some even consider the play's invigorating feel as suitable for children. "It has been a long time since we have seen such purity on a theatre stage, and maybe we have never known the tragedy and torture of the almost physiological plight brought on by jealousy, man's

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[3] RGALI (Russian State Archives of Literature and Arts. Moscow), 963, 315: press kit on *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

[4] Quoted by Meyerhold V. [Translation from French] 'Meyerhold à Lounatcharski'. In Meyerhold, *Écrits sur le théâtre. Tome 2 (1917-1930), op.cit.*, p. 129.

[5] Title of a debate led by Meyerhold. Cf. *Teatr i muzyka*, 1922, n°1-7, p. 23-25.

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[2] The only performance where Meyerhold allows it.

**ARCHIVES**





Photo of Meyerhold wearing the *prozodejda* (1923).





Lyubov Popova's rendering  
of the construction for  
*The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922).



The complicity  
of coordinated  
actors. Stella (Z.  
Reich) between  
the two men. Stage  
direction: 1928.





Scene with the village men,  
after the previous one: with  
his right leg, Bruno holds  
back the men as they make for  
Stella (Z. Reich). Photo from  
the 1928 production, taken  
by A. Temerin, studio actor.





Biomechanics: Excerpts  
from a series of  
photos taken in the  
early 1930s on the  
roof of the Theatre  
overlooking Moscow.

At work, the two best  
biomechanicians in  
Theatre: Z. Zlobin  
and N. Koustov (who  
taught biomechanics  
with V. Ploutchek  
in the 1970s).





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Editorial direction: Clarisse Bardiot

Graphic design: Mylène Boyrie

Translation: Sophie-Hélène Cimon

Editorial secretariat: Colin Ginks

Design consultant : Émeline Brulé

Cover: original work by Anne-Marie Thouin

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This book was published thanks to the support of the Hauts-de France Region, the Communauté d'Agglomération Valenciennes Métropole and the département du Territoire de Belfort - Espace multimédia Gantner.



Région  
Hauts-de-France



This book is available as a pdf, epub and mobi,  
in French and in English

Illustrations

Pages 17, 19, 21, 25, 28-31, 33, 37-42, 44-49, 54, 57, 58

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Pages 20, 22, 24, 26, 27, 32, 34-36

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[www.subjectile.com](http://www.subjectile.com)

ISBN: 978-2-36530-029-2

First online publication: 15/12/2017

Legal deposit: December 2017

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