



PROJECT MUSE®

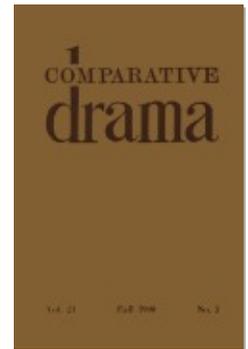
Vsevolod Meyerhold by Robert Leach (review)

James Fisher

Comparative Drama, Volume 24, Number 3, Fall 1990, pp. 278-279 (Review)

Published by Western Michigan University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1990.0042>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/486972/summary>

Vladimir: Well?

Boy: He does nothing, Sir. (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 59)

Waiting For Godot exemplifies Bouchard's tragic theology, although inexplicably Beckett does not figure significantly in this study.

The sections on Hochhuth, Lowell, and Shaffer, however, are extensive and cogently argued. Bouchard approaches these dramatists with a keen intellect and examines their work with scrupulous care. The treatment of *Amadeus* is particularly engaging, and anyone interested in Shaffer's work will benefit from the discussion. Bouchard's prose can be difficult at times (cautious, sober, abstract), but readers will find *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology* an impressive, thought-provoking book.

MICHAEL HINDEN

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Robert Leach. *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. 223 + illus. \$54.00.

Since the late 1960's a number of biographies and studies of Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold's prolific theatrical career have appeared in English. The best among these, Marjorie L. Hoover's *Meyerhold: The Art of Conscious Theatre* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), Edward Braun's *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage* (Drama Book Specialists, 1979), and Konstantin Rudnitsky's *Meyerhold the Director* (Ardis, 1981), as well as ample collections of Meyerhold's writings in translation—i.e., Braun's *Meyerhold on Theatre* (Hill and Wang, 1969) and Paul Schmidt's *Meyerhold at Work* (University of Texas Press, 1980)—have all managed, in varying degrees, to capture much of the profoundly imaginative art of perhaps the finest theatrical artist of his era.

The most recent study of Meyerhold, Robert Leach's *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, the latest entry in Cambridge's Directors in Perspective series, avoids the standard chronological approach to focus on two assertions: (1) Meyerhold had a conscious and highly original system (biomechanics) and (2) Meyerhold's working style was that of a pedagogue (a teacher, researcher, and practitioner). Although neither assertion is especially startling or original, few Meyerhold scholars have contributed as lucid and insightful an understanding of Meyerhold's theories as Leach manages.

Perhaps the contemporary fascination with Meyerhold's work results from the fact that Meyerhold, above all others, encompassed virtually all of the significant developments of early twentieth-century theater. He began his career in the plays of Chekhov which were staged in a predominantly naturalistic style at the Moscow Art Theatre by Constantin Stanislavsky. When he broke with the MAT, Meyerhold became one of Russia's most avant-garde artists of both the pre-Revolutionary and Soviet eras. He brought elements of the Symbolist movement, Oriental forms, *commedia dell'arte*, medieval drama, constructivism, the theories of Gordon Craig, the productions of Max Reinhardt, and the plays of Mayakovsky into a unique style that was charged by an intense involvement in the social and political turmoil in Russia between 1905 and his

arrest by Stalin in 1939. As Leach suggests, Meyerhold created "a poetic theatre, popular and engaging, which had infinite potential and reverberations" (p. 174) to counter the "prose theatre of realism" (p. 174) created by Stanislavsky in the same era.

The strongest element in Leach's approach is that he dispenses with the significant biographical details in a tightly constructed first chapter and is thus liberated to deal with the most potent artistic, social, and political influences on Meyerhold and his "system" in seven fascinating chapters, plus a concluding one on Meyerhold's legacy, which Leach detects in the productions of Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, and Peter Brook, among others. Much emphasis is placed on Meyerhold's sense of a total theater unifying all production elements and on the significance of biomechanics. Leach himself has spent considerable time in experimenting with biomechanics, and, in this case, it proves extremely valuable to the reader to have the insights (and the demonstration photographs) provided by Leach's experience with Meyerhold's system, one which made the art of the actor paramount.

Leach also painstakingly draws in a multitude of influences on Meyerhold, from the theoretical concepts of Gordon Craig and the productions of Max Reinhardt to the dizzying political turmoil in Russia. Well-known Meyerhold productions of Blok's *The Fairground Booth* and Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* are examined here with somewhat less intensity than has been typical in other studies of Meyerhold, but Leach gives a well-deserved chapter to the complex relationship of Meyerhold with the Soviet playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky. There was a special bond between these two artists, and Meyerhold, who often found the author's presence undesirable, truly collaborated with Mayakovsky. Meyerhold's staging of Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug*, *The Bathhouse*, and *Mystery-Bouffe* were among the most acclaimed and imitated productions of the Soviet period. Another chapter is devoted to perhaps the quintessential Meyerhold production, Mikhail Lermontov's *Masquerade*, in which Meyerhold's unique mixture of *mise-en-scène*, the actor's art, and fantastic theatricality exploded with striking originality.

Leach's study is fit into Cambridge's standard format for the Directors in Perspective series which, in this case, is somewhat limiting. Although there are an ample number of nicely reproduced black-and-white illustrations sprinkled through the text, an artist whose work was as fundamentally visual as Meyerhold's requires considerably more illustration than is possible in this format. Along with a select bibliography, Leach has included an excellent chronology that sets major events in theater, art and culture, and politics and society against the highlights of Meyerhold's career along with a complete listing of Meyerhold's nearly three hundred productions (as well as those that were uncompleted and those to which he made some contribution).

Vsevolod Meyerhold is a cogently written overview of a fascinating theatrical era and its greatest single exemplar, an artist who had the "ability simultaneously to make the medium illuminate the message and the message illuminate the medium . . ." (p. 174).

JAMES FISHER
Wabash College