Meyerhold's Footprint in Australian Education Practice
Selections

David Roy
University of Newcastle
Email: David.Roy@newcastle.edu.au
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‘For Theatre is, or can be, the most public, the most clearly political of the art forms.’ (McGrath 1996)

This paper argues to present the theatrical footprint of the 20th Century theatre practitioner Vsevolod Meyerhold1 upon 21st Century Australian Drama and Theatre Education. The context of Meyerhold’s work, the areas focussed upon by the majority and the potential for application of Meyerholdian ideas in education are explored.

A minority of students, internationally and in Australia study Meyerhold in Secondary Drama classes as part of their studies, as opposed to Brecht or Stanislavski(SQA 2008). Teachers seem to engage willingly with Stanislavski and Brecht and indeed such acting styles are propagated often as the ‘truth’ by specialist acting schools such as RSAMD, RADA and NIDA, based on the ideas of Dorothy Heathcote and Michael Saint-Dennis. Often there is the division of ‘physical’ theatre from characterisation and motivation. The deification of psycho physical acting appears to be propagated, at least in the white, paternalistic western society(Gordon 2006). This paper seeks to initiate a discussion to challenge this acceptance.

Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold (1874-c.1940)2 was a major theatre practitioner in Bolshevik Russia; a student, competitor and collaborator with Stanislavski, who whilst disagreeing with Meyerhold, also offered opportunities for Meyerhold’s ideas to be developed( Bradshaw 1954) and in later ideas collaborated once again with him. He was killed, under Stalin’s orders, in February 1940. Only since the 70’s has there been a gradual rehabilitation of Meyerhold into Russian culture. Indeed, confirmation of death was not until many years later. Meyerhold is included in many international curricula and is referenced as a major influence by theatre practitioners, alongside Jacques Lecoq and Étienne Ducroux (Neelands and Dobson 2000; Burton 2001; Balme 2008; Bradley 2009).

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1 In translation Meyerhold is also sometimes spelt Mejerhold, though these are rare occurrences.
2 Meyerhold changed his name from Karl to Vsevolod at the age of 21.
So what form of knowledge about Meyerhold should teachers embrace?

Data was sourced looking at both Schools of Drama and Schools of Education (Universities Australia 2009).

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This information represents the information freely available to the general public. In the course outlines provided by the Universities, specific details of what is offered to students is not provided in the public forum of the University handbook (ECU 2009; Sydney 2009; UoN 2009; UoN 2009).

The detail of any course outline is often provided to students once they have registered for a course. A case in point being at the University of Newcastle, where two courses offered in Acting, through the School of Drama specifically mention Meyerhold and biomechanics (UoN 2009; UoN 2009). Mention in other courses is also made of Commedia dell’Arte, however no connection is made to Meyerhold or the Grotesque in the course outlines. The reality is that Meyerhold and physical theatre, whilst not mentioned in detail in course handbooks, are explored in a variety of courses offered by the School of Drama at the University of Newcastle.

In Early Childhood Education and Primary Education and indeed Secondary Education, with the increase in grounding learning through theory, the process of Drama is not the only pedagogical approach, but should be contextualised with theory (Neelands 2004). Whilst the danger of this is ‘ghettoisation’ of Drama (Lewis and Rainer 2005), it is worrying that drama theory; as opposed to curricular/cognitive developmental theories in education; is often lacking in the creation of drama programs of study, particularly in early years learning (McCaslin 2006). In part this may be the divide in philosophical approach to those who view Drama as ‘play’ and those who view drama ‘education’ (Wright 2003). However despite these two contrasting views, the development of multiple intelligences, especially spatial and kinaesthetic forms does not negate the need for context, whatever the age of learning or development. (Gardner 1933; Gardner 1982) There may be structure to Drama, but too often there is little recognition given to the social construct of these ideas. (Winston and Tandy 2009) Process Drama is not enough,
though neither is pure theory (Hornbrook 1998; Sinclair, Jeanneret et al. 2009). We should be engaging the students, and offering a depth in background knowledge. The research of these concepts is offered through the Productive Pedagogies Framework (Groundwater-Smith, Brennan et al. 2009) and the Quality Teaching Framework (DET 2003; DET 2003). Research that these frameworks are based upon also support the concept of not only having a depth of knowledge for the teacher, but sharing that with the student, offering them control of the knowledge (Haberman 1994; Beane 1995; Black and Wiliam 1998; Black 2002; Ladwig and King 2003).

Meyerhold has the potential to be re-positioned as one of the key practitioners in applied theatre, the question remains as to whether there is desire in academics to do so or not (Beane 1995).
Works Cited


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holders/avcc_members.htm.


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University of Newcastle

Email: David.Roy@newcastle.edu.au

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Biography

David Roy currently lectures in Education and Drama at the University of Newcastle. He has extensive experience in Drama and Theatre education as a department head; advisor to government, theatre and media organisations.

His research interests focus on Representation, performance, physicality and Pedagogy.

He is the author of seven texts, and was nominated for the 2006 Saltire/TES Scottish Education Publication of the Year. His recent publication is ‘Nelson Drama for Secondary Students’.

He is currently completing a PhD in Drama and Education on Meyerhold.