

# Championing “the Right to Experiment, both in Science and Art”

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

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## Abstract

Throughout the 20th century and until the present, the notion of theatre laboratory has encapsulated the need for a suitable space-time for artistic research that is not linked to the imperative of production. This is both a challenge and a paradox for an art that only exists in the confrontation with the audience. However, it is also in this both ethical and artistic requirement where a non-sclerosing performance pedagogy can be invented; a collective mode of research, creation and sometimes even life; the renewal of an art threatened by excessively agreed expectations and by imperatives of immediate productivity.

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**Keywords:** theatre, laboratory, studio, school, research, exercise, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Copeau, Craig, Barba

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## Championing “the Right to Experiment, both in Science and Art”

The words “laboratory”, “research” and “experiment” are in vogue in the world of theatre, at least in France.

This is for several reasons:

- the feeling of loss of meaning, or even of a crisis, whose foundations are not only economic: theatre no longer fills the auditoria; it is out of touch with a world in which text, silence and “real presence”<sup>1</sup> have been replaced by image, noise and screen;
- in parallel, there is the awareness of a headlong rush: the professional life of a young artist, actor/actress or director seems to come down to an inveterate struggle to get into schools that rival each other in order not to miss career opportunities, to be part of the network and then to live off their own private income, get the best contract conditions and take on many roles as a manager, strategist, organiser and, incidentally, artist; but now almost never as an apprentice...

Certainly, this is the fate of any worker in a capitalist society, which has not only divided the tasks but also our lives between learning time and the time to get the most out of what we have learnt. However, given that theatre is defined as art, it obeys other imperatives; it is the artist who innovates, invents, who makes it unique. In short, it is the artist who searches and researches.

This is the fundamental paradox of the laboratory, which exacerbates the paradox of the “art theatre”, a watchword that emerged in the late 19th century to fight against commercial theatre. Since that time, the practice of theatre has been a permanent choice between:

- an individual subjectivity (that of the stage director) and a collective expectation (that of the audience);

1. Georges STEINER. *Réelles présences. Les Arts du sens*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991 (Folio-Essais).

- taking time to rehearse and filling the theatre coffers;
- inventing and reinventing what people can do;
- being an art and an apparently “popular” practice; in any case being the most socialised art of all, given that dissemination and reception are concomitant.

This paradox focuses on a strong opposition between light and shadow, between the long and secret time of learning or rehearsal and the ephemeral and public time of the performance.

Stanislavski fought against what he considered two paradoxes of theatre, which nevertheless are its two essential components: its public dimension and its repetitive character. It is not by chance that he introduced into the theatre world a term and a practice from the world of science and the visual arts: the laboratory. And this invention of a brand new space-time in the history of theatre already sought to tackle the feeling of crisis. In other words, to take note of an extinguished past, a routine way of doing theatre, without yet knowing how to overcome the impasse or where the new path would lead.



First laboratory in the history of theatre, the Studio, founded in 1905 in Moscow.

Stanislavski’s invention of the theatre laboratory by, called the “Studio”, emerged therefore from a non-contradictory dual premise:

- to make a clean sweep of the stale traditions, which are an obstacle between the artists and their present because they no longer grasp the essence of a time;

- and to “avoid always beginning from scratch,”<sup>2</sup> establishing a new tradition, but a tradition that would never be fixed but would always be in motion, driven by a research dynamic. What Baudelaire had defined fifty years earlier as “modernity”, this attempt to give universal form to what is transitory and ephemeral.

If we look carefully, we see many things in the photo of the first laboratory in the history of theatre.

- First, the youthfulness of the Studio members: Stanislavski thinks that the Art Theatre, despite its success, or because of its success, is trapped in routine. A shock, which arrived from abroad, came to challenge certainties: the symbolist dramaturgy of Maeterlinck, Ibsen or Strindberg. The performance methods behind the success of the Art Theatre were not suited for suggesting the imaginary, the dream, the unconscious, to make the invisible visible. Stanislavski’s idea lies in calling on youth to shake and regenerate his art.
- In the centre of the photograph we see Vsevolod Meyerhold; Stanislavski called on him to manage this Studio, he, the rebel boy who had been expelled from the Art Theatre in 1902, and that since then had managed a provincial theatre where he multiplied the creations at an exhausting rate. Stanislavski was aware that the need to experiment, the desire to research and the aspiration to the unknown are primarily rooted in rebelliousness.
- Meyerhold is surrounded by many young musicians and painters from the modern school, who drive their own research as a form of acting that excludes mimicry in the decor and the performance to invent a gestural score unfolding in front of a suggestive painted canvas and at another level than the sound score.
- The photo was not taken in Moscow but in front of the barn on Stanislavski’s estate in the countryside, where in 1898 he had begun the adventure of the Art Theatre. The laboratory needed another space, which was neither the theatre auditorium nor even the rehearsal room, but rather a gap, a utopian place in which time would stop, which would bring together all the conditions for the experiment, thus adopting the dreamed model of the scientific laboratory or the painter’s studio.

However, this very brief experience, lasting a few months, is pioneering for two reasons:

- firstly, because the fact of not showing the audience the plays rehearsed at the Studio turned it into a prototype: a space-time in which a group of artists, led by a master, experimented in several areas of theatre creation without the need to produce a show;

2. Constantin STANISLAVSKI. *Notes artistiques*. Translation from Russian by Macha Zonina and Jean-Pierre Thibaudat. Strasbourg: Circé / Théâtre National de Strasbourg, 1997, p. 30 (Penser le théâtre).

- secondly, because it defined the field of the next research project: the actor’s performance, which both Stanislavski and Meyerhold considered insufficient, must discover its laws, language and grammar.

Thereafter, two essential modes of 20th century drama research emerged, which first diverged and later converged:

- what we could call the Stanislavski system, which advocates the unity and coherence of the character and seeks to define the components, the stages, the method of the process of embodying that character in the actors’ body-mind; actors must control and be aware of this unconscious process by which the state of grace of splitting emerges;
- and the Meyerhold system, which makes the character, and more broadly the show, the product of an agreed staging that assumes the conventional aspects of the theatre technique; the aim is for actors to have control and be aware of the convention in which they choose to express themselves.

It would take a very long time to tell the whole story, which spans the 20th century and established a lineage of researchers who, beyond the aesthetic divergences, maintained the ethical demands of the experiment against the constant risk of sclerosis.<sup>3</sup>

Stanislavski’s research developed in this incredible experience of the diverse Moscow Art Theatre “Studios”, which he managed to impose inside and outside the headquarters, despite the sarcasms and resistances, putting his faith again in the new generation, led by his old friend Leopold Sulerzhitski. In 1905 he took a more radical approach by constructing a truly different space-time, which he could only define negatively: “neither a school for beginners nor a theatre ready to operate.”<sup>4</sup> The First Studio, which he opened in 1912 under the supervision of the young Yevgueny Vakhtangov, and all those that followed — Second, Third and Four Art Theatre Studios —were an incredible endeavour. Here the “system” was tested, here the constitutive “elements” of the actors’ performance were confirmed or invalidated, the exercises that enabled them to develop each one of their skills and put them into practice through a life in art.

We all know this, because this method still inspires many acting exercises and actors’ training schools. What I would like to illustrate here with a quotation is the atmosphere that reigned in this Studio. At the beginning there was an impulse, a crazy race, a race that took the young laboratory assistants from the Art Studio (where they attended the shows or performed small roles) to the studio in Tverskaya Street, which they called their “home”,

3. Jean-Manuel WARNET. *Les Laboratoires : Une autre histoire du théâtre*. Lavérune: Editions de l’Entretemps, 2014 (Les Voies de l’acteur).

4. Konstantin STANISLAVSKI. *Ma vie dans l’art*, 1924, translation, foreword and notes by Denise Yoccoz, Lausana: L’Age d’homme, 1999, p. 355 (th 20). [author’s own translation]

and where they had the feeling of participating in the construction of something bigger:<sup>5</sup>

We spent the time we didn't have to be in the Theatre in our fantastic house. From Kamerguersk Alley, often without removing all our make-up, we ran, coat flapping in the wind, hastily thrown over our shoulders, through Tverskaya Street, followed by the amazed gazes of the passers-by. We heard: “Crazy”; sometimes an old man's voice behind us: “Where the hell are you running?”, “I run, run, run, old man, where the devil takes me.” In the “house” they were already waiting for us: Lidia Deikoun made the sandwiches, Souler got angry because of the delay. And both the meals and the reproaches were light; they were necessary. (...) Sometimes, Konstantin Sergeyeovich arrived after the show, with a severe look, and reprimanded us: “It's late, go to sleep, stop working” and then, illogically, added “Ok! Let's begin.”

Stanislavski's system is also this research ethic that Vakhtangov called “studio spirit”<sup>6</sup> and that could be summarised as follows: abandonment of individual ambitions to the benefit of the group, absorption of the researchers' community, secrecy of their research, absolute respect for the rules that govern the community, opening to the unknown, acceptance of error and failure, being rigorous and demanding, submitting to the experimental objectives established by the master while developing their autonomous capacity to contribute.

The Meyerhold system was developed before and after the Russian Revolution in a series of laboratory-schools but also research very similar to that conducted by Edward Gordon Craig at the Arena Goldoni, the school he opened in Florence, or by Jacques Copeau in France, in his Vieux-Colombier school and later in the provinces, in a community of life and research.

These adventures are linked by a two-fold work:

- first, an archaeological search for the fundamental laws of theatre, not like Stanislavski in the psycho-physical process of the actor-individual but in what Meyerhold calls “the really theatrical eras”;<sup>7</sup> in other words in the performance traditions and conventions, such as the *commedia dell'arte*, which are not reconstituted but vivified;
- a reinvention of new traditions, based on the laws revealed by this training: the body in space, the word-movement, the mask, the play with the proscenium, and so on.

For instance, based on the *commedia dell'arte*, Jacques Copeau tried to invent a new improvised comedy with his students, based on the creation by

5. Sofia GYACINTOVA. *S pamjat'ju naedine (En compagnie des souvenirs)*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985, p. 15 and ff. Cited by Fabio Mollica in: *Il teatro possibile, Stanislavski e il Primo Studio del Teatro d'Arte di Mosca*. Translation from Italian into French consulted by the author, by Monique Bertolla, unpublished typescript, p. 79. NB: Lidia Deikoun is a young member of the Studio, Souler is the affectionate nickname of Leopold Sulerzhitski. [author's own translation]

6. Yevgueny VAKHTANGOV. “Lettre à E. Chik-Elaguina, 10 juillet 1915”. In: *Ecrits sur le théâtre*. Foreword, translation and notes by Hélène Henry, Afterword by Béatrice Picon-Vallin. Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 2000, p. 124 (th 20).

7. Vsevolod MEYERHOLD. *Ecrits sur le théâtre*, Vol. I: 1891-1917. Translation from Russian into French, foreword and notes by Béatrice Picon-Vallin. Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, reprint 2001, p. 239.

each student-assistant of a new fixed character, which corresponded with 20th century life. In his turn, Meyerhold remade, after the Russian Revolution, the small scripts of exercises he had imagined, to strip them of any anecdote and turn them into sequences that enabled the actors to work on their relationship with their partner, with the object, with the space, their rhythmic abilities and their ability to decompose each micro-movement into three phases: preparation, action, reaction. This resulted in the biomechanics exercises.

Fifty years later, Eugenio Barba adopted these two ways of research in his laboratory in Holstebro (Denmark), imagining research sessions that brought together his own actors, trained according to a psycho-physical coaching inherited from Grotowski, with eastern actors-dancers. By confronting them, he sought to discover “principles that return”,<sup>8</sup> not within shows with necessarily divergent aesthetic forms but in what he calls “the pre-expressive”; in other words, the presence of the actors even before beginning to perform and their acculturation to an extra-quotidian body-mind.

Finally, the actor’s challenge is to eliminate the urgency and uniqueness of the result to focus on the process.

I would like to very pragmatically develop some conditions for a theatre laboratory today by offering some reflections at the request of the French Ministry of Culture, which today is considering the possibility of fostering theatre research – which involves allocating grants to artists and companies not only according to productivity criteria.<sup>9</sup>

If the final goal of the laboratory is to feed and foster creation and the presentation of plays, it can only fulfil its experimental function through the construction of a unique space-time:

- long period of research, free from the pressures of production and the imperatives of output,
- isolated space, with a technical team, suitable for a concentration and modelling of the creative process,
- detachment from the audience, embracing the attempt, mistakes and failures, with no harm done.

The specific forms of the laboratory depend of course on the contexts and the arts. But essential recurrent questions emerge:

- how much time should be allocated to research? When to return to production? What relations should be established between research and production?
- is this research time a real hiatus in production activity or does it manage to unfold outside production activity, alongside it, in preserved intervals?

8. Eugenio BARBA, Nicola SAVARESE. *L’Energie qui danse (L’art secret de l’acteur)*. Translation from Italian by Éliane Deschamps-Pria. *Bouffonneries* (Denmark: ISTA), 1995, p. 8.

9. Jean-Manuel WARNET. “Pour un glossaire de la recherche théâtrale : LABORATOIRE, puisqu’il faut bien commencer par un mot”. *Culture @ Recherche* (Mission Recherche de la Direction Générale de la Création Artistique, Ministère de la Culture de la République Française), 135 (1st semester 2017).

- how to fund this “luxury” (subsidies, personal investments, sponsorship, partnerships) and how to account for its efficiency by ensuring its dimension of exploring the unknown?
- is the research that leads to permanence and coherence of the experimental project individual or collective?
- how is the group structured and what are their modes of decision-making, living and relations within the research group?
- can we distinguish between fundamental research (an experiment on a precise and very broad issue: without apparent link with the unique activity of production but rather at the service of the artistic community) and applied research (for instance, at the service of future creation or of an educational project)? And, in this case, how can we distinguish between laboratory and school?

To conclude, as I am in a theatre and dance school, I would like to tell you this:

- nobody is forced to submit to this threat of the experiment; it is perfectly feasible to choose to be a high level performer, at the service of the art and research of others, and the desire to perform, to be as close as possible to the audience; to live in a constant feverish state is perfectly legitimate, I would even say necessary, in a period in which the dissemination of shows is becoming more complicated and limited;
- a school, a real arts school, must necessarily be a research laboratory because it is no longer possible to teach unchangeable codes and traditions but only a joint movement of subscribing to traditions and of inventing new forms that can be taught;
- this is why it is necessary for you to find the trust to build your own singularity, to confront yourself with this theatre culture of the pioneers given that they carry with them this research dynamic that is a permanent rebellion against their own scleroses and those of the professional environment.

In 1938, Stalin and his minions condemned the “formalism” of Meyerhold’s research, closing his theatre and inviting the members of his company to a monstrous session of self-criticism. Of course, to save their necks, each actor, each former work colleague of Meyerhold, went on the platform to condemn and disown him. A man, the theatre’s carpenter, took the floor and was the only one to publicly defend Meyerhold, “in the name of the right to experiment, both in science and art.”<sup>10</sup> We are no longer in the era of Stalin

10. Vsevolod MEYERHOLD. “Interventions au GOSTIM après l’article de P. Kerjentsev, ‘Un théâtre étranger’ (22 and 25 December 1937)”. In: *Ecrits sur le théâtre*, Vol. IV: 1936-1940. Translation from Russian into French, foreword and notes by Béatrice Picon-Vallin. Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1992, p. 173-207 (th 20).

Meyerhold was publicly accused in Pravda of directing “a foreign theatre”, which meant the death penalty. Two GOSTIM general assemblies followed, in which Meyerhold suffered accusations, repudiations, petty revenges and jealousy. His theatre was closed. He was executed two years later.



or rigged trials, but more pernicious forces unite against the “right to experiment”: market pressure, individualist withdrawal, media stupidity, the frenzy of urgency, the dictatorship of what is useful. Against everything that attacks our crafts, which we believe are preserved — and we should admit that to a large extent are —, against all this we need the courage of the theatre carpenter.

