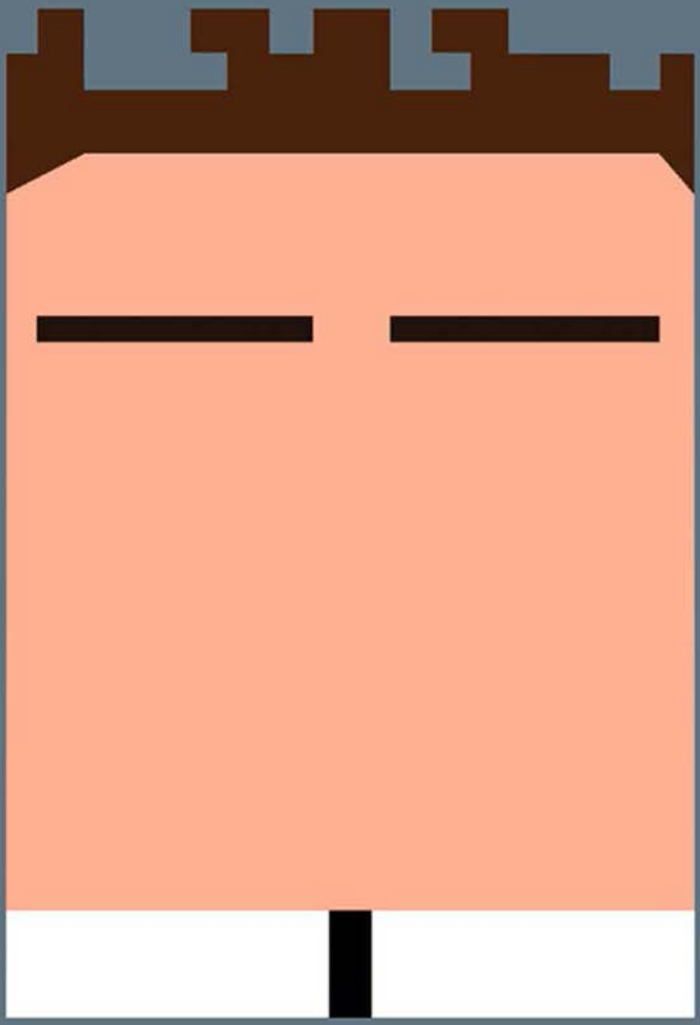

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JONATHAN PITCHES

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VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD

Jonathan Pitches

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TO CERI, HARRI AND GEORGE

It's very important in biomechanics that you're working with very simple things, very simple movements. You put them together and you can make something very complicated. But they are, in essence, simple.

(Aleksei Levinski, 1995)

CONTENTS

List of figures ix
Acknowledgements xi

1 A LIFE OF CONTRADICTIONS 1

Apprenticeship (1874–1905) 4
St Petersburg (1906–17) 12
Meyerhold and the Revolution (1917–22) 29
The Meyerhold Theatre (1922–31) 37
The death of Meyerhold and his theatre (1932–40) 39
After Meyerhold 42

2 MEYERHOLD'S KEY WRITINGS 43

Don't (always) believe what you read! 43
The key theoretical principles 46
Naturalism 47
Stylisation 50
Rhythm and music 53
The mask 57
The grotesque 61
Biomechanics and the actor of the future 67
Chaplin and Eisenstein: a theory of montage 73

3 MEYERHOLD'S KEY PRODUCTION: *THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR* **77**

Gogol's challenge 77
Meyerhold's response 78
Nikolai Gogol: the comet 81
Gogol's *Government Inspector* 83
Meyerhold's *Government Inspector* 89

4 PRACTICAL EXERCISES **111**

Practice: the living link with Meyerhold 111
Biomechanics' Key Skills 112
The exercises 117
Skills-based exercises 120
Back to the key skills 142
Improvisation exercises 144
Work on text 150
Conclusions 153

Bibliography **155**

Books and articles 155
Films and videos 158

Index **161**

FIGURES

1.1 Portrait of the young Meyerhold, 1898 7

1.2 *Sister Beatrice*, 1906 15

1.3 Grigoriev's portrait of Dr Dapertutto, 1916 24

1.4 *Masquerade* at the Aleksandrinsky, 1917 28

1.5 Meyerhold the Bolshevik, 1922 31

1.6 Model reconstruction of *The Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922* 35

1.7 Three actors in *The Magnanimous Cuckold,* 1922 36

1.8 Meyerhold, 1932 40

2.1 Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1797 66

3.1 Meyerhold's *Government Inspector*: 'Dumbshow', 1926 80

3.2 Meyerhold's *Government Inspector:* 'Bribes', 1926 94

3.3 Meyerhold's *Government Inspector:* 'Reading the letter', 1926 107

4.1–4.20 The actions of the étude 'The Slap', 2002 128–37

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1

A LIFE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Meyerhold's life was abruptly brought to an end in the basement of a prison in Moscow over sixty years ago. He was an old man, nearing his seventies, and had dedicated over two-thirds of his life to the Russian theatre, much of it to the cause of Communism after the Russian Revolution in 1917. After a life-long career of innovation and experiment his presence as a theatrical figurehead was deemed too dangerous by the Soviet authorities. He was tortured, 'persuaded' to confess to charges of spying and finally shot, a little less than a week after his sixty-sixth birthday.

It was the last of many contradictions in Meyerhold's life. From his theatrical theories to his relationships with others, Meyerhold courted controversy, even to the extent of promoting dissent among his audiences:

> If everyone praises your production, almost certainly it is rubbish. If everyone abuses it, then perhaps there is something in it. But if some praise and others abuse, if you can split the audience in half, then for sure it is a good production.
>
> (Gladkov 1997: 165)

His was a theatre based expressly *on* contradiction, a theatre which strove not to smooth out problems or to resolve paradoxes but to let

them resonate within the minds of his performers and his audiences. A divided audience, Meyerhold argued, was more likely to engage at a deeper level with the content of the production, to turn in on itself, discuss and debate. We have all travelled back from the theatre with friends and talked about the spectacle we have just enjoyed. But how much more lively is the discussion if, for some reason, we don't agree on everything we have seen? This was Meyerhold's logic and it informed much of his practice.

There were contradictions in Meyerhold's life as well. Often labelled an opponent of Stanislavsky's, he ended his career holding the reins of his teacher's last directorial project, described by the dying Stanislavsky as his 'sole heir in the theatre' (Benedetti 1990: 345). Although he was reputed to be a dictator and a control freak, Meyerhold's workshop nevertheless produced a startling range of theatrical freethinkers, each one capable of enriching the Russian tradition in their own right. Notorious for being difficult to work with, his record of collaboration with musicians, artists, playwrights and co-directors belies this image, and instead defines a man with an irrepressible desire to move with the times and to learn from the people who defined those times.

Meyerhold undoubtedly manufactured some of this controversy, but the one contradiction over which he had no control was his relationship with the political powers of Soviet Russia. He was overtly supportive of the new powers from the earliest opportunity and much of his work in the early 1920s was geared to furthering the cause of the new Soviet regime. It is difficult to believe, then, that those who embraced Meyerhold's vitality in the early years of the Revolution were also responsible for extinguishing it. But this was precisely what happened. It may have taken over twenty years for the turnaround to be completed but its conclusion was undeniably decisive. What is more, Meyerhold's fate was anything but unique. He was joining a long roll-call of artists whose love of experimentation finally became an unendurable threat to the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin.

But why begin here, at the end of Meyerhold's story, rather than at the beginning? First, because Meyerhold's death offers us a measure of how seriously the authorities in the Soviet Union (and before the Revolution, under the Tsar) viewed the art of the theatre. British politicians no longer see the theatre as posing a threat to their authority,

and the fact that people might be killed in order to silence its voice is almost incomprehensible to us today. But in the post-revolutionary climate of the new Soviet Union, live theatre was viewed as one of the most effective tools of communication – not least because most of its audiences were unable to read. To be in control of this weapon of communication gave the director great power, but it was power that came at a cost and for many Soviet artists the weapon proved double-edged.

Second, by reversing the chronology of his story, we are recognising that any version of Meyerhold's life is somehow uncontrollably coloured by his death. The bitter irony of his demise hangs over his work, constantly reminding us of the volatile context within which he was practising his art. In a way, this foreknowledge captures the kind of attitude Meyerhold himself wanted to inculcate in his audiences. He, like Bertolt Brecht, did not want his spectators to focus their 'eyes on the finish' (Brecht 1978: 37), but instead to engage in the material of the production in a consciously enquiring manner. For this reason, Meyerhold delighted in revealing the mechanics of the theatre. He filled his productions with self-conscious theatricalities, arranging the order of the scenes in such a way that they might collide against one another rather than seamlessly fuse together. We might conclude from this that, in Meyerhold's thinking, people's lives are similarly unpredictable. They do not unfold in a smooth, organised way (as the naturalistic repertoire often suggested), but are multifaceted, problematic and surprising. In Meyerhold's own case this could not have been more true.

So, with our eyes diverted from the finish and focused now on the course, let us examine the episodes of Meyerhold's life, from his early years before he met Stanislavsky to the final period of his career before his arrest by the NKVD (the no-less-brutal predecessors of the KGB). We will cover the following ground:

- Apprenticeship (1874–1905)
- St Petersburg (1906–17)
- Meyerhold and the Revolution (1917–22)
- The Meyerhold Theatre (1922–31)
- The death of Meyerhold and his theatre (1932–40)
- Meyerhold today.

APPRENTICESHIP (1874–1905)

LIFE BEFORE THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE

As the eighth child of the family, Vsevolod Meyerhold had to work hard to make an impression. He was born into the affluent family of the German vodka distiller, Emil Meyerhold, on 28 January 1874, and, recognising that he would never inherit the family business, he developed a much closer relationship with his mother, Alvina, than with his businessman father. At such a distance from the head of the family, the young Meyerhold did not find himself obliged to espouse all of his father's values. Instead, he mixed with the workers from the distillery and attended music concerts and the theatre. The artistic influence was so great that at the age of nineteen he was already able to define his career path, claiming an even earlier calling in his diary:

> I have talent, I know that I am a good actor. . . . This is my most cherished dream, one I have thought about almost since I was five.
>
> (Gladkov 1997: 4)

But the decision to enter the theatre wasn't as clear cut as it might have seemed. Two alternative careers presented themselves to Meyerhold – one as a lawyer, the other as a violinist. In fact, it was the former occupation which first beckoned him and which provided his escape route from the provincial town of Penza to the bustling city of Moscow. Meyerhold began reading for a degree in law at Moscow University in 1895, after graduating with some effort from his school in Penza. Once in Moscow he faced what he called 'a crossroads' in his life (Gladkov 1997: 91), torn by the equally appealing possibilities of a theatre training or a career as a second violinist in the University orchestra. Failing the orchestra's audition made the decision not to play 'second fiddle' unnecessary and instead, in 1896, he went into two years of actor training with the playwright and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Philharmonic school. Music continued to play a significant part in Meyerhold's career, however, and although he gave up the violin and later looked back at his failure with some relief, he never turned his back on the discipline of music itself. Indeed, the *musicality* of many of his productions is a notable characteristic of his directorial approach.

VLADIMIR NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO AND KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY

Nemirovich-Danchenko is best known for his stormy relationship with the director Konstantin Stanislavsky and for co-founding the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) with him, arguably the most famous theatre in all of Russia. But before he began this collaboration with Stanislavsky in 1898, Nemirovich had already established a well-earned reputation as a creative artist and, if anything, it was he who was the most experienced theatre professional in the early days of the MAT. For his part, Stanislavsky had begun cutting his teeth as an actor and a director ten years earlier at the semi-professional dramatic society known as the Alexeiev Circle. There, he developed an impressive range of character roles, many of which were revived under the auspices of the MAT.

Nemirovich was not an actor. Essentially he was a literary man with an intuitive eye for great writing. It was he, for example, who first recognised the dramatic talent of Anton Chekhov, calling for *The Seagull* (1896) to be awarded the Griboedov literary prize in place of his own play: *The Worth of Life* (1896). But although his talents lay first and foremost with the dramatic text, he also had experience as a director and, judging by the range of activities he lists in his autobiography, was clearly interested in teaching too. Meyerhold's tuition, he tells us, 'went far beyond the bounds of first experiments in stage technique'. It also involved:

> Psychological movements, everyday features, moral questions, emotional mergings with the author, aspirations towards frankness and simplicity, the quest of vivid expression and diction, mimicry, plastics, self-assurance.
>
> (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1968: 46)

It may not immediately be clear what he means by 'everyday features', but Nemirovich's commitment to *simplicity* on stage and his call for a vivid *expressivity* in the performer are characteristics clearly reflected in the later practice of Meyerhold. Even more important, perhaps, is the implicit relationship indicated here between the inner and outer work of the performer – *psychological movements* as Nemirovich calls them – for this all-important relationship, often referred to as *psychophysicality,* is a dominant theme in the Russian tradition of acting and we will encounter it in many guises in this book.