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Teaching and Professional Fellowship 2006-2007

The Vakhtangov Technique

Final report

The intention of this report is to illustrate the progress made from my fellowship sabbatical. It will discuss the main outcomes resulting of the research carried out in Russia, describe the past and the current dissemination of these in my teaching and directing practice at Drama Centre and establish the future development of the project.

Data gathering September - December 2006, Moscow

I started my research at The Vakhtangov State Theatre where I was given the opportunity to work with Vakhtangov's original notebooks and diaries and with recordings of his lectures. It was soon apparent, that Vakhtangov's experiments between 1919-1922 require very detailed investigation, for it is during this period that he began his radical re-evaluation of the application of the Stanislavski system and to develop the unique approach to theatre known as "fantastic realism". Vakhtangov was not a keen theorist and did not leave a full account of his methodology due to his early death at the age of 36 and thus the Vakhtangov archive, quite moderate in volume and relatively fragmentary, did not therefore furnish me with the full picture of his methodology as a director and teacher. I was however particularly keen to get as much information as possible on the way in which he coached actors, conducted rehearsals and analysed plays. The curators of the archive therefore advised me to utilise the material and memories of Vakhtangov's direct disciples and contemporaries, who might themselves have left a more detailed account of his work.

To this end I therefore spent most of my time in Moscow at The Russian State Library, The Theatre Library and The Library of The Arts. All these libraries have a vast amount of data on Vakhtangov, most of which I studied carefully. The most important information was

discovered in the materials from between 1918-1939, when many of those who wrote about Vakhtangov were not obliged to present him constantly as a devoted disciple of Stanislavski nor as a rigorous interpreter of his system, the attitude which had become and would remain for many decades de rigueur as the establishments' approach.

I also conducted 10 interviews with Vakhtangov scholars, with actors from The Vakhtangov State Theatre, teachers and directors of The Boris Shukin Theatre Institute and with family members descended from Vakhtangov's original company. Most notable of these were discussions held with Dr V. Ivanov, who has been researching the Vakhtangov legacy for more than twenty years and is a recognised specialist on the unknown Vakhtangov.

I attended classes and rehearsal at The Boris Schukin Theatre Institute in order to see how the Vakhtangov method is being taught at the very theatre school, which has been developing it over the last ninety years. My supervisor Dr Vladimir Mirodan spent a week in Moscow during which we discussed the progress of my research and ways in which it could be further developed.

Key findings

Vakhtangov is the first and arguably the only director in the history of the theatre to have achieved a practical synthesis of the methodologies of the two revolutionary masters of the Russian school of acting – Stanislavski and Meyerhold. He considered the combination of these methodologies as the apogee of theatrical synthesis and named it “fantastic realism”. This concept gave rise to a theatrical paradox: the creation of an acting technique that was outwardly highly stylised and yet internally realistic. To put it another way an actor ought to have real and believable feelings on stage but they have to be presented in a theatrical, “fantastical” way. For Vakhtangov the theatre is not a copy of life but a condensed version of reality or in other words a super-reality.

Fantastic realism

Vakhtangov believed that in the age of cinematography the use of the naturalistic techniques in the theatre is anomaly. Theatre must not simply photograph or recreate reality but deepen our perception and understanding of it. This can only be achieved by revealing truth through lies and the probability in the improbable. In other words the theatre should freely turn the reality inside out in order to reveal it in all its complexity.

To bring a life event or character on stage is to subject it to the rules of the theatre, with its particular notion of space, time, and tempo-rhythm which has very little in common with real life. In some instances it means selecting just one detail from a situation, or just one trait from a character and then playing imaginatively with or around it. At other times it means generalising or exaggerating facts of an event, establishing masks instead of clearly delineated characters and playing on contradictions and contrasts within the latter. As a result both event and character will gain a complexity, and reveal a psychological depth and unconventional physical manifestation. This is what in Vakhtangov’s view should take place in a “theatrical theatre” and this is what defines its “fantastical” nature.

According to Vakhtangov life events, people and objects undergo double transformation or game in the art of the theatre. The first one is the transformation from reality into play and the second is when the play is subsequently transformed into a stage production. In this double transformation what is real and what is fantastical? Events, people and objects or their theatrical interpretation? To give a clear answer to this was

for Vakhtangov to destroy one of the most intriguing mysteries of interplay of real life and theatre.

“Fantastic realism “ is therefore a combination of the reality of life and the “fantastical” nature of theatre. To say it another way “fantastic realism” is theatrical realism i.e. a whole complex of theatrical methods by which one can express real life on stage.

The concept of a dramatic character

Vakhtangov believed that there is no such a thing as an objective character on stage. All characters created by actors are subjective. That is to say that they are a combination of the actor's personality and what has happened to him so far that day, prior to his entrance on stage, plus his character's objectives within the play. Therefore Hamlet, for example, will change every night because the actor has undergone different experiences that day before coming on stage. Far from subscribing to Stanislavsky's principal that the actor should leave his day at the stage door, Vakhtangov strongly encouraged his actors to feed their immediate mood and experiences directly into their acting.

For Vakhtangov the first feeling with which the actor walks on stage or into a rehearsal room is his life state i.e. a chain of incidents that have happened to him and affected him thus far in the day. This state must be preserved as it will enable the actor to bring to his role a sense of unique immediacy. The first mood of the actor is then followed by the second, or the character mood which is activated by his actions in the play. The combination of the actor's personal mood with the character's states creates a rich colour range in the portrayal of a role.

The fact that the actor keeps his personal mood active up to the very moment he walks on stage, renders unnecessary the special and often lengthy pre-performance preparation during which he works sublimating himself in order to become a character. Instead he should be able to take on his character in an instant or, using Vakhtangov's own words "to jump into the role".

I have designed an exercise which develops the actor's ability to "jump into character" immediately. I have tested it with my second year students who found it both challenging and highly beneficial to their training.

The concept of "inner justification"

Vakhtangov established the concept of "inner justification" for the actor. Contrary to Stanislavsky, who placed the actor's identification with the character as deriving from the circumstances of a play, Vakhtangov believed that the performer's justification of his stage actions could be totally unrelated to the circumstances of either play or character. Justification is the actor's secret weapon and he could invent his own inner reality for his actions. The strength of the actor's fantasy, no matter how improbable or ludicrous it might be, could lead him to a more believable sense of reality in his performance. This concept of "inner justification" allows the actor to create his own powerful private reality in productions ranging from the most stylised to the most naturalistic.

The concept of "selected truth" and "theatrical theatre"

Vakhtangov believed in the importance of truth in a theatre production, but he detested theatre productions in which the truth was presented in a shallow, pseudo-real, stale way. In his view life itself offers a theatre practitioner a huge variety of truths to recreate on stage and he should select only those ones, which would impart to the audience something profoundly complex and new about life.

The theatre is only viable when it possesses true theatricality and a joy mood at its core. In theatre such as this the actors are not afraid to live through their characters' feelings and at the same time to reveal their craft to the audience. Theatre of this type presents an artistic and passionate reflection of life not one drawn by means of precise imitation. Its productions possess both bold form and a style which allow the audience at the same time to recognise the reality of life and also to admire the art with which it is being created.

Acting craft.

Characters and their feelings should be both recognisable and believable in the theatre; however actors who create these characters must present them purely by theatrical means. The difference between the naturalistic and the theatrical mode is like that between duck served at home or in a restaurant. The contents of both meals might be the same, but in the restaurant it is served in a "theatrical" way and therefore looks and tastes more appetising.

The Vakhtangov's actor does not hide the fact that he is performing for the audience. As opposed to the actor of the naturalistic school, trained to live through his character or to perform this character's inner experience, the actor of the Vakhtangov's school is trained to live through or experience a performance.

Therefore the actor demonstrates not only what he does in the role but also how he does it. The how becomes as important as the what. i.e. the method or style of the actor's performance has the same value as its content. To this end Vakhtangov trained his actors to manipulate the audience during a performance. At the point where the audience has forgotten that they are in the theatre with actors on stage, the actors should suddenly step out of the character and openly demonstrate their technique or reveal the tricks of the trade. After a few moments they should reconnect the audience with the reality of the play and its characters. Vakhtangov's actors therefore can destroy a scenic illusion at their will in front of the audience and then restore it in an instant.

The principal of the dramatic grotesque

According to Vakhtangov a naturalistic theatre produces good examples of a naturalistic grotesque i.e. a selection and exaggeration of the external and psychological traits of the stage character. There is also another type of the grotesque, which could be called "the exotic grotesque". It features not just the psychology of the character and its everyday reality but also uses an unconcealed technique by means of which the character is created. This type of grotesque consist of: hyperbola leaning towards the fantastical, sharp contrast, sudden switching from the tragic to the comic and back again. For Vakhtangov this particular type of grotesque was one of the principal means of developing a stage character.

The concept of "performing a character" as opposed to "living through the character's feelings"

Stanislavsky always insisted that in the actor's ability to identify with the character's feelings lies the peak of creativity. Vakhtangov, however, contradicted this idea. After many years of exploring and testing the Stanislavsky system at his studio he came to the

conclusion that “the art of living through your character’s feelings” is merely a foundation for “performing the character”. The latter, however, becomes true art only when the actor is able to present during his performance a clear personal attitude to the character portrayed. Therefore unlike Stanislavsky Vakhtangov was convinced that it is only through the overt display of the actor’s attitude to the character that highest creative achievement in any particular role may be seen.

The pure “experience of living through the character’s feelings” as understood by Stanislavsky remained for Vakhtangov only a technical tool, and not an end in itself. Instead of aiming for a complete identification with a character he stood up for the actor’s right to comment on the character and to pursue the freedom of creative subjectivity. Hence the actor, rather than the character becomes the creative basis for a theatre production. This means that instead of the character subjugating and absorbing the actor; it is the actor who is in charge and who through the medium of the character is able to reveal his own essence and truth as a human being. This allows him to justify the illusion of a theatre performance. It also allows him to find a more meaningful existence within his role for now he can simultaneously unite the joy of performing his character with the joy of commentating upon it himself. This does not, however, mean that the actor overwhelms the character, but simply that he interiorises it in order to illuminate it with his own attitude consisting as it may of empathy, trust, irony or ridicule.

The emphasis is therefore put on the principal of free and courageous creativity in playing the character, in contradistinction to the principal of what could arguably be an unattainably profound transformation into the character.

The concept of “playing the play”.

Vakhtangov insisted that the actor should not actually become a character but only play at being a character. Unlike the Stanislavskian actor, the Vakhtangov’s actor does not fully identify with his character’s feelings, he just plays at having them. This “playing the play” or the “playing at theatre”, however, must be executed with utmost seriousness, humanity and depth, thus turning the play into a form of art profoundly reflecting life.

The principal of the monism of the actor

The basic principal of a naturalistic acting technique lies in the attempt to reconcile the actor’s truth as a human being with that of the character. The followers of this technique seek to overcome the “lie” of the actor’s performance by means of a complete and authentic transformation within the stage character. Instead of acting a character one must become that character exactly as it is drawn in the play and thus fully experience the character’s feeling. However the more the actor strives to achieve this the more detrimental it becomes to his acting as a theatrical game. Starting the artistic portrayal of his character’s essence and feelings, the actor moves towards a mundane imitation. As a result he is not in charge of the character’s feelings but simply submits himself to them. The wealth and freedom of the actor’s inner technique turns into its opposite; the actor is thus burdened by the need to establish

shallow everyday traits and sensations of his character and to search for his own affective feelings instead of fulfilling his true mission - to move the audience by means of an artistic and imaginative manifestation of the character.

Vakhtangov looked at this problem from a different perspective. By means of the stage character's essence he wanted to reach the essence of the personality of the actor playing it. To this end he first established the supremacy of the creative game as forming the foundation of theatre, supported by the actor's will to participate in it. He also promulgated the monism or unity of the actor as opposed to schizoid split of the naturalistic actor always maintaining the balance between his own persona and the character. This monism allows the actor to construct his character freely from himself through his own active and creative and thus reveal his inner truth as an actor, which may differ from the naturalistic truth of the character. By establishing the importance of the actor-personality, he discovered that the truth of the theatre for the actor is achieved by means of performing and freely controlling the character without hiding this fact from the audience and thus to speak his own truth.

If in the past the character prevailed over the actor, now Vakhtangov was permitting the actor to prevail over the character. He was freeing the actor from his traditional craft and from disappearance in the amorphous of psychologism. He inspired the actor to achieve the technical perfection, to control the audience, to exult his power on stage, but above all to be allowed the game of theatre to intoxicate him. In this sense he consciously purged from the Stanislavsky system extraneous features and returned it to its initial purpose- the discovery of "inner justification" for the actor. It would now be possible for the actor to find his own justification of the actions of the character and to justify its essence not through its own truth (as written in the play) but through that of the actor- personality. The perhaps clumsy concept of "living through your character's feeling" or identification with the character's feelings is therefore replaced by the more practical and creative Vakhtangov principal of inner justification through the actor-personality.

The role of intuition, spontaneity, imagination and improvisation in acting.

Vakhtangov believed that spontaneity and intuition are amongst the most important qualities the actor can possess and that training must not destroy them. In his view an actor should not be a theorist whose character's choices are entirely governed by his intellect or derived from detailed research. The role of the latter is accepted as being helpful tool by which the actor can activate or feed his intuition, but it is intuitive approach, which must be the principal impetus in the process of creating a role.

In Vakhtangov's view a truly intuitive actor must be able to develop his character even with the most basic amount of information available. As a director he was proud of his ability to establish a specific world of a play through an intuitive and imaginative digestion of just a few historical details.

As a director he had developed a completely free approach to all dramatic material and believed that the staging of a play demands that a director search for an original approach that is both organically inspired by and most appropriate to the essence of the play and is not imposed by established theatrical techniques. A director should also be free to combine many approaches and aesthetics within one theatre production. Vakhtangov successfully implemented this principal in his 1921 production of Gozzi's Turandot.

What defines the Vakhtangov actor

- He (the actor) performs his character in a condensed, “accentuated way” without concentrating too much on detailed psychological detail, and instead presenting his character in what might seem a rather generalised way with a strong emphasis on one or two of its most important features
- His performance is graphically precise. He moves, speaks and interacts musically with a clear sense of tempo-rhythm. One can say that he “dances” the inner essence of his character
- He builds his character on the principal of contrast, i.e. in the tragic essence of his character he reveals the comic and vice versa
- He possesses a profound inner reality for his character but presents it in a totally unexpected, theatrical and physically bold way
- He does not hide the fact that he is performing the character in front of the audience. He loves this theatrical game of playing and emphasises it in his performance
- He experiences his character’s feelings, plays with them and at the same time maintains a distance from them. In his acting he reveals the “inner irony of the heart” of his character.
- He presents his character in a “demonstrative or extrovert way”, i.e. light, skilful, confident and generous
- He can play a whole range of roles from tragedy to farce. He is exceptionally capable of transformation
- He does not lose himself in the character and is not carried away by its feelings. He is aware of every moment of his performance, is able to control the audience and can re-adjust his impact on it according to its reactions.
- He is skilled at improvisation. Every time he performs he keeps the content of his character’s actions or “the what” unchanged and improvises “the how” or the way he plays these actions. For him an improvisation is not general freedom in performance but a courageous break through, which pushes him beyond his current abilities and becomes an act of profound artistic discovery.

Vakhtangov developed three concepts: “a method of contrasts”, “the dramatic grotesque” and “heightened acting style”. These enable actors to combine two totally contrasting qualities in their performances – profound psychology with extreme expressiveness and the grotesque with the lyrical. As a result the actor creates a powerful and long lasting impact on the audience.

Using the memories of some of Vakhtangov’s actors I have rediscovered some of his original exercises, which to the best of my knowledge have not been used in actor training since his death. I also drew from the written records of his acting classes and rehearsals and through that was able to create some new exercises, which I feel, develop the actor’s abilities according to the Vakhtangov principals described above.

Dissemination of my findings

I have taught two of the Vakhtangov exercises to First and Second year BA acting students at DCL over the last two terms. Both of the exercises were presented to the staff and students of the school as well as being filmed for future references. I have used the Vakhtangov technique while directing an Elizabethan comedy project with the Master of European Classical Acting students and received both oral and written feedback from them. In the Summer term I also directed the Second year students in Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Person of Szechwan". This was an important opportunity to test the whole range of the Vakhtangov principles of acting, especially because both Brecht's and Vakhtangov's understanding of theatre bear striking similarities. The technique of the latter in fact proved highly beneficial to the students in their work on the Brecht play.

The work with all the year groups showed that they reacted very positively to the Vakhtangov technique. For example, my "Cabaret Project" with the second year demonstrated that many students who mastered some of the Vakhtangov principles, revealed an unexpected creative freedom and an ability to transform, which they had not shown in their previous projects. Many of them discovered an alternative acting tool previously unknown to them and acquired self-confidence and the courage to explore the demands of contemporary acting in a much more imaginative way.

I felt that my work with the imaginative, extrovert and the physical principles of the Vakhtangov acting training over the last two terms complemented and balanced very well the introspective methodological approach of Drama Centre. I feel that my fellowship has been completely justified and I am enormously encouraged in my future plans for dissemination of the Vakhtangov technique.

At the end of the term I will be holding talks with the Director of Drama Centre Dr Vladimir Mirodan and The Course Director of The BA Hons Acting Annie Tyson to discuss future integration of the Vakhtangov technique into the school's curriculum. It is my intention as a tutor to focus my teaching of the Drama Centre students solely on the Vakhtangov technique.

Together with ARTSCOM at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, a 10 week workshop on the Vakhtangov technique has been set up, which will run each term of the 2007-08 academic year and which will be open to any University of The Arts London students and staff as well as to general public. I have submitted my proposal of workshop to the Actors Centre in London and to various other drama schools and universities both nationally and internationally. I am currently awaiting their response. Throughout the Summer I am planning to write to various international acting workshops with a proposal for master-classes and workshops on the Vakhtangov technique.

Later in the year Dr Vladimir Mirodan and I will be applying for research funds to carry out further research into some areas of the Vakhtangov technique in order to write an article for one of the international journals.

Conclusion

The Teaching and Professional Fellowship gave me the most worthwhile opportunity possible to augment and enhance my practical knowledge of the Vakhtangov technique. It has resulted in a coherent system of actor training wholly relevant to the needs of contemporary theatre. This intensive and stimulating method of work places at its heart the exploration of story-telling, character and dramatic relationships through means of imagination, improvisation and movement. It challenges the actor and gives him permission to push his creative boundaries and to develop his imaginative and physical capacity to the full.

The Vakhtangov technique contains the answers to many pressing questions facing today's theatre: the question of reality and artifice; psychology and physical expression; theatricality and behaviour. To a world of performance torn between kitchen-sink naturalism and Hollywood artificiality, Vakhtangov's work brings a freshness of approach that leads to exciting, innovative and visually bold theatre.

Oleg Mirochnikov 17 June 2007