

# Meyerhold's Experiments and Beijing Opera: Blok's Play, 1914

Nanjia Yang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>State Institute for Art Studies, Performing Arts Department, Mohovaya, 34, Saint-Petersburg 191028, Russia

\*Corresponding author. Email: 2685169@qq.com

## ABSTRACT

The process of interaction and mutual influence of the cultures of the West and the East, including the sphere of theatrical art, acquired a qualitatively new meaning in the Silver Age in connection with the emergence and formation of the art of directing, especially the part oriented towards theatrical conventions. The most significant in this respect is the figure of Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold (1874 - 1940), whose production experiments in the Studio on Povarskaya (1905) and in the Komissarzhevskaya Theater in Officer street (1906 - 1907) and their theoretical justification in the article "On the history and technology of the theater" (1907) [1] laid the foundations of the Meyerhold methodology of the Conventional theater. During his creative process, V. Meyerhold turned to stage art of the East, designed to enrich the artistic expressiveness of the Conventional Theater. This article aims to analyze how V. Meyerhold's methodology is connected with the techniques and approaches of the Beijing opera. The focus of this article is the analysis of the Blok's play "The Stranger", which serves as an example of the Russian director's experience to draw upon the Oriental theater.

**Keywords:** *conventional theater, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Beijing Opera, cultural interaction, theater director's experiments*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Meyerhold's experiments during the *traditional period* (1910 - 1918) identified those areas of stage art where the Meyerhold's Conventional theater could detect staging techniques and methods that could become elements of a new theater language. Along with the achievements of *ancient theaters of genuinely theatrical eras* (Elizabethan theater and the Spanish Golden Age theater, Moliere theater and *commedia dell'arte*, and others) and such areas of activity where elements of the *movement theater* (booths, music halls, variety shows and cabaret theaters, circus and sports, etc.) has been preserved [2], Meyerhold designated yet another sphere of stage art that could enrich the arsenal of the means of artistic expression of the Conventional theater, namely, the stage art of the East [3].

In modern scientific literature devoted to the theater, there are works on the topic of "Meyerhold and the Oriental Theater". For example, the chapter "Traditions of Oriental Theater in theatrical aesthetics of V.E. Meyerhold" in the book by E. V. Shakhmatova "Creative searches of European directors and traditions of the East"» [4]. The author is mostly focused on the influence of the Japanese theater on the Meyerhold's experiments - primarily the Kabuki Theater, the

Chinese theater is only mentioned several times. The chapter also give an analysis of the Blok's play<sup>1</sup> [5], and the main emphasis is on the connections between the Meyerhold director's decisions and the techniques of the old Japanese theater [6]. The same approach we can see in the article by E.V. Shakhmatova "Grotesque and Meyerhold: memories of the future" [7].

In the book "Meyerhold" by N.D. Volkov [8] and in the "Director Meyerhold" by K.L. Rudnitsky [9] Blok's play is analyzed primarily in the context of the development of the Meyerhold methodology for the Conditional theater.

K.L. Rudnitsky in his article "Letters of a Stranger" set the task to fully restore the history of the production of the Blok's play [10]. However the author did not touch on the impact of the Chinese theater, the text is interesting because of the memories of L.S.Ilyashenko, who performed the role of the Stranger.

Article by A.M. Gordin and M.A. Gordin "Alexander Blok and Russian Artists" contains useful

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<sup>1</sup> Performance Studio of V. Meyerhold on Borodinskaya based on plays by A. Blok "The Stranger" and "The Balaganchik" (third production), performed on April 7, 1914 in the hall of the Tenishevsky School (co-director and artist Yu. M. Bondi; composer M.A. Kuzmin).

information about the set design of the Block's play [11].

The article by Xu Qi, "The Study of Theatrical Experiments of V.E. Meyerhold through the analysis of the stage space of the "Balaganchik", is mainly, as the name implies, about the theatrical version of the Block's play at the Komissarzhevskaya Theater [12].

Among the works devoted to the Block's play, there is no special study analyzing the connection between the methodology used by the director and the techniques and approaches of the Beijing opera, and this article's goal is to fill the gap. The stated approach forces us to confine ourselves only to an analysis of the Meyerhold's "The Stranger", since there is next to no reliable information about the third edition of "Balaganchik".

As a source study base, we will use the memoirs of A.A. Mgebrov, V.P. Verigina and A.L. Gripich, as well as the few existing reviews of the Block's play.

This research is based on a comparative method and approaches to the analysis of the performance developed by the St. Petersburg (Gvozdev) theater school.

## II. STAGE DESIGN OF BLOCK'S PLAY

Blok's play was not a one-time event and survived "seven performances in a row" [13]. A.L. Gripich recalled: "All the studio members were occupied in the play: some of them were cast, and all the others came out as servants of the proscenium" [14]. And also: "The performance was created not only with the participation of the students, but in a significant proportion with their hands, since they themselves dyed fabrics, sculpted props, sewed costumes, etc. ... They began to make lanterns themselves, and then paint the curtains, sew sequins of stars on the tulle, ... etc. The process went on after rehearsals, well after midnight" [15].

The director paid great attention to the stage space. A.L. Gripich left the following description: "The semicircular hall of the Tenishevsky school had an amphitheater encircling the stalls. Meyerhold removed the chairs from the stalls and thus created the main three-dimensional stage platform, which was open from all sides. The small stage located behind it on an elevation, similar to an orchestral shell, was connected to the main platform by two side stairs. To the right and left of the ladders, along the straight wall there were wide passages with an exit to the lobby. These passages, as well as the middle passage in the amphitheater, Meyerhold used for action" [16]. How the action was distributed among the various elements of the stage can be judged by the memoirs of L.S. Ilyashenko: "The first and third dreams of the Stranger (that is, the scene in the courtyard and in the bourgeois

living room) were on the upper stage in ordinary room pavilions, and the second dream (the scene at the bridge where the Stranger meets Blue) was on the site below. The bridge was semicircular, like on the Winter Canal near the Hermitage, and it was equipped with rails invisible to the audience, so that the actors could enter and descend from this bridge. It was movable, and while there was no need for it, both of its halves stood on the sides of the lower stage, away from it. The servants of the proscenium assembled and then disassembled it" [17].

The conventionality of the *stage space* proposed by Meyerhold resembles the traditional arrangement of the site of Chinese musical drama. The most common decoration in Chinese theater is the installation made on the principle of "one table, two chairs." All the action of Chinese drama often develops within the framework of such a stage composition. The different arrangement of the table and chairs on the stage expresses the change of surroundings and places. The chairs set behind the table show, for example, a courtroom or office; the chairs in front of the table mean that it is a living room, hall or reception room, etc. With the help of various conditional movements of the actors, for example, imitating a palanquin ride, climbing uphill or descent from it, rowing on a nonexistent boat, etc., various types of action are depicted. Spectators, enjoying a similar imitation game of artists, through their own imagination see the details of the scenic landscape - mountains, rivers, horses, boats, etc. In addition, in Chinese musical drama, two stairs are often installed on both sides of the stage in order to provide actors with additional space and reduce the distance between them and the audience [18].

The conditional nature of the stage design, indissolubly connected with the conditional style of the acting of the Chinese musical theater, could have served as a guide for Meyerhold in deciding on the stage design and acting techniques of the performers involved in "The Stranger".

So, for example, in the stage composition of the opera "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Intai" the nature of South China is represented through the use of a light tulle curtain and other elements of stage decorations that have nothing to do with the realistic manner of depicting the locations. Also, with the help of songs performed by the actors and drawings of the movements reproduced by them, the audience is given the opportunity to recreate an imaginary space, which includes mountain churches, beautiful landscapes of the south of the country, where strong feelings of the lovers developed. In 1917, the production of the opera "Mantou Monastery" also used a light curtain of tulle and scenery in the form of clouds. In order to create the illusion of fluttering in the air, a swing was made on the stage. The actors seemed to soar on a swing and

perform various dance movements, as if fluttering in the clouds [19].

One can certainly point out the similarities with the techniques of Meyerhold, which were used in "The Stranger" and were made, according to the memoirs of A.A. Mgebrov, as follows: "Today, the star Mary fell from the sky," the mysterious stargazer repeated on top of the bridge, curved like an overturned horizon. ... The bridge was airy and fragile ... On its semicircular peak, the astrologer calculated the time of the fall of the star Mary from the sky. At the same peak, the poet then met a mysterious stranger who had emerged from the star falling from the sky and became forever beautiful for him ... Behind a convex and thin bridge, on long poles, two masks ... held the sky. What an amazing thing it was! .. Bondi scattered large, golden, shining stars across the blue, airy tulle, and in the light of the blue lights, these stars on the vibrating tulle really trembled and glowed in a very special way" [20].

### III. INTRODUCTION OF EASTERN THEATER ELEMENTS

In "The Stranger" took part *proscenium servants*, who were used in this production, essentially, in the same way as the arapchats were involved in Meyerhold's "Don Giovanni" (1910) - ballet in Alexandrinsky theatre. Here is how A.L. Gripich described it.: "The action of the servants of the proscenium was not the technical aspect of the performance. The servants of the proscenium led, as it were, accompaniment to the action of the actors. Either they created the illusion of a star falling from the sky, or they covered the actors with veils depicting snow on the bridge, then they ramped up a large living room, started a parade in a performance, entered into communication with the public during intermission, created hum and noise, introduced festive theatricality into the play. Meyerhold himself, along with the students, was sometimes a servant of the proscenium. All the actions of the servants of the proscenium were carefully designed and rehearsed with the accuracy of a *ballet* performance (italics added - Y.N.) [21]".

A.L. Gripich recalled that among the servants of the proscenium "costumes gave freedom of movement and emphasized the position of the body. Wide sleeves freed hands to play with a thing. The tunic of kimono cut and harem pants easily fit the figure from all angles. The waist was pulled together by a wide belt. These bluish-gray suits were made of crepe de chine. The faces of the servants were covered in black half masks. The influence of the Japanese theater "Kabuki", which Meyerhold was fond of at that time, had an effect on it" [22]. For all the originality of the Japanese culture, one should not forget that its origins are associated with Chinese influence. And among the literary texts that came from China of the Tang era (618 - 960) to the

Japanese islands, there was a treatise on theatrical art. If we take into account the Chinese opera itself, then among its actors until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were "stage assistants" [23], whose functions were similar to the *curombo* of the Kabuki theater and, accordingly, to the Meyerhold's *proscenium servants*.

Finally, another *exaggeratedly conditional* technique was used, with the help of which a ramp could be indicated: "Proscenium servants are lining up along the stage, holding candle holders in their hands with lit candles, facing the "living room", their back to the viewers» [24].

### IV. ANALYSIS OF COSTUMES AND GRIM

Certain parallels between the Meyerhold's "The Stranger" and the Beijing opera can be found in the characters' costumes and their makeup.

Before the emergence of the Chinese musical drama, two types of makeup were used in various types of performing arts: the mianju mask and the liangpu makeup. The makeup mask originated in the dance and song rituals of the primitive society and acquired the religious coloring of the dance "nuo" (translated from Chinese means "to expel demons of epidemics, to expel diseases" - that is, the ceremony of expelling evil spirits in ancient times, which implied a certain dance during the ritual of sacrifice). The dance "nuo" came from primitive witchcraft. By the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), the "ritual of expelling spirits by the son of heaven" had gained considerable scope in the imperial palace. The dancers put on masks, in their hands held the shield and the battle ax "qi" (an ancient weapon resembling an ax), depicting exorcism and catching the devil. These masks were the earliest makeup prototype of Chinese musical drama [25].

Artists of traditional Chinese opera apply liangpu makeup directly to the face. "Lianpu" is a painting on the face of an actor in musical drama. The clown "Xiaochou" in the Chinese opera presents a comic role, the make-up is applied to the bridge of the eye socket and fits amusing funny characters. As a rule, these characters do not have singing performances, often they only clearly and fluently recite text. There is a wide variety of this type of character, some, for example, are good-natured, others are funny and comical; the third are insidious and evil, and the fourth are stingy and dishonorable. Basically, the Xiaochou role is performed using characteristic basic movements, for example, squatting, kneeling, standing on tiptoe, shrugging, etc. [26]

A.L. Gripich explained: "One of the essential elements that determined the audience's perception of the ironic grotesque (in "The Stranger" - Y.N.) was fake noses on the faces of the performers. This clownish trick (and for some characters even clownish

wigs) made the characters' realistic and even everyday behavior exaggerated, emphasizing their negative qualities" [27].

If you look at the comic characters of "The Stranger" from the point of view of the character and characteristics of the person they embody, it can be noted that Meyerhold endowed them with the characteristic features of a clown. They look like Wenchou comedians (civilian characters) in the role of Xiao chou in a Chinese musical drama.

Comic characters in the traditional opera can be divided into two categories - civilian "wen chou" and military "wu chou", which have their own characteristics. In addition to warriors, comic characters, as a rule, are embodied in various roles of Wenchow civilian characters. Performing the role of humorous and resourceful characters with a high level of combat skill requires sonorous intonations, dexterous, flexible and easy movements, courage and strength, masterful performance of somersaults, jumps and other military exercises. For example, the vile man-schemer Tang Qin in the opera "The Killing of Tang Qin", cringing Gao Lishi from the opera "The Intoxicated Yang Guifei," plotting Jiang Gan, who made a mistake, from the opera "Letter Theft". However, in some plays you can find decent, interesting, successful in martial arts characters. For example, Yang Xianwu from the opera "Three Robbers and the Bowl of Nine Dragons", Shi Qian from the play "Shi Qian Steals the Plate" - these comic characters have different moral qualities and character, expressed using distinctive artistic features [28].

E.V. Shakhmatova noted: "The pranks in the street pub and in the bourgeois living room in "The Stranger" had fake noses and colored wigs: one had a green paper wig, and the other had striped, red and yellow" [29]. The examples of costumes of comic characters indicated here are identical to the colors and images of the Chinese traditional musical drama: clowns in the Chinese style apply oil paints to the face.

A.L. Gripich recalled: "Only the Stranger, Blue, the Poet and the astrologer were without 'noses' and also, if I recall, the mistress and guests in the third 'dream'" [30]. The performer of the role of the Stranger L.S. Ilyashenko noted: "The artist Yu. Bondi *painted eyelashes* for me - they were needed to ironically convey the Stranger's unreality. The dress in the role of the Stranger was of heavy black silk. In the third dream I did not take off my hat, but I was without a veil, which earlier, in the second dream, one of the servants of the *proscenium* threw on me. By the way, this servant who "served" the Stranger was played by Meyerhold himself. Throwing a veil with amazing dexterity, he quietly whispered to me - "With God!" [31]. K.L. Rudnitsky made such a clarification to the description of the leading role in "The Stranger": "from the eyelashes, as their continuation, small blue rays

went up to the eyebrows and down" [32]. Analogies to such techniques for the appearance of stage heroes can be found in the ancient Chinese theater.

In the Chinese opera, the makeup of female characters was especially emphasized - "dan" (young women). For example, in the ancient Chinese poem "Mulan" a description of a young girl is presented, according to which she beat locks on her temples and pasted golden leaves on her cheeks in front of a mirror. This is one of the manifestations of the ideal of female beauty in ancient China. Similar ornaments for the head indicate the presence of identical theatrical elements. "Dan" was associated with such features as a powdered face, red lips, thin crescent-browed eyebrows, phoenix eyes (almond-shaped eyes with raised outer corners), whisked high curls on the temples - so the images of beauties acquired perfection on the stage. The roles of the Chinese opera "dan" (young woman) and "sheng" (young man) required only a small amount of makeup to achieve a decorative effect. Such makeup was called "jiun ban" ("lovely performance"), "sumyan" ("unpainted and powder-free face") or "jie mian" ("clean face"). A feature of this makeup was its identity: all the characters in terms of makeup looked alike [33].

Let us consider the Stargazer costume next. A.L. Gripich recalled: "The costumes, like the blue uniform of the Stargazer, suggested by Blok, emphasized the characterization of the characters in the play. In the second "dream" the Stargazer appeared in a black cloak and top hat, Blue in a blue cloak, the Stranger in a black silk dress, a large hat "with mourning feathers"; the costumes of all the other characters were purely common ones. Visitors of the pub: jackets, coats, boots, caps, scarves, wide-brimmed hats, etc. The sweeper in a white shirt and pants. The guests in the large living room have fashionable dresses, impeccable tuxedos, frock coats" [34]. Based on this description, we can conclude that the use of color in the costumes of characters, which played a significant role in the director's plot, was symbolic.

In Chinese musical drama, the color of clothing also expresses the situation and atmosphere. In the opera "The Night Escape of Lin Chun", the hero Lin Chun wears a black hat and a black archer costume - he is all in black. In this case, the color emphasizes the meaning of the night. Subsequently, black velvet was replaced by black satin - since the light-absorbing properties of this fabric are better, an even darker effect is created, that enhances the character's secret night journey. At the same time, color emphasizes the mystery [35]. This is the best match for the black costume of the Stranger. Along with this, a psychological atmosphere is manifested: as a rule, young characters on stage are dressed in bright, colorful costumes, which suit the inner world of young people. Nevertheless, even young

people are able to convey a different stage atmosphere using the color of their costumes. On this topic, Mei Lanfang said that, for example, in the opera “Peony Arbor”, Du Lingyang is a young girl from a bureaucratic family, she must wear beautiful clothes, but she has extraordinary talents, so “colors must be muted and tender in beauty”. Many scenic images in terms of color were influenced by descriptions borrowed from fiction, but they continued to exist for a long time and successfully portrayed the hero’s character [36].

## V. MUSICAL CHARACTER OF THE BLOK’S PLAY

In “The Stranger”, performed at the Tenishevsky School, one can find certain features of the Meyerhold’s play in music, which was fully formed in the Meyerhold Theater of the 1920s and 1930s. A.L. Gripich recalled: “The somewhat muffled, blok-like, *excitedly chanting* voices of the Stargazer, Blue, the Poet, the Stranger, their stillness, daydreaming created an atmosphere of phantom (italics added — Y.N.)” [37]. The musical character of the characters’ speech could be achieved as follows: “Dialogues, individual shouts (“brie”) escaped from the hum of voices and mumble filling the pub. It was conducted in street jargon, with the brightness of everyday intonations. And this was achieved not artificially, but by selection of *character type*. In this case, Meyerhold took into account particular actors, while selecting them for a particular role. So, to perform the role of Verlaine, an employee with a beard was chosen, who looked very much like a poet. Meyerhold achieved expressiveness by a *combination* of various character types, so to speak, by *instrumentation* of a performance ensemble (italics added – Y.N.)” [38]. But the director also used the actual musical parameters of speech. L.S. Ilyashenko recalled that Meyerhold “picked up different voices for roles: the Seminarian - tenor, the Poet - baritone, the Stargazer - baritone bass, the Stranger - soprano, the Mistress ... - mezzo, etc. In prose, he very much followed the execution of musical pauses and the change in conversational pace. So, for example, in the first dream, the Girl – soprano, spoke very quickly on high notes, and then followed the bass chord - Man (important and slow) - “Drink and shut up” - and a long pause (italics added – Y.N.)” [39].

The very idea of a play in music was closely connected with the Meyerhold’s experience in the opera house and his keen interest in the development of the opera, which the director called the line of Haydn and Wagner [40], in other words - in *musical drama*. At the same time, there is reason to believe that some of the musical characteristics of the characters and the events, in which they participated, in the Beijing opera could

also be related to the Meyerhold’s experiments in a special stage structure - a performance in music.

In the violin part in the opera “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Intai” (this is a Chinese classical love story) you can clearly hear how and when music changes according to the “dynamic-melodic” principle. The meaningful meaning of this musical device in the opera “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Intai” is that, at the beginning of the opera, several pizzicato sounds are continued by the flute, creating the impression that you are in the clouds. So begins the prelude, the purpose of which is to achieve the sensation, as if you are looking at the earth from heaven. The rows of clouds are moving apart, the figures of people from vague gradually become distinct. The melody sounds calmly and unhurriedly, moving away and subsiding, as if Zhu Intai is sitting nearby and telling an ancient story. Then the leitmotif is repeated in bass and, thus, returns the action to earth. In the second segment of the musical composition, there are three segments where the tempo is fast, slow, fast. At first, the orchestral music sounds powerful, like an electric impulse, and symbolizes the refusal of Zhu Intai’s father to agree to the wedding with Liang Shanbo, the musical phrase continues for several bars in a row, as if saying: “It is impossible! You can’t!”. Liang Shanbo, because of the girl’s father refusal, was so saddened that he fell ill from despair and died. Music changes quickly through playing on special rattles that are used in the Chinese opera (the accompaniment uses one clock size, the speed of the Beijing opera and the beat are relatively free and suitable to express a sense of impulse, strong emotional feelings and screaming). In the last part of the musical part, the theme is “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Intai turn into butterflies.” Against the background of smooth, graceful, sublime and spiritualized sounds of stringed instruments, the main love theme appears again. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Intai overcome death and turn into a pair of butterflies, which are now forever together fluttering joyfully among the flowers [41].

## VI. CONCLUSION

Confidently attribute the Chinese influence on the stage structure of Meyerhold’s “The Stranger” we can only in connection with the performance that Meyerhold arranged during the intermission between the acts of the play. Here is how it is described by E.V. Shakhmatova: “In the intermission, appeared the real Chinese, who Meyerhold picked up somewhere on the street during their performance, and wanted them to perform during the intermission. ... The Chinese were juggling with knives, and the scene’s servants at that time threw oranges into the public, trying to target those who openly resented the performance (a gift from Dr. Dapertutto, editor-in-chief of “Love for Three Oranges” magazine!). During the intermission, the viewer’s attention should not be scattered to the side, Meyerhold

believed, so that the viewer was ready for further perception of the play, you cannot let him lose the mood for a short period. According to Meyerhold, the intermission “needs to be used as it was used in the ancient theater, as it is used in the Old Japanese and *Old Chinese* theater, how it is used in the circus” ... that is, to maintain a rhythm of action during the intermission, which is possible only if the performance is built according to musical laws (*italics added – Y.N.*) [42]. At the same time, the analysis of the connections between Meyerhold’s experiments in the Conditional theater and the staging techniques of the Beijing Opera allows us to gather further insights about the formation of the Meyerhold’s methodology and its constituent elements.

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