

Title: Stanislavsky's Humans and Meyerhold's Puppets: Mimetic Bodies in the Russian Modernist Theater

Author: Alisa Ballard, The Ohio State University

Abstract:

The theater is specially suited to mimesis, as Plato shows in his critique of the theater on precisely those grounds. Martin Puchner argues that furthermore, the theater's long dependence on the live human actor made it difficult for the modernist theater to revise its own mimetic tendencies: "The theater... comes to be fundamentally at odds with a more widespread critique, or complication, of mimesis because this critique requires that the material used in the artwork be capable of abstraction and estrangement." Theater's efforts to be anti-mimetic and anti-naturalistic must always contend with the fact that a human body onstage is a real human body.

This talk will examine these problematic mimetic qualities of onstage bodies—human and puppet—in the Russian modernist theater, through a focus on Meyerhold's use of puppets in polemic with Stanislavsky's mimetic, naturalist acting techniques. While Puchner's study of European modernist theater links the critique of mimesis with the critique of individual, living human actors in the theater, this talk will show the friction between Meyerhold's rejection of Stanislavsky's forms of mimesis and Meyerhold's use of puppets to reinforce and re-invigorate the living quality of the actor-audience relationship in the theater. In the background of the talk is a larger tension between a humanist, actor-centered focus in the Russian modernist theater and the mimesis that it continually pushes against. A key question the talk will pose is: how does mimesis function to complicate and question its own artistic medium?