

## **A Meeting Point or a Turning Point: On Vakhtangov's Theatrical Activities and Thought**

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### **Abstract**

A very common perspective concerning Vakhtangov is that he is an eclectic who combines Stanislavsky's psychological realism and Meyerhold's theatricalism. Based on historical facts, however, this paper indicates that although Vakhtangov was deeply influenced by Stanislavsky in the early stage of his career, under the impact of anti-realism in Western European and Russian theatre, he gradually changed from Stanislavskian realism to Meyerholdian theatricality. Particularly, *The Princess Turandot* directed by Vakhtangov in the very year of his death was a stage production of pure anti-realism. Since his life was short, Vakhtangov only proclaimed his theory of "fantastic realism", but did not have enough time to practise it fully. Furthermore, this paper also analyzes the historical reasons for misunderstanding Vakhtangov: in the Soviet Union then, "socialist realism" dominated literature and arts such that "realism" was a positive term while "anti-realism" was a negative one; naturally, Vakhtangov's students had to emphasize that "fantastic realism" was not beyond realism, and on the other hand de-emphasize their remarkable teacher's anti-realistic leanings.

**Keywords:** Vakhtangov, Soviet theatre, Anti-realistic theatre, *The Princess Turandot*

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The historical position of Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) in Russian theatre is so important that many history books about the world theatre cover his theatrical activities. It seems that only Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) exceed him in reputation, though he directed fewer productions. Probably, this is because he worked with several student groups and trained many performers, and some of whom became considerably successful later on.<sup>1</sup>

A very common perspective concerning Vakhtangov is that he is an eclectic who combines Stanislavsky's psychological realism and Meyerhold's theatricalism. For instance, in a text book about the general history of the world theatre, the authors wrote: "Vakhtangov was able to synthesize Stanislavski's psychological realism with Meyerhold's theatricalism and thus brought a theatrical truthfulness to his productions" (Wilson, 1983: 297). And a specific research paper on Vakhtangov's theatrical activities argued that Vakhtangov "unified the two diametrically opposed systems: that of psychological realism and graphic expressionism—through gesture, movement, and sound." (Orani, 1984: 463) "According to Brecht, Vakhtangov was this 'meeting point' between Stanislavsky and Meyerhold" (Worrall, 1989: 78).

Needless to say, we can find both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold's influences in Vakhtangov's theatrical activities. However, this does not mean that we can simply come to a conclusion that Vakhtangov was a "meeting point" between Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. It appears that at first Vakhtangov was an excellent student of Stanislavsky, but, as he began to blend Meyerhold's theatricalism into his approach, he became more and more anti-realistic in his later years, particularly in his last and most successful production *The Princess Turandot*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Yury Zavadsky was an artistic director of the Mossoviet Theatre, N. M. Gorchakov was a senior director at the Moscow Art Theatre, Boris Zakhava was a head of the Vakhtangov Theatre's Shchukin Theatre School, and Ruben Simonov used to be an artistic director of the Vakhtangov Theatre (Golub, 1988: 1034).

<sup>2</sup> In the eighteenth century, Carlo Gozzi wrote *Turandot* for the Commedia dell'arte. Interestingly, since its birth, this pseudo-Chinese story has been adapted and performed in various theatrical forms. Recently, for instance, it has been rewritten and interpreted in different forms of Chinese *xiqu* (literally, "theater of song").

## 1. From Stanislavsky to Meyerhold

No doubt, Vakhtangov was once deeply influenced by Stanislavsky's system. Like Meyerhold and other directors, Vakhtangov was brought up in the traditions of the Moscow Art Theatre. He entered the Moscow Art Theatre in the March of 1911, and then began to play a number of minor roles in the Theatre's productions. What is more important is that he acted as a director, teacher, and organizer at the Theatre. By his second year at the Moscow Art Theatre, Vakhtangov was already holding classes in Stanislavsky's method there (Worrall, 1989: 83). Moreover, he was once the head of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, and he founded and led the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, which became an independent theatre and was named for Vakhtangov after his death. Stanislavsky once said to Vakhtangov, "I love you for your talents as a teacher, regisseur, and artist" (Simonov, 1969: 150).

Vakhtangov learned Stanislavsky's method from Stanislavsky directly, and taught it in several Moscow theatrical studios, although, in his practice, he did not use Stanislavsky's terms like "super-task" and "through action." (Gorchakov, 1957: 101) In his early productions, such as *Holiday of a Peace* by Gerhart Hauptmann (1913), and *Rosmersholm* by Ibsen (1918), Vakhtangov preferred to utilize self-analysis to help performers to search for the characters' spiritual world (Simonov, 1969: 149).

Even in Vakhtangov's last couple of years, one can still recognize that through the approach of psychological realism he helped his students to bring out the inner life of the characters. For instance, in the rehearsal of *The Princess Turandot*, he often asked actors how they would have behaved if they had been the characters and been in such a situation. (Simonov, 1969: 163) When Adelma (the rival of Princess Turandot in love), played by Orotchko, decided to do anything to win Calaf's love, audiences indeed saw the actress' true passion from her monologue and action (Simonov, 1969: 182).

Stanislavsky once praised Vakhtangov by saying: "He knows how to teach my system better than I do" (Gorchakov, 1957: 9). Perhaps, Stanislavsky's comment here is a bit exaggerated. According to another source, at the end of his life, Stanislavsky believed that Vakhtangov only understood half of his system while Leopold Sulzerzhitsky (1872-1916), a prominent educator and propagandist of Stanislavsky's system, caught at least three-quarters of his views of theatre. Further,

Stanislavsky declared that, except for these two people, there was nobody who really understood his views on theatre (Worrall, 1989: 81). In other words, even if Stanislavsky thought that Vakhtangov only understood half of his system, he still considered that Vakhtangov knew much more about his system than others. Perhaps the reason why Stanislavsky in the end of his life changed his comments on Vakhtangov, thinking Vakhtangov only understood half of his system, is that he saw that Vakhtangov had been moving closer to Meyerhold.

In his letter to Stanislavsky on 29 of March 1919, Vakhtangov wrote: “There is no one and nothing higher than you for me. In art I love only the Truth of which you spoke and which you teach” (Worrall, 1989: 76). However, two years later, on 26 of March 1921, Vakhtangov wrote in his diary, “Meyerhold provided the roots for the theatre of the future. So shall the future honour him” (Worrall, 1989: 76). In August the same year, Vakhtangov thought that the way he had previously followed was a road to a “luxurious cemetery” (Worrall, 1989: 78).

One year later, in 1922—the very year of his death—Vakhtangov declared,

*Stanislavsky came when true theatricality died. He started creating a live human being, with a live heart beating and blood running. This man started living a real life and thus left theatre.... Now is the time to restore the theatre to theatre again.... What I do, I'd like to call “fantastic realism.”* (Orani, 1984: 463)

In his later years, Vakhtangov had already seen that sometimes Stanislavsky went to extremes to copy the “exact truth of life”. In the preparation for *The Princess Turandot*, Vakhtangov told a true story about Stanislavsky to his students. In staging one of Ibsen’s plays, Stanislavsky built an almost real porch, and had a real rain pipe put up and on the roof he put a tank of water. Then, under the pipe, he had a little hole made and covered it with canvas. When a “storm” started, the water ran down the pipe into the hole and formed a regular puddle near the porch. To complete the illusion, Stanislavsky had two “live ducks” swimming in the pool. One day, Stanislavsky brought Sulerzhitsky’s boy inside for the rehearsal and let him watch the porch of a “real” house, with the rain, the puddle and the ducks. In Stanislavsky’s opinion, children would believe that the scenery looked real. However, the boy’s answer was completely unexpected. He said, “It’s not true.

You can't have a house inside a house." Then, Stanislavsky realized that he had overdone it (Gorchakov, 1957: 109-110).

In the April of 1922—one month before his death, Vakhtangov discussed his "fantastic realism" or "imaginative realism" with his two student assistants, saying:

*The theatre should not contain naturalism or realism, but it should have imaginative realism. The appropriate theatrical means give the author a true life on stage. Means can be learned, but form must be created, it must be a product of the imagination. That is why I call this imaginative realism. Imaginative realism exists and should be in every form of art now.* (Worrall, 1989: 139)

The anti-realistic style of Vakhtangov apparently appeared in his theatrical practices, especially in *The Princess Turandot*. In this production, Vakhtangov did not want to create any illusions on the stage at all. At the very beginning, he said, "I think the success of *Turandot* will depend a lot on how it is designed" (Gorchakov, 1957: 98). He spent a great deal of time discussing and revising scenic and costume elements with the designer of the production, Ignati Nivinsky. At first, Nivinsky designed costumes which were similar to Chinese clothing, but Vakhtangov rejected them, saying, "We don't want to see actors as they are in life, but as they are on the stage" (Gorchakov, 1957: 112). Vakhtangov suggested making costumes based on tail-coats. And, they even used a towel as a beard for Timur (Calaf's father) and a tennis racket as a sceptre for the king (Simonov, 1969: 193).

For the setting, Vakhtangov and Nivinsky created an expressionist, what Vakhtangov called "grotesque" look (Gorchakov, 1957: 202-207), and he had stage assistants wearing blue theatrical overalls with numbers like member of football team change the scenery before the eyes of audiences (Simonov, 1969: 172).

Also, Vakhtangov employed music as an important device in *The Princess Turandot*. The orchestra played the introduction to the song which the whole company sang, and actors who wore masks bowed in the rhythm of the song. (Simonov 171) And, in many parts of the production, actors and actresses performed to the accompaniment of the music. In order to help his students develop this ability, Vakhtangov gave them training in Russian vaudeville (Simonov, 1969: 201-202). Moreover, Vakhtangov incorporated pantomime in his students' performance.

For example, between the “torture scene” and the “night scene” in Act IV, there was a witty pantomime in front of the curtain (Simonov, 1969: 184). As Simonov vividly pointed out, “He moved the ‘fourth wall’ over the footlights to the last row of the orchestra and gallery” (Simonov, 1969: 163).

It appears that, in his last couple years, Vakhtangov was moving himself from Stanislavsky’s psychological realism to Meyerhold’s theatricalism or anti-realism. Of course, the change of Vakhtangov’s style is a gradual process rather than a sudden action. In Vakhtangov’s early productions, the germs of non-realism already existed. For example, in the first play Vakhtangov directed in the Moscow Art Theatre, *Das Fridensfest* by Hauptman, there was no podium or proscenium. Although the setting of this production was realistic, it was simple in order to “intensify the intimate relation with the audience” (Orani, 1984: 466).

## **2. Anti-realism’s Influences on Vakhtangov**

There are historical reasons for Vakhtangov’s shift from Stanislavsky to Meyerhold. It was in the anti-realistic climate of Western Europe and Russia that the non-realistic seeds visible in Vakhtangov’s earlier work grew into an anti-realistic forest.

Anti-realistic movements, as reactions against realism, emerged in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The anti-realism stream consisted of symbolism, expressionism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and so on. Among them, symbolism was the first, existing primarily between 1880 and 1910 (Wilson, 1983: 288) and entering the Russian theatre circle in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> In 1902, Valery Briusov (1873-1924) criticized the realistic theatre created by the Moscow Art Theatre, and considered it “not the genuinely new, but the old refurbished.” (25) He pointed out, “To reproduce life faithfully on the stage is impossible. The stage is conventional by its very nature.” (26) Also, he advocated the symbolist theatre, “the plays of Maeterlinck and the latest dramas of Ibsen” (29). At the same time, Aleksander Blok (1880-1921) wrote his symbolist play—*The Puppet Show*. Then, Andrei Bely (1880-1934), Fyodor Sologub (1863-1927), Meyerhold, and others followed them to support the anti-realism theatre (Worrall, 1989: 3-4).

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<sup>3</sup> In its process of growth, Russian theatre was constantly influenced by literary and artistic trends from Western Europe, such as neoclassicism, romanticism, and realism.

After the October Revolution, the anti-realistic tendency continued to develop in the Soviet Union. Many followers of the October Revolution in the theatre circle, such as Meyerhold and Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), were enthusiasts about the avant-garde theatre. They believed that they should break with the bourgeois tradition of the Russian theatre and create new theatrical forms in the new times. In their experiments, they incorporated elements from stylized and conventionalized theatre, such as the Commedia dell'arte, and other traditional performance styles, into their productions. Most notably, Meyerhold created his famous biomechanics,<sup>4</sup> and employed constructivist scene designs in staging *Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), a play by Fernand Crommelynck (1886-1970), and other plays.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, the major developers of anti-realism in Russian and Soviet theatre, directors like Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, and Alexander Tairov (1885-1950), who had begun their careers at the Moscow Art Theatre, were now working in opposition to the work of Stanislavsky. At first, they began to develop their new artistic ideas in the First and Second Studios of the Moscow Art Theatre; later, some of them left to practise on their own. Even Stanislavsky himself was also involved in the anti-realism trend for a while. Before the October Revolution, he invited Meyerhold to direct a theatre studio in order to experiment with symbolist theatre (Worrall, 1989: 4). And he tried to stage Maeterlinck's plays and co-produced *The Blue Bird* with Sulerzhitsky (Gorchakov, 1957: 97). In 1911 Stanislavsky invited Gordon Craig (1872-1966) to the Moscow Art Theatre to cooperate with him in the production of *Hamlet*.

The avant-garde theatre in the early twentieth century in Russia and the Soviet Union was so rich and varied that it had achieved well-deserved international recognition. Unfortunately, this important phase in Soviet theatrical development was violently interrupted by Stalin (1879-1953) and his followers. In 1934, "socialist realism" was declared the proper style for all literature and arts, and "formalism", namely, the modernist tendency in Soviet literature and arts, was increasingly criticized. Stanislavsky's system became a compulsory theatrical

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<sup>4</sup> "Biomechanics" is the system of actor training, which focuses on learning gestures and movements to express emotion visibly, deriving from mime and the Commedia dell'arte.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see "Constructivism" (Talarr, 2002: 174) and "Crommelynck, Fernand" (Watson, 2002: 184) in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, ed., Colin Chambers. London: Continuum, 2002.

dogma which ended anti-realistic experimentation. It seems that Vakhtangov was lucky. Because of his early death, he escaped the disaster Meyerhold and others met, and avoided seeing cruel reality—how the Soviet Communist Party persecuted even artists who had wholeheartedly accepted the October Revolution.

Obviously, Vakhtangov's theatrical practices existed in the wider context of Russian and Soviet theatrical development. Thus, it would be helpful to observe how Vakhtangov was inspired by the anti-realism in Russian and Soviet theatre. For this reason, the following events should deserve our attention.

First, before the October Revolution, Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, a symbolist play, was performed in the Moscow Art Theatre, and Vakhtangov participated in the production. Moreover, in 1910, Vakhtangov visited Paris, the centre of the symbolist movement, where he assisted Sulerzhitsky in producing *The Blue Bird* according to the original production of the Moscow Art Theatre (Worrall, 1989: 82). Vakhtangov himself said: "I learned a lot from *The Blue Bird* and my trip to Paris with Suler [Sulerzhitsky]" (Gorchakov, 1957: 98).

Second, as mentioned above, Gordon Craig was invited by Stanislavsky to work on *Hamlet* in the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911. When Gordon Craig discussed the production with Stanislavsky, it was Vakhtangov who recorded their discussions. "Those discussions, no doubt, strongly influenced Vakhtangov's thinking on the art of the theatre" (Simonov, 1969: 212-213).

Third, Vakhtangov was also influenced by Meyerhold. He had surely read Meyerhold's journal, *The Love for Three Oranges*, published before the October Revolution, in which Meyerhold and others explained their experimental work in acting classes based on the comedy of masks. Moreover, a direct influence can be traced to Meyerhold's production of *Harlequin the Marriage Broker* in 1911, in which all the participants wore dinner jackets, dresscoats and ball gowns, and masks were also employed, quite like what Vakhtangov used in his *The Princess Turandot* later (Worrall, 1989: 129).

Vakhtangov once said that a director should direct different playwrights' works with different stage forms, namely, the stage style of a production should match the content of the play script (Gorchakov, 1957: 104-105). And, in his practice, he offered performers a "progressive idea which he carried out differently in every play" (Gorchakov, 1957: 101). Certainly, Vakhtangov has his right to choose any kind of play scripts. Nevertheless, his choices definitely reflect his personal aesthetical



interest. It seems that, from Chekhov's *A Wedding*, to Maeterlinck's *The Miracle of St. Anthony*, and Gozzi's *The Princess Turandot*, Vakhtangov's interest was changing and he became more and more interested in non-realism.

As discussed above, under anti-realistic influence, Vakhtangov moved from Stanislavsky to Meyerhold. Unfortunately, because of stomach cancer, he died in 1922, when anti-realism had just begun to flourish in Soviet theatre. Had he lived ten more years, he would possibly have gone further along the direction he started in *The Princess Turandot*. However, if he had really lived until the late 1930s, he would have met the same trouble as Meyerhold and other directors did, even though he had not gone as far as Meyerhold. As a matter of fact, in spite of his death, "Vakhtangov was posthumously discovered to have 'mystical-idealist' roots to his philosophy" (Worrall, 1989: 11) and some experimental productions in the 1930s were "branded as 'formalism', 'Meyerholditis' or 'Turandotism'" (Worrall, 1989: 12).

### **3. The Misinterpretation of Vakhtangov's Theatrical Activities and Thought**

Why were Vakhtangov's theatrical thought and activities so widely misunderstood? One important reason might come from his students' interpretation of him. Since Vakhtangov died very early, unlike Stanislavsky, he was unable to summarize his creative activities and interpret his theory in his later years himself. Thus, the reminiscences of Vakhtangov's students became very precious sources to research on his theatrical activities. Generally speaking, Vakhtangov's students are more familiar with their teacher than are theatre historians so that their interpretation of Vakhtangov's ideas should be authoritative. Due to particular historical and political reasons, however, their interpretation could not be always exact.

Taking Simonov as an example, in his discussion of Vakhtangov's "fantastic realism", he believed that Vakhtangov's "fantasy" equalled "imagination",<sup>6</sup> which holds an important position in Stanislavsky's system. To prove his point, Simonov quoted Stanislavsky's views on "imagination" as follows,

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<sup>6</sup> As mentioned before, Vakhtangov's "fantastic realism" is also sometimes called "imaginative realism".

*Each of our movements on the stage, every word, must be a result of the imagination in the correct direction of the play. The creative work on the role, and the transformation of a written work of a dramatist into the scenic life, from the beginning to the end, proceeds with the participation of imagination. That's why I want you to pay special attention to the development of your imagination.* (Simonov, 1969: 148-149)

However, from the quotation above, it appears that Stanislavsky's "imagination" mainly involves the movement, the word, and the creative work on the role. In other words, Stanislavsky's ideas above are only connected with the performance, and are likely to be related to his famous "magic if".<sup>7</sup> Thus, Stanislavsky's "imagination" is not outside of his goal of psychological realism.

However, Vakhtangov's "imagination" both in his practice and his definition about "fantastic realism" involves the whole theatrical form. This not only includes performance, but also includes set designs, costumes, and all other stage elements. From his production of *The Princess Turandot*, we can clearly recognize that Vakhtangov employed anti-realistic costumes, cubist settings, masks, percussion music, and pantomimes, which clearly fall outside Stanislavsky's conception of "imagination." Moreover, as described before, during his short career, Vakhtangov made the widest possible employment of the grotesque.

In order to stress that Vakhtangov was not opposed to realism, Simonov repeated in his book,

*He [Vakhtangov] never said a negative word or indicated any non-acceptance of the realistic teachings of Stanislavsky, either in our rehearsals or during our discussions with him.* (Simonov, 1969:164)

*Vakhtangov never betrayed the eternal realistic basis of the teaching of Stanislavsky; he never doubted the validity of Stanislavsky's system.* (Simonov, 1969:150)

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<sup>7</sup> "Magic if" is one of Stanislavski's methods, by which actors must try to answer the question "What would I do if I were in this situation?" This kind of self-analysis will help actors to search for the characters' spiritual world.

Even when Simonov mentioned Vakhtangov's criticism on Stanislavsky's weakness, he emphasized that Vakhtangov's new ideas were accepted by Stanislavsky (Simonov, 1969:150). In other words, according to Simonov, Vakhtangov's new ideas were not beyond nor inconsistent with Stanislavsky's system.

Importantly, as mentioned before, in describing his concept of the "fantastic realism," Vakhtangov clearly declared that "the theatre should not contain naturalism or realism, but it should have imaginative realism." When Simonov subsequently quoted Vakhtangov's famous explanation of "fantastic realism", however, this sentence was omitted. His quotation is below,

*The correct theatrical means, when discovered, gives to the author's work a true reality on the stage. One can study these means, but the form must be created, must be the product of the artist's great imagination-fantasy. This is why I call it "fantastic realism." It exists in every art. (Simonov, 1969:146)*

It is clear now: Simonov made a great effort to draw a clear distinction between Vakhtangov and anti-realism. In the Soviet Union, "socialist realism" dominated literature and arts for a long time, and at that time "realism" was a positive term while "anti-realism" or formalism was a negative word.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is very natural for Vakhtangov's students to defend their remarkable teacher.

In conclusion, Vakhtangov started his career before the October Revolution, when the Russian theatre began to be influenced by the tendency of anti-realism from Western Europe. In this anti-realistic climate, Vakhtangov's work gradually changed from Stanislavskian realism to Meyerholdian theatricality. Since his life was short, Vakhtangov only proclaimed his theory of "fantastic realism", but did not have enough time to practise it fully. Had he lived for a longer time, possibly, he would have become another theatre giant.

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<sup>8</sup> The published date of Simonov's book, 1969, is that of the English version rather than that of the original. The translator, Miriam Goldina, did not mention the published date of the original, but told readers that, in October of 1963, Simonov gave her the book. It is quite possible that Simonov wrote his reminiscences about his teacher in the transition between 1950s and 1960s during which time the Soviet theatre circle still could not boldly practise anti-realism. For example, though Meyerhold was rehabilitated in the middle of 1950s, his influence did not revive until the middle of 1960s.

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## 交匯點還是轉折點——論瓦克坦戈夫的戲劇活動與思想

孫 玫\*

### 摘 要

人們普遍認為瓦克坦戈夫是斯坦尼和梅耶荷德兩種對立學說的調和者。本文則依據歷史事實指出：儘管瓦氏早年深受斯氏影響，但在西歐和俄蘇反現實主義戲劇潮流影響下，他逐漸轉向了梅氏；尤其是，瓦氏在生命將盡之時導演的《杜蘭多公主》，完全是一部反現實主義的舞台作品。只是由於早逝，他未有足夠時間去充分實踐他的「幻想現實主義」。本文還進一步分析了瓦氏被誤讀的歷史原因：在當時的蘇俄，「社會主義現實主義」統治著文學藝術，「現實主義」被人褒揚，「反現實主義」遭貶斥，因此瓦氏弟子自然要強調「幻想現實主義」並未逾越「現實主義」的界線，同時淡化瓦氏身上的反現實主義色彩。

**關鍵詞：**瓦克坦戈夫、蘇俄戲劇、反現實主義戲劇、《杜蘭多公主》

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