

DRAMA *Works*

Exploring Physical Theatre

EXTRACT

CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS PHYSICAL THEATRE	3
PART 1 THE ORIGINS OF PHYSICAL THEATRE	
a] HISTORICAL INFLUENCES	5
b] FOCUS ON COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE	7
c] MICHAEL CHEKHOV	11
d] VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD	13
e] JACQUES LECOQ	15
PART 2 PRACTICAL EXPLORATION: PREPARATION AND TRAINING EXERCISES	
a] WARMING THE BODY UP	18
b] TRAINING THE BODY	23
i] Separating the parts of the body	
23	
ii] Control	25
c] TRAINING IN ENSEMBLE WORK AND SPATIAL AWARENESS	27
i] Games that require group collaboration	27
ii] Spatial awareness	
29	
iii] Group movements	30
d] MIMÉ AND CLOWNING	34
e] MASKED AND UNMASKED	40
f] COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE	45
i] General Commedia training	45
ii] Some practical hints on the main Commedia characters	49
PART 3 PRACTICAL EXPLORATION: PUTTING THE TRAINING INTO PRACTICE	
a] RHYTHM, SOUND, VOICE	61
b] CREATING PLACE AND ATMOSPHERE	67
c] USING OBJECTS	71
d] CREATING CHARACTERS AND METAPHORS TO SURPRISE AN AUDIENCE	
74	
PART 4 PRACTICAL EXPLORATION: USING PHYSICAL THEATRE IN TEXT AND DEVISING	
a] WITH TEXT	97
b] AS AN APPROACH TO DEVISING	102
CONCLUSIONS	104

INTRODUCTION

All theatre is physical - how can it not be, when the actor's body is involved in a setting which is also a physical space? The term 'Physical Theatre' is as absurd as 'polished improvisation', but both terms have come to mean particular things to artists and practitioners. Polished improvisation is not as fully developed as devising, but has been worked on from improvisational beginnings until it is some way towards a finished product. It may be a devised piece in miniature. Physical Theatre [which has also been called Visual Theatre in an attempt to pin-point it further - a definition which appears not to have stuck] is a style of theatre where the actors' bodies are given more importance than is usual in, for example, Naturalistic Theatre. It may be that the actor's gestures and movement are exaggerated, or certain features are emphasised. This might be to make a particular point, or for comedic purposes. In addition, the expectation of an audience watching a group who are performing a piece of Physical Theatre, is that the group should work together in a more extraordinary way, showing a unity, a refinement of group awareness over and above what is obvious from a piece of more conventional theatre.

In the next section, I explore the origins of Physical Theatre, those influences which have inspired groups and practitioners working today. Because I have not dealt with them elsewhere, there is some explanation of the working methods of Meyerhold and Michael Chekhov, neither of whose work have been more than brief mentions in other resources I have already written. As a more recent influence, I have also spent a little time on Jacques LeCoq, who taught so many of our practitioners working today, notably Stephen Berkoff, many members of Theatre de Complicité including Simon McBurney himself, Foothorn Theatre and Julie Taymor [who staged *The Lion King*], to name but a few. Of course, major influences like Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook are given credit where appropriate, but I have not attempted to explore their theories fully. I have done that elsewhere. This book is more about the rich amalgamation of all the influences - those whose sources we can trace and those which have just been picked up en route [via a workshop here, an exercise passed around till it becomes common practice there] into the modern melting-pot which we loosely call Physical Theatre.

Today there are many groups practising a physical or more movement-based style of theatre. Kaos Theatre, Frantic Assembly, Shared Experience, Told By An Idiot, Foursight Theatre Company and Kneehigh are just some of the more mainstream examples, along with Complicité as mentioned above. Then there are a whole realm of Dance Theatre groups from DV8 to Hofesh Shechter and on... too many to mention. There are amalgams of acrobatics, visual story-telling and movement like Cirque du Soleil or Fuerza Bruta. The field is vast.

So what do they all have in common? What all Physical Theatre groups share is collaboration between all the members in the creation of the product, whether working with a text as the base or devising. The creativity of the actors is of paramount importance. And this creativity comes from the actors' bodies. From the start of rehearsal, the impetus is from the physical - the bodies' ways of telling a story, or expressing emotion. Companies are experimental and playful in approach, seeking for the accidental discoveries that they make which will create a link with the audience's imagination.

There is a demand on the audience to, as it were, fill in the spaces with their own imaginations. Just as some works of art, notably that from the Far East, will leave a large part of the canvas bare so that from the painted branch of cherry-blossom our minds fill in the tree, the sky, the mood, so too the Physical Theatre group will supply the images

made by their bodies and the links with our own experience are filled in by ourselves. It is a two-way process. In Physical Theatre the energy created by the live relationship with an audience is essential.

For this reason I often call Physical Theatre the poetic form of theatre because, like poetry, where the poem is often a starting point for a journey into the reader's own experience, Physical Theatre images are suggestive, not tied down by verbal or logical explanation. This is different from Naturalism where our imaginations are left sleeping, where all the details are supplied and where what is woken in the audience is satisfaction at the recognition of life or of a character's reality. We may feel sympathy for a character on the Naturalistic stage, but we do not experience the sensory frissons, the kaleidoscope of emotions and sensations supplied to us by the best of Physical Theatre.

In the end, the field of Physical Theatre is so vast, so varied, that there are no real definitions one can give which will embrace all that is out there. The attempt I have made above will be clarified, I hope, by the explanations within this resource, and the many practical exercises throughout. By the end, especially if you and your students seek out some of the excellent companies around, you will come to your own understanding of the term.

Above all, by giving routes into practice for a teacher to follow, this book attempts to demystify what, to some teachers, is still a source of anxiety. Pressure is on to incorporate more Physical Theatre practices into examinations. Teachers are aware that examiners applaud and are excited by physical ideas that work. Hopefully, the large range of practical exercises, and the section on Physical Theatre uses in devising and in the approach to text will prove helpful in encouraging teachers to experiment further with their own students. Be brave! The results can be electrifying!

Extract One

frustration
boredom
greed
ambition

For example. anger might simply be the movement of an angry crowd listening to something that makes them feel mad. But instead of an individualistic naturalistic approach, the crowd could be choreographed and moving together, or in Mexican Wave format. Gossip might be the group linked by fingertips on extended arms criss-crossing the stage, as if they were telegraph poles and wires. Punctuated by phone ring tones, the sounds of scandal travel down the wires, which are activated one by one and when the whole line is buzzing, they all finish with a suitable shocked or delighted, pretending-shock pose.

d] MIME AND CLOWNING

Stanislavski has a famous exercise in which the teacher picks a couple of volunteers to have an argument about something. **Try this out as an introduction to mime, even though that was not its original intention. What they are saying doesn't matter really; it is the communication of the argument that is important. As they argue the teacher walks around them, touching a part of the anatomy, which thereafter cannot be used. It is frozen. Instead of touching, I usually just call out the part they have to stop using, but they must continue to argue. Start with calling 'the voice'. From then on, unable to communicate with speech, they have to convey their feelings with their body. The exercise does not work if you simply become frustrated with the fact that you cannot speak. It must be that you are still speaking but with the body instead.**

The art of Mime is an ancient one. It has obvious advantages for Physical Theatre, since no words are involved. In an Artaudian sense, it therefore crosses the barriers of audience understanding created by language, since it creates its own language of signs and gestures. It is an area that school students will find difficult at any 'high' level, since extraordinary skill and control is needed to do it properly.

However, we can tackle the basics. Like any other form of acting, much depends upon remembering the feel, the weight, the sensation of things in the nerve ends of the body. **You can test this out by performing a simple action with a prop - opening a book, picking up a glass of water, using a pencil - and then immediately repeating the action without the object. Feel the imaginary object in your hand whilst you can still remember how it really feels.**

A certain amount of exaggeration is necessary even in realistic mime - called 'illusionist mime', since the artist is setting about creating an illusion of reality. **Test this out with a volunteer in front of the rest of the group. Have the volunteer establish for the group where a table-top in front of him is situated.** The trick of getting the whereabouts of the surface always the same is to have it level with something like your navel. You soon get used to establishing that particular illusion. **Now ask the volunteer to place an object, say a glass or a jug, on the table.** Ask the group whether it worked. Chances are they'll say no, but won't really know why it hasn't. It hasn't worked because the invisible table did not have the illusion of solidity. **Now ask the volunteer to repeat putting the glass down but when it reaches the 'surface' of the table, bring the hand sharply back up a fraction - a tiny bounce back - as if what is in his hand has landed physically on something hard.** Its

movement downwards has abruptly stopped. Without the tiny 'reject' movement, to use Meyerhold's terminology, the glass in the audience's imagination simply does not stop its downward journey.

Another ingredient is also necessary for successful mime. This is the involvement of the audience with what the mime is doing. The mime artist has to make a link with his audience at the start of a piece as well as sharing times of delight and disappointment. So, when establishing the table-top, look at the audience to check they are with you, they are understanding. When you have put the object down, check again that you have carried them with you. Maskworkers also need to do this. It is called 'clocking the audience.'

This is an exercise to keep an audience with you when clowning or doing a solo mime. It reminds you that you need to clock at the beginning, at the moment of failure or difficulty and when planning the next move.

Walk fast or run round the stage as if it were a clock-face. The second time round 'clock' the audience briefly at 3.0. Trip and fall at 9.0. The next time round, you approach 9.0 more cautiously, you clock the audience to make them aware of your thought process then jump over or evade the 'obstacle'. Smile triumphantly at the audience. Reach 3.0 and trip and fall. Clock the audience in disbelief.

Now have everyone establishing their own hard surface and placing objects onto it, or doing the ironing, or playing the piano. Everytime something hits the supposed 'solid' surface - even a finger as in playing the piano - the little reject, the bounce back, is necessary to create the illusion of solidity.

When you mention Mime to a group of students, chances are they will all do the 'trapped in a box' thing, feeling the imaginary walls above and around them. Most of them will do it badly, without the bounce back, so that the walls look soft and the only illusion created is of someone trapped inside a jellyfish - something amorphous whose 'walls' are in a state of flux. **If they did do this at the beginning, get them to repeat it now, with bounce back and see if they've improved already.**

Meyerhold broke down every movement or sequence of movements into units, seeking for the unifying rhythm to every action. Most illusionist mime artists [Marcel Marceau was one] will do the same thing when rehearsing, but not so much to find the rhythm of the action as to seek for the kind of detail that makes an illusion complete for an audience.

Try breaking down a simple action like squeezing paste onto a toothbrush, or filling a glass with water, or unscrewing a bottle top, into units. One unit ends and another begins when the action changes in any way. For example, if you are removing the screw-top from a bottle, one unit is the movement of the fingers to take hold of the top, the next is one twisting movement, the next is the brief removal of the hand to reposition it for another twist, then another twisting unit - and so on. It's much harder than you think, and takes real focus and memory to make sure that every detail is correct and finely reproduced. The details will help the illusion - the reality of the bottle and its screw-top - be real for the audience.

Count the number of units it takes to complete one relatively simple action and remember the number. Then count your way through the whole sequence, matching every number with its single-action movement.

**As a group try creating the illusion of: lifting a heavy long pole
pushing a stuck object like a car out of the mud
a tug-of-war**

This requires the kind of group sensitivity you were aiming for in the last section. In lifting a heavy solid object, everyone's hands of course need to be at the same level, and their muscles must be tense to create the illusion of weight. Placing your hands against

the car to push it will involve a slight bounce-back, to give solidity and once again, muscles must be used to show the weight of the car. The rope in the tug of war must be picked up and gripped by everyone, bearing in mind the difference in the rope's tension between its slackness when first picked up off the ground and its tension once pulled on. Once again, the group's hands need to be at the same height.

Finish the work on illusionist mime with a team game without the ball, or without bat and ball. Use eyes and whole bodies to watch where the ball goes and keep the illusion of the ball alive for the audience. This takes considerable skill.

Illusionist mime is concerned with the reality of the world and its recreation for our pleasure. But there are other uses of mime, some of which we'll look at here.

Berkoff uses mime often in his plays, but it is more impressionistic than realistic. Here are some moments from *Metamorphosis*, where impressionistic mime is used. See if you can have a go and produce them now. Berkoff's style of mime is very clear but also very exaggerated, much larger than life.

a] Greta collects up food for her brother who has changed into a beetle. She doesn't know what he will like so she takes a bit of everything from dinner leftovers to vegetables, fruit and bits of stale cheese. Her attitude, which needs to show in her face and body language as she does this is love and concern for her brother. She is full of the 'Quality' of wanting to help him. No effort to make the food gathering look realistic is made. She just gathers up things from all over the place and creates a huge heap in her arms. The heap looks physical and awkward, but the individual shapes of the foodstuffs do not matter.

b] The family eat sitting on stools [chairs will do] facing the front. They eat in a mechanical and rhythmical way, using their mimed knives and forks with jerky 'broken up into units' movements that are timed with the loud ticking of a clock.

c] The family mime listening to the sounds of the insect Gregor moving about and eating. The sounds that are made are disgusting to Father. Mother is fighting her disgust - but her feelings are really the same. Greta, the sister, is pleased that he is enjoying the food she has brought. All of this mime happens whilst the family are on their stools.

These are just a few examples from very many in the play. Much of the mime that Berkoff requires in his plays are both Artaudian [the grotesquerie and larger than life elements] and LeCoq's interpretations of Meyerhold's rhythmic work and the playful creative mime of Copeau.

Try performing the following actions:

pulling	pressing	lifting	throwing	crumpling
coaxing	separating	tearing	touching	brushing away
opening	closing	breaking	taking	giving
supporting	holding back	scratching.		

Now try them with different Qualities [as Chekhov would call them]:

violently	quietly	surely	carefully	staccato
smoothly	tenderly	lovingly	coldly	energetically
superficially	painfully	joyfully	thoughtfully	angrily

Make the movements broad, wide and beautifully executed - larger than life - and keep them rhythmical, with a feeling for the tempo of the movement, which will depend upon the Quality you are using.

This is a slightly adapted Chekhov exercise. Note the similarity with some of Meyerhold's work - the emphasis on rhythm, for example and on making the movement beautiful.

Add emotions/ Qualities to some of the following activities. Try the Qualities of:

care tenderness anger carelessness joy
with

**playing a piano
laying a table
writing a letter
eating a meal
reading a newspaper**

Use some of the skills you have learned already: establishing surfaces and 'bounce back' to establish solidity.

Now, choosing any of the activities you have done, build in something going wrong:

**the wind blows your letter away;
the food is disgusting or someone else is picking the chips off your plate;
you drop the pile of plates when laying the table;
the newspaper has reported something terrible about yourself - and there is a photo of you in it which the people around you might recognise.**

Once again, it is a case of starting with something recognisable, making sure the audience is with you - they are understanding what you are doing. Clock them again when something goes wrong. Build in a moment when you think everything is going to be all right after all - a clock of relief or triumph - but then a final disaster, also shared with the audience. Changes of mood are essential with clear body language and facial expression to communicate each change.

Note that Meyerhold used some of the Chinese and the Japanese Noh theatre language as economical ways of expressing something through movement, e.g. walking with high steps to go upstairs, walking in decreasing circles to go uphill, opening a door by touching fingertips in front of chest, opening hands and extending arms to open it, two or three steps to go through then fingertips back together to close it. Some of these are common practice in mime now.

Meyerhold shows us how the mime artist can carry the audience with them by beginning with a mimed activity that is instantly recognisable and then becoming creative with the idea. I have added considerably to a Meyerhold original. **Try a mime of fishing. You cast your line and reel it in. Nothing. You cast it again, leave it for a little and perhaps start to feel sleepy in the lovely sunshine. Suddenly a tug on the line. Excitement. You reel it in. A large fish! Carefully you take it off the hook; the fish is slippery and hard to handle. Now the hands become both fish and man-handling-fish. The hands flutter to show the fish flapping. You grasp it firmly and try to force the slippery creature into a container that is much too small for it. The fish escapes and slips back into the water. You are desolated. Share each change of mood with the audience by clocking.**

Some solo mimes. Remember clocking. remember exaggerated, clear body language and facial expressions. Make your gestures larger than life.

You are practising your juggling skills and are rather pleased with yourself. Share your pleasure with the audience. You become more and more daring, but then ...

The buckets of water. A man has to fill a hole in the ground with a bucket of water. The bucket has a leak so that by the time he reaches the hole, little or no water is left. He examines the bucket. He tries ingenious ways to fill the hole so as to complete his task. He shares each idea with the audience. The ideas may start sensible-ish, but soon become absurd.

Extract Two

acted crowd scene that every actor is working with his own character's inner tempo-rhythm for the majority of the time. Those concerted moments of rhythmic togetherness will come when the goal is scored, or the would-be suicide jumps, or the politician in the hustings tells a blatant lie. In between the actors revert to the paces of their own characters.

Observe the difference for yourself. First of all, try the following crowd scenes naturalistically:

watching a football match

watching a burning building or a man on the top of a roof

last minute Christmas shopping in crowded streets

a funeral procession going to the graveyard

a wedding party coming out of the church

a politician speaking at an outdoor event

In each case give yourself a character, a reason for being there and establish your inner feelings.

Now repeat one or two of these with the teacher dictating when moments happen that will bring the crowd together in unison. Some of these moments are indicated above. In the funeral procession you could suggest that the mother/husband/wife of the deceased has suddenly broken down in tears, or the first clod of earth has been dropped, or that someone has leapt dramatically into the grave [cf. Laertes and Hamlet at Ophelia's funeral] For the wedding you could suggest that the bride and groom are having their photo taken, or the bride wants to throw her bouquet into the crowd. Don't use members of the group to enact any of these things. They must be the crowd for this exercise. The teacher makes himself the focus, if a focus is needed. The Christmas shopping one will not have a particular focus; it is a different style of movement.

First of all, analyse the movement you are doing as a group and exaggerate it. Pull it out to the nth degree. See if you can impose a rhythm on it. This is one way of turning a naturalistic crowd scene into something closer to Physical Theatre.

This is another - more daring but more in tune with the practitioners you have been examining. Remembering some of the group movements you did in the earlier Training in Ensemble work section, which pattern of movement does each of the ideas you have done most closely resemble. For instance, is the Christmas shopping crowd scene closest to birds or fish moving this way and that, or to the random movements you discovered when moving in pairs and separating as if attached by invisible pieces of elastic, which had pairs all working at different paces? Did the listening to a politician crowd resemble the movement created by playing Grandmother's Footsteps without Grandmother?

Does watching the groups moving remind you of anything else at all? Remember the Physical Theatre group is always looking for accidental metaphors which will surprise an audience into looking at something a different way.

Finish by choosing a move you have done earlier in your course, or at any time in your experience, and seeing if you can transpose it into your situation as a crowd movement. To understand what I mean, try out some of the following examples:

a] How might it be, for instance, if you wanted to suggest that the crowd at the funeral were weighed down by their grief, made clumsy and awkward by it and you used the group movement where people were hanging onto each other's ankles, or other parts of the anatomy, to suggest this. It was a team game originally - look back at it in the group movement section and try it again if you can't remember. Could you use the idea of supporting other people, the burden of grief, the stooped and awkward positions of some of the mourners and transpose some of this relay of movements onto the scene? Try it out.

b] Could the wedding party coming out of the church find an apt movement in an earlier exercise in the mime section where the group flew

imaginary gas-filled balloons and one took off?

c] an angry crowd listening to an unpopular politician who is telling people what he thinks they want to hear rather than the truth might work well using Grandmother's Footsteps as a platform as suggested above.

Hopefully these examples will help you make that leap into a playful Physical Theatre approach. Be brave, stay open, don't be afraid of failure. Ideas don't always work and there's no shame in that.

Meyerhold was inspired by the Noh drama's ancient idea of Jo-Ha-Kyu - which is the rhythm of everything that moves, whether it is a bird, the growth of a flower or the single step of a man. Everything that moves goes through preparation, action and pause, or completion of the activity. This is the physical law of blossoming and conclusion. It can relate to a whole play or a tiny action within a scene, just as it relates to everything in nature. Everything is made up of this rhythm at different paces. Meyerhold's example of the rhythm of Jo-Ha-Kyu is to imagine an aeroplane taxiing along a runway. This is the preparation for letting go into full throttle and then flight. For the purpose of this example, the movement of this aeroplane goes into high speed taxiing and then brakes to come to a stop.

So in Meyerhold's understanding of the Noh theory, everything has an inner three-fold rhythm. From stillness there is the initial movement which develops into the full action and then comes to a stop. The whole of his Bio-mechanical System is about the formal rhythmic interplay of stillness and movement.

Take a small section of the crowd scene you have been working on. As a contrast to what you have been doing so far, have everyone breaking up every one of their gestures in this very short section, so that every movement, beautifully and gracefully done, moves from idea to movement to completion and the briefest pause before moving into the next movement. What is the effect on this tiny section with everyone moving in this three-fold rhythm?

Discuss all your findings from these experiments.

Artaud talked about the audience identifying with a piece through its rhythms, just as the actors should feel the rhythms of the performance in the soles of their feet, right through their bodies and in their blood.

With half the group using percussion instruments, or just feet and hands to make rhythm, see if the rest of the group can move freely to the rhythm established. Try not to be self-conscious or to put up any barriers. Working in a studio that is darkened a little, or has scattered pools of light, would help. Focus the whole mind on the sound and allow that sound to filter into the body, which should respond with free movement.

Artaud believed that rhythm in particular can 'infect' an audience. Have you been able to 'infect' each other?

We looked during the section on Mime and Clowning at miming with sound, using our voices not in words but in gobbledy-gook or sounds. **Revisit the argument you did in pairs here which used grunts, whistles, harsh and soft breaths, clicks and any other sound you can make with your voice and body, accompanied by relevant intonation very much exaggerated.**

Follow this up by trying one or two other ideas in which sound rather than actual words are used to accompany big clear movements. Still in pairs try:

**soothing your partner who is distressed
expressing frustration that whatever you do you cannot reach an
object that is out of reach
encouraging your friend to trust you; you will lead him across the
narrow bridge over the ravine.**

Extract Three

c] USING OBJECTS

The use of objects is important to most Physical Theatre. Grotowski uses just a few that are 'lying around'; these have to become anything that is needed in the action. In Commedia and Clowning, objects take on lives and characters of their own. Peter Brook brings in objects that could be useful adjuncts to a particular text [such as circus objects for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*] and invites the actors to be playful with them, in his search for visual metaphors or surprises. LeCoq uses the movement of objects as things to copy, once again in the search for visual metaphors. [The next section deals with a number of these as stimuli.] Kneehigh have often taken an object as a running theme throughout a piece, e.g. newspapers in *The Bacchae*, where newspaper was used for furniture and levels, as well as origami-style cut out newspaper shapes pulled out in a line to represent an army of people. So objects have an important role in all but mime. Even there, the object being mimed has to be carefully remembered and realised.

For this first exercise you need a glass.

Sit a number of students in a line, the rest as audience. The glass is passed from person to person down the line. Each person uses the glass to communicate a different mood, e.g. happy - lifting the glass jauntily in a 'cheers' manner; depressed - lifting the glass very slowly, as if it were a dead weight; nervously, the glass trembling in the hand - and so on.

With the next line of people, a hat is required - any hat. Each person puts on the hat and suggests by stance and the way it is put on a particular type of character. The shape and style of the hat does not matter - an actor can become a chef, an old woman, a king, or whatever.

With the next line of students, pass a cord along the line - not too long. Each person uses it as something else: a snake, a necklace, etc.

If you have more students, you can pass along a piece of cloth and they wear it or use it as whatever they feel inspired to do.

This exercise is a good lead-in to Poor Theatre and also a good introduction to being playful with objects.

Use any object found in your drama room as something other than what it actually is. On a clap, change the object to a second thing, and then a third.

Moving on from this, try the following improvisation game.

You need any object as a starter. A volunteer starts improvising a scene in which he uses the object, not as it is but as if it were something else. All the other members of the group join in to further the illusion. The group needs to sense when the idea is flagging, at which point someone else takes over the object and starts using it as something else. Again everyone must instantly adapt to this new challenge.

If your group is clearly too big, you may need to divide them into smaller units at the start, each working with an object. Groups ought to be up to about ten, I feel.

No one is more playful with props than Commedia or clowns, with whom often props become quite complex characters. I call this exercise Have Fun with Chairs.

Start with each student on his own, sitting on a chair. He is doing something peaceful; maybe he is watching television. The film gets exciting and you want to move closer but the chair resists. In fact, it leads you a merry dance, sometimes seeming to behave so that you can sit back on it, but then, after a pause in which you start to relax, throwing you off. You admonish it. You walk around it as if it were a dangerous animal. As you do so, you are building feelings about that chair in the audience too. The chair appears to take on life.

Then work in pairs or threesomes, each with his chair, sitting in a line. The other person's chair is better than your own in your opinion and you want it. But guard your own. Remember, too, the unexpected. At least one of the chairs doesn't behave as it should.

For the next exercise every actor needs some coins. You are all going to be Pantalone, always a miser, counting his money.

Each piece of money has a different personality. Pantalone keeps talking to the coins, as if they're loved ones, or naughty because hiding from him, or shy because he didn't see one hiding, etc. Being Pantalone, whenever he thinks he has lost a coin he goes into hyper-frenzy. This could equally well be just a solo activity for one volunteer, with the others watching - especially if no one has many coins about them!

In another solo activity, each person has a conversation with a prop, for example a shoe. Perhaps you could plan a robbery with it. Treat the object as if it were a person. Act as if it is answering you and participating in the plan. As in all Commedia and clowning work, push the idea all the way.

Meyerhold liked to bring in an object or two and invite the students to create a short piece out of them.

One comic piece was created out of a piece of rope and a largish cloth. This was a piece for three actors. Two of the actors became jugglers and the third became a snake charmer, using the rope as a snake. The rest of the action, which I have been unable to find out, I am imagining as follows:

After an opening, in which the jugglers mime juggling and the snake charmer charms, the snake escapes under the cloth. First one juggler goes under the cloth and from the frenzy of the cloth's movements, the audience knows that something terrible is happening. The cloth goes still. The others look aghast. Then the other two exchange looks and one volunteers to go under and see what has happened. Or, more comically, neither wants to investigate and lots are drawn, a coin flipped, or eenie-meenie-miney-mo played. There is more frenzy and then stillness when the unfortunate second person goes under the cloth. The third actor whips the cloth off, reveals two dead bodies and dives on the 'snake' before any further damage can be done, bringing it up triumphantly, held firmly by the neck.

This exercise might be fun for the students to try.

Divide the students into small groups and give them a number of random props each. See if they can create their own scenario out of these things.

[Meyerhold was fond of giving actors quite random things to work with like this. Consider one étude that featured three oranges and a telescope! In fact this would be a good one to do, using three balls perhaps and a piece of cardboard tubing for the telescope. I can imagine a piece where a pompous but very vague astronomer is teased by his pupils who pretend they have discovered a new constellation made up of three hitherto undiscovered astral bodies...!]

In Berkoff's *The Trial*, two people use a long rope to create the angles and twists and turns of a maze of a building, full of corridors. Two more people travel through this building. **See if you can do this yourself, using long pieces of rope.**

If you have no ropes, try creating a confusing building with the whole group and canes. The building needs to be quite surreal, opening out into sudden rooms, closing doors to trap the journeyers in, creating higgledy-piggledy corners and angles.

Surrealism, which remained an influence on Artaud all his life, likes to challenge the

spectator over objects. Magritte, for instance, did a number of paintings in which he wrote labels on objects, giving them the wrong names. Thus, an image of a cloud might be labelled 'table'. An image of a table, 'hat', and so on. The idea challenges the safety of our world and accords with Artaud's feelings that words are just sounds. If you call a table a 'fish', for instance, it remains physically a table still, but you might look at it slightly differently.

In pairs or threesomes, choose a prop like a pen, a torch, a sword, a chair, a waste-paper-bin - something that is lying around in the studio. One prop per group. Devise a short piece of work that centres round that prop, using it as many times as you can in conversation. But call it something else - your choice, though it should be an unsettling choice - perhaps something that reveals the violence underneath the surface of life, or hidden in the unconscious: 'knife', 'blood,' 'razor' - anything like that would work very well. It takes a bit of concentration to remember to call your object by its new name but the results will be unsettling for an audience.

The stimulus for this idea is from Ionesco's *The Lesson*, where the Professor instructs his female student on language, whilst dropping in the word 'knife' at every possible opportunity. He ends up building himself into some sort of quasi-sexual frenzy in which he kills her with the imaginary knife - a knife that between them they have made real.

The following idea is one based on Poor Theatre, as proposed by Grotowski. In poor theatre a prop can become a number of things depending on the actor's belief when he uses a stick, for instance, as a spear, or a guitar, or a dancing partner.

Choose two or three props that are lying around the studio and add in a couple of cloths. These have to suffice for any prop, costume addition or setting needed. It is the acting that you create and the sincerity with which you approach the task that will convince anyone watching that these things are what you pretend they are.

Now create an acted out scene and a setting that uses the actor's bodies alone, with your chosen props. Here are a few starters to choose from:

hell

the concentration camp at Auschwitz

a hospital ward for the victims of land mines

Create an atmosphere for your setting, using voices and rhythmic sounds. Then create an incident that happens within this setting.

When you perform these pieces, try to think where you would like to place your audience - the rest of the group. Do you want them to feel they are participants in, or witnesses to, an event?

Grotowski set a play in a hospital, and the audience sat on chairs in the ward, or even on the beds. In his *Dr Faustus*, audience sat round a banquetting table whilst the actors sat with them, performed on and under the table. **See what you can come up with that is appropriate to your piece. Afterwards, ask your audience what they felt. Would they have felt the same if the presentation had been on a 'normal' stage?**