Futurism and Constructivism: Crash Course Theater #39

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=u_JmkmPYpec
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/u_JmkmPYpec

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course: Theater, and today, futurism's so bright. The mainfestos continue. So does the grudge match between realism and newer forms, which argue that if you really want to show how weird and visceral and terrifying contemporary life is, a bourgeouis family arguing in a living room just doesn't cut it. This time, the argument gets dangerous. We'll look at futurism, a multiple manifesto-having Italian and later Russian movement that got going in the early decades of the 20th century, and then we'll stay in Russia to hang out with the constructivist director (?~0:38) who was Stanislavksy's opponent and ultimate inheritor. Lights up!

(Intro)

Futurism is an Italian movement that got going in France. In 1909, Filippo Tomasso Marinetti published a manifesto in the front page of the newspaper *Le Figaro.* Nice placement. The manifesto called for a form of art that would be as fast, exciting, mechanical, and macho as a race car. Marinetti later named this idea automobilism. Art, he wrote, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, injustice. He called for a form that would, "sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness," and okay. I mean, that maybe sounds kind of fun, but Marinetti also called for an art that glorifies war, the world's only hygiene. Militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom bringers' beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.

He wrote, "We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind. We'll fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice." Basically, as the name implies, futurism wanted a total break from the past, but it's probably also important to note that Marinetti also co-wrote the original Italian fascist manifesto and founded the Futurist political party, which would later be subsumed into Mussolini's political party, so yeah, that total break with the past has really different theoretical underpinnings in comparison to say, dada, which was kind of about, you know, pulling pieces of paper out of a hat.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Futurism was the rare art movement that embraced war and a lot of futurist artists got excited about Mussolini when he showed up. Futurism even became the house style of Italian fascism. Now, maybe you're thinking, uncool. Well, Marinetti doesn't care. He writes, "You have objections? Enough! Enough! We know them. We've understood. But who cares? We don't want to understand. Woe to anyone who says those infamous words to us again." Marinetti would fit right in on Twitter.

So, what was futurist theater like? It definitely wasn't realistic. Marinetti vented his disgust with both historical reconstruction, pastiche or plagiarism, and photographic reproduction of our daily life. Futurists said goodbye to all of that. The first futurist play was Poupees Electriques, or electric dolls, a play about a bourgeois couple and their look-alike robots. Marinetti recited his manifesto in the middle of it. The audience hated it. Really hated it. During the second act, the play included a bunch of gross digestion noises. They pretty much rioted.

Futurists liked the music hall and the variety theater, too. Marinetti wrote that, "The authors, actors, and techniques of the variety theater had only one reason for existing and triumphing: incessantly to invent new elements of astonishment."

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

They produced variety evenings called 'serates', kind of like dada but less playful. These evenings had music and poetry and surprise, surprise, the reading of more manifestos. In futurism, the manifesto was also a form of art. There were plays, too, called 'sintesi'. The important thing to know about sintesi is that they were short and they were fast. There's one called "Detonation" and it's main character is a bullet, like an actual bullet fired from an actual gun. No guy in a bullet costume. Just a guy with a firearm with a bullet in it.

Marinetti's idea was to take conventional plays, like Othello, and shrink them down into playlets that were one minute long. Envy, handkerchief, adultery, strangling, wow. Efficient. Marinetti was definitely against psychological realism and instead promoted what he called 'fiscofollia', a crazy kind of body movement.

The other important thing about futurist theater was the audience was supposed to get in on the action, but not voluntarily or happily. To get spectators going, Marinetti had some ideas: "Spread a powerful glue on some of the seats," he wrote, "so that the male or female spectator will stay glued down and make everyone laugh. Sell the same ticket to ten people, traffic jam, bickering, and wrangling. Offer free tickets to gentlemen or ladies who are not notoriously unbalanced, irritable, or eccentric and likely to provoke uproars with obscene gestures, pinching women, or other freakishness. Sprinkle the seats with dust to make people itch and sneeze, etc." Marinetti was a bad person.

Futurism also took off in Russia, though it had a much different feel there, more literary, more philosophical. Still, Russian futurism also wanted a complete break with the past and embrace of modernity. No fascism to speak of here, though. Russian futurism drew much more from communism and the Soviet state.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Cue horseshoe theory comments here. In "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", a 1912 manifesto written in part by the playwright Vladimir Mayakowsky, the Russian futurists said that we should "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc, etc overboard from the ship of modernity." Mayakowsky was also against the slaughter of World War I, though, so that's a nice change of pace.

Russian futurists wanted new words and new forms and they didn't mind if the audience booed them for it. The most fervent years of Russian futurism were before the Russian revolution, but its most famous theater performance happened after, when avant garde theater and avant garde politics had a brief honeymoon. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

In 1917, during the October Revolution, which actually happened in November, a group of Bolsheviks took over the Winter Palace, where the provisional government was meeting. Originally, the palace was defended by 3,000 soldiers but most of the soldiers skedaddled when the Bolsheviks arrived, so it wasn't exactly a pitched battle. Three years later, in 1920, the director Nikolai Evreinov created a play about it, "The Storming of the Winter Palace", which was an all-night show staged on-site in front of 100,000 spectators. It included 2500 performers, including the entire class of the imperial ballet as well as a bunch of tanks and armored cars.

This wasn't really a re-enactment or it was a re-enactment in a Bolshevik kind of way. It ignored most of the details of the real event, like the fact that it had actually happened during the day and that there was almost no opposition. Actors playing the workers gathered on a red stage to the left, and actors playing the provisional government assembled on a white stage to the right. Then, the actors playing the workers swarmed the white stage, chanting 'Lenin, Lenin'.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

There was a car chase and shadow plays in the windows of the palace. The performance ended with a cannonball being fired from a ship and then a bunch of fireworks. Lenin for all.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. What's neat about this performance is that it's one of the first we've talked about that was captured on film. Obviously, this is longer than most futurist performances, but it's reminiscent of futurism's total break with the past. Embrace of modern technology, modern weaponry, and revolutionary politics. Use of multimedia and multiple focus and interest in spectacle and astonishment over psychology. Futurism kept going for a couple more decades in Italy, but it was the preferred aesthetic of the fascist regime, not a rebellious countercultural style. Unsurprisingly, young artists were way less into it after World War I.

Meanwhile, Stalin pretty much shut down futurism in Russia. He preferred propaganda that glorified the present and his regime to dreamy glimpses of future utopia, but we can still feel futurism's influence in theater today, in multimedia performance, multi-focal performance, works that mix actors and audience together, and works that veer away from psychology and logic.

Now, we've talked about manifesto and playwrights, but before we wrap up for today, we should talk about a famous director and producer from the period: Vsevolod Meyerhold, who only took from futurism what he needed and nothing more. Meyerhold was born in 1874. He was a law student and an accomplished violinist who fell in love with the theater, eventually joining Stanislavsky's Moscow art theater. In the famous production of "The Seagull", Meyerhold played Constantine, the young writer who keeps telling everyone, "We need new forms!" Meyerhold himself believed that, too. He and Stanislavsky clashed often, as Stanislavsky wanted realism and Meyerhold wanted a theater that was unashamedly theatrical and dream-like. Meyerhold left the company after four years. Meyerhold went on to direct for the Imperial Theaters and that's where he started to pioneer new trends in staging, like eliminating curtains and backdrops and leaving the house lights on throughout the show.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Like the futurists, he loved the fairground and the variety theater, and he incorporated elements of circus and (?~10:18) into his productions, but he wasn't a fan of the Italian futurists. When Marinetti came to Russia, Meyerhold wrote that his visit reinforced the anarchy that was an unhappy tradition of the Italian theater. Meyerhold didn't dig the wild uncontrolled deliberately offending the audience style. He believed that without self-restraint, there is no craftsmanship, but restraint didn't mean realism or naturalism. In his essay on the fairground booth, he wrote, "When man appeared on stage, why did he submit blindly to the director who wanted to transform the actor into a puppet of the naturalistic school? The actor of today will not understand that the duty of the comedian and the mime is to transport the spectator to a world of make-believe."

He believed that the truth of life would not be found in realistic surfaces but beneath them. Only theater at its most theatrical, fantastical, and acrobatic could help an audience understand it. He emphasized the primacy of the director, rather than the play, writing, "A play is simply the excuse for the revelation of its theme on the level at which that revelation may appear vital today."

Meyerhold is also famous for pioneering a new method of actor training that he called 'biomechanics'. Biomechanics has been linked to ideas like Fordism and Taylorism that were all about how to make the worker more efficient, but in aesthetic terms, we can link it to constructivism, another modern art -ism. In keeping with early Russian revolutionary goals, constructivism glorified industrialization and mechanization, no expressionist anxieties at all, transforming the theater into a meaning factory.

===== (12:00) to (13:52) =====

Constructivist stage designs, for example, looked kinda like theatrical assembly lines, covered in treadmills and windmills. Initially, Meyerhold collaborated with the Bolsheviks and was briefly an official of the theater division before the government pushed drama in a more conservative direction. Meyerhold founded his own theater and continued to produce plays but socialist realism, the favored style of Soviet Russia was never really his thing. He was accused of bourgeois formalism and in 1938, the government liquidated his theater.

"The pitiful and wretched thing called socialist realism had nothing in common with art," Meyerhold is reported to have said, "In hunting formalism, you have eliminated art." That didn't go over well. He was arrested, tortured, and then secretly killed by firing squad. In exploring theater and modernism, we've seen a lot of conflict and a lot of riots, but this is one of the first examples in which aesthetic choices can actually get you killed. No jokes about that.

Next time, we'll be heading to America for a look at some mid-century (?~13:09): Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein. Until then, a curtain is a curtain is a curtain is a curtain. Unless it's not.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people, and our animation team is Thought Cafe. Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our Patrons at Patreon. Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows like Origin of Everything. Origin of Everything, hosted by Danielle Bainbridge, PhD, explores the history behind stuff in our everyday life from the words we use, the pop culture we love, the technology that gets us through the day, or the identities we give ourselves.