

# Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold Biography

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# Biography

The Russian director Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold (1874-ca. 1942) is noted for his stylistic experiments with nonrealistic performances in constructivist settings.

Vsevolod Meyerhold was born to German parents on Jan. 28, 1874, in Penza about 350 miles southeast of Moscow. Baptized Karl Theodore Kasimir, he changed his name in 1895, when he was converted from Lutheranism to the Orthodox Church. After a year of law at Moscow University, he studied drama at the Moscow Philharmonic Society, where one of the teachers was Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the future founder with Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre. Upon graduation in 1898 Meyerhold joined this company and in December played Treplev in the historic production of *The Seagull*. Never outstanding as an actor and opposed to Stanislavsky's naturalism, he left Moscow after 4 years to direct his own company.

Between 1908 and 1917 Meyerhold attracted international attention at the two St. Petersburg imperial theaters with his dazzling productions influenced by the conventions of commedia dell'arte and other nonrealistic theaters. Probably the most opulent spectacle ever seen on the Russian stage was his production of Mikhail Lermontov's *Masquerade*, which opened on the very day in February 1917 when the first shots were fired in the Russian Revolution.

Early in 1918 Meyerhold joined the Bolsheviks, produced the first Soviet play, Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery Bouffe*, in September, and the following year was appointed head of the Theatrical Department in the Education Commissariat. In the postrevolutionary decade of the 1920s he became the leading Soviet exponent of antirealistic theatrical experiment. Daring constructivist productions of Aleksandr Ostrovsky's *The Forest* (1924) and Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* (1926) inspired a host of reinterpretations of the classics. In 1913 he had published a collection of his articles, *On the Theatre*. Expounding even more radical theories, his *Reconstruction of the Theatre* appeared in 1930.

After Mayakovksy's *The Bedbug* (1929) and *The Bathhouse* (1930) were criticized by advocates of Soviet socialist realism, Meyerhold presented *The Lady of the Camellias* (1934) and *The Queen of Spades* (1935) somewhat more realistically. Nevertheless, the official attacks on his "formalism" continued, and on Jan. 8, 1938, the Meyerhold Theatre was liquidated. On June 5, 1939, at the All-Union Conference of Stage Directors, Meyerhold made a speech apparently defending the principles he had pursued throughout his career. Immediately after the conference he was arrested. Russian sources list the date of his death in prison as 1940 or 1942.