

Important Figures in Drama Theory

Constantin **Stanislavski** (Russia, 1863-1938) was a director who used a system to help an actor to create a part. He believed the mind and body were indissolubly connected. By first learning relaxation and breathing techniques, and by learning to focus emotional memories to allow the imagination to create a character alive in the present, the actor can suggest truth and life to an audience. Using accurate analysis of text and context, for instance the significance of pauses, the actor can find the sub-text or underlying dynamic which allows speech and movement to be integrated into a convincing whole.

Lee **Strasberg** (US, 1901-82) was a theatre director and acting teacher, who learned a lot from Stanislavski. He has been called the 'father of method acting in America'. He encouraged actors to prepare for their roles by summoning emotions from their own lives to illuminate the parts they played. He believed acting should contain strong emotion held under strict control. He was a major influence on Hollywood film actors, from James Dean and Marilyn Monroe to Al Pacino and Jane Fonda.

Bertolt **Brecht** (Germany, 1898-1956) was a playwright and director. He did not want his audience to be passively entertained or have the illusion they were looking at reality. He used a *Verfremdungseffekt* (an alienating and distancing technique) to make the familiar strange and to make the audience engage intellectually with the issues in the theatre, rather than simply empathizing with characters. In what he called 'epic' theatre, making events more important than emotions, the stage illusion is constantly being disrupted.

Antonin **Artaud** (France, 1896-1948) was a writer and director involved in many types of avant-garde theatre influenced by surrealism and unfamiliar cultures (such as those of Bali or Mexico). His name is usually associated with the concept of 'Theatre of Cruelty', the need to restore to the theatre a 'passionate and convulsive sense of life'. He understood cruelty as nihilism, as rigorous discipline, as a process of making the spectator a physical part of the action, and as a shattering of the idea of the 'real'.

Jean-Louis **Barrault** (France, 1910-94) was part of a tradition of mime, particularly strong in France, which developed from medieval dumb-shows and Pierrot theatre. It was also influenced by Italian Commedia Del'Arte and Japanese Noh theatre. Mime is the art of acting out a story through movements of the body without the use of speech, and often making use of masks. Other important practitioners were the performer Marcel Marceau and teachers Jacques Copeau and Jacques Lecoq, whose methods involving masks are used in some general actor training.

Jerzy **Grotowski** (Poland, 1933-99) is associated in his early work with the idea of a 'poor theatre', using the actors' bodies and the audience rather than props or conventional sets. The audience should be intimately involved with the actors in an experience of extremes through a totality of physical and mental reactions. This was often accompanied by unexpected textual juxtapositions. Grotowski is widely regarded as having pioneered experimental theatre.

Richard **Schechner** (US, born 1934) is a director and influential educator and academic involved with experimental and performance theatre, considering new ways of using the relationship between performers and audience, as well as unconventional performance spaces and the integrated use of media. He believes in adopting random and accidental elements during the rehearsal process into performance.

Peter **Brook** (UK, born 1925) is a director who has changed the way theatre practitioners and audiences see the possibilities of performance in non-traditional spaces, drawing upon many different cultures from all over the world. His recent work aims at clarity and lightness, while engaging with major cultural and religious themes.

Pina **Bausch** (Germany, 1940-2009) was influenced by classical ballet, German contemporary dance, Brecht's theatre and the German cabaret. With her own company in Wuppertal she first erased the boundaries between modes of performance in what was then called 'dance theatre'. This combined elements of dance, theatre, music and elaborate sets, often making use of surrealistic elements and subtly varied repetition to explore themes like human relations, age and contemporary life.

Simon **McBurney** (UK, born 1957) is the founder and artistic director of the theatre company Complicité, which specializes in devised theatre (away from text-based theatre towards collaborative theatre based on stimuli that can be objects, poems, paintings, topics, etc). They see their aim as: "seeing what is most alive, integrating text, music, image and action to create surprising, disruptive theatre."

In her 1995 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*europäisches Shakespeare: Ein Sommernachtstraum*), the German director Karin Beier used 14 actors from different countries speaking 9 different languages. Each actor spoke in his or her own language. In her production, the workmen who put on the play within a play 'Pyramus and Thisbe' (see Students' Book Text 16) represented the different drama theories of their countries, so the German played Brechtian theatre, the Frenchman mimed, the Russian acted according to the Stanislavski method, while Bottom, played by a Pole, followed Grotowski.

[Michael Mitchell]