

TO HELL WITH MEYERHOLD

by Julia Nemirovskaya

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Ghost of Meyerhold (Master)

Spirit of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold's teacher

Ghost of a Sinner

Administrator of Hell

Two Angels

Zero

Tik

Sim

August

Witch

Three Men in Black

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

August, Zero, Tik

August. Hello, Zero!

Zero. Greetings, August. What's the matter with you? Some wreath on your horns... a garland on your shoulders...

August (playfully). We were creating a pantomime, "The Love of Rose."

Tik (also playfully). I have a heart painted on my cheek.

Zero. Changed your essence, didn't you? Horns and tails, are you ashamed of them? A wreath... what filth, it's an angels' thing!

August. What's with you? it's just building a character. That's what we do at the Meyerhold's Studio. The Administration of Hell is unhappy with the way sinners are currently burnt; they hope Master Meyerhold will fix it.

They made him The Executive Director and Producer of Hell. Guess who signed the papers?

Zero. Himself?

Tik. Right.

August. We abandoned Naturalism for the Theatricalism.

Zero. How about a drink?

August. Now I know the meaning of my name. August meant royal, in Ancient Rome. I have a grand personality and talent.

Zero. Would you please shut up? All I wanted was our regular 150 grams before work.

August. Shut up, shut up. This is why I am August and you are a zero. Null. Nothing.

Zero. Null? And you are ...

Tik. Take it easy, take it easy!

August. What do you have there?

Zero. Gold Standard Vodka, handmade. You can't get this brand even in Paradise.

Tik. Master says actors have to be sober. All our vulgar habits will go, and burning sinners will now become a planned, well-rehearsed and scientifically supported activity. We will have qualification exams. Well, I need to go to a coaching session.

Tik exits.

August. You have to admit, I look more beautiful with this wreath on.

Zero. What's beautiful? There's demonic beauty and angelic beauty, it's a multicultural term. Define it!

August. Master prefers Aristotle's definition: beautiful is perfect in its own kind. A perfect toad is beautiful.

Zero takes off August's wreath and tunic.

Zero. I am perfecting you in our own kind. Now you look like a devil. I won't be drinking with someone who has plants on his horns.

August (upset, gathering pieces of his outfit). How will I act in "The love of Rose" now? "The Love of Rose..."

Zero. Now, now, have a shot and you'll feel better.

SCENE TWO (Administrator sees biomechanics practice)

Administrator, Sim, Tik, Zero, August

Administrator walks into a hall and sees that devils are engaged in a strange exercise. All bow their heads respectfully.

Administrator. Is this work related?

Tik. This is Master's biomechanics, the highest order of exercise for developing actor's intellect and excitability. All members of HICOMETH and HICODIH, and also participants in SGRUEMEH have to take it.

Administrator. HICOMETH?

Tik. High Courses of Meyerhold Theater in Hell, High Courses for Directors of Hell and Study Group Exploring Meyerhold's Innovations in Hell.

Administrator. HICOMETH and biomechanics. It's too... elaborated.

August. It's not elaborated. There are three parts --- intention, realization, and reaction. We begin with preparation for the main movement, enacted by a movement in the opposite direction, like a spring. Then goes the main action, then completion and reaction. Here: two claps up and down give springiness to your body; keep your feet parallel; toes slightly turned inside.

Administrator slowly repeats the movements.

Now your center of gravity is in the middle. Feel where it moves.

Administrator. Moves?

Devils grin and exchange looks.

Tik. Wave of hand transfers it to the leg. Do you feel it? Opposite direction...

Administrator. Opposite direction? And this very moment the sinner jumps out and runs away. This is the end of your biomechanics.

Actors in pairs perform a biomechanics etude for Administrator.

(To Sim) What is it? A golden lock under the wig? What does this mean? A soul from a different Department. A bright soul.

Sim. I am here temporarily, as part of the theater education program.

Administrator. It's the first time I've seen anything like this. They emigrate from here, but to here... How did you cross the border? There are guards.

Sim. I found a crack.

Tik. For the love of...

August. There are millions of cracks there... and cold frying pans and broken caldrons and other tricks.

Administrator. Put the wig back on. Hide the locks. Do you understand there is no way back to paradise for you now?

Sim. I heard Master is staging Hamlet here... being in his productions is better than paradise.

August. What love! Most exciting!

Sim.

[Sings, crosses]

How should I your true love know

From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff,

And his sandal shoon.

Sim leaves.

Administrator. This soul is... quite remarkable. I would like to talk to her again.

SCENE THREE

Meyerhold, Tik, Zero, Administrator, August, Moskvin, Chorus of Angels

This scene is fast. It begins with sounds in the dark: desperate cries, grating, howl. These sounds are followed by music (the type used for the Japanese butoh dance). Tik and Zero dance to the music around a caldron with Moskvin inside it. Their faces are painted, they have wigs.

Meyerhold. Stop, stop, stop! Sound effects are fine. But the props won't work. I am not afraid, scare me! Lubyanka prison was much more scary!

Tik. So Hell is like a resort after that?

Enters Administrator

Meyerhold (looking around). Well, no. There was no transition. I didn't notice that I was already in Hell.

Meyerhold rises from the Director's chair, closes his notebook and bows his head respectfully.

Administrator. Yes, now and then they set up a first-class Inferno there.

Meyerhold (pointing at the students). See, they keep going back to their routine Hell-style tricks.

Administrator (shakes hands with Meyerhold and moves back). Keep rehearsing, keep rehearsing. I will just sit here in the corner.

Meyerhold. Gentlemen, you won't create any horror by dancing around caldrons and stirring tar. It could work for Bosch and the like, but not after Stalin and Hitler and the gas chambers... And what sinner is there in your caldron?

Tik. Moskvin, an actor. They said he was a genius.

Meyerhold. Set him free --- I will cast him.

Moskvin. Great Master! Get me out! I will play any part!

Administrator. Are you sure? He served as party official when your wife was brutally murdered. He refused to bury her --- he also took away your children's apartment from them.

Meyerhold. No...

Administrator. I would suggest that you make an official request to access your personal file. Incidentally, all information there is presented in a reverse chronological order. You can really understand a life only if you [reverse time] read it from the end to the very beginning.

Meyerhold. Thank you for the helpful suggestion, Sir. I was going to ask...

Administrator. I remember, regarding your wife Zinaida... We are hoping to find her, but there are millions of souls here and we have poor

access to files in Paradise.

Meyerhold. Thank you, Sir, I appreciate any help with this matter. (To devils). Take the cauldron away!

Moskvin (as they are taking him away). No-o-o-o! You know what the time was like! It's not me! It's the time!

Meyerhold. Let's practice. Put on black and red masks. You will dance a phrase. This one:
"I did not notice that I was already in Hell." (Phrase on screen). Say no to realism! If you show how they interrogated and tortured me realistically nobody would want to see or believe.

August. They'll throw up.

Meyerhold. Take off your wig, August, and stop walking in this preposterous manner. Are you drunk?

August. I consider this a slanderous insinuation.

Zero. Could you show the interrogation, Master?

Meyerhold. It is bad practice for directors to show. But I occasionally show. Go ahead, August.

August whips Meyerhold's feet.

August (in a macabre dance). Sign it up, bastard. Do you want me to turn you into a piece of bloody meat? I'll break all your bones and spare your right hand and one eye so you can sign it.

August whips Meyerhold's feet again.

Meyerhold (also in a weird dance, bending and wiggling). Yes! I concealed it from the investigation! I was a Japanese spy. I tried to discredit Communism and destroy its leaders. Write it down! Seki Sano, my assistant director, recruited me on the 19th of July of 1939.

August. Biomechanics etude two! Whipping up!

Three pairs of actors do the etude to music.

All present applaud.

Angels convene on an elevated platform. They recite hexameters.

Angels.

They beat me a prostrated old man,
With a rubber wisp they beat me, on my heels and back.
Forcefully they beat me, on my knees, calves and hips,
They beat me just as forcefully on just the same spots the next day,
I was squirming like a dog, I howled under the master's whip
Tears were pouring down onto the cement floor in streams.
You don't admit doing it, asshole? So we'll make you a piece of bloody meat;
We'll leave you one hand and one eye so you can sign the sentence.
This is how I was writing: blindfolded, slandering all without exception,
Slandering everyone I knew and everyone I did not know, and slandering myself.
No, death is easier I thought in a terrible frenzy.
Yes, I cried, I am a spy; Yes, I cried, everyone is an enemy of the people!

Meyerhold. You just hang there for a few hours in a thorn wreath and everyone calls it a martyrdom! How does it compare to being slashed on your bollocks in Lubyanka prison? If you were crucified for us all why did they slash my bollocks? Couldn't you allow petition[?] for such a small thing like an easy death --- so that when the time comes we could just melt away like clouds?

August (shows emphatically). Melting away, thawing away, flying away, slowly, slowly...

Zero. He was just a gymnast on that cross. Somersaulting back and forth, back and forth.

Chorus of Angels. You suffered, you suffered, you deserve to go higher.

Meyerhold. Why do you think we all want your bliss at the price of suffering?

Angels cover their mouths with hands in horror.

SCENE FOUR

Meyerhold, August, Zero, Tik

Zero holds a skull.

Meyerhold. Ladies and gentlemen,

As we begin working on Hamlet, I need to emphasize the timely and urgent nature of our work. Shakespeare's play is the most appropriate piece for Hell written by man because it's absolutely infernal. What's happening there? The infernal ghost of the King relates to the Prince the secret of his death and appeals for revenge. From that moment on Hamlet's own earthly form begins to irritate him; he becomes other-wordly in essence. Here:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

August. He could make a comfortable living here in Hell if he had no Christian fix.

Meyerhold. Claudius poured poison into the King's ear and melted his earth shell. And the Ghost poured the poison of truth into Hamlet's ear and melted Hamlet's earthly existence. Hamlet begins to understand what man is: a quintessence of dust. Here is Hamlet's most open confession and it makes us realize this play is actually written to be performed in Hell:

Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

Zero. Bravo!

August. This is why it's staged so often! We the devils are so charming!

Zero. Have you done the casting yet, sir?

Meyerhold. Give this to me!

Zero gives Meyerhold the skull. Meyerhold throws it to August.

August (throws it to Tik). Here's a skull now; this skull has lain in the earth
three and twenty years.

Tik (throws it to August.) Whose was it?

August (throws it to Zero.) A whoreson mad fellow's it was: whose do you think it was?

Zero (throws it to Meyerhold). Nay, I know not.

Meyerhold (throws it to Tik.) A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! a' poured a
flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull,
sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.

Tik. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow
of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath
borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how
abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at
it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know
not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your
gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment,
that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one
now, to mock your own grinning? (throws skull to Zero)

Meyerhold. Nice! Very nice and powerful! We would need to work on your makeup... You know, you look like one of my former actors.

Tik (takes Meyerhold aside and lowers his voice.) It's me, Master. I have been acting out a devil and Musya, too --- so that we could take
you away from here. We found several cracks and deepened one for us all to escape.

Zero sneaks up with the skull and listens.

Meyerhold. Wait, Erast, who told you I would like to escape? I have business here. Let's talk after we do the play.

Tik. Well, to play Hamlet is every actor's dream.

August. Hey, Zero, I absolutely have to show you my new place. It looks like a perfect ruin...

Zero and August leave.

Meyerhold. I need some silver wire... Where's the lights technician?

SCENE FIVE

Zero, Administrator, Sim, Meyerhold (light moves from one pair to another)

Zero. I heard it with my own ears. He said: Erast. Erast Garin was his primary actor. Now Sim as you know is his actress. And he asked for some silver wire. I immediately figured it all out.

Administrator. Halos?

Zero. Yes, halos. Dozens of young devils are already involved with his project... they are in love with him.

Administrator. Do you think we are dealing with an enemy plot?

Zero. Of course. Otherwise why would they discuss an escape? It's a political diversion.

Administrator. You know what to do. Continue your shadow work. Report to me, regularly.

Zero exits.

Meyerhold (to Sim). It's you, Musya?

Sim. It's me.

Meyerhold. Erast told me... let's do Hamlet first. I always dreamed about it... I wanted the inscription on my grave to be, "Here lies an actor and director who never played or staged Hamlet." And I am given a chance. All technical issues are taken care of. The oval stage, the metallic light on everything. Musya?

Sim (crying). YOUR Hamlet.

Meyerhold. Hold! Stage hands? What are you dragging there? Wait! (exits)

Administrator. So you told him you are here.

Sim freezes.

You astonished me. To go down to hell --- and you're not his mother, not even a lover. Just his actress.

Sim (in fear). I know you won't inform on me... you have a noble face.

Administrator (laughs devilishly). We have neither faces nor bodies. We look as we wish to look. Have you ever encountered real evil?

Sim. I think I did.

Administrator. Even a thought about the way we are evil here would burn your brain from the inside. I worry about you, Musya. Is this what he called you?

Sim. Yes.

Administrator (comes up to her). Let's leave here.

Sim. Can there be love without a body?

Administrator. The more body-less it is the more painful... and the more fulfilling.

Meyerhold's voice. Metallic light and water everywhere!

SCENE SIX

Meyerhold, August, Tik, Administrator, Sim

Meyerhold (browsing his dossier). This can't be true, this can't be true, this can't be true...

Tik. When did you become an informer?

August. My lord?

Tik. Have you a daughter?

August. I have, my lord.

Tik. Let her not walk i' the sun.

August. My honourable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you. Your friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are here.

Tik. What have they deserved at the hands of fortune, that she sends them to prison hither?

August. Prison, my lord!

Tik. Denmark's a prison.

August. Then is the world one.

Meyerhold. ...An NKVD man in the theater since 1932... And this one, recruited in 1929... She collaborated in 1920s... All of them were bathing in blood!

Administrator enters.

Administrator. I knew your file would read like a page turner. I have some news for you.

Meyerhold. News?

Administrator. M-me Meyerhold's spirit is currently residing in a sanatorium for suicides. She herself is not a suicide, just a victim of brutal NKVD assault, but she has... friends in the sanatorium, they arranged her stay.

Meyerhold. I'd like to see her.

Administrator. You have to have her consent to meet. However I have her number, here.

Meyerhold (taking down the number). I don't even know how to thank you...

Administrator. It's OK. I would appreciate it if you let me sit at the rehearsals of some scenes... the ones that involve Ophelia.

Administrator leaves.

Tik (to himself). Rosencrantz is recruited, Guildenstern is their man, Polonius is their supervisor... (To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). What make you at Elsinore?

August. To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.

Tik. There is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour: I know the good king and queen have sent for you.

Light on Meyerhold who is reading his file. Sim enters and watches Meyerhold from a distance.

Meyerhold. I was mean, I deserve Hell, but not this. Even those I totally trusted betrayed me. And nobody loved me.

Sim. Those you fired, those you informed on, ask them... they loved you despite all that! To be with you was the greatest misfortune and the greatest fortune. You were loved!

Meyerhold stares intensely into the darkness then leaves.

Enters Administrator, approaches Sim unnoticed, from behind.

Administrator (makes a step). And you? You loved him?

Sim. Who? The Master?

Administrator. Yes... Were you with him?

Sim. No. He loved his wife. Fiercely.

Administrator (gets close to Sim). You are lying... you are lying.

Administrator takes the wig off Sim, strokes her hair and kisses her. Sim and Administrator leave.

SCENE SEVEN

Tik, Zero, Meyerhold, August, Witch, First Angel, Second Angel

Tik. Horatio!

Zero enters.

Zero. Here, sweet lord, at your service.

Tik. Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal.

Zero. O, my dear lord,--

Tik. Something too much of this.--
There is a play to-night before the king;
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death:
I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
Observe mine uncle.

Zero. Biomechanics etude number three, "Poisoning of the King" (claps).

Zero, Tik, Witch and August perform biomechanics etude "Poisoning of the King."

Meyerhold. Sharper movements, make it tight, art can only thrive on a needlepoint!

First Angel enters; Second Angel enters from the opposite direction. First Angel whispers something in Meyerhold's ear. Meyerhold nods. First Angel gives him a phone.

First Angel. Vsevolod Emilievich, a phone call for you... from there (points up).

Meyerhold. Hello! Zina! Zinochka! My love! I can't hear you well. Say it again... Olga? What? No, no, no, I am not busy. How are you? The girls? You cursed me? and then forgave?

Holding the phone with his shoulder, fixes August and Tik's posture and movements.

Enters Second Angel.

First Angel (to Second Angel). He thought it was Zina, but it's his first wife. She cursed him when he left her for Zina but she forgave him because of all his suffering.

Second Angel (browsing Meyerhold's dossier). I am returning to Moscow with a new wife. Please vacate the apartment.

First Angel. AAAAH! This is atrocious!

Angels are appalled; they run away in dismay.

August. He didn't love her, any devil can see that.

Witch. He loved her but forgot all about it.

Zero (to Witch). It's just like you: you loved me once.

Meyerhold (showing actors how to change positions). Thank you, my dear, thank you for forgiving me. What? Open house, the girls... again? No, here it won't be possible. For the love of... for devil's sake, think about it: all that stress again, the apartment shortages... Wait, don't hang up! Olya! Hello! Olya!

Signal. Dialing.

Voice (from the phone). The number you are calling is currently unavailable. Please leave your message and phone number.

Light off. Angels return and pick up the phone and the dossier. Voice from the phone is repeating: The number you are calling is currently

unavailable. Please leave your message and phone number.

SCENE EIGHT

Meyerhold, Tik, Sim, August, Zero, Witch

Meyerhold. Give me the jewelry box, Cecilia! And please ask the Administrator to come.

Sim. Vsevolod Emilievich, could you please not invite him... yet?

Witch gives the box to Meyerhold, Meyerhold hands it over to Sim. Witch walks across the stage.

Meyerhold. Cecilia... don't go yet.

Witch returns.

August. Ophelia, walk you here. Gracious, so please you, We will bestow ourselves.

Tik (he speaks solemnly, apparently he worked on the soliloquy for a long time).

To be, or not to be: that is the question.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles.

Meyerhold. Tik, we are omitting the monologue. It will slow down the action.

Actors are in astonishment, then they go on.

Sim. Good my lord, How does your honour for this many a day?

Tik. I humbly thank you; well, well, well.

Meyerhold (answers the phone). Hello, Zina! Zinochka! Yes, I'm here, I'm directing Hamlet, remember we dreamed about it? Without you I am like a blind man. Have a nice vacation, take care of yourself, then come back here. I am not casting until you return. Who would you like to play? Hamlet? Or maybe Ophelia? To write a script where one actor plays both? Of course I can. I'll do it myself. Zina! My wife, my sister, my mother, my friend, my lover, my golden one! My Hamlet, my Ophelia!

Sim. Vsevolod Emilievich, you casted me as Ophelia.

Tik. And I was Hamlet. It was a firm offer, I was preparing...

Sim. It's not unfair, it's blatant injustice.

Meyerhold (coldly). The casting was preliminary, pending upon Zinaida Nikolaevna's decision. She will be joining us shortly.

Sim (to Tik). She'll drive me out. Do I have to live through that hell again?

Tik. He is hell. But without him, there is no theater, there's nothing...

August. Greatness! He is great even in his treachery.

Sim. He'll use you. And then you are trash.

August. People are used all the time. People are the eyes of a humongous monster. They are closed after being used and that's it (closes his eyes with a funny "terrified" expression). People, people, people, people. People (spreads out his fingers) are only the openings for the life of the spirit, which life is not a concern for us, devils.

Tik. Musya, I heard that Zina is with Sergei again and will never return.

Meyerhold. Stop the debates, please. Tik is Hamlet and Sim Ophelia for now, go on please.

Sim. My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver;
I pray you, now receive them.

Tik. No, not I; I never gave you aught.

Sim. My honour'd lord, you know right well you did.

Meyerhold. Tik, take the box.

Tik. Ha, ha! are you honest?

Meyerhold. Take out the necklace and look at it as if you see it for the first time.

Sim. My lord?

Meyerhold. Put it on her and step back.

Tik steps back and marvels at Sim wearing the necklace.

Tik. Are you fair?

Sim. What means your lordship?

Tik. Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? Where is your father?

Sim. At home my lord.

Tik. Let the doors be shut upon him. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell. Or marry a fool.

Sim. O heavenly powers!

Tik. They eavesdropped; what they did not hear well, Ophelia will repeat to them. Ophelia is spying, mother is spying. Horatio is the only one who isn't.

Meyerhold. Drop the box.

Crashing noise; August screams.

August. Not on my foot, idiot! Master said drop, not throw. This is the end of it, I have no foot!

August tries to throw the box into Tik, Tik ducks and runs away. Everyone surrounds August. Witch runs in.

Witch. It's OK, it's OK, we have tons of feet here, we'll have a new one attached to you, which one would you like? You may like three not one, it's so much in vogue now, or to have a tripod foot. All three hooves are so neat on that new kind of foot!

Zero runs in with two feet, one consists of three branching feet, all feet are in motion. Zero exits.

August. It's understandable if he kills me when I am behind the tapestry, it's in the script, but now...

Witch attaches a triple-hooved foot to August.

Witch. Gorgeous! I would love you to have three of everything!

August stands up, unsteady on his tripod foot.

August. These three do whatever they like. I would rather have my old one back.

Witch. Then be it the old one. I'll just spit and blow and it will reattach (spits and blows).

Meyerhold. Cecilia, what is it? Why is your hair all tangled and you have this dirty gown on?

Witch. It's for the scene with Queen Gertrude in the bedroom. I hoped...

Meyerhold. Do you understand the character?

Witch. Absolutely! You said, middle age sensuality. Sensuality. I spent all morning practicing.

Tik is practicing taking out the sword.

Tik. How now! a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead! (pierces the screen/rug) Dead, for a ducat, dead! (pierces the screen/rug again then lowers the sword and talks to Meyerhold in low voice). When you were leaving our apartment the night before your arrest we saw two rats cross the yard in front of you.

Meyerhold. They did not arrest me after the media campaign, they waited. Before killing a beaver they scare it a few times so that the fur is silvery. It's more expensive that way.

Meyerhold and Tik leave.

August (in fuss and haste). Rats? So what? Here in Hell rats are pets. Ratty-tatty-teety sweetie... Cecilia?

Witch. What?

August. It's so strange that you have a name. I did not know it and now I can't help saying it again and again.

Follows Witch. Light on Witch's room furnished with ruins of different buildings and things. Witch and August are there together.

August. Why did you join this cast?

Witch. Directing was my major. Then I had an existential crisis. I changed my appearance one hundred and forty four times. I changed my major twenty times. And here comes Master. I was recruited to inform on him and study in his workshop.

August. Were you in love with him? Did you like him?

Witch. Not as a man of course. I prefer more corpulent guys, like you, just to give you an idea. But I was in love with him as a director. Also, he is our own, infernal soul.

August. Art on a needlepoint... I honestly don't like his formalistic avant-garde tricks. I care for realism.

Lights off.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Meyerhold, Tik, Zero, Witch

Tik. You know, Vsevolod Emilievich, I thought there was no hell at all.

Meyerhold (looking around anxiously). Frankly I also think that all this paraphernalia is only for show. Are they real devils? Do they really burn sinners? What if there is no hell at all? Our thoughts are the real hell. The rest is a play. They had bad directors and script writers. The material was dated. Dante Aligheri, think about it. Or maybe hell is seeing yourself the way you could be and then the way you turned out. Or just our dreams. Yes, the hell is in one's head.

Tik. But then why is there such terror all around here that I want to yell? Where are we now?

Meyerhold. Why twist your brain over it? We are at the rehearsal of Hamlet. (Begins to direct) Our Hamlet carries the mystery of time in him. You can play this. I had a chance to find out a few things about time here.

Meyerhold notices Zero.

Do you have a question?

Zero. No, I am waiting for my line. Horatio... talks after Hamlet.

Meyerhold. Good. So Hamlet is still alive but his life is hell, he has dreams.

Tik (takes a cloak, begins to play Hamlet). O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Meyerhold (begins to play Guildenstern). Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

Tik. A dream itself is but a shadow.

Meyerhold. Good! The otherworldly chill is in your shoulder blades. You are walking in the sun, well, how about to your dacha. All of a sudden, from a meadow, rises a flock of ravens. You are continuing to walk, but you are cold and shadows surround you.

Tik. How true! Sometimes in my dreams, I was sealed in a chunk of glass and could not move.

Meyerhold. Terrific! Play as if there's glass or a grave slab on your chest and you know you can't get it off. Incidentally, Hamlet is soft when he feels strong while weakness, on the contrary, makes him manly. Leave out the monologue "O all you host of heaven!" --- till later, I am still not sure how to do it. Let's go back to the Ghost scene, quickly. The wind is tearing you off the cliff. Cloak! Follow the Ghost!

Tik. Run through it?

Meyerhold. No, the Ghost in the play is real. He is not a live father and not an ancient theater messenger. He is a Ghost barely exposed to the horror of afterlife. He obeys the infernal rules so he cannot talk about the otherworldly mysteries... (To Witch). Incidentally, in what situation can one get a permission to return, for a short time, to earth from here, say, as a ghost? To call one's son to revenge --- is it a good enough reason?

Witch. Ghosts can't talk but they can answer. It's all classified information. But... we here respect revenge, jealousy, ambition, one can even go help the living with certain business... but there is a lot of paperwork ensuring that one keeps all that secret, and don't ask me how to get such permission, what exactly the paperwork should be like --- it's all up to the Administration.

Meyerhold.

I am forbid

To tell the secrets of my prison-house,

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

List, list, O, list!

If thou didst ever thy dear father love--

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Tik. O my prophetic soul! My uncle!

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?

And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,

But bear me stiffly up.

Tik in tears.

Meyerhold (sharply). No tears in a tragedy! Dry voice. Or maybe do cry, I am not sure how to do this one, I trust you. Speak as you walk up that staircase.

Tik (stops crying, dryly).

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee!

Disappears upstage.

Zero (tries to follow Tik then stops). My lord, my lord! Heaven secure him!

Meyerhold. Speak a second later. It has to be as exact as a musical score. Tik, very well!

Zero (returns to Meyerhold, in low voice). Master, I think he is not on top of it...

Meyerhold. I always say "very well;" an actor has to be happy. He should tremble with joy while playing the dying Hamlet... not on top? I don't think so.

Zero leaves.

Tik. Master...

Meyerhold. You and the guards.

Tik. Adieu, adieu! Remember thee...

Meyerhold. More sharp! Imagine you see the guards as skeletons, their bones and skulls.

Witch. Why imagine? We'll do it. Nothing can be easier! I will take a note: turn everyone on stage into a skeleton.

Meyerhold. Oh, how Hell befits me! Magnificent! But don't overdo it. Tik --- move not TO music but ON music.

Music (Shostakovich?).

Witch runs away.

Tik. Adieu, adieu! Remember thee...

Meyerhold. You want your friends to keep your secret. But you don't have friends any more. As a Wittenberg student happily in love with a girl you had friends; now you are surrounded by a wall of silence. Seeing death ahead makes you absolutely lonely.

Tik. How would you like me to act this out?

Meyerhold. Avoid a certain position as if you are wounded (shows Tik how to move on stage). When Stanislavsky died I awaited arrest... and there was a wall of silence around me: nobody looked my way or shook hands with me. Even a leper has other lepers around him, but I had nobody.

SCENE TWO

August, Meyerhold, Tik

August appears.

August. I would like to get an exposition of Polonius. At least some directions...

Meyerhold. Have you seen informers?

August. Tons and tons of them. In 1930s, everyone not in prison was an informer. They all went straight here after they died.

Tik. This is an overstatement.

Meyerhold. Polonius is unable to feel the pain of others and does not have any inclination to mystics. A total antipode of Hamlet.

August. Yes, Polonius is very reasonable.

Meyerhold. Walk as if you are a goblet filled up to the brink; have a servile grin on your face; half-bows, small movements, splayed fingers.

August walks in small steps.

August. How does my good Lord Hamlet?

Tik. Well, God-a-mercy.

August. What do you read, my lord?

Tik. Words, words, words.

Meyerhold. Pause!

August. Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Tik. Into my grave.

August. Indeed, that is out o' the air. My honourable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you.

Tik. You cannot, sir, take from me any thing that I will more willingly part withal: except my life, except my life, except my life.

Tik leaves.

Meyerhold. It's perfect, as always, perfect, August!

August cheers up.

SCENE THREE

Administrator, Zero

Zero. He said, there is no Hell. And then that Inferno is also a prison.

Administrator. Anyone saying things like that will be burnt to ashes. What else?

Zero. There are some small things, like he asked for a cross in Ophelia's room... also he does not heed to the needs of the common devils in theater.

Administrator. Anything else?

Zero. My Lord Administrator, I would like to explain the overall situation... I had several advantages over the other actors. I have the right

complexion and body flexibility. And he casted his old student as Hamlet. In general, devils are discriminated against while the souls, often the bright ones, get the best deals.

Administrator. Is it anything personal?

Zero. Absolutely nothing personal, I am an actor only for the sake of disguise. But if we talk personal, I would like to remind you...

Administrator. ...That you were the First Director and Head of Theaters in Hell. Right. Meyerhold will be destroyed, and you will get your job back. Rumors are, he is already condemned by the High Court. Article of Criminal Code number 13-10, "Degrading Hell."

Zero. Degrading Hell... I am not sure, but... I am very grateful to the Administration, I really am.

SCENE FOUR

Meyerhold, Tik, Sim, Zero, Witch, Administrator

Meyerhold (dialing). Zina! Hello! Zina!

Voice. The number you have dialed is currently unavailable. Please leave your message and phone number. The number you have dialed is currently unavailable. Please leave your message and phone number.

Administrator appears, unnoticed.

Meyerhold. I need well trained cadres! And what's wrong with this phone number? It never answers! If Zinaida Nikolaevna does not show up... I'm deprived of my best actors and students, this is a no go.

Administrator (harshly). Mister Meyerhold, I don't understand --- you took it upon yourself to prepare cadres right here in Hell. Recently, you reached the point where you criticize the authority and deliberately disrupt its actions. Are you really deprived of your actors? Isn't this your best actor (pulls forward Tik) and your best actress (beckons Sim). And what about your friend Picasso who is still eager to collaborate with you as an art director of your shows?

August. You shouldn't complain, Master. Actually... here I am (takes off his hat and pulls back hair).

Meyerhold. Ilyinsky? But you... you were an amazing devil, you're a genius. (To Administrator, anxiously). Sorry, My Lord Administrator, you were misinformed, I constantly emphasize the wisdom of the authority and I deeply value the opportunities I have here. It's just a nervous breakdown, the premiere of Hamlet is so close.

Tik (sarcastically). Yes, our genius, he'll make himself into a god.

August (in a lofty and offended manner). I am surrounded by envy! (To Meyerhold) Master, I hope for the main part in your next production --- especially since I did not get to play Hamlet. Of course if you won't find an equally gifted devil.

Tik. Igor! Where are you from?

August. I cannot answer because of the ambiguity of my situation. Many geniuses as you may know are hanging between Heaven and Hell, in a special, so to say, space where nothing is defined.

August winks at Tik, Tik smiles.

Administrator. If I were you, I would not be so reckless, Mister Meyerhold. I stopped liking the things you say.

Meyerhold. My Lord Administrator...

Administrator leaves. Meyerhold thrusts himself after him but returns and hugs August. August and Tik exit.

Meyerhold. Let's go back to the insane Ophelia picking and handing out flowers.

Sim. There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

Meyerhold. In this scene, let's introduce a wet nurse, she is desperate and she tries but cannot stop Ophelia.

Music. Meyerhold shows the pantomime of the insane Ophelia with flowers. Sim plays the wet nurse. Witch applauds.

Zero is on the other side of the stage. He is also trying to distract Ophelia from her insane pantomime. Sim leaves.

Myerhold. Fantastic, Zero! This is exactly how Horatio would react to Ophelia's madness. You have such a fine understanding of the play. Maybe you can help me... I still can't figure out what happened to Ophelia.

Zero. Isn't it easy? She went insane and drowned herself. She loved the Prince but the Prince killed her father out of the blue.

Witch. There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
There with fantastic garlands did she come
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

Meyerhold. Isn't it strange that the Queen can describe Ophelia's death like that? Where could the Queen obtain such minute details? Did she see this with her own eyes?

Zero. I don't think so.

Meyerhold. Before the mad Ophelia comes, the Queen talks to Horatio as she would to someone who has her full trust. Then she orders a courtier to watch over Ophelia. This courtier was sent to the King by Horatio. The courtier sees how the branch breaks off but he does not hurry up to save the girl. Perhaps Horatio sees her fall, too. Ophelia is swimming and singing for a long time, she could be rescued, but both men just follow her with their eyes. What does this mean?

Zero. They could not swim?

Meyerhold. I think they could but still did not rescue Ophelia or even pushed her to the river. It was too convenient for King Claudius, the time was just right.

Zero. So Ophelia was murdered?

Meyerhold. They helped her drown. And who told the King that the insane Ophelia is planting suspicion in the minds of his enemies? Horatio! And whom does the King ask to watch over Hamlet in Ophelia's funeral scene? Horatio!

Zero. I don't understand.

Meyerhold. What is there to understand? The King showed much kindness to Horatio, in Hamlet's absence, and made him his spy. Horatio directly or indirectly kills Ophelia. That was the secret order of the King!

Zero. This is a misinterpretation. Horatio is against the murderous duel. In the end, he wants to take poison and die like a Roman. Hamlet pulls a goblet with poisoned wine out of his hands.

Meyerhold. Something is a misinterpretation and something is not. Someone is an informer and someone is not.

Witch leaves. Zero steps back. Meyerhold grabs his tail.

Zero. Let me go!

Meyerhold. What if I tell your boss that I knew who you were from the very first moment I saw you? That I said things specially for your ears? Where would be your reward? You own theater where you play all the main parts?

Zero. Let me go! You yourself do not believe in devils! I am just your own ambition! your own cruelty!

Zero runs away. Meyerhold who was holding him has his garment in his hands. Meyerhold throws it away and takes the phone.

Meyerhold. Zina! Hello! Zina! Stay away from that sanatorium. Suicide, the only sin that leaves you no chance for atonement... Sergei is the most terrible influence in your life, and he will now pull you to the bottom. It's not true that there is no ultimate perdition. I saw them taking away a soul's form, turn it into ashes, nothingness.

SCENE FIVE

Meyerhold, Administrator, First Man in Black, Second Man in Black, Third Man in Black

Meyerhold is working on his notes. Three Men in Black enter.

Administrator. Biomechanics etude number four, "Arrest."

Administrator claps, providing the rhythm for the Three Men in Black. Three Men in Black perform the etude.

First Man in Black. Mister Meyerhold, you are wanted for a few words.

Second Man in Black and Third Man in Black search the theater and take all papers from the Director's table.

Meyerhold. I don't understand. There are no charges filed against me.

First Man in Black. Come on, let's go, they'll figure it out there.

Shouts and moans are heard backstage. Meyerhold is taken across the stage and forced into a chair.

Second Man in Black (over the phone). Yes, he is here. Just arrived (nods to the Third Man in Black, hangs up). First you will be photographed full face. Now the side view. It's for our files, just in case they disperse you, so that the pictures are preserved.

Meyerhold. Disperse... If my spirit turns into ashes, would the memory of me disappear, too? Or these photos would preserve it?

Third Man in Black. Take away all hard objects, especially the metal ones. The belt, the pen... Here is a check for you to get your cloths back. Please sign here that you allow us to keep your belongings till the end of the trial.

Second Man in Black. What article is incriminated to him, thirteen or sixty-six? OK, then we we will leave him his form. Make the face on the photos just a bit darker. (To Meyerhold) Fill out this short questionnaire, please.

Meyerhold. No, the memory won't disappear... It'll be stuck between Heaven and Hell, in the grey world, where nothing is defined.

SCENE SIX

First Angel, Second Angel, Tik, Sim, Witch, August, Meyerhold, Administrator

Meyerhold (at the lectern, he looks exhausted, dressed in a torn, ragged suit). I would like to say it again, Comrades: the Administration's actions were rightful and justified. Our theater has, for a long time, been at bay. We were carried away by staging Hamlet in a perverse, non-realistic, formalistic manner. Unhealthy modernism spread all over Hell like a cancerous tumor. We allocated too little time to practical work. I took the liberty of criticizing the Administration. I admit my wrongdoings and ask the Administration to further punish me but without depriving me of my directing job. We will now perform the Biomechanics etude number five, "The Fight of Devils and Angels for the Soul of Man," with a subsequent victory of the devils over the weaker enemy (begins to clap).

Angels, Sim, Tik, Witch and August perform the Biomechanics etude, "The Fight of Devils and Angels for the Soul of Man."

Sim (panting, to Administrator). What are you doing, what are you doing? There's rosemary and there is pansies... and rats, so many rats all around! But rats cannot hurt Master, he is beyond Hell and Heaven, he is where air is thin and everything fits on a needlepoint...

Administrator. Your sincere repentance impressed us. We grant you permission to open Hamlet with some cuts and suggestions (gives papers to Meyerhold). However your repertory will be reconsidered. From now on, you are an Assistant Director of Hell. Yes, and the Administration hopes you will come out with an effective criticism of theatrical life in Paradise.

Meyerhold. I will.

SCENE SEVEN

Meyerhold, Administrator, Angel, Sim, August, Tik, Stanislavsky

Meyerhold. You can't do theater in Paradise. Art is not pleasing... it's rooted in discord. Of course I could direct a play or two there just to show them what art is.

Administrator. Paradise is not the right place for art indeed. One of your saints wrote that theater is a school of the devil, and even if it looks like an angel it's only a disguise.

Angel. Why, Master, your teacher Stanislavsky is in Paradise and he is still a director.

Meyerhold (with interest). And what is he directing there?

Angel (awkwardly). I am not sure... I am not very much into theater, you know. I think he directs Processions of Angels with branches and Processions of Angels with violet wreaths... circle dances of golden-eyed Angels.

Meyerhold. That's what I thought. And has he ever done Hamlet there?

Angel. He did it when he lived... as a soul, he is exploring new areas of experience.

Meyerhold. I am doing Hamlet here in Hell.

Angel. We can offer you a stage, too. We can restore to you your theater.

Administrator. It will be an illusion! There is no theater in Paradise! You all are in eternal bliss there and have no desires except to continue being in that bliss.

Angel. Do you mean Christian Paradise? What can you know, you who experience only the Inferno? Oh, faithless men!

Angel covers his face in wings and exits.

Sim. Master... It's a shadow world here and there it's all light.

Administrator. And all of you there are nothing but the molecules of light. Look, you are just an empty shell... easy to dissolve.

Sim. Please, leave me my appearance! I will stay here with you.

Administrator. You will? You know who I am. Will you still stay --- even if your Master beckons you?

Sim. I will.

Tik. He won't dissolve you, Musya. Nothing vanishes, even plays that were not staged, films that were washed off, erased, and people who disappeared, dissolved.

Administrator. Let's go. Let them finish their show on their own.

Administrator takes Sim's hand and they leave. Everyone looks after them.

Meyerhold (as if awakening). So you say there is real theater there?

August. Here comes your teacher. Ask him. (to Tik) We'll see where it will all end up --- as to now, I am staying here. The show is sold out, you can get a ticket for ten times the price only. The Hell is all rave about our new Hamlet. Master is turning us into stars again.

August and Tik exit.

Meyerhold. Konstantin Sergeevich?

Meyerhold and Stanislavsky hug.

Stanislavsky. I heard you are moving up to join us. I am delighted! I have always admired you.

Meyerhold. Thank you for saving me from the arrest. I never had a chance to thank you.

Stanislavsky. But you were still arrested as soon as I died, weren't you? Died as a martyr?

Meyerhold. Tell me, what do you direct? sweet processions of angels? You may not answer if it's a secret, I know the two agencies have strained relations.

Stanislavsky. It's not like the West and the East...cold war... the iron curtain... This is more subtle.

Meyerhold. Forgive me for all I did to you. You were good and I was evil. I was too passionate about what I did.

Stanislavsky. Passion is suffering. You suffered. Give me your hand. Let's go up the staircase. You always said that there should be a staircase on stage. One flight up. See?

Meyerhold. Where are we? Are these the angels flapping their wings?

Stanislavsky. No, it's theater.

Meyerhold. The audience?

Stanislavsky. Yes, they begin applauding. It's for your Hamlet. Bow, Master!

Meyerhold. Are they from Heaven or Hell?

Stanislavsky. Does it make any difference? What matters is the applause. Bow!

Meyerhold (to the house, trying to focus on the faces). What are you?