One exercise I always return to: The *dactyl* and the *gruppirovka*

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An exercise I return to routinely is the *dactyl* of Meyerhold’s Theatrical Biomechanics. This short sequence (as described by various authors[[1]](#footnote-1) and seen in [Gennadi Bogdanov’s Workshop Demonstration](https://youtu.be/XrkB_rcQNzM?si=M5oBXWIizarz3Gqz) of 1996) encapsulates within it all of the core principles of Theatrical Biomechanics. It involves the key phases of the Acting Cycle (*otkaz* - preparation, *posil* - sending, *tochka* – full stop); the central role of rhythm in Theatrical Biomechanics; and the actor’s ability to connect to their stage partners and to work *ensemble*. But the one principle that I think the *dactyl* particularly elucidates for the actor is the rarely mentioned *gruppirovka*.

In Theatrical Biomechanics, *gruppirovka* (grouping) captures the notion of “gathering around the centre”. As with all of Theatrical Biomechanics’ principles, *gruppirovka* operates on the personal level of the performer, the group level of the ensemble within the *mise-en-scène*, and at the level of the play/performance as a whole. It is the first of these that I am most interested in for this short *essai.*

In terms of the performer, the centre in this case is considered to be the actor’s solar plexus. This point is selected because it is the centre of the torso and approximately equidistant from the hands and feet of the performer. Considering the solar plexus as the centre of the body encourages the actor to shift their attention away from the head/face as the focus of any expressive action/gesture, and to the body as a whole. In addition, it also encourages the actor to view their limbs and head as responsive to the motions of the torso – not the other way round – thus leading to greater physical awareness, specificity and control within the actor’s performance.

It is worth describing the execution of the dactyl, to get a greater sense of both its form and the challenge it sets a performer.

* The performer begins by standing with their feet in parallel, arms by their side (hands facing the sides of their legs) with a gentle active tension throughout the whole body and the sensation of a slight forward lift in their sternum.
* the performer prepares for the *dactyl* by shifting their weight slightly forwards so that the balls of their feet take a little more weight than the heels. Their gaze is soft and forwards (often looking at a partner or the wider ensemble).
* the actor then simultaneously bends their knees, contracts their torso forwards around the solar plexus, drops their head, and lifts their arms behind them (elbows uppermost and bent with fingers pointing downwards).
* The performer then (again simultaneously) straightens their legs, unfolds their body and swings their arms forwards and upwards so that their arms are straight above their head, and they are standing straight. Their gaze returns to look forwards.
* At the moment they reach the peak of this swing, the actor drops their elbows to the side of their torso and claps their hands downwards twice in quick succession. As the hands move to clap the actor bends their knees and contracts their torso whilst dropping their head. After each clap the actor straightens their legs, lifts their head and unfolds their torso.
* After the second clap the actor returns to the ready position, an active tension in their body and their gaze forwards.

From this description it should be clear that the *dactyl* embodies and trains the principle of *gruppirovka* by asking the performer to actively fold and unfold around their solar plexus, doing so with controlled speed and a rhythmic change. This rhythmic change is where the dactyl gets its name from: dactyl being the Greek metre of poetry that features one long beat (the initial contraction and swing of the arms upwards) followed by two short beats (the two claps). Crucially, the action of the knees and elbows (which bend and straighten in concert with this folding and unfolding of the torso) and the swing of the arms around the shoulder joint are initiated by the action of the torso. When actors first begin to practice the *dactyl*, the tendency is to start the action from the hands, often tensing their shoulders and back as they do so, but it is the activation of the *gruppirovka* that should initiate the movement of the rest of the body.

Repetition of the *dactyl*, its activation of the *gruppirovka*, and the exploration of the principle within the longer sequences of Theatrical Biomechanics’ *études[[2]](#footnote-2)*, is designed to gradually encourage a greater harmony and conscious organisation of the actor’s movement, as they work from the centre. This has the aim of affording the actor the capacity to more easily embody actions and gestures on stage, actions and gestures that are executed by the whole body and not isolated from it. The simple act of reaching to grab something, for example, becomes a whole-body action that is rooted in the torso and connected to the actor’s feet. Note, that whilst Theatrical Biomechanics was conceived of as the basis for a stylised and heightened physicality, the principles can also be translated to more nuanced performance styles, enhancing full-body action albeit less visible to an audience’s gaze.

Key to this training process is the actor’s consciousness of the action of their torso. Working with *gruppirovka* points to the need for the actor to activate the muscles around the solar plexus (those of the chest, abdomen, and back). During training this is a conscious action that needs to be sensed kinaesthetically. Korenev in his listing of the principles of Theatrical Biomechanics identifies the idea of the actor intentionally “tensing-up” [[3]](#footnote-3) as a general principle - not to be confused with unwanted tension that actors work to avoid but rather an intentional application of muscular tension. This suggests the quality of the kinaesthetic feeling the actor is looking for in both working with *gruppirovka* and Theatrical Biomechanical training in general. It is through this tensing-up (often in the form of a light, flexible tension in specific muscle groups) that the performer is able to build the consciousness of their actions.

Using this tensing-up to notice and activate their *gruppirovka* supports the actor in the training, most notably when they come to play the Biomechanical *études*, particularly the sections in the *études* when the actor is forced to adopt strenuous positions (such as when their back is curved), or when the actor supports themselves as they move towards and away from the ground. In this way, the actor is encouraged to use *gruppirovka* to physically support themselves in all of their actions on stage.

If the *gruppirovka* is utilised in this way, the actor is able to allow the movement of their legs and arms to become light and easy giving them the capacity to work playfully and with a fully embodied physicality. The *dactyl* (through copious repetition) supports this process as it encourages the performer to find a sense of ease in the swing of the arms, the springiness of the legs, and the robustness of the clapping. The actor has to both ‘tense-up’ but also be at ease, and the dactyl facilitates this development by asking the actor to shift between tensing and easing different body parts rapidly.

This quality of being both ‘tensed-up’ and at ‘ease’ extends to the ways in which the actor needs to be able to relate to the rest of their ensemble when executing the *dactyl*: attending to their stage partners whilst also being able to move freely around and with them. Work on this begins with the execution of the *dactyl* in pairs or as a whole group, with the actor encouraged to attend simultaneously to the rhythm of the *dactyl* and to their partners. Within the *dactyl*, this is explicitly stressed by the instruction to look at the stage partner when the actor’s eye line passes through the horizontal. This is initially challenging to achieve (as the actor’s mental load is predominantly concerned with accurately coordinating the different movements of the dactyl). However, as the actor moves towards unconscious competence in performing the *dactyl* they can begin to relocate their attention to their stage partners and the space around them. In doing so their attention starts to shift away from their personal *gruppirovka* and the idea of them themselves as the centre of the action, to the other centres in the room, and thus they can begin to explore the *gruppirovka* of the ensemble. But that is a topic for another *essai*.

1. see Pitches, J (2003) Meyerhold. London: Routledge p141 and Leech, R (1993) Vsevelod Meyerhold. Cambridge: CUP, pp 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The études are a series of short, increasingly complex, choreographed sequences that apply the principles of Theatrical Biomechanics to short dramaturgical actions, with titles such as Throwing the stone, The Slap in the Face, Leap on the Chest. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. see Korenev, M in Law, A. and Gordon, M. (1996) *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*. Jefferson: McFarland. p138 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)