

Josef Stalin Honored in Vsevolod Meyerhold's Penza

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What I am about to write is something that should not have to be written. Period. Yes, history repeats itself. No, people do not learn from past mistakes. We know all that. And yet this story just seems so obviously impossible.

A new bronze statue honoring — now, hold onto your hats here — Joseph Stalin was unveiled in mid-July in the Russian city of Penza.

There is a ton of information about it, there are a million explanations. It was an event sponsored by the Russian Communist Party and funded by "public donations," according to one [account](#). It was an attempt on the part of war veterans to recognize Stalin's contribution to "victory over Nazi Germany in World War II" according to [another](#).

Now, I want you to look up at the photographs that lead this page off. And then just bear with me for a few moments.

The man depicted there is Vsevolod Meyerhold. He began his career alongside Konstantin Stanislavsky as one of the young leading actors at the now-famous Moscow Art Theater. He soon branched out on his own as a director and became one of the greatest figures in 20th-century theater.

Meyerhold's contributions to Russian culture in general are utterly incalculable. His collaborations with the great poet Vladimir Mayakovsky affected the course of literature. His position as a mentor to Sergei Eisenstein changed the language of world cinema. His alliances with such artists as Sergei Sudeikin, Alexander Golovin and Leon Bakst influenced the development of Russian fine arts. His acting exercises called [biomechanics](#) are still taught and studied today. His impact is felt in every playhouse that opens its doors in every nation to this very day.

Back to the photographs now. You may have noticed that they look a bit rough. That's putting it lightly. Those photos are mug shots. They were taken on or about June 20, 1939, when Meyerhold was arrested during the height of the Purges sweeping Stalin's Soviet Union. Meyerhold was thrown in prison, tortured to within an inch of his life and then shot on February 2, 1940.

I don't often let Wikipedia do my work for me but its woefully inadequate [entry](#) on Meyerhold does contain a remarkable quote from a letter the soon-to-be-dead Meyerhold wrote to Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov in January 1940.

"The investigators began to use force on me, a sick 65-year-old man," wrote Meyerhold. "I was made to lie face down and beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap... For the next few days, when those parts of my legs were covered with extensive internal hemorrhaging, they again beat the red-blue-and-yellow bruises with the strap and the pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain.

"When I lay down on the cot and fell asleep, after 18 hours of interrogation, in order to go back in an hour's time for more, I was woken up by my own groaning and because I was jerking about like a patient in the last stages of typhoid fever."

Those were Stalin's henchmen working on a man famous for staging plays. Meyerhold was in prison because Stalin wanted him there. And he died because Stalin wanted him dead.

And when the citizens of Penza chose to honor Joseph Stalin with a bust this summer, they desecrated and defiled the man who is surely their own most illustrious son. Meyerhold was born in 1874 in Penza.

I am gratified — and not surprised — that many in Russia have been outraged by the unveiling of the Stalin statue in Meyerhold's hometown. Still, this event is just wrong, plain and simple.

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