

Commitment – the Principle of Identity in Theatre and Cinema

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Abstract: *I have always wondered how we could formulate an approximate definition of the Art of Acting and how we could integrate into the capacity for understanding of people outside our field of work this maxim about what we actors do: „Do we learn how to lie? Or do we learn to commit to lying?” Fortunately, I have not yet reached such a definition; I am still trying out possibilities. From my perspective, I would opt for the second choice, which somewhat approaches the type of acting discussed by Meisner – “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”. The circumstance derived from the text, the dramaturgical constraint, puts us in the condition of a different identity; first of all, we have to answer to another name (that of the character) and perhaps to a different past or possible future, to events that have happened or will happen. This “will happen”, this future becomes another aspect of committing – something that we as human identities (actors) expect, but of which we must feign ignorance in acting. The conscious commitment to this essentially becomes, through recurring, conscious exercise, one of the means of the Art of Acting.*

Keywords: *Theatre; Acting; Technique; Procedure; Analysis; Phonetics; Obligo; Commitment; Theatrical pinciples; Character; Meisner;*

Introduction

Generally, an actor’s first director is themselves. When reading a text, the actor (like all of us, in fact) imagines “how it is supposed to be more or less”, and this, practically, is what gives them their “flight of fancy”. Because the imagination developed by reading runs all rapports, relations, circumstances and characters through a personal filter, leading to an interpretation of the course which may be different from that of the director.

In our current day-to-day dialogue, most often in conflictual situations, we aim to change the opinion of the other person, change their perception, militating (with more or less pathos) for our personal perspective. Even if the situation is not conflictual, our dialogue would still tend towards causing change, whether through an action or a question - “Can I please have a glass of water?” or “Today won’t be very cold, will it?”.

And thus, because imagination is at work from the very first reading, error makes its way into the Art of Acting. We form our opinion of the character and “deliver” our lines the way we imagine the character speaking them. In other words, we do not attempt to turn convention into reality, but rather act according to a director’s impulse, though our job is to act.

Starting from the premise that “all characters are within us”, we can say that the actor contains all the material necessary to elevate a character from the level of a non-living object

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(text) to that of something alive (the person on a theatre stage or in a film scene). Personally, I strongly believe in this saying, “all characters are within us”. I think we contain everything we have encountered, read, stored, experienced, I believe we have been murderers (in thought), I believe we have all been traitors, rich, poor, liars, honest, top of our class or the dregs of society. Consequently, perhaps a mere introspection, subsequently guided towards the director’s vision, could be enough to turn convention into conventional reality.

1. Composition

In the Art of Acting, composition has a particular role, which begins with its definition. What does it mean to “compose” when you act? The general perception suggests a “character” lacking the physical data necessary for them to be played by an actor – in short, a 30-year-old actor embodying a 60-year-old person, or the other way around. I will begin with the second example, as ageing forces actors to operate with gestures or physical attitudes they know from a past biological condition. Someone who is now 60 was once 30 and thus has the knowledge necessary for a potential composition of such a character. In the case of the first example, the physical condition is not met – it is just a “supposition”, so we must find the exterior means, which rely on observation only and can find their incipient form only in an operational system based on an observational one (we look around, at people in our family and our society, see how a 60-year-old person moves or stands up, then attempt, through composition initially, to imitate them).

Practically, in a specialised pedagogical terminology, it would suffice to ask the “hows”, not the “whys” – this is a form through which the actor follows the course in the opposite direction, beginning not from “why do I do this”, but rather from “how do I make this show on the outside”.

Composition does not function as easily in film, as it is more readily accepted by the receiver (the spectator) in certain genres of theatre – Commedia dell’Arte, French theatre, revue, boulevard theatre, vaudeville. In films, and particularly in films d’auteur – based on realism or naturalism – the conventionality of a composition is hard to overlook. There is, indeed, experimental film as well, where it is entirely possible for a 30-year-old actor to be the father of a 60-year-old actor. But that is a particular genre, which should also use the aesthetic means of an experimental film. Also, films include a commercial type of composition – which puts me in mind of *Mrs Doubtfire*, where Robin Williams superbly plays the part of an elderly woman –, but in general such examples are few.

Therefore, we must know more about the interior and content, than we can see on the outside² and this non-acceptance comes largely from the scenographic condition in which the actor is placed. While props contribute to the perception of conventionality, things are easier – two concrete examples from Romanian cinematography are Alexandru Tatos’ *Secretul armei... secrete!* or Silviu Purcărete’s *Undeva la Palilula*. But there, too, committing plays a very important part, making the difference between “demonstrative/expository” and the part with a component involving a certain kind of naturalness. The freedom of one’s way to “express oneself” or to “be” in a condition which is not one’s own, with all the shortcomings of costumes

² Udo Kultermann. 1977. *History of Art History*, vol. II. București: Meridiane Publishing, p. 85.

or props that puts one in the condition of conventionality is literally conducive to commitment. One thing which is not exactly possible (no matter how much the actor commits to what they have to do) is overcoming the biological condition of a dramaturgical constraint – to return to the example of Robin Williams, there the composition was led to the extreme, but thanks to makeup and special effects it became possible and acceptable; however, he would not have been able to do it if his “character” in the script had been a woman one and a half metres tall. But the composition he had to perform had his biological data – or at least his height, since weight in films (when it comes to extra kilos) is hard to manage (less so when kilos need to be shed).

When it comes to theatre, particularly since this is a field which cannot have special post-production effects (green screen, multipoints, tracking), biological condition becomes even harder to assimilate. A young person can play an old one, but the other way around (particularly if the performance is heavily physical) becomes much harder.

2. Similarity with the “real”

The “believable”, or the “plausible”, has its correspondent in each spectator, through the filter of their experiences. What is believable for a ten-year-old spectator is different from what is believable and accepted by a 50-year-old watcher. And the perception of reality comes from the capacity of each of us to discover and reject (or accept) the convention, or the “lie”. The social conjuncture we have lived in and experienced so far is what sets the limits in our perception and traces the borderline between what is acceptable and what is not – assuming we are discussing a product which aims to be realistic, not dreamlike or fantastic.

Even in real life, there are situations in which our body imposes limits to acceptance, some resulting from our physical condition (people with allergies) or our mental state (people who cannot overcome mental trauma). The first example that comes to mind, straddling the line between the artificial and the real, is that of plastic flowers. They can pass for flowers in a play or film, if the distance from which we observe them is sufficient to mask the details. The spectator can perceive them as an integral part of a scene (in life, film, or theatre) and overlook their artificiality, without noticing them, but all the while integrating them into the whole.

In real life, the difference is made by “conjuncture”, whether social or personal. It makes what we have to say be more or less dissimulated, depending on the person to whom we are speaking – which derives from an incapacity to listen, as we are quick to react (sadly, often in a wrong or unfair way) because it is prejudice that acts through us, and it is made up of principles, ideas, life experiences, readings, everything we have lived so far.

In a convention – whether in theatre or film – we cannot fake the “real”, because the real would make us reactive, while we are tributary to the limitations of the text we have to utter. Which reminds one of a line in Lucian Pintilie’s film *The Reenactment*, where a policeman character says: “Make it lifelike. You don’t make it lifelike, you ruin my film” – a line which lends itself to abundant analysis.

The multiple meanings of any word in the spectator’s mind leads us to yet another dilemma in the Art of Acting – namely, that of which means are more relevant in expressing the director’s or playwright’s intention (assuming the director is not working against the author): the phonetic (in other words, the mechanic of the Art of Acting), or the emotional (following one’s own hypothesis on the meaning of the uttered word)?

There are two classical trajectories, also taught in schools of theatre or film, leading to commitment: from the outside to the inside (from form to commitment) or from inside to the outside (the “I” in the given situation, leading to the character). Ion Cojar used to say in his classes that “any method that works is a method”; proceeding with this paradigm, we can develop an individual teaching principle. At times, the actor’s personal perspective derives a little from the complex perspective of the director’s conception – first of all because of the actors’ narcissism, second of all out of a desire to “be seen”. Still, if treated with indulgence, particularly from the angle of pedagogy, this can be turned into an advantage, because it has a tendency towards the day-to-day “reality”, towards what we were discussing earlier – modifying one’s partner through the filter of personal goals. Of course, and again as mentioned, these things cannot deviate from the itinerary of the text, but in the rehearsals phase we can use a so-called “crutch” – one of the mechanics of the Art of Acting which uses personal words or experiences, overlapped onto a given text, merely to overcome a more complicated situation. (In a later stage, “crutches” are removed, used only as a bridge towards an incipient or intermediary stage).

The artificiality of the conventional approach is one of the things to avoid in a certain type of product – we are all aware of this commonplace truth and everyone involved in the artistic sphere probably supports this statement (to some extent). However, following all sorts of elements, conjunctures or habits, it becomes the hardest hurdle to pass. Of course we all want to be “believed”; of course we all want the public to say at the end “wow, did you see that? It was so real!”; of course we want the audience to be moved (through the whole range of emotions, from laughter to tears) – but strangely enough, in real life we don’t always see masterpieces. Sometimes, there are shows or films in which the actors aren’t doing exactly what they should. That is another element worth discussing – the connection between directing, which guides the actors, and the incapacity of an actor to do something, which, in a way, is also related to direction and casting, since the actor did not cast themselves – and if you, as a director, saw that they could not do it, I have no idea why you would put that particular actor in that particular role).

The process of commitment in acting – at least in theory, since in practice, as Ioan Cojar used to say, “there are no methods” – begins segment by segment, paragraph by paragraph, shot by shot, line by line: there can be no shortcuts. It needs an immersion into the process, an endeavour to turn convention into reality, which cannot be accomplished without the necessary steps. It is like preparing to bake a cake – you know you need flour, eggs, sugar, you can’t do it without. Or like preparing to write – pen and paper, or laptop and battery power. Whether the result is good or whether there is any result at all – whether your cake comes out burnt, bland, or finger-licking good, or whether your writing is commonplace, incoherent, or sensational – that we cannot know. But it is definitely impossible without the elements that meet the necessary conditions for the result.

3. Identity

Commitment is generally bundled with the issue of identity. Also generally, actors prefer to take refuge in commonplace identities – “police agents are like this / teachers are like this / priests are like this” – but that can only lead to stereotypes, to clichés, to something that the spectator (even one with the least knowledge of style, aesthetics or culture) will recognise as a hollow form, a typology with no personal contribution, a puppet with no individuality.

That is because not all priests are the same. Nor all police agents. (And now I am sure any reader of this paper has brought up a mental picture of a priest or police agent with whom they have interacted at some point.) It is the identity which the actor (with help from the text and with guidance from the director) can lend to the character on paper that makes the spectator break away from their personal image of it.

From my point of view, identity also includes the other extreme – the complete breaking with the paradigm of typology. There are written characters (particularly in social spheres – priests, police agents, doctors) about whom we spectators have a mental picture. Of the actor (out of vanity, pride or narcissism) insists on moving away from the commonplace (the community identity) and doing something never-before-seen, I believe, again, that the nearness to the real will suffer a little because of it. Community identity by relation to the characters which have an image in the community sphere is (also in my opinion) a two-edged sword. The first impulse is that in which we turn ourselves (or try to turn ourselves) into something we see day to day in films or shows – the stereotype. If we move on (as actors) and manage to overcome our first impulse, we will see that each person (just like each character) has their own particularities, their own way of operating in society, their own reactions.

Usually, identity becomes recognisable first of all through the “costume” – which makes it easier to commit to it and harder to assume the particularities of an identity. It is very easy to identify with a police agent if you are wearing a police uniform (both for yourself as an actor and for the spectator) and it is easier for others to identify you as such. On the other hand, it is very difficult to move away from the commonplace of community perception, which is where the work of the actor and the vision of the director come in.

The bridge between identity and the identity is a very tenuous one – a step which all actors want to take, but which is very hard to accomplish in practice. One of the mechanics employed in the Art of Acting for overcoming this hurdle has to do with the text. If the actor manages to deliver their text without the crutch of the costume, if they manage to integrate the text into its identity element, then the identity will shine through, easy to assimilate by the spectator, and the theatre or film convention will be accepted, and the social part of a character identity will be more easily overlooked thanks to the common denominators of cultural experiences, conjunctural and/or life occurrences – morals, assumed behaviour, tendentiousness or intransigence.

The actor’s work on oneself dictates precisely that: a singular approach of the character, the recognition and transformation of common traits into identity traits, and introspection into the human part of the character, with the goals, intention or trajectory of the character following after this stage.

4. Hazard

One thing that makes commitment shine is, in my opinion, hazard. We don’t know how, we don’t know why, we don’t know where from – maybe from an accumulation of things, tiredness, frustration, despair, anger, insecurity, reaching one’s limits – but “that” moment happens, the moment that everyone is waiting for, and the director most of all: the moment in which everything the actor does on stage, on film, or in their lines is good. Not just good – very good. Real. This word – REAL – is perhaps the most sought after in audiovisual products, whether in theatre or filmmaking.

Hazard is something we should wish for. It is assumed to come from inspiration (as a form of the divine's indirect contact with man, where direct contact is revelation), but inspiration cannot happen unless it is preceded by the process, by the orientation towards the process (and here I once again quote Ion Cojar: "the important part is not the success but the process"). It is a zone of intuitiveness, a zone where you only have access if you gain it with work, with study, with wanting it. Inspiration cannot happen "in an void"; it comes (if ever) when the actor is prepared to have that moment. When or whether it comes we do not know and I dearly hope we never find out.

The delicate part about hazard is the pure reenactment process – speaking strictly of the Art of Acting. (what is "pure" – to contain all the impurities, because by increasing their number they annihilate themselves)³. The condition for committing to the real is, in terms of hazard, as unique as hazard itself. In a profession whose coordinates are disposed around repetition, whether in the literal sense (of doing something, then doing it again and again, repeating what you have already done), or in its secondary sense of rehearsal (as a process of theatrical rediscovery), reenacting hazard is a thankless process. First of all, because at the moment when it happens (if it is to be real) you, as an actor, are not aware of what you have done. You have done something out of exasperation, frustration, exhaustion – so you were not in control of your means of expression. When you are not fully aware of something, it is very hard to remember your trajectory, the coordinates of what has happened. But (because that is how it is in theatre and film, not just in tennis, to reference Toma Caragiu), you have to retrace your steps. Either during the next rehearsal, or the next performance, or when shooting the next take. What to do, then? Well, I don't know. One of the possible roads to success would be to have someone next to you (usually the director) who can tell you what you did and with whom you can analyse what has just happened. Because the emotional discharge came, as I said, out of a sum of factors, and the sum has grown in time, during rehearsals, which may have taken weeks or months. Once the discharge happens, it is very hard, practically impossible, to reach the same charge during the next take. Or the next rehearsal. Which is where the difference between an amateur and a professional comes in. An amateur can be brilliant. With some divine inspiration, they can even reach genius. But they will not be able to reproduce it, because they lack the technical instruments or the mechanic of acting that would allow them to. I don't know how brilliant a professional can be. But they can do that "very good" several times in a row. Because once they commit to it, the role requires certain turning points, moments that bring the actor into the madness of the concrete. And if that is accompanied by a moment of inspiration (One of Caragiale's characters says: "I, as a young man of education, always have inspirations"⁴), the director should help the actor retrieve it – through a process of observation, unaltered by direct emotional involvement.

One thing which I find doubtful is committing through one's personal reality. That is because our truth is only a perspective and certainly not a pole, which means that our perspective will provide only a part, a facet of the real, one which we consider to be reality itself. That is why commitment cannot work in multiple directions – it cannot please all tastes, it cannot reach the spectator in its complete form from a formal point of view. It can, however, strike all the

³ Constantin Noica. 1990. *Philosophic Journal*. București: Humanitas Publishing, p. 66.

⁴ Ion Luca Caragiale. 1980. *A stormy night*. București: Meridiane Publishing, p. 47–48.

chords on the emotional plane. In other words, the reality of an actor playing a peasant can be interpretable – perhaps my “countryside” does not coincide with the “countryside” of the spectator occupying the seat next to me, perhaps my image of peasants is different, perhaps those in Moldova are different from those in Ardeal or Bulgaria. But the emotion will be the same. The emotion of a whisper, the emotion of a kiss, the emotion of an embrace or a meeting after a long time will be the same in Egypt, in Japan or in Vaslui County, Romania.

That is why I believe commitment is only possible through the actor’s filter, through the filter of their interior, of the trajectory on which they take themselves. Naturally, the costume, the props, the conjuncture – they all help the actor or pull the back. But the commitment we are discussing here, achieved through the coordinates of the Art of Acting, is difficult, impossible to decipher in a universally valid key; it is not a walk in the park, that everyone takes in the same way. It is the consequence of a way of thinking, of a hard journey which does not always end in success.

5. Conclusions

An actor should naturally change throughout rehearsals. The text changes you, the director changes you, your partners change you. But if all these changes are not met with a desire to *let yourself be* changed, then commitment – both as a process and as a landmark – will be hard to achieve. If our human sensors are not open to it (and here I will state something in which I firmly believe: acting is the humbling of our open senses), if the actor treats their relation with the “character” as something they “act”, then I believe the desired result will be hard to obtain.

Of course, we each have our own “real” sphere, but I believe that vulnerability, the joy of meeting, the lack of certainty all lay down a fertile soil for commitment to happen. “I know/ Don’t you tell me how it’s done/ This is how it’s done/ We say the words and that’s it” or anything from this range of set phrases used in theatre or film – for myself, I doubt they can lead anywhere close to the real. They can lead to a certain mechanic, to a better or worse “interpretation” of a text, of a character on a page, but for them to lead to commitment to the point of identification, to a person’s transcendence, on stage or on camera, into the spectator’s heart – I believe that is impossible.

Certainly, there is more than one way to commit to a role, which is why we have method acting, which is why we have workshops, which is why we have hazard, which is why we have rehearsals. But the faith in the text, the faith in discovery, the faith in what you do, viewed as a journey, not as an engagement, faith in an experience, not in wrapping up a project – I find these to be essential elements for the baggage we need to take along on the journey to commitment.

6. References

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