

The Word - between truth and lies

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Abstract: *Often in theatre is used the term Truth: you weren't true enough, I didn't feel the truth, try to be truer, etc. But for students, and even for many of us, it is very hard to understand what truth means and what it is. That's why, when a future actor is urged to search for the truth, most of the time he will understand that he is doing something wrong and has to try harder to make it right. Then perhaps he will force himself to feel more intensely, to speak louder, to be more expressive and, despite all his efforts, still fail to discover it. For actors, and especially for those who are just stepping into the field of theatre art, truth is something unlimited and impossible to evaluate that must be discovered by each individual artist. In other words, the artist-actor has to search in a very vast field for something he does not know what it is, although it is his alone and only he can find it.*

Keywords: *truth; metaphor; word; intellect; instinct;*

Introduction

Over time, tradition ("the system") has increasingly imposed the idea that acting is exclusively a psychological act and so, from Chekhov and Stanislavski onwards, the word has begun to predominate as an acting means of scenic expression. However, this direction, of psychological or situational realism, on which the art of the theatre is based, is recent, not even two hundred years, whereas thousands of years before it was based on something other than the word and the intellect. Moreover, even in the history of human evolution the intellect developed long after the advent of man. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most important European philosophers, affirms the timelessness of the human intellect in nature: "There have been eternities in which [the intellect] did not exist. And when the human intellect is finished nothing will have happened to us. Because this intellect is human and only its possessor and creator take it so solemnly - as if the whole world revolves around it"².

1. The path from rational to instinct

Starting from Nietzsche's statement, it is useful to remind ourselves that the characters played by the actors are humans, and humans have two brains: the brain in the head - the central nervous system, and the brain in the gut - the enteric nervous system. There is constant communication between the two nervous systems: the neurons of the enteric nervous system tell the brain when to eat and when we are full, and if we have eaten too much it can trigger nausea. Another example might be the feeling of butterflies in the stomach, which occurs when the brain senses a state of tension or stress. This connection between the brain and the gut is the so-called

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² Friedrich Nietzsche. 1873. *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. Retrieved May 05, 2024, from: <https://www.austincc.edu/adechene/Nietzsche%20on%20truth%20and%20lies.pdf>. [Fictional entry].

gut instinct. The enteric nervous system generates gut feelings, while the central nervous system dictates what decisions we make.

However, theatre students tend to deny their instincts, they are not used to trusting them, and this happens because of the fear of embarrassment and because spontaneity is suppressed in us from a very early age, from when we are taught how to behave correctly in order to fit in society. We forget that in art it is not correctness, fitting into patterns, following rules and "morality" that brings brilliance, but the courage to be ourselves, to see the world in the shades of our own self and not in the black and white established by society. As actors we should remember that between Real and Unreal there is Possible, and between Truth and Lies there is Metaphor.

So how can we re-train the spontaneity and unique personal instincts of the future actor? First of all through a constant and vigorous training of the body. Breath, voice, diction, as well as thought, nuance, feeling all lie in the body. That is why the body must be kept in the best possible condition, to remain alert and sensitive to the multitude of impulses it is constantly receiving from within and without. For example, speech: in everyday life it starts from an impulse sent by the brain to the whole body, telling it that it must communicate, and finally the voice reveals, not describes (!), these impulses, which may be emotional or rational, small or large, generated by the enteric or central nervous system. For actors their body is an instrument for expressing creative ideas on stage and can be their best friend or their most fearsome enemy, which is why they must strive to achieve perfect harmony between body and psychology – "There are actors who feel their roles deeply, who can understand them very clearly, but none of their inner richness is conveyed to the audience. Those extraordinary thoughts and emotions remain somehow trapped inside undeveloped bodies"³.

The word 'actor' is derived from Latin from the verb 'agere' – to do, to perform – and the suffix 'or' – the one who performs the action indicated by the radical. Therefore the actor is the one who performs an action, and the 'theatre' is the place from which an action is observed. But it would be good to understand the difference between 'doing' a movement and 'being' in movement. We can be aces at imitating actions, but acting is not about imitating, but about bringing an action into being here and now: "The essence of theatre is found neither in the narration of an event, nor in the discussion of a hypothesis with the audience, nor in the representation of everyday life - theatre is an act that takes place here and now, in the being of the actors, in front of other people"⁴.

And the action is not made of words, or not exclusively of words. Action is based on movement. Antonine Artaud pointed out in his work *Theatre and its Double* that in the theatre "everything that is specifically theatrical is left in the background, i.e. everything that is not subject to expression by words, by words, or, if you like, everything that is not contained in dialogue. Dialogue - in its written and spoken form - does not belong specifically to the stage, it belongs to the book"⁵.

Therefore, the study of the Art of the Actor would do well to start by detaching oneself from the psychological, by a rediscovery of one's own body and of instincts not shaped by society. In everyday life we do not use our bodies enough or properly, therefore most of our muscles are limp, inflexible and insensitive. They need to be awakened and reworked so that we can discover in the characters those subtle traits that no one else sees.

³ Michael Chekov. 2017. *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing, p. 16.

⁴ Jerzy Grotowski. 2009. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Bucharest: Cheiron Publishing, p. 56.

⁵ Antonin Artaud. 1997. *The Theatre and Its Double*. Cluj-Napoca: Echinox Publishing, p. 32.

Also, a well-trained body will help the actor to control his feelings and not be controlled by them. We can't dictate how we feel, so on stage we often end up pretending, because individual feelings are inconsistent and unpredictable. This is why the theorist Gordon Craig has even concluded that, to be perfect, the actor must leave the Art of Theatre and in his place must come the inanimate character – the super-puppet: "Whether the applause is many or few, their hearts do not beat faster or slower, their signals do not become hurried or confused; and though overwhelmed by a torrent of love and flowers, the face of the leading actress remains as solemn, beautiful and distant as ever. There's more than a gleam of genius in the puppet, and there's more in her than the shrillness of an exposing personality."⁶ We won't go as far as Gordon Craig, but his point of view helps us to understand how important it is to learn to control as well as possible the tools the actor uses in his art – the body (with all that it entails – breath, voice, expressiveness, intuition), the psyche (made up of thoughts and feelings) and the word (in the sense of "concept").

And since feeling is something so human and capricious, true artistic feelings must be manipulated by technical means, giving the actor control over them. Actor and theatre professor Michael Chekov has discovered, through his assiduous research, several ways in which creative feelings can be awakened, and one of the primary factors is imagination.

2. Bridge to creativity

Imagination needs to be trained all the time – when you train your body imagine the shapes and sizes your body takes on or models, imagine the sensations you experience, such as the feeling of floating, freedom, lightness, when you do your vocal warm-up imagine that your breath is a breeze carrying a leaf as far as it will go, or it is an engine that starts and goes, even when you are walking down the street, or waiting at the bus stop imagine without stopping, where people come from, where they go, who is waiting for them at home, etc. At some point you will find that the images naturally create emotions and feelings effortlessly. Then you start to be attentive and aware of the atmospheres around you. Atmospheres are created from feelings and can be objective or subjective. For example, every place (a library, a restaurant, a cathedral, a museum), every landscape, street, house, room, every part of the day or season, every phenomenon or event has a specific atmosphere, which you can either be immersed in or, on the contrary, your individual feelings can contrast with it – you can be at a friend's wedding, where the atmosphere is joyful and celebratory, and yet feel sad because you have just been left by your partner. Sometimes the subjective atmosphere is so strong that it can influence the objective one: we are in class, before hours, energetic and playful, laughing, joking and everything is full of good cheer; a colleague comes in and tells us that one of his parents has had an accident and doesn't know if he will survive. The whole atmosphere will change radically, as everyone is gripped by the atmosphere of fear and worry brought on by the late colleague.

When true, feelings are so powerful that they can change any atmosphere. When they are forced, imitated, counterfeited, they have no power. One of the exercises Michael Chekov proposes is to give action a certain quality. For example, you sit down on a chair – it's a simple action that you perform without any difficulty because it depends only on your will. On the other hand, if you do the same simple action but attribute a quality to it, such as caution, you will find that your physical action has taken on a psychological nuance, i.e. a sensation that runs through your body: "Sensation is the vessel into which your true feelings flow easily and of their own

⁶ Edward Gordon Craig. 2012. *On the Art of the Theatre*. Bucharest: Cheiron Publishing, p. 86.

accord; it is like a kind of magnet that attracts feelings and emotions, depending on the quality you have chosen for your movement. Did you force your feelings? Did you command yourself to "feel caution"? No. You just made a movement with a certain quality and thus created a sense of caution by which you stimulated your feelings."⁷

Words can also be given qualities. One of my favorite exercises is Same word/sentence but different in which a student goes up front and gets a word or short sentence from the group, which they will say at least three times with three different meanings, then the group discusses and each says what they understood. For example, "cloud" – storm cloud, a white cloud on a warm day, a cloud like a fantastic vision, or "I'm going back home" – I'm going back home because I failed where I left off, because it's vacation and I can't wait to see my folks, because I have no choice. I encourage students to take the time to visualize as much detail of the situation as they can, in the hope that those images will awaken their feelings and thus, perhaps, the mysterious Truth will emerge.

Often in theatre the term Truth is used: you weren't true enough, I didn't feel the truth, try to be truer, etc. But for students, and even for many of us, it is very hard to understand what Truth means and what it is. That's why, when a future actor is urged to search for the truth, most of the time he will understand that he is doing something wrong and has to try harder to make it right. Then perhaps he will force himself to feel more intensely, to speak louder, to be more expressive, and, despite all his efforts, still fail to discover it. For actors, and especially for those who are just stepping into the field of theatre art, truth is something unlimited and impossible to evaluate that must be discovered by each individual artist. In other words, the artist-actor has to search in a very vast field for something he does not know what it is, although it is his alone and only he can find it.

3. The metaphorical nature of language

For me, Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" was revealing in this regard. By contemplating what "truth" and "lie" mean, Nietzsche reminds us that all words are just conventions set up by humans in order to understand each other. People have agreed that when they say "apple" they mean the apple fruit and not an animal. Therefore, to utter a truth is merely to follow the law of naming things that we have all agreed upon – for example, if someone says of himself "I am a rich man" but the correct term describing his condition is "a poor man" then he is said to have lied. If someone doesn't follow the laws of naming things that society has established then society will exclude them, labelling them a liar. But the exclusion will not be made because he has offended the holy and absolute value of Truth, and "truth" is also a notion invented by men, but because he has misled. The philosopher advances the idea that truths are in fact lies that we have forgotten are lies, or, are illusions that we have forgotten are illusions⁸. Language, words invented by humans exist only in relation to human perception – a leaf is defined as a leaf only by our perception, not by a generally valid, i.e. correct, universal perception. A "universal perception" is, in Nietzsche's view a contradictory impossibility because "perception" already presupposes a filtering through a certain point of view, so the notion of

⁷ Michael Chekov, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted essay: *What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.*

"objective perception" is nonsense. Therefore, as language expresses exclusively human relations with the environment, it can never express an absolute truth independent of human existence. The philosopher concludes that it is impossible to arrive at absolute truths through language, which makes me wonder whether in acting, too, one can approach Truth more easily and more closely when one does not use words.

And even when we use words, we must keep in mind that they are metaphors – imperfect attempts to interpret and approximate the experience of life. For example, a man may say that he is 'cheerful', but to what extent does this term really describe his state? "Cheerful" is a convention, it is just a category in which you put this feeling in order to communicate it to others. Nietzsche sees human experience and words as doubly separate and explains how the words were formed – first a nervous stimulus is transformed into an image then the image, in turn, is transformed into a sound. In other words, in order to be expressed, human experience is translated twice, and some essence of experience is lost with each translation⁹ – "We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities."¹⁰ So, since all words are metaphors, the actor, on the stage, should be looking for the sensations that certain images translated into words give him, and not expressing truths through them. In theatre, words are often used to explain, to make sure that all the audience understands (basically the same thing), forgetting that all words start from a stimulus, a sensation, and will further transmit stimuli and sensations which, in turn, will be translated by the mind and soul of the audience.

This brings us to the notion of concept. According to the Small Academic Dictionary, 2nd edition 2010, a concept is a general idea that the mind has about something. Although in reality no two leaves are identical, we have created and understand the concept of 'leaf'. And how was the concept created? By eliminating all the individual qualities of leaves. This generalization has nothing to do with reality, but is merely a reduction we make in order to understand each other, and the German philosopher once again urges us to remember this. So the smaller the generalization, the closer we get to reality, the more detailed the qualities of my leaf, the truer it will be.

Nietzsche is of the opinion that if we forget that the concept of "leaf" is only a convention established by humans, we will get the idea in our heads that there is somewhere the original model after which all leaves were made¹¹, and we will struggle all our lives to achieve perfection, the ideal, notions that exist only in the human mind. On a much smaller scale, I think this is what sometimes happens in the mind/soul of the acting student: he has the feeling that somewhere there is a perfect interpretation of a character and, instead of discovering his own interpretation, discovering the character within himself, he will waste himself in trying to reach an illusory perfection. In this attempt the actor will isolate himself, losing contact with his partners and everything around him. As a result, nothing will amaze him, nothing will create an

⁹ *Ibidem.* To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.* Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. This awakens the idea that, in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the "leaf": the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted—but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original model.

impression on him, and thus life will disappear from his performance. He will no longer be present here and now, but will wander in the world where perfection exists.

And if, according to Nietzsche's conception, the world itself exists only filtered through man's perception, then the character also exists only filtered through the actor's perception. We live as if there are objective rules for this life, and we play an ideal theatre, not one that inspires the life in us. With each role the actor is reborn – not only as an actor, but also as a human being¹². The Art of Acting is a challenging and profound exploration of human nature. The theatrical tradition has placed increasing emphasis on the psychological and verbal aspects of Acting, neglecting the deep connection between body and instincts. Thus, because words are metaphors, perhaps in stage performance Truth cannot be reached through conventional language and must be sought elsewhere than in the word.

4. Conclusions

The journey into the world of the Art of Acting that students of the Faculty of Theatre undertake should bring them to a deep confrontation with their human nature. Words are just conventions, and truth transcends conventional language. Exploring the actor's art, therefore, pushes us to seek truth not in words, but in the depths of our being, in our primal sensations and instincts. In this way we discover that spontaneity and connection with our bodies are essential elements in the authentic and profound interpretation of a character. Truth is not a static entity, but a dynamic and subjective process. Therefore, in the search for authenticity and depth in interpretation, it is healthy to remind ourselves that it is not words, but emotions and sensations that connect us to human truth. Let us seek truth not in words, but in our deeper essence and our connection to the world around us.

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¹² Jerzy Grotowski, *op. cit.*, p. 16.