

Discipline or Freedom – Two Ways of Approaching Theatre and Film

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Abstract: *Rehearsals, whether in theatre or film, require a personal approach on a role. Any kind of “character”, unless it involves “playing yourself, your actual self”, involves a transformation, with a higher or lower degree of composition. Differences in this approach gain a more defined shape in the effective moment of the artistic act – namely, the theatre performance or the filming per se. In general, the stage offers more freedom compared to a film set, from approach to motion (and even interpretation) – sometimes, indeed, for technical reasons. Very rare are the situations on stage when the actor’s movement or entrance are conditioned by mere centimetres, while on set this happens constantly, in almost every shot, as distance from the focal plane is measured by the focus puller (first assistant camera) for each character, which conditions the actors’ movement in tighter shots.*

Keywords: *Theatre; Film; Acting; Technique; Focus; Film set; Procedure; Analysis; Phonetics; Obligo; Character; Composition; Emploi; Director; Actor; Interpretation;*

Introduction

There have always been discussions about “who makes the role” – is it the director or the actor? Of course, it is the actor who brings the role to life, adding (at least sometimes) personal touches to a character. But even that has been heavily debated, since (in most situations) actors come to play a role following auditions and test rehearsals. Legally speaking and *stricto sensu*, the actor is an “interpreting artist”, a holder not of copyright, but of copyright-related rights, in other words employed to interpret a preexisting idea, a character written out by the scriptwriter and imagined by the director. There have been many cases of actors being switched out during rehearsals, or even during filming, or even during the premiere, because the director simply realised they did not match the character. On the other hand, there are also situations in which a character’s rendition has become memorable due to the very presence of a certain actor. “*In this film, the author, who is only one, namely director Mircea Săucan, has created a representation of reality, through the description and its rhythm, through its tonality (generated through the style of movement – a sleepwalking-like, mechanical, flat, even gait), through the stereotypical facial expressions and gestures, through the vocal tones smothered inside characters, wadded, ground between teeth and almost closed lips*”² – this kind of observation is the type of critical speech now generalised in what concerns the connection between the director and the product, the actor and the director, and the actor and the product: a sum of thoughts by the author (in this case the director, namely Mircea Săucan) transmitting through the actor (the artist playing the

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² Iliu, Victor. 1973. *The Fascination of cinema*. București: Meridiane Publishing, p. 146.

role, in this case Dan Nuțu) certain personal thoughts and ideas on *Meandre*, the 1967 psychological drama based on a script by Horia Lovinescu.

1. The text – play or script

The particularity of the *obligo* – interpretive restriction – is both formal and informal, depending on the text-based indications (play or script) cumulated with the director's choices. Starting from this, we can discuss the creative freedom of the artist playing a role – once both restrictions, together, have already outlined clear boundaries for the character to be presented to the public. First of all, if we refer to the text, in both forms (theatre or film) the fact that “you have to be someone else, using someone else's words”, but using your body, your voice and your aspect, result in a transformation which imposes a Procrustean bed: the text itself already has a logic, a structure, a modality or a procedure.

If we are to speak of the relationship between *text and appearance*, the actor's contribution is apparently minimal, since it is the procedure being used that dictates the form of outer expression (commedia dell'arte, grotesque, naturalness etc.) Of course, beyond the restrictions, the actor's contribution is essential, otherwise we would be speaking of mere performing robots executing instructions – necessary as execution is for the fulfilment of the director's idea. Still, the approach remains strictly personal from all points of view, as it continues to be a part of compositional development. There are actors who prefer a form of freedom – and by freedom I mean attempts, searches – to test variants of physical and psychological coordinates for a character, just as there are actors who prefer to have the director, from the onset, trace a “path”, a “road” and attempt to walk on it, having at least an outline based on which they can try to pencil in a character.

The relation with the text is marked by great fragility and many sensitive curves – from an emotional sine wave based on the actor's affective past to the actual modification of expression (which can sometimes depend on translation, if the text originated in another language, or on the historical period when the text was written, or on the form of expression). It is in the field of restrictions that discipline comes into play – the degree of restriction imposed by the text, the degree of restriction imposed by the director, the degree of restriction imposed by the technicalities to which the actor must subject themselves. There are (in both theatre and film) many instances in which the actor cannot (or is not allowed to) intervene on the text they receive – whether out of the deeply rooted idea that “one does not improve on Shakespeare, Chekhov or Caragiale”, or because the director is also the author of the script and thus has a clear notion on what, how much and how the character speaks, or for any other reason which may determine the actor to limit themselves to executing. Which brings us to the key question – is it better to be able to execute, or to compose? Well, it depends. Personally, I believe it is best to be able to reach, or to verticalise the horizontal of a text, following the director's idea and concept – in other words, to be able to “be” what the director wanted when they thought of that particular character. Naturally, that involves a (considerable) number of restrictions, particularly those stemming from the text, the nuances, the intonations, the beats, the intentions – bearing some similarity to musical interpretation. If you start from sheet music by Bach, I doubt you can tell the conductor “I'm not feeling a La here, I'll play a Do”; I don't think it works that way. I believe an actor should struggle with all their might to “play that La” in the sheet music and, most importantly, to play it as the conductor hears it. That is why you can differentiate between the same musical composition when conducted by Celibidache and when conducted by von

Karajan: though the notes are the same, the tempo, the vibrato, the pressure on the string or the bow are different.

The actor's relationship with the text is, from my point of view, the same as that of a musical performer with their sheet music: you have to play what the sheet music says, you can't improvise based on what you feel. Up to this point, we can only speak of discipline. To be able to speak of "freedom", we have to move on – continuing the parallel with music – to the same composition when played by Ion Voicu and when played by another violinist. There, in my opinion, is where creative freedom or (text-based) discussions on discipline or freedom lie.

2. Stage or film set

The classical options of acting space are the theatre stage (in all its variations) or the film set (in all its variations). They are very different from each other, starting from technical possibilities and all the way to the end result – a theatre performance or a film.

There is a widely-used saying which goes "on stage, the actor rules" and which I, personally, find deeply frustrating for a theatre director. First of all, they can't stop the show when they don't agree with what is happening on stage – on the one hand, because directors don't normally attend every performance (usually only the premiere and a few more), and on the other, because there is a (very high) possibility that the actor might change reaction times, or be surprised by something in the audience, or by some accident on stage a.s.o. There have been many instances in which, whether thanks to or through the fault of of the actor, the performance came out different from what the director had intended. Also, as a continuation of the example we have been analysing, we can speak of "improvement" or "degradation" in theatre performances, which are, indeed, noticeable in most theatre productions. On the one hand, the actors who play the parts are not machines – they are human, and anything living cannot be repeated over and over without change; on the other, we must keep into account the rapport with the public (another living factor), particularly since the public is different for each performance. The question springing from this example is: "How much, or how far can one change a performance on the spot?" Many changes are for the better; the artist playing the role becomes aware of certain intentions or nuances they had not noticed during rehearsal and feels the organic need to change what has been discussed with the director. Many others are for the worse, caused by that relation of love with the audience, who reacts to what is happening on stage, and as a consequence the artist playing the part changes the timing of a text (compared to rehearsals) depending on the audience's reaction. Is this creative freedom, or ego altered by the need for confirmation?

With film, things are very different: first of all, the director can stop a shot as many times as they want and have it start over. Secondly, there is the whole post-production and editing phase, in which actors end up speaking the way the director wants, acting as the director wants, observing the beats the director wants. In other words, it is the director who takes responsibility for the product, as is only normal. But in this whole equation there is one very important part: namely, that the artist playing the role only has one voice and one body (aspect); they can only make use (barring special effects and forced compositions) of what nature or God has given them – which is where their relation with the director is, again, paramount, since the actor was cast, not brought in to play the part upon volunteering. If things don't work out, it is, again, the director's fault, since that means the artist was miscast.

Motion (*mise-en-scène* – in the literal sense of “putting on stage”, whether it is an actual stage or a film set) is yet another thing to consider when discussing creative freedom versus discipline. If on stage the actor can be allowed organic movement, and the director can build a lighting situation to match that movement, on set things are completely different. If the set is artificial, the situation is mostly similar to that of the stage (in terms of spatiality), but without harlequins (meaning going out of bounds, leaving the stage). If filming takes place on location, there are inherent limits which don't exist on an artificial set (in terms of height, lighting, sound), and which hem in scenic motion, not to mention that, depending on the optics factor (the type of lens, the recording format), depth of field can be very limited, which implicitly limits the actor's movements – we are talking about centimetres here.

On stage, in the absence of technical filters (we are discussing classical forms, not exceptional performances that make use of cameras) between the artist playing the role and the spectator, the latter will constantly be watching a wide shot, depending on their position in the room (here theatre audiences are rather privileged, being able to choose where to look). In film, the watcher can't choose where on set to look during a given shot – they can only focus their attention on one spot or another on the screen, as the camera can only frame a part of the whole.

The freedom of an artist playing a role is, in theatre, heavily filtered through the public's reaction; actors in general cannot ignore their audience completely. As such, the actor will constantly seek to please the public, do its bidding, provide what it expects. This relation between the actor and the spectator is, in a way, the translation into theatre of the relation between people and life, as described by Constantin Noica: “*The meaning of life is to ponder on the meaning of life. Any answer risks becoming limiting, I do admit. But to conclude that life has no meaning is the most limiting answer of all. Such joy that life has no meaning – that way I can give it one.*”³ It is the artist playing the role who should give meaning to the (theatre) performance, as theatre is something that can exist without many things – without a director, without a text, without props, without lighting – but cannot exist without two of them: the actor and the spectator.

3. The actor's ego in freedom or discipline

The matter of the ego in creativity (not to be confused with God's unique, unrepeatable Creation) is, from my standpoint, the focal issue here. It is a subject that sparks up scandal, generates contradiction, causes fights. I have often met (in cases where I was involved as both an actor and a director) fellows on set whose artistic ego was more prominent than it should have been. Creative freedom is to be manifested within limits defined first of all by the text, second of all by the director and third of all by the concept – in other words, you are free within the bounds of the Procrustean bed. Many times, this generates considerable friction, particularly when paying heed to a difference in status which the artist playing a role makes an absolute point of paying heed to – for instance, when an actor with more years of experience works with a debutant director. That is when you start thinking you are better than you are and feel entitled to “give advice” and “take offence” at an observation or an indication.

As a matter of principle, the artist playing a part is selfish – which results in a very close relationship with their ego: that is why they became an actor, to get the spotlight, to pull attention, to have all eyes turn to them. And it takes great training and a whole lot of work to

³ Noica, Constantin. 1991. *Jurnal de idei*. București: Humanitas Publishing, p. 163.

move on from “freedom” to discipline. Because it is only in context that the performing artist can shine, and only if the context is good and consistent. The ego of the artist playing a role has several manifestations, some of them masked, some not. There are actors who want the director’s full attention, who need indications for themselves only, who use the other actors as sparring partners until they exhaust the energy of everyone around, and only then do they shine. There are artists who say “don’t show me, I’ll do it myself”, and from my standpoint they are the most noxious, because only the director knows how and in what way given lines can be delivered, and if it has come to “showing”, it means indications so far have not worked. “*You may read a stanza. I let you all read it. Everyone reads it slightly differently. I get the definite impression that ‘None of them has got hold of it.’ Suppose then I read it out to you and say: ‘Look, this is how it ought to be’.*”⁴ 3

I myself believe that only the discipline of serving the product can give you the freedom of being creative; that only the relation in which you subject to the text and the director’s idea can grant you the freedom of running to the limits of the impossible and breaking down the formal barriers imposed by the limitations of the stage or the film set.

In theatre, the actor’s ego is more richly fed, particularly as a consequence of the two obligatory routes the performing artist has in front of them. One is the fact that, once the performance has begun, the director has no power over them any longer; the second has to do with the public’s reaction. Often, the performer draws from the whole of the show to enhance their personal brightness, through the way they wait for their moment, delay delivering “that special line”, wait for the curtain call to show the measure of their worth. And that is in the detriment of the performance and serves only to draw attention for one’s own purposes.

In film, there are performers (and here we are only referring to the negative examples) who deliver the text differently depending on how they are framed or what lens is being used – for instance, actors who deliver their text one way in a wide shot and in a different way in a close-up.

Unfortunately, in both variants, we are only discussing actors of a certain kind, unfulfilled actors, actors who relate to the product not as the result of teamwork, but as an opportunity for someone to see them and them alone, a chance to “prove themselves”, a mistaken approach having nothing to do with professionalism. Discipline, in its restrictive sense, is essential in building a role; it brings clarity to the character’s trajectory, lends rigour to the execution, brings depth to the essence.

Discipline stems from the text, from how the actors relate to it, from how they show up for rehearsals, from how they come to the shooting (or to the show), from how they speak with the crew, from how they relate to the director, from how they treat the costume or props team, all the way to how they appear at the premiere, what interviews they give, how they act during photo shoots – essentially, throughout this whole journey from A to Z, discipline is “a way of life”. Naturally, it is very hard to be disciplined, as it derives from sincerity, and sincerity in film and theatre is taken to be a concept that did not appear before the French New Wave.

In Romanian cinema, the relation between discipline and sincerity (translated into a realistic, naturalistic interpretation, as far removed as possible from the concept of a “character”) only appeared in the 1970, with Săucan, Ciulei, Pintilie and Iliu, to be continued in the 1980s by

⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1993. *Lecții și convorbiri despre estetică, psihologie și credință religioasă*. București: Humanitas Publishing, p. 87. (for this translation: Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1967 *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Transl. Y. Smythies, R. Rhees and J. Taylor. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 40 – tr.n.)

Daneliuc, Tatos and Pița and to return to the foreground after the 2000s, with the New Romanian Cinema. In this way of stylising the Art of Acting, the people I have named above have demanded of their actors a steely discipline, a degree of sincerity which is horribly hard to provide without spiritual aftereffects, a particular dedication for their goal – the film. And it was that very discipline that gave actors their freedom, making them be real, not paper cutouts; that freedom made those performing artists creative and allowed them to leave behind memorable roles. *“The duty to be honest commands us to stand guard before the depths of our souls, for if we revealed them, the others would see them as they are not, and thus we would lie. ... we must, of course, keep our souls open; but to have them open is not to have them torn apart, cut and laid bare from top to bottom. The more sincere the soul, the more fiercely it defends and protects the mysteries of its life”*⁵.

4. Personal relation versus professional relation

Much like in anything particular, this matter, too, has two sides – the positive and the negative. And, again much like for anything in this world, there is nothing fully positive, without one spot of black, and nothing fully negative, without one spot of white. One constant conclusion does decant itself, though, from my observations over the last twenty-five years: namely that, from a personal point of view, it is not recommended to transfer things from one relation to the other, unless the personal relation does not exceed certain limits.

There must be a personal relation, I do not believe it possible to do in-depth work with only a professional relationship, as this would generate considerable obstacles – I don’t think the performing artist would be able to go too far in their daring, sacrifice, faith or desire to understand and be understood (which are all crucial for working on a role), but it remains preferable for this personal limit not to be overstepped.

All of the above can only be obtained in freedom; one cannot take the leap of faith involved in working on a role unless one benefits from the freedom of creativity. The obtuseness of discipline will always maintain a distance, always remain an island on which to take refuge in case of uncertainty.

The personal relation between the actor and the director involves two essential elements – trust and admiration – and the two cannot take shape in a professional relation. They can only exist and develop in a personal relation, which has to be built up gradually. Admiration can exist from a distance as well (as it mostly does), precisely because there is no relation involved – one can admire a director or actor without having met them personally. At the time of acquaintance, precisely because the wall involved by social context is brought down and the relationship becomes personal, the ratio of discipline decreases and that of freedom gains weight – freedom of expression, the freedom of gestures or explanations. Turning a relation towards the personal requires a very demanding work with oneself to ensure discipline does not lose ground in one’s professional relation.

When social walls fall, the temptation of freedom is great – we often tend to speak differently, act differently, allow ourselves a different sort of language or different remarks, because we begin to feel safe with the other and start to shed our protective layers, the masks we wear before strangers to project an optimal image of ourselves. Personally, I do not believe this transformation is something we can avoid; I doubt you can gain depth in your work without delving into an emotional journey, a limitless “confession”, a painful quest – I doubt you can do

⁵ Unamuno, Miguel de. 2009. *Secretul vieții și alte eseuri*. București: Humanitas Publishing, p. 105.

all that in the coldness and distance of a professional relation in which each party knows their limits, preserves their “correctness” and only approaches work on the product from a technical angle.

There have been many situations in which the result has been more than positive when the limits of a personal relation were exceeded – there are many instances where the project only benefited from the abyss of feelings unleashed. However, most often, since it was all chemistry, after the project ends the personal relation fades away. We often read, hear or see in the media stories about such couples (actors and actors, directors and actors, stage designers and directors etc.) but, as often as not, we also read or hear that those couples have broken up after a great scandal or have given questionable statements about each other.

That is why the transition from the professional to the personal becomes delicate – of course, we can hardly do without the personal, but its limits must never be disregarded and should be kept to the coordinates of pure friendship, without other emotional implications. Easy to say, hard to do.

The status of discipline when a relation turns from professional to personal becomes very sensitive – it will be hard to relate to things the same way in the long term and preserve discipline in working on a role when your tongue is looser, you can take more liberties, your behaviour is less restricted – whether by social norms or context.

5. Conclusions

Creative freedom and discipline are two concepts which, though at first sight complete opposites, are related by the mere fact that they are powered by the same motor – the actor’s “common sense”. (In a previous paper, I have spoken of this “common sense” not necessarily as what you acquire through proper education, but rather as that professional decency combined with a humility of the senses. The paper was inspired by David Mamet’s book *Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*.)

Discipline is something without which I doubt one can achieve performance and go beyond a certain amateurism. Personally, I see no way of moving forward if the creative freedom an artist needs (whether a painter, a writer, a musician, an actor in theatre or film) is not supported by steely discipline – which involves reliability, punctuality, respect for the schedule and everything related (such as, in the case of actors, learning their lines, being respectful to their fellow actors, following the director’s indications). I have seen talented people with no discipline, people who quickly broke down in this complex line of work which is the Art of Theatre or the Art of Film, people who wasted their talent in unmemorable endeavours, in Bacchic or nocturnal adventures, in inappropriate situations or in falling into self-worship. When we rehearsed with Mr. Ciulei, he used to tell us “this job is a marathon, not a sprint” – and understood the final line is drawn much, much later.

I believe picking just one of these two paths can face you with a Fata Morgana, and that misunderstood “creative freedom” can lead you down a road from which it is very hard to return – whether as an actor or as a director.

If in his professorship Gottfried Semper considered the work of art as a "product of practical purpose, raw material and technique" Alois Riegl opposed his vision of the work of art as "the result of a categorical will of art aware of its goal" ⁵

Regarding those thoughts about „a work of art” – considering that what an actor does is „a work of art”, and not taking in consideration a director’s job, what I think about that is that the

art of acting (as Victor Rebengiuc also said about the Actor's Art - "love the art in yourself and not yourself in art" 6) should be done in the first place with humility towards the environment in which you operate, no matter if it's a theater stage or a film set, I think it should be less discussed and more observed, I think it needs less conviction and more doubts and especially lots and lots of dedication.

At several points in my life, I have had a chance to cast a glance outside the theatre-and-film bubble and noticed that things work more or less the same as in our line of work – there can be no high-level performance without discipline, and all the examples I know come from sports, some of them even from a time when the internet was unheard of, and only reinforce the necessity of discipline when supported by talent – Michael Jordan, Gheorghe Hagi, Nadia Comăneci, Rafael Nadal, Michael Phelps, Alberto Tomba, Wladimir Klitschko... and the list could continue. Watching documentaries on them, examining how they made use of their talent, analysing (from a strictly academic standpoint) a sort of rapport to their lines of work, I have come to strongly believe that mere talent and freedom given free rein are not enough. In the case of acting, inner and outer discipline (which also includes life outside the stage or set) can, I believe, lead to a continuously ascending trajectory, one in which you grow without the sufficiency of ephemeral success and show respect without believing you are owed it simply because someone, at some point, told you that you have talent.

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