

## On Imagination in Acting

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**Abstract:** *Due to its very human nature man lives mainly through the imagination. This article focuses on the paramount role of imagination in acting, where it bears even greater weight considering it represents the psychological capacity that lays at the basis of creation. To create a character the actor has to be a creator. Hence, the article argues the importance of creative imagination, in relation to the procedures and principles that liberate the actor and generate the expression of his imagination. It also tackles the need to imagine in acting. Finally, the article stresses that as long as the actor is a creator, imagination remains the starting point of any artistic discovery. Practicing and enhancing one's imagination is conducive to great artistic creation, significant aesthetic effects on stage and a remarkable identity of the acting profession.*

**Keywords:** *imagination; creative force; personal liberation; spiritual organ; imagined emotions; emotional language; embodiment of the character;*

### • Introduction

According to the Dictionary of the Romanian Language imagination is: „the human capacity to create new representations or ideas based on previous perceptions, representations or ideas; make-believe; fantasy”<sup>2</sup>. The article deals with imagination from the perspective of a psychological process that implies the creation of new images, representations and ideas that, later on, become a material object or a human activity. For example, to create a character an actor needs rich and vivid creative imagination. In his relationship with the text, the actor is not a mere performer. He uses the text to reach his own purpose, that is: to create intense and expressive life on stage. The activity of creation generates new and original products that bear social weight. Imagination lays at the basis of creation. The actor's imagination in creating a role harmonizes two specific forms of this spiritual process: the reproductive imagination and the creative imagination or fantasy. Reproductive imagination allows the actor to imagine the future character, as described by the author in the play. Reproductive imagination is also necessary in order to understand the feelings of others, when the actor needs to imagine the state or the situation of a character. The actor relies on this type of imagination and, with the help of his creative imagination, creates original characters that - more often than not – go beyond the descriptions and indications of the role. However, the actor's imagination is not a totally free process; to a certain extent it is conducted by circumstances proposed by the play, which motivates and defines the sense of imagination. Imagination plays a fundamental part in staging as – first of all - the actor creates the inner and outer appearance of the character. Thus, imagination gets a double function in staging. „The actor who wants to play, let's say, Othello must have not only a rich nature, from which he extracts value, but also imagination, so that he knows what to express, and brain that knows how to present itself in front of us. The actor will

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<sup>2</sup> Iorgu, Jordan. 1998. *A Dictionary of Romanian Language*, Second edition. București: Editura Univers Enciclopedic.p.475.

tell his brain to delve into the depth, to learn all that is there and then to go to another sphere, the sphere of imagination and there he can create certain symbols, which - without simply showing the passions, will express them with no less clarity.”<sup>3</sup> The path that Stanislavski advocated in the creative work of the actor, with the aim to awaken the imagination, started with the simple and concrete question „What would I do, how would I behave if I were the hero”. The actor’s creation starts with this „if”. The magic „if” represents the bridge between reality and imagination. The play, as well as the role, implies a series of other „if-s” and „given circumstances”. „If” and the „given circumstances”, the inner and outer action are important factors in acting together with many special creative artistic abilities such as: imagination, attention, the sense of truth, etc. All these elements are closely interconnected and some of them act simultaneously, interdependently. In the process of creation, the actor is led by imagination, which he needs every moment of his artistic work and of his life on stage, both when studying and interpreting the part. Due to the magic „if” and the „given circumstances”, the actor succeeds in creating the character’s life, beyond the indications received, which anyway he needs for a thorough study. Details from the actor’s own imagination should add to what is happening on the stage. The imagination should be developed permanently; an actor without imagination becomes the puppet of the director and, eventually, he is neither an artist, nor a creator. The less imaginative the actor, the more limited his interpretation of the role. The more active and richer the imagination, the more diverse, complex and convincing the emotion. „The creative imagination is a gift of the actor. Without developed and flexible imagination, there is no creativity, which does not emerge by instinct, from intuition or with the help of some external technique. To acquire it one has to penetrate the spheres of the subconscious, of the imaginary and harmonize them with each other.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, when educating actors, ‘imagination is paramount. Unlike children’s, the imagination and belief of adults – in general – and actors – in particular – bears the imprint of their level of intellectual development. It is a process of restructuring and conscious transposition of an artistic message which preserves the critical, appreciative and attitudinal nature towards the character and fully expresses the artistic personality of the actor who rigorously directs and controls his imagination to fulfil an act of creation. Moreover, the actor has the task to appear in front of an audience, which makes his belief different from the children’s. Stanislavski also talks about a passive imagination: which makes one the spectator of one’s imagination and of what it depicts; but this type of imagination is inappropriate for an actor, because it makes impossible the interpretation of a role. However, if the actor acts in this imaginary life, he can no longer see himself; he can only see what surrounds him and has to react to what is going on around him, as a true participant in this life. That is when the state called ”I am” is created, the moment of the mental and physical embodiment of the character. A scene needs an uninterrupted series of images linked to the given circumstances or, as Stanislavski put it, „we need a series of given circumstances rich in images.”<sup>5</sup> The imagination must be constantly put to work, it must be mobile, active, sensitive, developed enough and ready to act justly at any time in relation with the given circumstances. Creation is not a free game of imagination; it is serious and extremely hard work. Great scientific and artistic achievements are the result of huge efforts. It is wrong to assume that creation can be the result of momentarily inspiration, which would allow any creator to achieve his work effortlessly. Inspiration comes only to a concerned individual, who works systematically and constantly to reach a goal and who, obviously, has creative abilities.

<sup>3</sup> Craig, Edward, Gordon. 2012. *On the Art of the Theatre*. București: Fundația culturală Camil Petrescu. Revista Teatrul azi (supliment) prin Editura Cheiron. pp.43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Aron, Geanina. 1999. *Improvisation of the game - the game of improvisation*. București: Editura Ecologică. p.178.

<sup>5</sup> Stanislavski, Konstantin. 1951. *The actor's work with himself*. București: Cartea Rusă. p.163.

Inspiration is characterized by lucidity and requires a multitude of thoughts and images, as well as fast and fruitful thinking. Even if it comes easily, without intention, imagination remains the result of previous, long and fruitful concentration. Great artists have shown that inspiration comes only they have gathered a large number of observations, when they have clarified and totally absorbed the conception of their work. Michael Chekhov believes the actor should query the character that is creating in his mind. It is the moment when the actor starts to cooperate with the image. Ivana Chubbuck thinks that the actor must use inner images. „It is your obligation as actors to personalize the words that come from the mind of the author and make the audience feel as if they came from your mind. This is possible only if you use INNER IMAGES. If you do not have clear associations of ideas, they will seem and will be perceived as meaningless.”<sup>6</sup> Chekhov agrees that there are questions whose answer comes days later, and not on the spot, for example: What is the relationship between the character and the other characters in the play? And M. Chekhov, like Stanislavski, proposes a series of exercises that develop the imagination and should be done very often. In other words, it is the imagination that discovers the character based on the outer information, the things that are imagined and the inner life that has to be discovered. The ability to go beyond the surface of a character, to see its inner force and mysterious life is one of the most valuable and important functions that relate to the essence of imagination. Thus, the actor’s feelings will emerge naturally, easily, as soon as he learns „to see” the psychology, the inner life of his images. He believes that revealing the psychological depths of the character expresses the actor’s contribution to creation, besides his performance and talent. It is a crime to confine the actor within the limits of his so-called personality, thus making him a slave and not an actor. Where is his freedom? How can he use his own capacity of creation and originality? Why does he always have to appear in front of the audience like a puppet forced to make the same movements when the strings are pulled? In his exercises, M. Chekhov encouraged the actor to choose a word from a book randomly and try to see the image it recalls. The second step is to wait for the images to come to life, to start moving, talking, „acting” by themselves, irrespective of the actor’s will. Working on the embodiment of imagination, Chekhov advises actors to work gradually to avoid cliches and outdated theatrical skills. To develop their imagination, an actor or a student at the theatre school can choose improvisation exercises or games that offer them greater both inner, and outer freedom. The American professor Viola Spolin, the creator of theatre games, attached great importance to such exercises. She discovered the importance of improvisation games while training children that were to make films at Hollywood and could not get rid of their inhibition. Following their amazing result, theatre schools – Romanian schools included – took over such exercises as basic training in the first two years of study. „When the actor has to go beyond the text and to bring more reality in the relations with partners, general improvisation is extremely useful. General improvisation seems to have no direct connection with the written play. However, it offers the actor a deeper understanding of the character he is playing.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, V. Spolin thinks that games can solve any problem. In games, an actor can study and correct himself and can develop abilities indispensable for his profession and, above all, one can develop creativity and reach an enduring command of the gesture and word. „Playing a game and acting imply different psychological levels, but both are of a similar nature. The ability to imagine a circumstance and to play a part in it represents a tormenting experience, a sort of escape from one’s daily self and routine. We note that this psychological freedom creates the condition that dissolves tension and conflict and unlocks powers, due to the spontaneous effort to cope with such a

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<sup>6</sup> Chubbuck, Ivana. 2007. *The Actor's Power*. București: Editura Quality Books. p.79.

<sup>7</sup> Spolin, Viola. 2008. *Improvisation for the theatre*. București: U.N.A.T.C. Press. p.380.

circumstance. (Neva L. Boyd – „Play, a Unique Discipline”)<sup>8</sup> But everybody has experienced moments when one does not know and cannot explain why they reacted in a certain way. We often tell ourselves „I don't know why I reacted like that” or „I do not know where I knew that from”. These moments relate to intuition and are common – to a greater or lesser extent – to all individuals. We can call them moments of genius that we all experience throughout our lives. Their awareness and development can lead to creativity that is specific to acting. Lee Strasberg says that it is important to stress that creativity is an important feature of the contemporary theatre, just like in other areas of knowledge explored in the twentieth century. As far as the actor's training is concerned, Lee Strasberg considers the development of the artist's inner abilities to be the essential element, without stressing or excluding external elements, which are obviously important, but concentrating on what we generally call the actor's imagination, his ability to relive the experiences created on stage. Lee Strasberg identifies two essential stages in working with the actor. The first one is the training stage. If the actor is not trained enough to do the kind of work that he has to do for a performance, then obviously it will be very difficult to do the job. The actor needs to spend time to integrate himself in an activity which is by no means easy, and has no comparisons in any other arts. The important parts of the training concern the awakening of belief, the actor's ability to concentrate, to react to imaginary stimuli, to experiment - again and again – old and new emotions, emotions that he has not experienced before, but once he has experienced them the actor has learned to repeat them. The most important advice Lee Strasberg would give is to keep one's imagination alive and open, to remain open to the impressions of life, to things around him, to become aware of both his answers and reactions as well as to those of other people, so as to learn the nature of the real behaviour on stage. Otherwise, most of the actor's play on the contemporary stage or on the stage in the past tends to become very conventional and this is something we do not call a creative way or method. In the Romanian theatre school, Ion Cojar attached great importance to imagination and the need for make-believe in the student-actor's education, as he showed in his book „Poetics of art”. He starts by demonstrating man's dissatisfaction with his own condition and his permanent desire to overcome it. For most people it is only the power of imagination that helps them fulfil their dreams and reconcile their frustrations. Cojar says the desire to be someone else or something else, follows man throughout his life. Between *what he is* and *what he would like to be*, between *how he is* and *how he could have been*, there is a space that hides the greatest gift of man: the imaginary. On this territory one can live at its fullest everything that reality does not offer. For every man it is the territory of hope and personal absolute freedom. The space of imagination is nothing else but the space of creativity, of man's ability to imagine and – last but not least – the territory where man can *build his own way of life*. Without imagination there is no artistic or scientific creation whatsoever. „Creative imagination is one of the main ways for an artist to value his own individuality. He must develop his creative imagination just like the power of concentration. Each artistic activity is – up to a certain point – the product of imagination.”<sup>9</sup> Cojar admits that all inventions, the novelty in science, culture, art is a consequence of the freedom of the spirit and imagination. All that mankind has created is first of all imagination; our overall behaviour is the expression of the image of ourselves. Man has a creative destiny, he does not plan to create, he exists by creating and creates by existing. Imagination drives the action. The impetus for creation comes from the fear of ‚become’, from the fear of the end. Thus, creation becomes a postponement of ‚become’, of the end. Artists and scientists are multipliers of intelligence, and creationism is seen as something different from evolutionism. In common average individual reason develops with

<sup>8</sup> Idem.p.51.

<sup>9</sup> Aron, Geanina. 1999.*Improvisation of the game - the game of improvisation*.București: Editura Ecologică.p.176.

age, while creativity progressively decreases reason and needs more time to reach maturity. Creativity can manifest itself and create a work of art irrespective of age. That is why the first thing to do when developing an artistic personality is to break down any preconceived idea or inhibition as soon as possible. The key-word of this definition is action, which is actually the key-word of acting.

The importance devoted to action shows the quality of the relationship between the theoretical and practical understanding of acting, between the artistic project and its accomplishment. Imagination should match the action and purpose. Imagination has no limits and when it unfolds against an unaltered and honest background it can have fantastic results.

- **Conclusions**

The ability to imagine is paramount for the process of creation. Any activity that pertains to acting is determined by imagination, whether it is a simple exercise, even an exercise of relaxation, an improvisation game or the creation of a character. According to Osborn's study, the enemies of imagination have two sources: an exterior source, outside the individual, which includes the (social, cultural, political, religious, etc.) environment and behaviour; family and school education, specific types of professional activity which compel the individual to behave like „everyone else”, that is to adjust. Here spontaneity may be considered „out of line”. The other sources that tend to paralyse imagination are internal. Thus, vanity is considered to be a dangerous enemy of imagination, as well as functional fixations, those preconceived ideas that result in a mechanical and rigid spirit, anxiety which causes shyness and self-decay, and – last but not least, the critical spirit, of a negative nature, which made Viola Spolin give up labelling or dividing students into good or bad. In the process of creation no one can or has the right to decide what is good and what is bad. „Often the general improvisations offer actors an understanding which goes beyond the words and helps them *see the word* and give reality on stage. Sometimes improvisations are not necessary, but whenever used, they enrich the work with the play.”<sup>10</sup> The creative spirit has a positive mental attitude, it generates trust, enthusiasm, encouragement and strives to perfection. Preconceived ideas are determined by education, experience and are an obstacle to finding solutions to problems and have an inhibitory role. Inhibition diminishes the ability to tackle new issues and to open one's imagination. The burst of imagination is the first and most important thing in acting; without imagination there is no process of artistic creation. As long as the actor is a creator, imagination is the starting point of any artistic discovery; when practiced and enhanced, it will result in great artistic creations, stage effects of high aesthetic value, in a remarkable identity of the acting profession.

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