

The Confident Actor

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Abstract: *There are two fundamental directions in acting. The first one is called formalistic acting and can be found from ancient times, through Commedia dell'arte, all the way to Bertolt Brecht. The second one, even though it has its origins in the theoretical ideas of Aristotle, is called realistic acting and it has achieved its practical manifestations only in the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to be confident on stage, no matter what method we use, we must always be free to experiment in our own way. Without freedom there is no creation, any coercion destroys the spontaneous creative living processes.*

Keywords: *actor; emotions; acting; formalistic; realistic; audience; commedia dell'arte; Diderot; Dario Fo; uber marionette; Brecht; Stanislavsky; System; Ion Cojar; freedom;*

All actors (good or bad) have something in common: emotions. Even though emotions are vital to acting, the nerves and insecurities can ruin a show (or even a career). What to do about those emotions that tend to get in the way of a good performance? Right here, in **the introduction**, I will tell you a secret: there is no point in an actor's career that he can say: "I'm done with emotions". Some of them are just better than others in hiding the negative emotions. But others... the professional ones can use these emotions in their own benefit and always relate on their craft to get the job done right. We are not talking here about talent. No! We refer only to the basics of acting: to make a character that is easily understood by the audience and to be a credible actor.

To make a long story short: there are only **two major directions in acting**. In the attempt to systematize the evolution of acting, throughout the history of the theatre, two fundamental directions can be distinguished. The difference between them was given, in fact, by the method used by the actor to approach the character he had to play. We can say that the two ways are: from the outside toward the inside (or rather: from the outer shape to the essence of the character) and from the inside out (or: from the essence to the outer shape of the character). But this is not the only criterion of the analysis; because the aesthetic finality of the process can be considered a big decision factor. Therefore, we can say that there is: the formalistic acting, as well as the realistic one². The first one is used by the actor who thinks of his character as a mask, a shape, which he studies in the smallest detail, in order to be able later to present it in front of the audience (of which he is aware). The second one is for the actor who makes a long and deep journey of self-discovery, of self-search in the new theatrical reality, which he then assumes, so that, in this way, the character can be "born" organically from his being; more precisely, he is identifying himself with the role he is playing, he is experiencing the role (unrelated with the audience).

Regardless of the historical time, geographical areas, cultural differences, education, social or economic developments, the theatre walked (somehow) these two major paths. The actor was also the subject to the same rules. Whether he was a genius, or just a mere presence,

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² "Formalistic acting" and "realistic acting" are terms used by actress and acting teacher Uta Hagen in order to avoid confusion between "presentation" and "representation"

or was just a simple performer, or an excellent representative of his art, the actor submitted to these rigors.

The formalistic acting

In ancient Greek, Plato considered theatre to be an inferior form of art. And this is because he saw the sensitive world as an imperfect copy of the transcendental world (the world of the ideas). In this context, art was seen as an imitation of the real world, a deceptive copy, an imperfect imitation of another imperfect imitation.

However, there were many admirers of this "imitation". They did not want to "trick" their minds, but just to have fun. They accepted the imitation of either the faces or the features of those who were ... abnormal. And they had to be "corrected" by the laughter of the community.

Nevertheless, the fairest followers of the masked characters were (many, many years later) the actors of the *Commedia dell'arte*. In medieval European times, they became very popular. They could be seen from the royal palaces to the open markets or at the popular holidays. The actors toured the world, delighted the audience and managed to make a living from their art. We can even talk about a well-established first form of professional organization of a theatre company. Here is a unique story on the subject told by Dario Fo: "It is said that as he passed through Venice, King Henry III was delighted by the cleverness and spontaneity of the "Geloso" theatre group. So excited that he invited them to Paris (in the invitation, the ambassador from Venice asked the Doge directly for a favor in hosting the company in Paris for a long time). The Doge accepts and immediately the Venetian Republic will organize the trip by preparing a caravan with a large number of carts and carriages. The actors start their journey to Paris but, halfway, they got kidnapped by a gang of Huguenots (protestants of France). The letter that Henry III later received reads: "if you want to get your actors back, release all our Huguenot brothers imprisoned in France, plus 10,000 gold florins and 5,000 silver ones, or you'll only receive their heads". The outcome: Henry III frees the detainees, pays the reward and releases the actors. A chronicler of the time commented: "If he had to save the prime minister, four consuls and three marshals, Henry III would have left them with the kidnappers."³

Another milestone for this kind of acting is in the year 1773, when Denis Diderot published: "The paradox of the actor". The great French philosopher claims that the actor, after resorting to all means of knowing reality, after being able to approach his character emotionally and the situation in which the play unfolds, is obliged to build a perfectly articulated, coherent, complex and logical character to present to the audience. But, pay attention! At the time of the performance, the actor will not participate emotionally in any form. He will present his character, but, at the same time, keeping himself...cold inside. However, the character must be so well constructed that it excites the audience. The paradox proposed by Diderot consists in this: the actor arouses emotion in the hall, but he remains, on stage, cold and lucid. "I don't want the actor to have a lot of judgment; I need him to be a cold and quiet spectator; I ask of him, therefore, to have insight and no sensitivity, I want him to master the art of imitation and to be worthy of all kinds of characters and roles. If the actor allowed himself to be sensitive, could he play the same role twice with the same warmth and the same success? Passionate at first, but at the third performance he would be as tired and cold as marble. As a careful imitator and thoughtful disciple of nature, the first time he will appear on stage under the name of Augustus, Agamemnon, Muhammad, a perfect copyist of his own being or of his studies, his acting, far from weakening, it will be strengthened by the new observations; it will ignite or calm down

³ Fo, Dario. 1980. „Mic tratat de artă actoricească”. *Secolul 20*, nr. 228-230.

and you will be more and more satisfied”⁴. And the philosopher continues the explanation by making a clear distinction between actors who "play from the heart" and those who "imitate an ideal model." The first ones are inconsistent, they cannot be equally good in every performance; instead, the others - the imitators - once they have established a form of interpretation, it will remain perfect... forever.

Diderot's vision will be developed further more by another important personality of the theatre: Eduard Gordon Craig, who will launch the famous "*uber marionette*" theory. The possibility of the existence of a type of unrealistic actor who does not deal with the assimilation of a character's individuality, but embodies "supreme forces" that he can express through movements and symbolic gestures. A fierce opponent of the direct reproduction of life on stage, Gordon Craig drew attention to the stagnation of acting at the beginning of the twentieth century. He wanted to distance himself from the Realism that he did not regard as art, because art presumes clarity and order and excludes any accidental manifestations. All of this because, in his opinion, the actors, at the beginning of that century, "surrendered" to a moment of inspiration, to the impulse, proving that they were incapable of controlling their expression on stage, abandoning themselves to "dramatic" emotional discharges. This is what Craig thought, and for this reason he said that the actors are responsible for the spiritual involution of the theatre: "as I have written before, the Theatre will continue to grow, and the actors, for a number of years, will continue to delay its development"⁵. Craig urged the actors not to limit themselves to simply reproduce the nature, but to create like nature. His dream of replacing the actor with a *uber marionette* sprang from the desire to develop the actor, not to cancel him. He suggested that the actors give up the pettiness of individual expression and, by "sublimating their own being and self-transfiguration", take over the qualities of a Divine Puppet. The actor, in his vision, had to have access to the world of essences and bring on stage symbolic gestures, archetypal characters, mystery and grandeur, not just an imitation of everyday life. Self-conscious, capable of a rational control over his body and psyche, the actor dreamed of by Gordon Craig would be malleable as a super-puppet in the hands of the show's creator.

In the evolution of theatre, at the beginning of the same century (the 20th), a new trend crystallized: the epic theatre. Bertolt Brecht - theatre practitioner, playwright and poet - also rose up against naturalism (as did Gordon Craig) and advocated removing "illusionism" from the theatre. Therefore, what Hugo and his supporters had managed to achieve after the "battle of Hernani" by introducing the two concepts: illusionism and the environment, Brecht categorically abolished. Illusionism is related to Aristotelian theatre, which means that the spectator must be convinced that what he sees on stage is happening for the first time, that it is real. In other words, artists create the illusion of reality. Brecht did not like this type of theatre, claiming that in the Aristotelian theatre, the spectator is thrown into a kind of trance, hypnosis, in which he gets emotional empathizing with the characters on stage. In his view, the spectator of the twentieth century must be educated to think, not to just get excited. The solution was, first of all, to destroy the illusion. In this sense, the spectator is constantly informed that he is at the theatre, that what he sees is a convention and that he listens to the story of some events that happened once (not now) and elsewhere (not here), to other people (not to the actors).

Another novelty introduced by Brecht, this time acting related, is that the actor is invited not to assume another reality, another life, but to narrate it without any emotional involvement, through the process of distancing (*Verfremdungseffekt*)⁶. For example, if in the

⁴ Diderot, Denis. 2010. *Paradoxul despre actor*. București: Ed. Nemira. p. 29

⁵ Craig, Gordon. 1973. *Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în sec. XX*. București: Ed. Minerva. p. 147

⁶ Brecht, Bertolt. 1977. *Scrisori despre teatru*. București: Ed. Univers. p. 225

dramatic theatre, a character is presented by his partners, in the epic theatre, the actor introduces himself: "I will be Hamlet". Therefore, I, the actor, will tell you the story of Hamlet.

The scenery was also changed. If in the dramatic theatre, the scenographers and the directors tried to build the set and the costumes as close as possible to reality, in order to increase the illusion, in the epic theatre, if a certain space is needed, it is just announced by the actors or written on a tablet (for example: here is the moon, or we are in the courtyard of Elsinore Castle).

But the novelties didn't stop there. It was the dramatic construction that was also shattered. The narrative does not go naturally, following the steps of an ordinary story. The Brechtian spectacle is built from a series of moments, each with its own ending, chained in an unexplained logic that gives the feeling of ... strange. The effect is obtained by editing the next episodes without a dramatic connection.

The audience of the epic theatre is invited to think about what the actors are saying on stage and to get emotional only after... the thinking process; not as in Aristotelian theatre, only by the visualization. The Brechtian scenes had to be defined (after the (re)search of the actors together with the director) by an essential gesture, called the basic gesture (*Grundgestus*).

The realistic acting

Also from ancient times, we have another decisive writing for the theatre. Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, wrote "Poetics", a genuine school-book of aesthetics. Here, he considers the gift of writing poetry "a gift from the gods", able to generate superior spiritual feelings. He believed in art as imitation: *mimesis*; and he argued that the artist must be able to discover the reality in its most fundamental way.

Aristotle's innovative vision not only put order in the process of elaborating the dramatic work but also determined that valuable and distinct path in acting, the art of identification. Basically, Aristotle and those who followed his vision saw the actor's art as a construction based on truth. It is this truth that derives from the process of deep and detailed knowledge of life. This actor is invited to build his character by analyzing the dramatic text, the historical details (those related to the era in which the character lived and in which the play was written), to find real life situations, as well as people who resemble the inner universe of the character, and then assume this information. Thus, the actor will "live" convincingly the situation in the play, and by doing this... making the audience believe it. And if this happens and, more than that, the audience gets excited, then the purpose of the theatre is fulfilled.

However, from a practical point of view, this wish would not be fulfilled until the beginning of the twentieth century, in Russia, where Konstantin Stanislavsky created The System. This Russian director, actor and acting teacher followed the principles of the dramatic theatre, bringing to perfection what we use to call today: psychological realism in theatre. Stanislavski's "System" focuses on the actor's creative process, pursuing a realistic development of the characters' inner universe. From the beginning of the volume "An Actor's Work", the director reveals his intentions: "one of the main issues is the natural stimulation of nature's organic way of creation and its subconscious; the human intellect suppresses the artistic emotion and the subconscious that plays a significant role in the artistic process"⁷. It is a form of theatre that rejects traditions and patterns, giving a special importance to the area of the subconscious that needs to be most carefully controlled.

The Russian professor demonstrates that the (hidden) subconscious area can be provoked by certain means, starting from the actor himself, from his particularities, as a unitary being. The "work of the actor with himself" consists precisely in the path taken from the exercises of challenging the subconscious to the installation of self-control. Stanislavski

⁷ Stanislavski, K.S. 1956. *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*. București: ESPLA. p. 13

presents the relationship between the conscious and the subconscious: "On the one hand, our conscious technique tends to force the subconscious to work, and on the other hand to learn not to stop it when it begins to work on its own. For this we must forget the existence of the subconscious and move towards any goal in a conscious, logical way". Stanislavski keeps the illusion in the theatre and, in addition, transfers it much more strongly to the actor; this will give credibility to his presence on stage, but the actor must not suffer, really hurt him, but through imaginary stimuli he can trigger his mental processes similar to those that would be triggered in a real situation similar to the one required of the piece.

The Russian professor demonstrates that the hidden, subconscious, area can be provoked, starting from the actor himself, from his particularities, as an organic being. The actor's work consists precisely in the path taken from the exercises of challenging the subconscious to the installation of self-control. Stanislavski presents the relationship between the conscious and the subconscious: "On the one hand, our conscious technique tends to force the subconscious to work, and on the other hand, tries to learn not to stop it when it begins to work on its own. For this we must forget the existence of the subconscious and move towards any goal in a conscious, logical way"⁸. Stanislavski keeps the illusion in the theatre and, in addition, transfers it much more strongly to the actor; this will give credibility to his presence on stage, but the actor must not suffer, really get hurt; he must trigger through imaginary stimuluses his mental processes similar to those that would be triggered in a real situation similar to the one required in the play.

From Stanislavski's work emerge three essential principles. The first one is that the actor, on stage, is not allowed to play his own passions and images, but must act according to the images and passions of his character. The second one drifts from Pushkin's aphorism (of Aristotelian origins): the truth of our passions and feelings, in certain situations; that is what our intellect demands from a playwright and, convinced by this, Stanislavsky states that an actor must not play the passions, but act under their influence. There is also a third principle that considers the artistic creation as a product of conscious-subconscious alternation.

But the greatest value of the System is that it was never locked. A few of Stanislavsky former students, inspired by their master, developed systems of their own. For example, the most important of them, besides Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Alexander Tairov, is without a doubt: Vsevolod Meyerhold, to whom we owe the biomechanics system.

And now... time for a **conclusion** and a justification for the title.

The actor cannot manifest himself at full capacity, unless he finds a favorable framework and... a proper acting method. What works for one person might not work for the next one. The actor must be truly free from any constraints in order to become a creator and not just ... a simple performer.

The idea that the search for the truth is more precious than the truth itself, supported by Ion Cojar (Romanian director, actor and acting teacher), quoting Lessing⁹, is one that can be put at the basis of any acting method. There are no infallible methods. There are only ways in which we can get closer to our characters. Ways in which we can understand them, (re)present and experiment them. The more ways we try, the closer we are to create our own system, which will make us more and more confident.

To keep us confident we must always fight against preconceived ideas about acting and theatre. We must play the (theatre) game and, while we do it, we must remain free in order to

⁸ op. cit. pag. 91

⁹ Cojar, Ion. 1999. *O poetică a artei actorului*. București: Ed. Paideia. p. 89

experiment it in our own way. Without freedom there is no creation, any coercion destroys the spontaneous creative living processes.

And always... always... work with partners you can trust.

With real hope that this was useful... now get to work!

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