

Nonverbal Theatre as a Tool for Actor Training

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“On stage, one must act. Action and activity form the very foundation of dramatic art and of the actor’s craft. In Ancient Greek, the term ‘drama’ means ‘an action unfolding’”²

Abstract: *The article examines the role of nonverbal theatre in actor training, based on the premise that physical expression precedes and underpins verbal expression. The study highlights the importance of body awareness as the primary tool for stage communication and explores the relationship between presence, authenticity, and the construction of stage situations. An analysis of this approach highlights how the elimination of words stimulates the development of body awareness, the relationship with one’s partner, and the ability to communicate on stage. In this context, I presented a pedagogical exercise conducted with first-semester students, based on the nonverbal dramatization of situations inspired by the Legends of Olympus. The project aims to explore the possibilities of theatrical expression without words and to investigate the relationship between intention, emotion, and their physical manifestation.*

Keywords: *the art of acting; physicality; nonverbal theatre; tool;*

Introduction

The art of acting is not about delivering lines, but about listening. More than just a technical skill, listening in acting requires an openness and a genuine attentiveness to what lies beyond words. In performance, lines do not merely convey information; they carry intentions, tensions, and hidden emotions. “Try to listen in such a way—with your heart, your blood, your mind—that you understand the true meaning of what is being said. What is said in a play is not simply, ‘Oh, I’m late for dinner.’ But that is all you will hear until you become accustomed to discovering what lies beneath.”³ This capacity for sensitivity forms the foundation of the actor’s entire artistic journey.

The art of acting has its roots in Antiquity, a time when theatre was not merely a form of entertainment, but a genuine ritual. From its very beginnings, the actor was entrusted with a fundamental task: to lend their own instrument—the body—in order to portray life. Acting is not a modern concept; it is an ancient form of expression that has evolved alongside society while preserving its enduring principles: truth, coherence, and the relationship with the other.

These principles can already be found in the writings of Aristotle: “In the portrayal of character, as in the arrangement of incidents, one must always seek what is necessary or probable, so that it is necessary or probable for a character to speak or act in a particular way, and for one event to follow inevitably from another.”⁴ The authenticity and internal logic of acting are not

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² Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski. 2013, 2018. *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Volume I* [Munca actorului cu sine însuși, volumul 1]. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, p.v 94.

³ Stella Adler. 1999. *On Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov*. New York: published by Alfred A. Knopf, INC, p. 17.

⁴ Aristotel. 1957. *Poetics* [Poetica]. Bucharest: Scientific Publishing House, p. 49.

discoveries of contemporary theatre practice, but rather fundamental conditions that establish the connection between the character and the audience.

1. The Theatre Actor: Space, Corporeality and Intensity

When we think of theatre, the first elements that come to mind are the stage, the spotlights, the curtain, the actors, and the set. All of these contribute to the creation of a distinctive atmosphere; however, the essence of theatre lies not only in these visible elements, but rather in the encounter between actor and audience. Theatre is a living space, a place of profound communication, where the actor's role is to tell a story here and now. In my view, what keeps theatre alive is this direct, intense, and unrepeatable relationship between actor and spectator, which transforms a simple performance into an emotional connection.

The spectator is not a passive observer, but experiences emotion alongside the actor. They become part of a story that is born and comes to an end before their very eyes. "The level that an actor must reach in order to awaken in the spectator this willingness to create together, in complicity, is what Barba calls the level of pre-expressivity. It consists of two components: balance in action and the dynamics of oppositions between different parts of the body⁵, for 'the paradox of the actor is that, while remaining still, they possess the ability to move the spectator.'"⁶ The actor offers energy, voice, body, and thought, while the audience, in turn, offers attention and response. It is a subtle yet essential exchange of energy. The actor creates an illusion, but the audience before them is a certainty. The fact that dozens or even hundreds of people occupy the same space, listening and reacting together, makes theatre not merely an art form, but a fundamental human experience.

In theatre, any space can become a stage, as long as the actor brings it to life through imagination and the spectator is willing to accept it as such. Theatre thus becomes a shared belief in an imagined reality. Every actor has probably heard, from their very first day of training, that theatre is life. This notion can be interpreted in various ways: for some, it means that theatre tells stories about life; for others, that actors are living beings who create an alternative reality; or it may refer to that very exchange of energy between the stage and the audience. In my view, this energy creates a unique form of intimacy that can scarcely be replicated by any other art form.

One of the fundamental concepts of theatre is the existence of the fourth wall. This convention, which separates the character from the spectator, should not, in my view, function as a form of isolation or protection. The actor should neither hide behind the wall nor seek to destroy it. Rather, the fourth wall serves as a means of sustaining the illusion of an inner reality, but it should never become an excuse for detachment. Stage presence requires an awareness of the body, the space, the rhythm, and the intensity of one's actions. The actor's body is their only visible instrument, and the absence of editing or a camera capable of selecting the most effective angle demands that the actor remain present through gaze, posture, and movement. Every physical detail contributes to the construction of the character's image. Movements must be consciously understood and controlled, as they constitute a form of expression. If the actor's body is indeed their instrument, it must be tuned with the same care as a musical instrument in order to perform effectively. "At some point, I am sure you have found yourself in a scene, relaxing on a sofa and smoking a cigarette. You were engaged in a conversation with another character, without being consciously aware of

⁵ Romina Boldășu. 2019. *On Physical Expressivity in the Actor's Art*, [Despre expresivitate corporală în arta actorului] Bucharest: UNATC Press, p. 21.

⁶ Eugenio Barba. 2001. *The Paper Canoe*, London: Routledge, p. 13.

your body, except for the fact that you believed you were truly there. Then you stood up and remained standing for a while as the conversation continued. Suddenly, the simple act of standing became uncomfortable. You became aware of your hands as though they were useless appendages. Your legs and feet tensed up, you lost your sense of the character and the environment, and you ceased to be a person in a room; instead, you became an actor exposed on stage”⁷.

When an actor is not aware of their own presence and loses connection with their body, they become vulnerable. Becoming aware of one's body does not simply mean being physically present; it means grounding oneself in the present moment and aligning every movement and gesture with the character. The body should not become an obstacle that reveals fear. If theatre is defined by authenticity, then even a simple breath can add emotional depth to a scene. An actor who lacks awareness of their own body is often undermined by unjustified gestures that may be perceived as false. The true challenge, therefore, lies in learning how to transform every movement into an extension of emotion. Once the connection between mind and body becomes conscious, movements acquire a sense of naturalness, and the actor no longer merely represents a character, but truly embodies them. It is essential to cultivate a relationship of trust with one's own body, which is not merely a mechanism, but a creative partner. Through this process, the body gradually becomes a genuine instrument of expression. When actors become aware of their actions and establish harmony with the space and their fellow performers, they are able to fully inhabit the stage. The spectator senses this presence, even without understanding the mechanisms that make it possible.

A gesture that is too subtle may go unnoticed, while one that is overly exaggerated can undermine credibility. The intensity of an actor's performance must be both controlled and profound, emerging from an understanding of the space and of one's own corporeality in relation to it. The theatre actor exists in a constant tension between control and surrender, between technique and instinct, between reality and convention. This tension becomes most apparent in the way the actor manages emotional intensity. “The sensitive person follows the impulses of nature and expresses only the cry of the soul. The moment they begin to moderate or intensify that cry, they are no longer themselves, but an actor performing.”⁸ It is precisely here that the actor's mastery emerges: they must neither be confused with the sensitive individual who erupts uncontrollably, nor fall into the trap of a purely technical performance devoid of life. Instead, they must discover a form of stage truth that is at once authentic, alive, conscious, and carefully calibrated.

Acting is a paradox, and the control of intensity is an art form in itself. In the absence of a camera, the actor must regulate their own emotional intensity. On stage, there is no cinematic filter available; everything unfolds before the audience's eyes, and it is precisely this direct exposure that demands a heightened awareness of how emotion is calibrated. It must remain accessible to the audience without overwhelming them. To control does not mean to suppress, but to balance. It means knowing how to sustain the tension of a moment, not by releasing it all at once, but by allowing it to simmer beneath the surface. In this way, control does not become a restraint, but a channel through which emotion can reach the spectator with clarity.

Building on these principles, I consider nonverbal theatre to be an effective method through which beginning actors can develop an understanding of the relationship between emotion and expression. “At our first contact with students, we must encourage freedom of physical expression, because a physical and sensory relationship with this art form opens the way to a deeper

⁷ Uta Hagen. 1973. *Respect for acting*. New Jersey: Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 69.

⁸ Denis Diderot. 2010. *Paradox of the Actor*[*Paradox despre actor*]. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, p. 67.

understanding of it”⁹. During the first semester of study, I asked students to create nonverbal dramatizations of situations inspired by the *Legends of Olympus*. The choice of these myths was not accidental. These stories are built upon powerful conflicts and fundamental human relationships, providing rich material for the exploration of dramatic situations exclusively through the medium of corporeality.

The complexity of this exercise stemmed precisely from the elimination of words. Beginning actors often tend to take refuge in the power of the text, believing that the expressiveness of a line or a particular vocal intonation is sufficient to convey the emotional truth of a dramatic situation. The body, however, is the first element that confirms an actor’s authenticity. No matter how well a line is delivered, it loses its credibility when it is not supported by physicalization. “An actor may dissect, analyze, intellectualize, or develop an interesting case for a role, but if they are unable to assimilate it and communicate it physically, their efforts are theatrically sterile”¹⁰. An actor is not evaluated by what they understand about a role, but by their ability to transform a situation into a reality that is perceptible to the spectator.

The exploration of nonverbal theatre is not merely an introductory stage in actor training, but a method of investigating the relationship between intention and expression. Deprived of the support of spoken lines, the student is compelled to focus their attention on their own body, on their relationship with their scene partner, and on the dramatic situation constructed through action. “The appearance of a body on stage immediately draws attention to itself, prompting the spectator to form an impression of the character, their personality, and their development. Following this line of thought, we may conclude that the actor’s body constitutes a stable bridge of communication”¹¹. The process thus becomes one of realizing that emotion is communicated not only through words, but also through physical presence. “When an actor discovers that they can communicate directly with the audience solely through the physical language of the stage, their entire organism awakens”¹².

Throughout the development of the scenes inspired by the *Legends of Olympus*, students were required to find ways of making conflicts, relationships, and characters understandable without the aid of verbal explanation. This process of distilling dramatic action to its essential elements led to a deeper understanding of corporeality as a means of expression. Before discovering the power of words, students were challenged to understand their necessity and justification within the theatrical act. In this context, the spoken word does not emerge as the starting point of scenic construction, but rather as the consequence of an already existing action and objective. As one author observes, “Our body, as a bearer of signs and emotions, is a perfect dramaturgical instrument”¹³.

2. Conclusions

Nonverbal theatre represents more than a particular form of stage expression; it constitutes a fundamental means of understanding the mechanisms that underpin the actor’s craft. An analysis of the relationship between corporeality, presence, and expression reveals that the acting process originates in action before it is ultimately realized through words. In this sense, the body is not

⁹ Viola Spolin. 2008. *Improvisation for the Theatre*, [Improvizație pentru teatru]. Bucharest: U.N.A.T.C. PRESS, p. 63.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 64.

¹¹ Geta Răvdan Huncanu. 2019. *The Actor’s Corporeality: Between Theory and Practice*, [Corporalitatea actorului, între teorie și practică]. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House, p. 154.

¹² Viola Spolin, *op. cit.*, p.64.

¹³ Diana Cozma. 2016. *The Ephemeral Dance of the Actor’s Actions*, [Dansul efemer al acțiunilor actorului] Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, p. 57.

merely a vehicle for spoken lines, but the primary and most significant instrument through which the actor constructs and conveys meaning. The elimination of words encouraged students to focus their attention on the relationship between intention and action, on their interaction with their scene partners, and on the ways in which emotion can become visible through stage behaviour. Within this framework, the spoken line no longer appears as the point of departure for character construction, but rather as an organic consequence of an already established reality. In conclusion, nonverbal theatre may be regarded as an essential tool in actor training, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of the relationship between body, emotion, and action. Before learning how to speak a text, the actor must learn how to be present, how to act, and how to communicate. Only upon this foundation can words acquire strength, necessity, and stage truth.

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