

6. THE ACTOR'S JOURNEY BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL

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Abstract: *In Acting, what you teach is not a universal recipe, but a personal vision of theater that makes sense and works only for you. Practically, The Art of Acting is unique to each individual, although in theory the concept may seem the same for everyone. With this in mind, it is imperative that arts education is student-centered and not subject-centered, the goal of an Acting school is for each young artist to discover and develop their own artistic personality/individuality.*

Key words: *acting, theatrical education, creativity, artistic individuality, body training*

1. Introduction

The pre-university education system in Romania is largely centered on formal education: students attend school, where they follow a curriculum set by the Ministry of Education, teachers teach according to well-structured syllabuses, and students are assessed through tests and exams in a formal setting. The other two systems, non-formal and informal, appear only as exceptions, reinforcing the belief that high grades reflect academic achievement, thus suggesting that success in learning equates with intelligence, admiration and personal fulfillment.

It is indeed simpler to be told what to learn than to explore on your own, because the possibilities are endless and this can generate anxiety. In the face of this challenge, many choose to shelter under the clear guidance of a structured educational system, a natural tendency, part of human nature. Dostoevsky captures this profound dilemma in *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*: "...man prefers peace and even death to the freedom to choose between good and evil! For there is nothing more alluring to him than freedom of conscience, but at the same time there is nothing more terrible!"¹⁶⁴

2. Discussions

The question arises, do we choose our own path in life, or is it imposed on us? How many of the students at the Faculty of Theatre have a genuine calling for this art and how many are here because they graduated from an arts high school and theater seemed the only option? Or perhaps they were lured by the mirage of fame, the pressure to become a student right out of high school, or simply chose this path because "why not?" in the absence of clear alternatives. Does the current education system develop people who know who they are, or does it prefer a collective mass, individuals who are indistinguishable from each other? In Romania, we still don't understand that each individual evolves at their own pace. For example, John F. Kennedy became president at 43, Barack Obama at 47, and the last two US presidents, Trump and Biden, at 70 and 78. Here, however, the reminiscences of an outdated system persist, in which we are pressured to fulfill a "norm" - to accumulate a little of everything, regardless of our educational profile, to take

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¹⁶⁴ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2018, p. 316

optional subjects considered compulsory, such as music, drawing or religion, and to strive to get high grades in each.

During the eight crucial years of young people's development (10-18 years), they are subjected to an avalanche of adults telling them what they should like, what they need to do in order to be appreciated and accepted. As a result, by student age, many arrive at arts majors such as acting with the "Teach me, make me a great actor!" mentality, leaving teachers disarmed. In acting, you don't have a props or a treble clef, you don't have precise colors and shapes, nor clear sets of movements or correct positions, as we find in other fields. All you have at your disposal is your own passion, their curiosity and a willingness to explore together. This is why the great theorists of the Actor's Art, from Stanislavski to Ivana Chubbuck, Declan Donnellan or Anne Bogart, have emphasized the need for the actor not to take the methods *word for word*, but to transform them into the driving force of his own artistic quest. In Acting, what you teach is not a universal recipe, but a personal vision of theater that makes sense and works only for you. In theory, The Art of Acting is the same for everyone, in practice it is different for each individual.

With this in mind, it is imperative that arts education be predominantly non-formal, student-centered rather than subject-centered. The aim of an Acting school is for each young artist to discover and develop their own artistic personality / individuality. Thus, I believe it is imperative that the pedagogues of theater education subject themselves, first and foremost, to an act of *cruelty* - in the Artaudian sense. That is to say, a process of self-analysis whereby the artist realizes his or her templates and constantly seeks to overcome them – "a difficult and cruel theater first of all for myself."¹⁶⁵ Trying to understand what our artistic/pedagogical dominance is (text, situation, character composition, choreography, etc.) and fighting against it will keep us alive, attentive, present in the Here and Now.

For example, early on in my teaching experience, I realized that I was putting too much emphasis on the spoken word, believing that the acting class was based more on the psychological and less on the physical. This perception was influenced by the growing conception that acting is essentially a psychological process, an idea supported by the great classics such as Chekhov and Stanislavski, who attributed a central role in stage expression to the spoken word. However, when I revisited Stanislavski's thought, I realized that he attached equal importance to both the inner and outer construction of the role: "To reflect the most subtle and often subconscious life, one must necessarily have an exceptionally sensitive and highly educated vocal and bodily apparatus."¹⁶⁶ Before you get to educate this apparatus, you first have to (re)discover it, because in everyday life we don't use our bodies enough or properly; thus, most muscles become insensitive and stiff. They need to be awakened and reworked in order for the body to remain alert to the multitude of stimuli it constantly receives from within and without.

In this context, I realized how important body training is in discovering the artistic individuality of each student. Let's not forget that in the history of human evolution the intellect developed long after the appearance of man. Friedrich Nietzsche, the great European philosopher, emphasizes the ephemeral nature of the

¹⁶⁵ Antonin Artaud, *Theater and its Double*, 1997, Echinox Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, p. 65

¹⁶⁶ Konstantin Stanislavski, *The actor's work with himself*, vol. I, 2013, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 18

human intellect in the immensity of nature: “There have been eternities in which [the intellect] was not present. And when the human intellect disappears, nothing will change. Only man, its creator and possessor, treats it so seriously - as if everything revolved around it.”¹⁶⁷ This statement is important because it reminds us that man has two brains in his body, and both of them function on the basis of neurons. He has the brain in his head - the central nervous system and he has another one in his gut - the enteric nervous system.

3. Results

The latter generates instinctive feelings, while the former dictates what decisions we make. And there is a constant and inseparable communication between them: 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 they can cause nausea. The feeling of 'butterflies in the stomach' is also a result of tension or stress perceived by the brain. This connection between the brain and the digestive system is the gut instinct. Therefore, the road to true human nature, to our individuality and our artistic selves starts with constant and vigorous training of the body. By training the body, we are in fact training this primordial brain, where the instincts and spontaneity that are not molded by society and education reside.

Body training, on the other hand, is so important in the art of acting because it is the main means of expressing creative ideas. Breath, voice, diction, and further on, thought, nuance, feeling, memory, rhythm, posture, posture, energy, intention and stage presence are all tools that the actor uses to bring a character to life. They are all found in the body, which can be both the actor's best ally and most difficult adversary. For example, in everyday life, communication starts with an impulse sent by the brain to the whole body, signaling the need to express something, and the voice is the end result of this process. Thus, the actor should not focus on how he or she utters a word, but on discovering the impulse that generated that word.

This is the first, the most important and the most ‘formal’ lesson I could teach in my Acting class. I consider arts education, at least theater education, to be, par excellence, non-formal. Unfortunately, the evaluation system remains a formal one, based on grades that turn into scholarships and ultimately influence students' confidence in their own abilities. One method that could prove effective in reconciling non-formal teaching and formal assessment is to involve young actors in as many festivals and workshops as possible, both at home and abroad. I believe that contact with other troupes and methods of theater making will develop students' capacity for self-evaluation, allowing them to compare their work not only with academic standards, but also with the realities and diversity of the contemporary theater world. This exposure will give them the opportunity to discover their strengths and weaknesses in a less rigid, but still competitive framework.

In this way, assessment would no longer be limited to grades imposed by a formal system, but would be underpinned by a personal and critical reflection on their own performance and involvement. This kind of experience shifts the emphasis from formal assessment to individual progress and the importance of constant

¹⁶⁷ 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>. Our transl.

exploration of the theatrical arts. The workshops that students attend with specialists in the field also have a major impact on their development and self-analysis. By interacting with very passionate people, students connect not only with new techniques and methods, but also with the energy and enthusiasm of these professionals. The passion of the specialists becomes contagious, inspiring and motivating young people to explore their own creativity in depth. These practical sessions offer a fresh perspective and the feedback received in such a context becomes extremely valuable as it comes from people who have no pre-existing relationship with them.

Also, if the homeroom teacher or year tutor ends up playing a parental or guidance role for students, young people initially tend to reject or question home education. In this context, they will be much more open and receptive to ideas and approaches brought by someone new, perceived as a temporary mentor. This openness facilitates a different learning process, where students can explore and experiment without feeling constrained by the emotional and formal relationship they have with their home teacher. The workshops thus become an ideal setting for experimentation and self-reflection, helping students to discover their artistic identity.

I say all this from personal experience: while during classes, students used to complain that we used to do too much physical warm-up and that they had muscle fever, during a workshop given by Carolina Pizarro, an actress at the Odin Theater in Denmark, founded by Eugenio Barba, they worked three times more intensively and more on the physical side, and discovered how much a well-trained body can help in acting. This revelation completely changed their perspective. Early and frequent exposure to the public works on the same principle, because nothing teaches better than direct practice. With the last generation, in the vacation between the first and second year, I did a show – *Anxious People*, a dramatization of Friedrik Beckaman. I proposed them the text, which they liked, and we set a deadline - the premiere had to take place at the beginning of the academic year, after a month and two weeks of rehearsals, in the desire to give them a taste of what it means to work in a theater.

The students didn't realize at the beginning that they had to work much harder, that we didn't have a whole semester available, and that it was necessary to learn the text quickly and build their characters early, to give them a chance to settle and become more settled in them. For this reason, we approached the premiere with characters barely sketched out, with the show's message insufficiently taken on board, and with many uncertainties. We discussed these issues openly and decided to keep the premiere as we had planned, assuming that we are in school and that here we have the right to make mistakes. The show was only performed twice, but the lesson was learned. After that, classes went much more smoothly, the students became much more engaged, and the exams that followed, in both psychological realism and Shakespeare, had the feel of authentic performances, even if they were just assessment tests.

But perhaps the most important form of education in art education is informal education, that which springs from one's own curiosity and desire to explore. Informal education actually reflects the extent of your passion. Two of the most valuable tools an actor has in discovering his or her own artistic individuality, the

creative self, are imagination and attention. Imagination gives us access to the *Possible* – that infinite, universe-like place where artistic creation is born. In contrast to the strictly limited and singular reality, the Possible opens before the actor as an endless palette of possibilities. Reality is only a small part of the infinite Possible, and the actor's greatest richness is precisely this ability to transcend reality and enter a new world. This world, though not true, cannot be considered false - it is simply Possible. Konstantin Stanislavski emphasized the transformative power of the 'magic if': "*If* is for artists the lever that takes us from reality into the only world in which creation can take place. (...) *If* does not speak of an unreal fact, of something that is, but only of what could be *if*... This word affirms nothing. It merely supposes, it puts the question to be resolved."¹⁶⁸

As an actor you have to constantly, not just constantly, train your imagination. As you practice your body, imagine the shapes and sizes that your body can take or that you create. Imagine the sensations you experience, such as the feeling of floating, freedom or lightness during the warm-up. When practicing your voice, visualize your breath as a breeze blowing a leaf as far as it will go, or as an engine picking up speed and taking off. Even when walking down the street or waiting for the bus, let your imagination run wild: where do people come from, where are they going, who is waiting for them at home? Every time we imagine we step into the Possible, so the more the actor trains his or her imagination, the easier it will be to access this creative space when on stage. Moreover, he will find that images naturally and effortlessly create emotions and feelings.

4. Conclusions

Attention training is just as essential. Why? Because the actor always has the best model for his craft: Nature. "Nature is the best creator, artist and technician, for she alone perfectly masters both the inner and the outer apparatus of living and embodying."¹⁶⁹ It is vital that the actor pay attention to everything around him - to people and himself, to their reactions, feelings and manifestations, to shapes and colors, sounds and smells, atmospheres, etc. Only through this attention to the details of the world around him can he enrich his performance and create believable characters. However, while in the case of physical training, teachers have some control, the training of attention and imagination is entirely up to the individual student. This is an exercise of will and personal discipline, a path that each individual must tread alone, but which, once understood, opens the door to infinite artistic freedom.

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¹⁶⁸ K. Stanislavski, op. cit. p. 89-90

¹⁶⁹ Idem, vol. II, p. 11