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SPECIFIC TOOLS OF ACTING: THE CONCEPT – A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING AND APPROACHING CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Actors are creators. They live on the stage and bring their own world with them. Sometimes, actors can live under the impression that the inner world of a part is so far away from their personal experience that there is no other access path towards the core of the character than creating a substitute, a model that would be convincing enough, so that, through imitation, reproduction and simulation of reality, they might go through with the scene. Some others might think that the simplest way to approach a part is to only focus on the lines, enveloping themselves in the melody, in an incantation of sorts, thus making the text, who had in the meanwhile become unclear, to surround them with a kind of fog that gives them the feeling they experience something real, an actual state. Some other times it happens that actors find physical actions to fill their own voids. It is a way to hide, and the actions are actually useless, and non-artistic. To find the way to a character one needs, first of all, to discover and understand the logical mechanism it is built upon, that makes a character what it is.

Keywords: actor; character; concept; otherness; vulnerability potential; process;

1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre, as a social and cultural phenomenon of great aesthetic scope, focuses on human nature, on man “re-found in its superior humanity” (Cojar Ion, 1998, 5), including on the complexity of the creative personality which gives people the “capacity to imagine answers to problems, to find novel and original solutions, to see the same things as everybody, but, nevertheless, to think of something different” (Limbos Edouard, 1990, 10).

In his book, *A Poetics of the Actor’s Art*, professor Ion Cojar considers acting as a specific way of thinking, first of all, and, secondly, as a modality of “doing” (Cojar Ion, 1998, 39), executing something. At the basis of the actor’s typical creation process there is a specific logical mechanism. Starting from the definition of the actor’s art given by the great theatre pedagogist, it can be concluded that creating a character implies building a complex structure, in order to reach a character psychology that would trigger the transformation of each actor into a character.



2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the process of creation, the actor is both an instrument and a instrumentalist, and his/her main task is to update, to bring to life what is only a possibility, or, better said, the dormant virtual potential from the sphere of his/her own creative personality. Michael Cehov, another great theatre practitioner, has the same vision on the creative role of artists: “the true task of a creative actor is not to simply create the outer appearance of life, but to interpret life in all its aspects and with all its depth, to show what is underneath life phenomena, to let spectators see beyond life angles and meanings.” (Cehov Michael, 2013, 4).

Throughout their relation with dramatic texts and under the circumstances imposed by the author, creative actors can actually “live” on stage only by establishing a direct and extremely personal connection with it. The situation on stage must be embraced by actors at a human level first, this personal approach facilitating the transition from the conventional level to the psychological one. Characters imagined by playwrights are purely fictional, a shapeless material, “a potential model communicated through literal signs, so they are but a semiotic system. For them to become a material, living systems, these systems have to be created, imagined, and brought into existence.” (Cojar Ion, 1998, 45). Consequently, actors are the living elements that animate fiction and transform it into processual-objective reality, which leads to the idea that acting is also “in a direct and strict relation with coming into being, as well as with transformation” (Darie Bogdana, 2015, 149).

A genuine creating process can only take place when actors use “their own tools for thinking and feeling, their entire sensory system, through a transfer of concepts from them to the character, by means of substitution imagination” (Cojar Ion, 1998, 32). It is only possible to find an alter ego hidden in the core fibre of the actor’s personality once the actor assumes the life concept of the character, thus making the character come to life in front of the audience, who witnesses a psychological reality that can carry deep meanings. Professor Ion Cojar believes that all characters are within each of us, and that actors become characters by substitution, following the process of assuming the concept, or, to put it otherwise, the logical mechanism specific to the character, which also establishes the character’s action coordinates.

3. STAGE PERFORMANCE PARAMETERS – ACTING CONTEXT

The path taken by actors during the creation process might lead to two different, but perfectly valid directions: from the conscious to the unconscious and the other way around. The actor’s artistic undertaking of discovering or configuring the character involves a set of “rational elements, direct observations of reality, logical thinking, but also instinct, native empathic inclination, and strong intuition typical for the organic creative nature” (Niculescu Radu, 2004, 213). The conscious approach of drama is guided by the stage performance parameters of the situation proposed by the author: where? when? what? why? which together form the context of the who and the how of on-stage actions. Viola Spolin, creator of theatre games, proposes in her book, *Improvisation for Theatre*, various exercises (Spolin, Viola, 2008, pp.173-213) through which actors train their abilities and their imagination in connection to these theatre parameters. “On stage, one has to act. Action, and activity stand at the basis of drama, of acting... Therefore, drama performed on stage is action taking place in front of our eyes, and actors on stage become characters” (Stanislavski K. S, 2013, 94) explains great Stanislavski, who warns that the actions initiated by actors, who think and feel at the same time (reason and feeling / conscious and subconscious), must also happen on the inside, not only on the outside. Who and how are the parameters that make the difference between a genuine actor and an actor who imitates, mimes the action on stage. Who shows the identity of the character, while how refers to its way of acting. On-stage imitation always appears following the limitation of the acting creation process to the how, which makes the actor pay attention to himself / herself, to the way he/she is perceived by the audience, thus cancelling the status of genuine creator which was meant to become somebody else starting from who he/she is.

The founding principle of acting is given by the complex nature of the actor, which, during on-stage creation, can access multiple identities. If the actor’s focus is on himself / herself, his/her presence on stage will not draw the spectator’s attention, because the latter is only interested in the actor while acting, facing a real problem and investing his/her own physical, psychic and emotional resources to solve it. Starting from the idea that the purpose of creative acting is to be and to do (the actor undertakes an identity on behalf of which he/she acts), not to show (the actor composes himself / herself in front of the

audience in order to please the audience at any cost, and the problem to be solved on stage becomes a secondary purpose), it is important to tackle what could support actors in their creative process, attempting not to become a form without substance.

Given the above, we could say that theatrical performance and characters that lack “human touch” are dead ends. Games are ways through which actors can release their dormant virtual potential, materialize the vital principles of life, the multiple possibilities that lie inside and, at the same time, trigger authentic experiences; however, games cannot exist without rules, creation cannot appear when things are left at random. In order to achieve a genuine creation process, such process must take place within certain well-established parameters that would offer actors clarity in understanding the situation and psychology of the characters. Actors gain freedom to improvise, search and discover when they precisely and clearly understand the situation, and the acting options are in accordance with the situation and character psychology. “Nothing cannot be experienced, only a situation can be experienced. But what we don’t know and we don’t have to ask is how to do what is to be done. If we knew how, the situation would no longer be a problem, would no longer be drama, and the reason for the exercise would be gone. The answer to how is actually the result of the experiment... improvisation would have to consider the more complex parameters, starting with the answer to who – referring to the character” (Gâlea Marius, 2002, 14). An authentic creation process cannot take place without the man behind the actor; otherwise, without this organic component, imposture follows.

4. THE CONCEPT – TRIGGER OF OTHERNESS

In front of such challenges, actors need specific tools in order to authentically act on stage. During the process of understanding and assuming the character, the concept is a key element, which can solve many of the problems encountered by actors during the character creation process. As a work instrument for the art of acting, the concept functions as a compass in the attempt to understand and approach a dramatic character, starting from the information provided by the author, corroborated with the life experience and cultural background of the character, thus facilitating the transition from the private person to somebody else / the other, which is hidden and must be revealed.

All thoughts, actions, intentions and decisions of a character throughout the life imagined by the playwright can be related to a certain view on the world. The basic source lies in the inner value scale of the actor, which changes depending on the circumstances imposed by the dramatic text: if for the actor per se the governing principle is correctness and honesty, for the character (somebody else / the other) the value scale may be governed by falsehood and dishonesty. This example shows how a person might appear different through a simple reversal of the defining elements which are part of the perception filter for the environment. The actions and behaviours of an individual are, most of the times, keys to his/her nature, indirectly showing who he/she is, the evaluation of the others being first based on facts and behaviour and only then on words. Knowing a person on the outside, through his/her interactions with other people, precedes deeper inner knowledge. The conclusions drawn following such an evaluation are meant to define a person. For the analysis to go beyond the shallow level, actors have the task to place themselves at the core of the studied system, which is the role, the character.

The concept is the working tool that helps actors to explore the depths of a character’s inner life, in order to discover his / her primary purpose, the engine that drives him / her and significantly defines him / her in contrast to other characters. Why does he/she think, act and speak the way he / she does? is a question aiming to find an answer to the ultimate question: who is the character.

The concept is underlain by social and personal behaviour, life options, belief system, contradictions, but also by fears which might lead to paradoxes. The character’s energy also resides in the concept, which includes the character’s supreme goal. The value of a concept is, at the same time, given by how much is actor creativity stimulated, by its quality to set things in motion in order to achieve the end goal. The more energy an actor invests for his / her defining aspirations and desires in order to reach the ultimate goal, the higher the level of character assumption, and the vulnerability potential, the capacity to change at psychosomatic level will be activated. The personal involvement of the actor in the situation proposed, according to the Stanislavskian principle regarding the organic unity between the actor’s psychic and the physical life, brings into focus the human factor. Only by using the full “vulnerability potential” as a biopsychosocial unity shall the actor be able to perform within the

boundaries of his/her own humanity; only by approaching the “human side” shall the proper grounds for otherness be laid, and the personal subject as a source of originality and depth made concrete. Professor Ion Cojar highlights that actors function on a different type of logic, different from the classic, binary one, and he believes that acting creative phenomena cannot be reduced to “either reason, or feeling” (Diderot Denis, 1957, 15), as stated by Diderot, but involve both to equal extent and at the same time. This specific logical mechanism (which allows reason and feeling to co-exist in artistic creations), namely character mentality, is actually a concept, a founding principle that drives thinking and, consequently, a person’s behaviour, the assumed character’s way of thinking, a dynamic element capable of inciting substitutive imagination, meaning the actor’s specific way of being creative.

In the attempt to discover and synthesize the Concept in a single phrase that would capture the character’s essence, actors encounter another type of obstacle. The road to the character will not be always easy, because it will hide behind appearances and paradoxes, as it is the case with every human being permanently marked by contradictions: characters will say one thing and mean another. Most of the times, the intimate creed of a person is not directly displayed for the world to see, but can be guessed. Therefore, characters must not be taken at their word, and, following a vertical analysis, it results that they do not reveal their innermost desires to the other characters casually. When characters borrow the actors’ mentality, governed by various defence mechanisms meant to hide their own sensibilities and vulnerabilities, attempting to hide their ultimate goal, they will function according to the same type of human process. The concept must be hidden by the actor, who becomes the character’s lawyer, thus assuming all motivations standing at the basis of his / her behaviour. Actors become characters because they support the characters’ actions and ideas in the confrontation with other dramatic partners. Throughout the creation process, the actor substitutes the character, lending his / her body and thinking (uses his/her spirit in the interest of character’s conceptions), so that, finally, theatre conventions are transformed into a processual-objective reality.

The concept is the catalyst standing at the basis of a new reality. The strategies and solutions to satisfy the character’s desires and needs originate in the actor, who uses its inner resources to this purpose. Without the actual involvement of the actor, of the living element, giving it the human touch (including adding mystery), the concept, like the character (lifeless literary fiction), remains an abstract and sterile notion incapable of generating genuine life on stage.

5. GENUINE ART AND THE PROCESSUALITY OF THINKING

Dramatic text, made of various stimuli, becomes a living system only when the relation between the actor and the text is established at all levels of personality and it becomes a real, objective action. The importance of the plot fades in front of the events through which the actor goes through. Actors test by live experimenting the way to the truth. Genuine art means that the actor gives himself / herself to the characters, living his / her own feeling which correspond to the character’s; otherwise, “no real creation can exist where there is no sensation of one’s live feelings, analogous to the character’s” (Stanislavski K.S, 2013, 215) as Stanislavski said.

Consequently, actors are encouraged to search within themselves the feelings befitting the part, instead of changing it, falsifying it by creating the character after their own image. The same indication is given by Lucia Sturza Bulandra: “the more we are able to strip of our own personality in front of a study, the more clearly it will succeed for our mind” (Sturza Bulandra Lucia, 1962, 261). Basically, the great actress does not say that actors should lose their personality, but advises an approach lacking prejudice, fixed formulas, and recipes. The character revelation by the discovery of the whole through a defining feature must start from a “naivety” state, which could be called intuition of the character, referring to a view inside the studied system that implies deductive knowledge and analysis.

At this point, we come back to what the great theatre teachers say about the actor’s ability to understand. According to Stanislavski’s perspective, actors must, before all, observe, and afterwards filter through their own mind the meaning of the phenomena they observe, they must process it in order to use it. Consequently, on-stage performance is structured, in his opinion, as follows: observation → understanding → processing. Starting from these three stages of the process, Viola Spolia and Ion Cojar bring clarification aiming to result in a better understanding of the thinking process: taking over / coping ; processing; option and action.

Actors receive information, the stimulus from the environment or the partner, process the meaning of such information, which might generate several responses; actors may choose among these responses the one they consider necessary, and, in the end, they act. Without this psychological process, there can be no authentic creation and life in theatre, because “no on-stage creation is possible by simply uttering the words” (I.A.T.C.-Arta actorului, 1972, 126). Theatre is grounded on conflict, tensed clashes of will between partners with opposing goals and ideas, and thinking is exposed through dialogue, it is interrelational. For the psychological process (psychic events, either rational, or irrational, metabolic exchanges taking place in the depths of human beings) resulting from stage interactions to be spontaneous and continuous, the dialogue between actors must be coherent, logic, that is it must comply with “all the rules of a real dialogue: X says (verbal action), Y listens, processes the information received, chooses depending on the concept and his / her interests and acts accordingly, both verbally and physically” (Bețiu Mihaela, 2017, 84). The concept acts in the process area where the Option is - the step when actors choose to respond to a stimulus received according to the mental grid given by the concept. This is where the character comes in, through the assumption of a different perspective over the world, in accordance with the character’s mentality, which may be similar or, paradoxically, completely different from the actor’s.

An interesting circumstance might arise when the actor, as a private person, is proud, choleric, aggressive, but has to play a character with an impeccable calm, forgiving and tolerant in relation to other people. The main danger in such cases is the fact that the actor will be tempted to fake the behaviour, to use a known pattern or to use behavioural clichés related to “nice people”. However, the result will be an empty carrier, a general approach of a character type, an “artistic intention” that lacks authenticity and plausibility, because imitation does not mean character assumption, or organic behaviour determined by due process. In the example presented above, the concept (which works according to the principle explained by professor Ion Cojar “only by being myself can other people become possible inside me”) helps actors throughout the entire process of creation to distinguish between the attempt of substitution through assumption and the temptation to use imitation.

By means of this important tool, actors start developing the character from known information toward the information to be discovered. Only by using the assumption first on oneself can one assume the dimensions of the other, who one aims to become, explains professor Ion Cojar. It is obvious that the actor cannot radically and irrevocably change his / her behaviour, personality, and world view during the process of developing a character. What can be changed then? The way that one chooses to act. Sanford Meisner believes that a character is defined by “how he/she does what he / she does”. Therefore, the moment when the actors chooses another line of action in reaction to a stimulus, adequate for another mental grid, different from the actor as a private person, marks the switch to another point of view, the assumption of another mentality which will define the actor’s actions and will determine their specific parameters. The main goal of the character will not be changed, but only the way it proceeds to attain that goal. In the actor’s art, the goal is a work tool that determines the character’s action set, while the concept defines how the characters choose to act to reach that goal. Moreover, the concept has one most relevant quality, that of stimulating the affective side of the actor by developing the emotional dimension of the character.

There are situations when the actor understands and “solves” the artistic tasks related to a dramatic part only at a rational level, being blocked from an emotional point of view, and thus using emotion impression or its representation in order to “cover” the feelings of the character. Nevertheless, the character component of utmost importance is the inner one, the emotional side, and this side results from the manner the actor understands the text given circumstances. Characters are born by emotion, by the actors’ capacity to change at a deep level (psychically, physically, physiologically, emotionally), by using one’s potential of vulnerability. The concept has the ability to stimulate this potential which is essential in order to render with authenticity the character’s inner workings throughout his / her life on stage. From this point of view, the concept could also be used as an emotional unblocker in the acting process.

This is why we strongly believe that the concept must not refer to general beliefs on life – the world is cruel, life is hard, etc. – but statements containing verbs with an obvious emotional impact: I only feel happy when I give, I love to be the centre of attention, I hate liars, etc. By using such statements, actors will no longer be tempted to have a general approach or to process information at an exterior level, and his / her actions on stage will become personal and specific, befitting the character profile.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the concept has a key role in the attempt to approach and understand the inner workings of the character. It synthesizes the core of a character, the intimate mechanisms of his / her personality, thus proposing a highly subjective perspective. The concept strives to schematically define what makes a character who he/she is, what determines his / her actions, what triggers his / her feelings, being the essence of a new identity and, consequently, of a new reality.

While the concept is the heart of the character's personality, a formula to reach the proper outcome, the actual factors of this equation are the solutions to accomplish the characters' desires and needs found by the actor during his / her work on the part. Without the support of the actor's spirit, personality, and creativity, the concept is just an empty vessel, a cold and unrealistic rendition of a human being. This is why character assumption is of utmost importance in order to achieve outstanding acting performance.

Therefore, when actors do not fill in the blanks with plausible and creative approaches, the concept results in clichés and stereotypic actions. In such cases, characters cannot be brought to life, they remain shallow and unconvincing abstract notions that comply with a recipe, and cannot resonate within the audience.

Given the complex interactions between concept and character assumption, we might say that the concept is a guide that must be used creatively to define precise, specific actions, it is an inspiration that helps actors to choose a path that gathers many possible approaches, thus supporting the actor in character assessment. Character assumption is the ingredient that adds depth, liveliness, and meaning, helping to recreate a slice of reality on stage, and it focuses on the emotional connection between actor and character, activating the vulnerability potential of the former by proper assessment of the latter. By using these tools, it becomes possible for on-stage performance to reach the hearts of the public, because the characters become relatable and recognizable, touching the emotional strings of the audience.

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