

# THE ACTOR'S DUALISTIC BEING

Rumyana Nikolova

Any talk about the actor inevitably goes through an attempt to “get a hold of” acting as an art. Most basic postulates have become completely banal, and nevertheless theorising on that topic cannot but proceed from them. Not in order to refute them but rather, by reaffirming them, to insert its own individual, albeit small corrections; to expand the possible points of view to such an elusive matter as the art of the one who acts.

Historically, the views on the actor and the focus on his/her art changed fundamentally with the establishment of the director's figure. In the pursuit to problematize the role of the text and the spoken language as the only possible bearer of meanings, Modern theatre in its very beginning ignored the actor because of his/her role of the principal bearer of verballity. Thus, the reform in Modern theatre began from the scenic space (Adolphe Appia, Peter Behrens, Georg Fuchs, Gordon Craig). In some concepts, the actor is even seen as a superfluous element that holds secrets and therefore becomes a threat to the future of theatre.<sup>1</sup> Seeking for its new face, the theatre of the early Modernity wanders about in different, sometimes quite extreme directions; it waits for its essential

<sup>1</sup> See Прампolini, Енрико. Футуристичната сценична атмосфера (1924). – В: Браунек, М. Театърът в XX век. – Сп. “Гестус”, 1990, № 3–4, с. 186. [Prampolini, Enrico. *The Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere* (1924). In: Brauneck, M. *Theatre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. – *Gestus*, 1990, No. 3–4, p. 186.]

axis – the actor's own action. The actor's transformation from a tool-thing into a tool-individual. Into an actor-personality obsessed by another person. This transformation is done by Stanislavski.<sup>2</sup>

From that point on, 20<sup>th</sup> century practitioners, having realized that the generic characteristic of theatre is the actor's presence, have looked for ways to improve, train and develop it, and theoreticians have attempted to find and describe its essence. The actor is recognized as the principal bearer of the stage narrative and the actor's strategies in the process of narrating determine the various acting theories and practices.

The difficulty in finding a clear and categorical definition of acting stems from the well-known fact that performing/role-playing is inherent to the human individual, especially in their social functions. It is precisely for this reason that the most general formulations of acting are also usually the most precise ones. Such for instance is the defini-



<sup>2</sup> Николова, Камелия. Другото име на модерния театър. София: Университетско издателство “Св. Климент Охридски”, 1995, с. 71. [Nilolova, Kamelia. *The Other Name of Modern Theatre*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 1995, p. 71.]

tion offered by Declan Donnellan: "Acting is a mystery, and so is theatre. We assemble in a space and divide into two parts, one of which enacts stories for the remainder. We know of no society where this ritual never happens, so it appears that humanity has a profound need to witness acted-out representations, from television soap opera to Greek Tragedy."<sup>3</sup>

This general definition contains several of the dualisms inherent to the actor as an artist. Firstly, the actor is an individual with his/her personal qualities, peculiarities, knowledge and emotions, just like the ones who will be watching him/her, but at the instant of separation (the actor is on the stage, and the audience is in the auditorium), the actor is transformed, on the one hand, into an artist, and on the other, into "raw material" for creative work.

According to Philip Auslander, "in discussion, we often treat acting as philosophers treat language – as a transparent medium which provides access to truth, *logos* or a grounding concept which functions as *logos* within a particular production. Such grounding concepts are: the playwright's vision, the director's concept or, more interesting, the actor's self. We often praise acting by calling it "honest" or "self-revelatory," "truthful"; when we feel we have glimpsed some aspect of the actor's psyche through her performance, we applaud the actor for "taking risks," "exposing herself."<sup>4</sup>

We cannot help but agree with Auslander's assertion that "The problem-

atic of self is, of course, central to performance theory. Theorists as diverse as Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths."<sup>5</sup>

From a slightly different point of view, it is precisely the "problematic of self" that also defines the grounding dualism of acting: "being someone else while being yourself on stage." This duality is a main axis around which the various acting methodologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are situated.

At one end of that axis is Stanislavski with his requirement of the actor: "Never lose yourself on the stage. Always act in your own person, as an artist. [...] The moment you lose yourself on the stage marks the departure from truly living your part and the beginning of exaggerated false acting."<sup>6</sup> The quest for psychological accuracy becomes Stanislavski's main objective for the actor. The actor is required to "live the life" of the character (s) he is embodying on stage; to experience and not to represent is Stanislavski's popular and basic idea. Achieving psychological accuracy is not an easy task for the actor. The path to it goes through a number of exercises and encompasses the entire experience of the actor's personality. From this perspective Philip Auslander is right that "Stanislavski's discourse on acting is inscribed firmly within logocentrism: he insists on the need for logic, coherence and unity. [...] There is no question but that the presence of the

<sup>3</sup> Donnellan, Declan. *The Actor and the Target*. Nick Hern Book, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Auslander, Philip. "JUST BE YOUR SELF": *Logocentrism and difference in performance theory*. In: *Acting (re) considered*. Routledge, 2002, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Stanislavski, K. *An Actor Prepares*. Routledge, 1989, p. 192.

actor's self as the basis of performance is for him the source of truth in acting: he defines good acting as acting based on the performer's own experience and emotions. He privileges the actor's self over his or her role by stating on the one hand that actor and character should fuse completely in performance and, on the other, that an actor can never play anyone but herself. [...] The merging of actor and character thus results exclusively in a fresh presentation (or representation) of self.<sup>7</sup>

These assertions are true as far as the first half of Stanislavski's practice (which his theory is also derived from) goes. When he starts dealing with the method of physical actions, Stanislavski ceases to ask himself, "what would I feel under the circumstances of the character? As far as what I do depends on my will." And it seems that here is the key to all of his discoveries. It was not until the end of his life that he reached the true discovery. Until then he was dealing only with the right questions but it was at the end of his life that he began to get close to the right answers.<sup>8</sup>

Stanislavski's ideas can be derived from several of his texts. He constantly changed or developed, and sometimes abandoned some of his previous theses on actor's methodology in the process of looking for the "right" one. This makes it possible to draw different conclusions from his books which are substantiated in a given context but turn out to be false if applied to another stage of his work.

<sup>7</sup> Auslander, Philip. "JUST BE YOUR SELF", p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Гротовски, Й. Йежи Гротовски и Анатолий Василев. – *Homo Ludens*, 4–5/2002, с. 123. [Grotowski, J. Jerzy Grotowski and Anatoliy Vassiliev. – *Homo Ludens*, No. 4–5/2002, p. 123.]



Photographer Phillip Zarrilli

The nine basic states of being / doing (*bhava*) in *Kathakali* dance-drama.

For Bertolt Brecht that same dualism is not only not a hindrance to be overcome, it is a possibility which the actor must use in his/her work on the role. And it would read like this: "commenting on someone else while being your own self on stage." One of Brecht's theatre's most important principles is the need for art to be involved in social change. Theatre in its ideology must study, and dialectically at that, the relationships between people and events for the sake of change. Thus, his actor is required to express his/her attitude towards the character being presented and their actions.<sup>9</sup> In this sense Brecht has "excessive requirements" of the actor because

<sup>9</sup> Брехт, Бертолт. Из писма до актьора. В: Бертолт Брехт за театъра. София: "Наука и изкуство", 1964, с. 260. [Brecht, Bertolt. *From a*

the latter must be present on stage as a person but not with his/her personal emotional experience, as is the case in Stanislavski's theory, but with knowledge that is presumed to be greater than the spectators' knowledge. Roland Barthes suggests that "the [Brechtian] actor must present the very knowledge of the play's meaning [...] The actor must prove [...] that he guides meaning toward its ideality". Timothy Wiles enlarges on this description by indicating that the Brechtian actor "feigns to inhabit a position of knowledge that is superior to the audience"; the actor "speaks from the position of a Marxist utopia in which the problems of the play that Brecht suggests *can be solved have been solved*". To guide the play's meaning properly, the actor must pretend to possess knowledge which, historically, he or she cannot possess. The persona that the Brechtian actor presents alongside of the character that she portrays is a fictional creation.<sup>10</sup>

Both Brecht's and Stanislavski's pursuit to have the actor present on stage with his/her personality (with his/her social experience in Brecht; with his/her emotional memory in Stanislavski) and to have the character building closely tied to that personality proves to be quite illusionary.

At the other end of the axis outlined by that first dualism is Grotowski's practice in which the actor's personality is self-revealed in its deepest intimacy. "Here everything is concentrated on the "ripening" of the actor, which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bear

---

letter to an actor. In: Bertolt Brecht on Theatre. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1964, p. 260.]

<sup>10</sup> Auslander, Philip. "JUST BE YOUR SELF", p. 56.

[sic] of one's own intimacy – all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment."<sup>11</sup> Total precision is required from the "sacred actor". His/her presence on stage is closer to excess and trance: "One must give oneself totally, in one's deepest intimacy, with confidence, as when one gives one-self in love. Here lies the key. Self-penetration, trance, **excess**, the formal discipline itself – all this can be realized, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defence."<sup>12</sup> This determines Grotowski's and his actors' quite different attitude towards the character. They are not concerned with the actor's motivation in the fictional space and role. The role is a means of self-revelation of the actor's personality. The desired outcome is a form constructed by the role which is used as a "surgeon's scalpel" to dissect themselves in order to get to the deepest and most intimate experiences of their personal lives.<sup>13</sup>

We have outlined a possible way of speaking about the actor through the dualism of personality (self) and fictional personality (role). We have used only the most vivid examples from the theatre practice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many other ideas about the actor's essence may be placed on the axis outlined by Stanislavski – Brecht – Grotowski; both in between, before, and after these names.

Thus, for instance, on this axis, Brook's actor is somewhere between Brecht and Grotowski. (S) he is a researcher, an inventor, and, first and foremost, a mediator for the "transfer of truths", which reminds us of Brecht's theses. And the ways of achiev-

---

<sup>11</sup> Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Routledge, 2002, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

ing those purposes resemble Grotowski's method of *via negativa* – the elimination of boundaries and limitations rather than the accumulation of skills.

Another basic dualism that stems from the essence of acting and can be used to speak of it is the mind – body (mental – physical / inner – outer) dualism. Without fully coinciding in meaning, these pairs are very often used as synonymous or mutually explanatory ones. Traditionally, in Western tradition these pairs are oppositional and mutually exclusive. This separation was suggested as early as in the Ancient Greek call for “a healthy mind in a healthy body”. Since this is the “ideal” option, the assumption is that there are various potential combinations, such as “a healthy mind in a sick body,” for instance. The important thing is that the human entirety is perceived as a composite of two independent parts: mind and body. This separation did not go away with the emergence of psychology as a science in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, either. Psychology evolved as a science concerned with thoughts and feelings, as opposed to the disciplines dealing with physiology. The evolution of the scientific notions of the relation between the mental and the physical strongly influenced the concepts of the art of acting, too.

It is precisely in that area that we find Stanislavski's revolutionary contribution to the actor's preparation. The conviction he arrived at towards the end of his practice, that body and mind are a psycho-physical whole, became one of his most influential ideas. It was shaped under the strong influence of both French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot and his thesis that emotion does not exist without a physical consequence, and Russian physiologist

Ivan Pavlov. The result of that conviction was *The Method of Physical Actions*, considered to be one of the supreme achievements in Stanislavski's System. It was developed based on the concept that human behaviour is a phenomenon resulting not just from psychic or just from physical impulses, but from their interconnection. Hence the notion that if an actor chooses an appropriate physical action and acts it out convincingly, she/he will also elicit the feeling sought.

Stanislavski invested a lot of energy and long-lasting attempts in his pursuit to build the actor's psycho-physical entirety. At certain stages of his work, he went more or less to one extreme or the other. The reason why every follower of Stanislavski developed a different aspect of his legacy probably lies here.

The most popular follower of Stanislavski's system in America is Lee Strasberg. He developed his Method starting from the aspect in Stanislavski's work associated with psychology. According to David Krasner's precise definition, “Method acting” emerged as a technique that drew from Stanislavski's emphasis on the craft of acting and accentuated working on a role that called upon the actor to build from his or her personal life and political ideals.”<sup>14</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner developed their own versions. All three elaborated different directions of Stanislavski's work, but in terms of the dualism under examination here, they are on the plane of psychology where “The actor personalizes the role, i.e. draws from the self, from his or her emotional, psycholog-

---

<sup>14</sup> Krasner, D. *Strasberg, Adler and Meisner. Method Acting*. In: *Twentieth Century Actor Training*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 130.

ical or imaginative reality, bringing into view aspects of one's memories, life experiences and observations that correlate with the role."<sup>15</sup>

Mikhail Chekhov also uses Stanislavski's ideas as a basis but he, much more consciously, seeks the psycho-physical totality of the actor's presence. Exercises with imagination have an exceptional practical worth in his work with actors. Rehearsals in imagination also have a very specific external manifestation. They prepare the actor's body by sending him/her impulses for the character's nature and manner: "you mold your body from within, as it were, and penetrate it throughout with artistic feelings, emotions and will impulses."<sup>16</sup>

Meyerhold sought his acting method in the other end of the dualism discussed here. The actor's training system he developed and called *biomechanics* is "a form of training that aimed at developing actors who would be part athletes, part acrobats, part animated machines. Bio-mechanics was gymnastic based upon:

- Preparation for an action – pause –
- The action itself – pause –
- And its corresponding re-action.

Its aim was to discipline both the emotional and muscular response of the actor. [...] Meyerhold demanded from his actors the vigorous elimination of all human feeling and the creation of an order based upon mechanical laws; the actor was to function as a machine – a somersault, *salto-mortale*, or head-spring would suffice to convey different states of emotion."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor: on the Technique of Acting*. Routledge, 2002, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Roose-Evans, James. *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavski to Peter Brook*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 28.



Photographer Antonio Mayo

Pedro Carhel *Virtual Vertigo*, 1993

For Meyerhold the essence of an actor's art is in the organization of his/her material, that is, the skill to correctly use his/her body's means of expression<sup>18</sup>. The challenge lies in another dualism which Meyerhold was aware of and which puts the actor in a situation quite different from that of other artists, namely that the actor combines in him/herself both the organizer and the one being organized

<sup>18</sup> Мейерхолд, В. Е. Актьорът на бъдещето и биомеханиката. В: "Статии, писма, речи". София: "Наука и изкуство", 1984, с.239. [Meyerhold, V. E. *The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics*. In: *Articles, Letters, Speeches*. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1984, p. 239.]

(i.e. the artist and the material).<sup>19</sup> Meyerhold expressed that with a formula:  $N = A1 + A2$ , where N is the actor, A1 is the constructor who proposes the conception and gives an order for its implementation, and A2 is the actor's body, the performer who carries out the task set by the constructor (A1).<sup>20</sup>

Meyerhold's exercises with the actor are led by his conviction that the body's position also determines the correct intonations and emotions, i.e. the correct physical form is a point of departure for finding the true basis of the role.

The example with Meyerhold's theses corroborates the idea that most acting methods from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tend to gravitate to one or the other pole of the dualism discussed here, even where they intuitively understand that one cannot work with the actor but as with a total, psycho-physical whole. During the second half of the century, theatre practitioners focused much more on methodologies that reconcile and reveal the mutual dependencies of spirit and body (or: mental – physical / inner – outer). To a great extent Antonin Artaud's theatrical visions have become an inspiration for creative quests in that direction. After his encounter with Balinese theatre, Artaud formulated his call for an actor who is much more sensory but by way of the "physical localizations of feelings" because "the actor is an athlete of the heart"<sup>21</sup>. The actor's art is a total act; "The actor should not use his organism to illustrate a "movement of the soul", he should

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and Its Double*, translated by Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958, p. 133.

accomplish this movement with his organism"<sup>22</sup>.

Artaud's utopias foment the research theses on the actor of key theatre practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook. In their practice, this dualism remains the focus of their research interest, but now with the clear conviction of the interdependency of its extremities.

All three of them make exceptional efforts to train and master the actor's body, but the physical training is not an end in itself for them. The actor's training prepares him/her for the true creative work or is a part of it. For the actor does work publicly with his/her physical body as the main means of expression, but it must be in a "state of being an obedient tool capable of representing a mental act."<sup>23</sup>

Acting methodologies from the second half of the previous century shape out the contemporary psycho-physical approach to the actor's creative work. In its essence it is an attempt to develop an acting language beyond the mind – body dualism. It is not only the directors mentioned here, but also a lot of contemporary practitioners who work in that direction. This gives us grounds to assert that the most topical trend and opportunity for new acting approaches is the quest beyond the extremities of these dualisms inherent in the actor's nature.

*Published in Homo Ludens 2009 / No.14.*

*Translated by  
Atanas Igov*

---

<sup>22</sup> Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*, p. 123.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 152.