

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING THROUGH THE ART OF ACTING

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Abstract: *When a person becomes part of a university program in order to become an actor, they might choose to assign important meaning to their learning process by basing their success on the approval of one or more individuals considered to have a superior status. This mentality is one that will not positively support the student once they exit the academic environment as it promotes a lack of self-confidence and self-sufficiency. For this reason, it is essential that the actor-pedagogue broadcast a mindset that will benefit their apprentices by example as well as through their words. First year student-actors often practice the self-defeating mentality of disregarding their own way of thinking for the sake of exterior approval, a goal that they consider to be more important. However, this kind of thinking does not serve anyone wishing to practice the Art of Acting. An actor must first of all be free to examine his or her own personal way of thinking, of reacting in different circumstances. It is from that point onward that they can truly be prepared to start gathering the life experience necessary to become a professional actor.*

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Having recently been accepted into a doctoral study program, and shifting perspectives from that of student to teacher's assistant, I have been observing how various teaching methods are currently being applied in theatre pedagogy. It has become clear that

the Art of Acting takes on much new meaning, when emphasized through this shift of perspective. As the student-actors progress in their understanding of the artform they have chosen to study, their educators undergo a similar process of evolution by adapting their methods and techniques to suit not only the students' needs, but also their own level of knowledge and experience. In other words, teachers and students evolve simultaneously. The kind of training that takes place in a classroom designed for theatre students is unlike the traditional education system the students are familiarized with, where the teacher is considered to have a superiority. However, although changing this point of reference is beneficial for the learning process, it can prove difficult to accept and apply by both factions.

A highly influential theatre director, university professor and author of "Poetics of the Actor's Art", a book that reflects on the subject of theatre pedagogy, Ion Cojar, stated: "A good theatre school does not teach the truths of past generations, but rather methods, ways, towards the yet undiscovered truths of generations still in formation. (...) Any school, especially one of the actor's art, any institution that claims to be formative, must keep a constant sharp eye on the human who is continuously evolving, and to subordinate everything to the process of actualization of the potential that is hidden within each possible creator."⁵²

This is a fundamental concept for teaching this specific artform, as it defines the starting point of the course from the professor's perspective, in relation to defining the most suitable scheme for constructing the lesson plan. This is the reason why I believe the most important part of the educational process in the Art of Acting is to first and foremost assess the group's educational needs by identifying each individual's top aptitudes as well as those skills that still need to mature. Then, by choosing appropriate

⁵² Ion Cojar, *Poetics of the Actor's Art*, UNATC Press, București, 2017, pp. 94-95

exercises, a group dynamic will be established, while maintaining a safe space for unhindered experimentation and challenging the individuals at the same time.

Cojar also speaks about the fact that the purpose of an academic course which teaches the Art of Acting is not to obtain a final artistic production, but to discover and mature the creative potential inherent in every creator. This defines the main goal of an academic setting in which the student may freely experiment with and learn to develop those necessary skills needed in order to approach the profession of being an actor.

The teacher, like the actor, cannot reach an end point in his or her educational journey. With each student, they begin anew, by adapting to the person or group of people in front of them. This does not mean that the previous circumstances they have experienced are to be forgotten or regarded as superfluous, as the resulted considerations shape and advance the ideas and techniques utilized by the professor in each new course.

An educator in the artistic field must always be open to new perspectives and willing to adapt their point of view, according to the group's dynamic. The focus should not be on maintaining ideas for the sake of being viewed as flawless, but to be susceptible to change, to keep an open mind, an ability which educators must encourage in their students as well.

In “Managementul grupului în pedagogia teatrală și cinematografică” we can uncover many different perspectives on teaching the Art of Acting at a university level. For example, Ioana Barbu, a professor in this field, makes a very detailed description of a typical group of first year students who have chosen to study the Art of Acting in an academic setting. This group is usually comprised of young people, between 19 and 30 years old. Of course, each group will contain various perceptions about the Art of Acting itself, based on prior experiences involving theatre or their familial backgrounds, etc. This comes to emphasize the idea that each group, constructed

from the various identities of its individual members, may become an entity in and of itself. This allows the teacher to alternate between focusing on the group's abilities and those of the individuals forming the group to select and apply those exercises that are proven to be most effective and engaging to not only utilize but also enhance the targeted aptitudes.

The same author touches on the importance of vulnerability during any theatre workshop or class. She states that: "The great contradiction of the Art of the Actor is that, most often, it spotlights intimate situations in front of an audience. Moreover, the relationship between acting partners relies on intimacy and trust, but this also takes place in front of an audience. Yet another source of vulnerability for an actor. Therefore, one of the main objectives of an acting class is to train students to find the freedom and pleasure to create within the uncomfortable condition given by vulnerability."⁵³

Vulnerability always gives rise to fear, especially in an unsafe environment. This is the reason why both inner and outer safety are of utmost importance in an experimental setting. The safer the student will feel, the more he or she will freely experiment without being concerned for their safety, physical, emotional or otherwise. For this reason, an essential part of the educational process is represented by the definition of rules.

Regardless of age, the concept of rules provides strong boundaries and defines the environment in which the learning procedure will take place. Because of this, they create a space that is safe for experimentation, which is one of the main building blocks of life-long education. This type of learning will not only provide explanations for the elements that are being studied, they will also make available to the student the ability and interior freedom to test

⁵³ Translated from Camelia Popa, *Managementul grupului în pedagogia teatrală și cinematografică*, UNATC Press, București, 2019, p. 43

various situations and involve themselves in a continuous learning and adaptation process.

The subject of feedback is a highly sensitive one in my opinion. This is due to the fact that, whereas praising the student at times can have an enormously beneficial effect on their self-esteem, this should always be done with careful consideration on the effects it will produce within the group. Commendation should serve to teach constructively and should neither become a common platitude nor a goal for the student to achieve. Even in situations where a healthy degree of competition is an appropriate solution to stimulate beneficial energy, it should be kept in mind that another fundamental element in practicing the Art of Acting is equality. This may be a difficult concept to fully grasp. However, considering the fact that the individuals present in the class are there to focus their current experience and knowledge in order to develop certain aptitudes is true of students and professors alike.

In the book “Actorul român între teorie și practică”, Dana Rotaru, a lecturer at The National University of Theatre and Film “I. L. Caragiale” of Bucharest, points out the main idea to be considered when working with actors in the classroom: “As for the conception of the art of the actor, both actors, those representing the old school, as well as those of the new school, plead for an interpretation as close as possible to life itself, to what we call *natural*, humanlike. The *natural* interpretation of the actor of the nineteenth century, for example, is not the same as the *natural* interpretation of the actor from the second half of the twentieth century. The *natural*, the *human*, the *realistic* interpretation, these are expressions, forms of manifestation that respond or meet the needs of today’s present society.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Translated from Dana Rotaru, *Actorul român între teorie și practică*, UNATC Press, București, 2018, p. 89

It is common to speak about the realistic interpretation of an actor when analyzing the pedagogical principles of this specific artform. However, the perception we apply to the investigation should always be based on that which is currently understood as *realistic, true* or *natural*, concepts that may differ radically according to time periods or cultures. Consequently, it will become apparent that students' and teachers' points of reference may be different.

It is very important not to invalidate the students' cultural references due to the fact that these elements are a part of the formative journey that the individual has undergone up to the present point in time. Encouraging new experiences, compatible with the student and useful for his or her progression in the Art of Acting is significant.

The professor-actor should inspire and encourage the student to challenge his or her own self, to overcome their current condition and always evolve and learn new things in concordance with their personality and character traits. Expanding a student's horizons not only by providing examples but also by teaching them how to think for themselves, is one of the most valuable skills an educator should perfect.

At times, the line between guiding the student towards uncovering his or her own internal mechanisms so as to utilize them constructively in any given situation, may become unclear by the wish to excel as a teacher. It is for this reason that a sense of equality is preferable when teaching this specific artform. The one who teaches the Art of Acting is not and should not be viewed as an expert, or an authority figure by their apprentices, as this type of interaction will guide the student along the path of pleasing the teacher, which will not yield positive long-term results.

The pedagogue is, in many ways, learning new insight from each new group they come into contact with, therefore, it must be understood that the process of learning does not have a finality. When both the student and the educator understand the principle of

equality, it will be much easier for them to function in the set parameters of the teaching space dedicated to the Art of Acting.

The book “Curs de arta actorului, Improvizatia” written by Bogdana Darie elaborates on the principles first systemized by Stanislavski and applied in the Romanian school of the Actor’s Art by Ion Cojar. The following quote speaks about the starting point of the educational process of the actor: “(...) under no circumstances can a separation be made between actor and human being. When the process of education and preparation for performance of the actor begins, the stage of education and training specific to this art begins, for the human being who is... within the actor.”⁵⁵

Therefore, an actor’s training occurring in a university setting focuses on the entirety of the human being. This is due to the fact that an actor utilizes his or her personal truths and abilities, both internal and external, in order to portray any given character at any given moment. By conveying this message to the student, an educator in the Art of Acting becomes a part of a team whose goal it is to explore and uncover ways in which to become more susceptible to the existing realities of the world. The student undergoes a process that allows him or her to constantly acclimatize to new circumstances, according to their own internal nature and organic structure. However, this internal guidance must first be explored and acknowledged. This is the core purpose for studying the Art of Acting.

In conclusion, an actor’s first year in university should represent a time dedicated to exploring within the self those essential abilities that he or she will need in order to function according to their natural structure. The learning process is a permanently ongoing one for both the student-actor and the actor-professor. It is the pedagogues who must pass on these principles through example and

⁵⁵ Translated from Bogdana Darie, *Curs de arta actorului. Improvizatia*, UNATC Press, București, 2015, p. 41

practical work, they themselves functioning by the same ideologies that they impart.

References

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