

The Art of Acting as a Specific Logical Mechanism

Claudia Ene¹

¹I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, Romania

claudia.ene@unatc.ro

Abstract

First and foremost, acting is a specific logical mechanism. As Romanian Director and Acting Professor Ion Cojar stated, an actor must assimilate different concepts and ways of thinking specific for the characters he is portraying. Thus, the actor's way of thinking is the polyvalent logic—he is both a civilian and Romeo. The founding principle of acting, as Ion Cojar summarizes in *Poetics of the Actor's Art* (1996) is that the actor is, at the same time, both himself and another. Creation begins from within, putting “myself in given situations”. Only after discovering one's own dimensions can one take on “the other's” dimensions.

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Introduction

In terms of the art of acting, classical logic accepted the dichotomy: “either sense or sensibility”, as found in Diderot's writings. Contrary to this idea, Romanian director, and acting professor Ion Cojar states that the art of acting involves both feeling and thought, and that the actor's way of thinking is based on polyvalent logic, he must believe and be two things at a time: himself and “another”—the character. In other words, the actor must identify the concept of the character, its “way of thinking”, and assimilate them.

When analysing the artistic creation process of the actor, the starting point is precisely the equality relationship between “ACTOR” and “HUMAN”, discussed in

detail by Ion Cojar. It is impossible to make a distinction between the two: "This logical couple is irreducible, no matter from which perspective or presupposition and, therefore, form of artistic diversity, we would approach the actor's art" (Cojar, 1998, p. 99). This relationship of equality opens the discussion not only about the permanent process of self-knowledge and self-discovery of the actor, but also about the relationship between the actor and his role. The road to portraying a character begins from within: first, there is the road of "myself in given situations", then of the self-searching for its purpose in the stage convention and, ultimately, of the self-becoming the character—taking on its fundamental concept and way of thinking. Creation must reflect the free and unpredictable manifestations of the dynamic and contradictory human nature. That is, creation must spring from the immediate man, from the human actor's own dimensions. Only in this way, the actor's art transcends its condition of "imitation of nature" and becomes "the expression of complex and contradictory nature as a specific phenomenon of human totality" (Cojar, 1998, p. 156).

Drama universities are particularly concerned with the process and phenomena specific to human creativity. In terms of student training, theatrical pedagogy aims at both the natural biological and cultural components of the human beings. The aim is to reconsider, to approach differently, the natural component by developing specific skills. It turns out that from any point of view we approach the actor, we cannot ignore a founding principle—that of human individuality. Thus, the actor's training—aimed at acquiring specific skills—cannot take place without a specific preparation of the self: his personality, his own way of thinking etc.

How do actors approach a part?

What do we mean by biological and cultural components and what is their purpose? First of all, actors are creators, not interpreters or imitators. Creation demands that the artist bring his own world on stage.

It often happens that the actors choose to create a convincing model of what they think of the character, simulating reality. When this happens, what we see on stage is an imitation, a reproduction of the actor's opinions on the respective part. They may believe that this is a proper way to go through with the scene, a very accessible path towards it, especially when they see the part as far away from their own personal experiences. Distancing themselves from their own worlds, they

create a void that they feel they must fill with physical actions, useless actions, “civilian” gestures. Or, in some other cases, they do not try to find the meaning of the lines but choose to “sing” them in a way that gives them the feeling of experiencing something real. No such solution can fill up the inner void—and the audience can see that.

The only way to the core of a character is, as Ion Cojar mentioned, to discover and assimilate its specific logical mechanism, the concept that makes a character be that character. Before considering the art of acting as “a modality of doing” (Cojar, 1998, p. 39), we must consider it a specific way of thinking. Creation implies building a complex psychological structure of the character, which, afterwards, triggers the transformation of the actor into “another”. Cojar believes that all characters are within ourselves, in a latent state, waiting for the proper triggers in order to spring to the surface. They are but fiction, “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, 1998, p. 45). Actors must begin their journey towards the character from within themselves, making use of their own tools for feeling and thinking. Only by doing this are they capable of turning fiction into a psychological reality, transforming and becoming the characters right in front of the audience.

Assuming the concept of a character, the actor brings to life an alter ego hidden in his inner world, giving it meaning, significance and turning it from a potential model to a psychological reality. If all characters are within us, actors become characters as long as they assume the logical mechanism specific to said character. This mechanism, this life concept establishes all the other action coordinates of the part.

One of the most important issues in theatre is the form without substance. Very often, the actor forgets he has a complex nature, and chooses to show himself in front of the audience, rather than be the character. He must draw the audience’s attention, but this is impossible if the actor focuses on himself. What the audience wants to see is a character solving a problem, the physical, emotional, and psychological journey from beginning to end. Creative acting, unlike imitation or reproduction, involves undertaking an identity on behalf of which the actor acts. During onstage creation, the actor is able to access multiple identities, which cannot

be anticipated or simulated. Cojar considers that these psychological changes cannot be faked—they are organic, like the changing in somebody's colour of face. The actor must not imitate the final result but take on the real process of creation.

This process cannot be left at random. Actors must follow certain rules, in order to release, to materialize their virtual potentials that lie inside them. Rules are made only to trigger real, authentic human experiences. In the first place, actors must understand the situations within the play, establish parameters such as who?; when?; why?; where?; how?, which offer clarity in terms of both the situations and the psychology of their character. Afterwards, their acting options will be in accordance with these parameters.

The most difficult of them is the parameter of “how?”. Searching for an answer, the actor begins to improvise, in order to find a solution for the conflict. Here is brought into discussion the organic component of the actor – the self, with all its experiences, desires, dreams, or traumas. The actor is unable to find an authentic answer to “how?” without making use of his own persona, his psychology and ultimately – his imagination. In order to create genuine art, the actor must give himself to the play, give his thoughts and feelings to the character, finding analogous emotions to those of the part.

Every character is a challenge for the actor, who needs specific skills in order to fulfil the demands of the creative process. In order to better understand and assume the psychology of a character, the actor uses a key element called *the concept*.

The concept encompasses a view on the world, provided by the whole set of actions, thoughts, objectives, intentions, motivations, or decisions of the character, as they appear in the play. Understanding this complex (yet fictional) structure, the actor makes the first steps towards “the other”, a virtual potential lying inside him. Further character study will show the difference between his actions and his words, his interactions with other characters versus his real intentions etc. In other words, the concept defines what makes a character be that character, what is his essence, his personality, his view on the world. We must not forget that, if we attribute a sort of psychology to the character, this means contradiction and paradox—between words and actions, thoughts and display of emotions etc.

However, assuming the concept is not enough. Having acknowledged the core of the character, the actor must approach all his actions based on the respective

concept, using his own creativity in the process. Otherwise, the concept is purely theoretical and useless. It is the personality of the actor that makes the character and his concept flourish. Without it, characters remain abstract, cold, and do not communicate meaning to the audience.

The actor often begins the creation process with “me in given situations”, which means he uses his own inner dimensions, his organic and cultural components, in order to come closer to the character. Only by first identifying and assuming your own potentiality and dimension can one assume the potentiality and dimension of others. There are components hidden in the depths of the human being that cannot be eradicated—the actor cannot completely change himself, his personality, his view on the world, when becoming another. What he changes, though, is how he acts. A different line of action marks a different mental grid from the one the actor has. This means that actions reflect the logical mechanisms of the character, his points of view, his mentality. We cannot see if the actor truly adopted another set of values and thoughts; we can only “see” them through the character’s actions and decisions.

Conclusions

The purpose of theatre is to create a slice of life on stage, that reaches the hearts of spectators. This is possible as long as the actor uses tools that support his creation process towards character assumption. This adds meaning and life and creates a strong connection between actor and his part, but also between actor, character, and audience.

This can be considered one of the founding principles of acting: “The problem lies in what the human does, humanly, and not the actor, acting” (Cojar, 1998, p. 154). The actor must support the creation process on his personality and physical capacities. He must assume the character in all aspects and circumstances, and resist traps such as reproduction, imitation, or formal representation. One must not reduce his stage existence to voice, facial expressions, gesture. In terms of onstage reality, the actor is, first and foremost, a human being: using his psychophysical apparatus, he then can access virtual potentials, in order to fill the empty vessel of the character with livelihood, paradox and authenticity.

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