

The Me-Role-Character Path

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Abstract

It is of tremendous importance for an actor-student to have a very well structured and personal method of approaching a role. This can only be accomplished by try, error, experience and self-knowledge. The me-role-character path represents a milestone on which one can rely on whenever faced with difficulties on stage while creating a character or improvising a situation. In respect to the scenic parameters, the focus point, Stanislavski's theory on the actor's work on the role and Ion Cojar's poetic, the actor-student can learn information of prime importance for anyone who wants to be(come) alive on stage. Shortcuts are not possible while one is in the process of learning to become a professional actor / actress. Consequently, the complex road from amateur to professional represents a journey that must be crossed with a great amount of patience and curiosity. Moreover, an important discussion is needed on the significance and the urgency of developing a systematic emotional education in the academic system.

Keywords: actor-student, Ion Cojar, logical thinking mechanism, scenic parameters, emotional intelligence.

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Introduction

In the art of acting there are no recipes. The work method of Victor Rebengiuc is different from the one Meryl Streep uses to approach her characters. The same way two actor-students colleagues in the same class and mentored by the same teacher

have different ways of thinking and acting on stage. Each individual has a particular past, present and future. Every experience influences the personal reality of a human being, and every personal reality has the ascendancy of the personality, character and actions that one has, feels or does. The pedagogue should have a bilateral and simultaneously approach when referring to the student-actors. The teacher should address each student with respect to the universal and natural typology of the humankind, while also taking into account the specific characteristics that individualize each member of the group.

Nevertheless, it would be proper for each actor-student to be aware that, even though one's intrinsic structure is unique and unrepeatable, there are a couple of universal milestones on which one can rely on.

Be that as it may, even if one absolutely respects the given me-role-character path, nobody can guarantee success, appreciation and fame of the actor-student. Why is that? Because, as stated in advance, there are no recipes and shortcuts. Therefore, a new dilemma arises: why follow a track that offers no certainty for obtaining the much craved glory? For the simple reason that it would not be an excellent and professional idea to only lean on momentary "inspiration and talent". Because "inspiration and talent" are two subjective factors and cannot be used as valuable tools and inexhaustible resources when performing (creating a character, playing a role, improvising a situation). Following the me-role-character path always helps the actor-student whenever he doesn't understand or know what to do on stage.

Me? Me!

Acting is the only career (and art) where one's body is also the instrument and the outcome. One of the most important resources one has while being on stage is the potential of vulnerability. Therefore, as professor Ion Cojar stated, "ACTOR=HUMAN" (Cojar, 1998, p.99). As a result, each actor-student's personality is different. The genetic structure, the environment in which one developed and the education received customize each and every human being. But exceeding dreams and passions, what truly unifies all the individuals that want to be professionals in the art of acting?

A student admitted to the acting school of the Faculty of Theatre should definitely possess some specific aptitudes for becoming an actor. Some of these

aptitudes are being observant, attentive, imaginative, spontaneous, oriented, and coordinated. During the course of four years of Bachelor acting studies, these specific aptitudes are mostly trained using theatre games.

Consequently, the actor-students must first learn to listen to and connect with themselves and only after to listen to and connect with their partners. Their mind, body and soul must be in harmony with each other in order for them to be able to take on the logical thinking mechanisms of “made-up people” (also known as “characters”).

An adequate ambient is needed for studying the art of the actor. The specific pedagogy does not consist of just a teaching and learning process, but also of research and discovery, a self-discovery and self-knowledge process, a process of initiation and unlearning conventional behavioural habits acquired in family life, at school and in society, which are dominated by preconceived ideas related to theatre and acting. (Cojar, 1998, p. 13???)

The art of the actor cannot be taught and the theatre pedagogue cannot be anything else but a mentor, a guide, a witness of his younger colleagues “becoming”.

On one hand, the theory is simple: the actor must simply “be alive in the scenic parameters”. On the other hand, the practice is extremely complex, with endless nuances and includes countless variations. Nevertheless, by discovering with commitment, curiosity, and a great amount of patience, guided step-by-step and experiencing life through theatre games, one can pass the process of professionalization with a favourable outcome.

If and only if it were me in the given situation...

The actor-students must cast aside all clichés and restore the essence of their own organic structure. The starting point is always the self (“I”); afterwards, the laws of creation (“I in the given situation”), and thereafter to the logic of another person, which is the character, without any interpretation or emphasis. For Stanislavski “the role” was not important, but “the self” in the circumstances set forth by the dramatic piece.

The most used technique to bring to light the *pure* self and the *authenticity* of reactions is by theatre exercises. These games, discussed, analysed and, most

importantly, played, are of prime importance for training the specific abilities that a student-actor needs to develop. Learning the benefits of teamwork, understanding the usefulness of imagination and gaining the strength of being vulnerable are only a few examples of the utility of these kind of exercises.

An *if* is needed as starting point and the actor-students will let themselves to the will of their own organic structure. *If I were in the given situation* means accepting a proposition, entering a convention. "The secret to the action power of *if* resides in the fact that it does not speak of a real fact, of something that exists, but of something that could exist" (Stanislavski, 2013, p. 112??). This potentiality entices the actors' imagination. Hence, the desire to "trick" and "to perform" is diluted and (theoretically and ideally) all that remains is the desire to "live". It is said that this *if* is magical because of the capacity to naturally generate within the artist an effortless internal and external activity. *If* represents the internal stimulus that enhances the active and efficient character of the acting creation. The entire range of theatre exercises have in their core a *magical if*, an *if* that *if would not be it none would be possible*.

Five scenic parameters

During the actors' creative process, the scenic situation is guided by five scenic parameters. With their help, the actor can correctly and pragmatically answer to the most basic but, at the same time, most essential questions related to the time and space where the action, the identity and the motivation of the actors are happening. The theatrical parameters are: **who, what, where, when and why**.

Without a specific answer to these questions, the actor-students cannot correctly¹ find the ideal solutions in the scenic situation. They will feel confused and will not understand what is necessary on stage, nor why they should (or shouldn't) do certain actions. By correctly answering the questions "who, what, where, when and why", the actor obtains a solid initial stepping stone. This represents the foundation of an actors' creativity and craft. Understanding these scenic parameters is equivalent to having a birth certificate. In spite of that, being a re-

¹ It is said that there is no *right* or *wrong* in art, but everything is allowed. Yes and no. Indeed, everything is permitted, in any form, but respecting the primary inner conditions requested by the scenic situation. This is the *correct / right* that should be tracked, not the socially / ecstatically / politically form of correctness.

creation of life, it is not enough to have a birth certificate in order to be alive.

To be an actor is a mystery, as theatre itself. (...) When actors play with no blockages, it is like an alive organism that cannot be analysed; the problems in the art of acting are in relation with the structure and the control, and only these can be dissected. (Donnellan, 2007, p. 15)

Even a doctor can tell why an organism is dead, but not why it is alive.

It is of utmost importance for the actor-students to observe from the very beginning that the word *how* is absent from the list of theatrical parameters. The theatre “happens” and the performance is an active process, not an illustrative result of the rehearsal period. For this reason, the actor must grasp the *what* and the *why*, never the *how*. The answers to *how* are descriptive and prosaic. However, one cannot hypocritically ignore the existence of *how*. But the *how* is nothing more than the shell that embodies the physical and organic expression of authentic internal actions.

If the actors think of the *how*, they will become distracted by the way they are perceived by others, instead of focusing on effectively solving their given theme. The focus point becomes them, the actors in the eye of the spectators, which have to be entertained (Darie, 2015, p. 136), intrigued or emotional. However, in order for the actors to be understood and believed, it is necessary that they become aware and attentive to their stage partners and to the situations which needs to be solved. In other words, their focus point should always be towards an action regarding something external.

The focus point

“Everything needs to be necessary and veridical. And veracity emerges only if the action performed by the actor is necessary; and necessity appears only if the actors truly focus their attention on a point of importance” (Darie, 2015, p. 56 ???). Viola Spolin named this *The Focus Point* (TFP). What is its purpose?

Firstly, it is of great help to isolate the theatrical techniques on different segments. Divide the theatrical experience on minute (but simple and familiar) segments so that each detail is easy to recognize and does not overwhelm, nor scare anyone. It progressively becomes more intricate as the issues relating to the actors’

art advance. In the beginning, TFP (The Focus Point) may be playing with or handling a cup, opening a door, simply walking around the stage. The actor-student may explore in this manner a character, an emotion or more complex events. It creates scenic action within which the actor-student is completely absorbed and the fear of “approval/disapproval” is removed. The actor-student circumvents focusing their cerebral activity on an acting issue, thus organicity arises. As an organic result, the actor gains the ability to do the physical and psychological actions required by the scenic situation.

Secondly, it sets the actor-students free, it enables them to act spontaneously, and it prepares them for an experience which is more natural and organic. It occupies and cleans the mind (the known element) and it acts on the intimate centres (the intuitive element). Spontaneity cannot arise from duality, out of the reality of being watched, be it an actor watching himself, or the fear from external observers. Individual energy is unleashed, and confidence is born. In addition, the actor-student “forgets” about the stage induced discomfort and becomes free.

The focus point must always be in the outside – an action, a partner, a goal the challenges, a situation that awaits to be changed. If one puts TFC in the interior, the immediate consequences will appear: lack of liberty, stiffness, inability to think logically – physical, psychological and emotional blockages.

One of the most important techniques that a student-actor should acquire as fast as possible is the capacity of distancing from the unavoidable tense moments. This capacity of observing and reasoning before action is of supreme importance in the career and personal life of any actor-student. It is very easy to get frustrated or to have to deal with unpleasant emotions in the artistic environment. Most of these complicated situations have very little to do with the individual that lives through heavy emotional times. One should understand, the sooner the better, that usually nobody wants to harm them, not everyone will love them and that a successful career in the art of acting takes time, enormous patience, and luck.

These elements are part of the emotional education – an absent field in the Romanian society. This absence causes unimaginable harm, and the results can be seen and felt by every individual: a poor quality of life, anxiety, anger, depression. It is a matter of urgency to create a tradition of taking care of the emotional intelligence. Even though history has proven that an actor can be successful without any emotional education, history also has shown multiple cases of unhappy,

addicted, depressed famous actors.

Taking into consideration the social and emotional characteristics that are specific to Gen Z (openness, civic spirit, courage of speaking publicly when an injustice occurs), the present moment is optimal to start encouraging emotional education.

A+B+C+D+E = ?

In order to simplify the creative process of the actor and the transition from spectating to acting, Professor Ion Cojar identified five different coordinates: themes, issues, situations, duties and purposes. These are the coordinates that actors use as guidelines in their scenic existence. The actor's journey appears to lack difficulty: the actor receives a theme; as a consequence, a problem or more problems arise that need to be solved; these problems may be encompassed by one or more situations which, naturally, create different duties for the actors, duties which need to be organised using a marked route which involves pursuing a clear purpose, derived from the main theme. There is no specific solution or way of solving a specific theme by the actor. There is no unique answer nor a necessary one. However, thorough training, by organically appropriating a specific logical mechanism and by maximizing the vulnerability potential, the actor-student may successfully travel the self-role-character path.

Nonetheless, actor-students should be encouraged to enjoy the journey of finding themselves and discovering others. Another crucial matter that is repeatedly discussed especially with the first-year students is the joy and the luxury of making mistakes. There is no wrong, shameful, embarrassing action that one can do during an exercise. In the creative laboratory of the student-actor any form or judgement should be discouraged. The working atmosphere has to be calm, relaxed and friendly. Of course, there are rules that have to be respected, but freedom is not equivalent to anarchy.

What does the actor have to do?

He has to get to know the living human subjects in their continuous dynamic, of which the specific and fundamental characteristics are instability, uncertainty. In this manner, we naturally converge to the principle of *organic unity* between the inner and outer life chaos.

“THE ART OF THE ACTOR IS A WAY OF THINKING.

THE ART OF THE ACTOR IS, FIRSTLY, A SPECIFIC LOGICAL MECHANISM.

THE ART OF THE ACTOR IS, SECONDLY, A WAY OF *DOING*” (Cojar, 1998, p. 103)

The discipline of the art of the actor is based upon a specific action meant to trigger and maintain updating processes of virtual possibilities, which are specific to only to the art of the actor, not tributary to literature.

The discernible invisible – I am the character

Professor Cojar believes that “all characters are within ourselves”, and this journey from actor to character has three crucial moments: 1) the actor in given situations; 2) the discovery of their meaning, their role within the scenic convention; 3) taking on the concept, the logical mechanism of the character, the Actor-Role-Character substitution.

Concretely, the training of the actor-students is achieved through theatre games which help develop specific abilities. Throughout this constant training and by acquiring solid discipline which ensures the method of work, the actors will succeed in completing their most important duty: transforming dramaturgically written situations in objective psychological realities, which become both veridical and universally valid. Consequently, the role gains life and becomes organic through the actor. The character is created through the actor’s psychological processes and these processes are delivered to the public through physical and organic expression which arise from the inner actions which transform the actor.

The first level of a new way of thinking is developed by the *animals* game. All the students are asked to choose an animal and to study it: why it moves or stays the way it does, what and why is it thinking, what does an animal feel when it hunts or is hunted? They are asked not to imitate the animal, but to think as the animal. This represents the most basic level of a specific way of thinking. The next levels are trying to adopt a concept of an acquaintance and a logical way of thinking of a character.

After taking on a new logical thinking mechanism, specific to a character which has different interests, different purposes, caused by objective and subjective elements, which has a different individual structure, that is when the vulnerability potential arises. Taking on the logical thinking mechanism naturally transposes the

actor towards exploring the vulnerability potential. The grand issue resides in what humans do with their humanity, not in what actors do with their acting.

In the end, but of primary importance, the actor-students are encouraged to be brave, to be themselves, to have patience and to work on discovering their true selves. There are no recipes, but there is hard work, that sooner or later will pay off.

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