

**You/Me**

## **The Stage Event and its Practice: Acting from the body to the text**

### **Introduction**

I am a theatre actor, not a teacher in the purest sense. My approach to teaching is therefore based on an ongoing practice that is constantly seeking out what is most effective and necessary, to respond and adapt to the needs of the different poetics and sensibilities I find myself working with. This practice naturally includes a pragmatic summation of the various methods I have studied and experimented with over the years, in the course of my career as an actor and trainer. As such, the primary frame of reference for my teaching work is the methodical contribution made to acting theory that we have inherited from the post-Stanislavskian Russian school, namely "the active analysis of the text through physical action" (c.f. *Active Analysis* by Maria Knebel – Routledge; *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* by Michael Chekhov – Routledge; *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* by Vasili Toporkov – Methuen Drama; and *Different Every Night* by Mike Alfreds – Nick Hern Books).

Over the years I have developed a playful and maieutic approach to teaching: observing the work from the outside, I guide the performer with a series of prompts that aim to stimulate scenic action and bring clarity to what lies beneath the surface. The task of such a guide isn't to simply hand over easily digested 'pills' of methodology, but rather to be relentless and uncompromising in the questions they ask. Starting from the 'objective' data that a text provides, these questions must generate subjective, mutable and demanding interpretations, which only the work on stage can explore, confirm or deny. During the time they spend in the rehearsal room – and even before they act – the group and the individual should, through a series of games and exercises, momentarily put their preconceived ideas about the text, its themes and the style it seems to demand, on hold. They should be primarily focused on the physiological experience of being entirely in the moment (*The Actor and the Target* and *The Actor and the Space* by Declan Donnellan – Nick Hern Books). Ultimately, the primary aim of this work is therefore not to teach one particular acting style over another, but the organic revelation of a founding principle that both anticipates and encompasses everything that is related to being on stage. In other words, it seeks to train the actor in active presence through a personal, physical, somatic and sensory enquiry into the text as a structure. The events that lie unseen, beneath the text, must therefore not only be understood but effectively *rendered* through stage events that are consciously organised as part of a personal "performance project".

An initial "table read" of the play is vital in this regard, and the analysis that emerges from it must subsequently be translated into the physical space in real time. By way of a continuous critical exchange between the guide and the actor, this analysis must seek out the events and textual circumstances that will generate a detailed physical 'map' with its own, increasingly specific, pathways. This training starts the actor/actress on an initial phase of character exploration in which the coordinates of the events/happenings – and the space, time and circumstances of the scene/text – provide a clear and shared structure that appears fixed, but which is necessary to create and bring the onstage elements to life (*Active Analysis* by Maria Knebel – Routledge). During this process, mistakes and the unexpected are useful and fruitful travelling companions, insofar as they allow us to recognize the 'im-postures' and relational clichés that ultimately undermine the performer's creative faculties. This also avoids the perils of quick, easy solutions, premature, mimetic approaches, and/or the adherence to an initial, predetermined idea of character.

## Physical preparation

The first phase focuses on preparing the body on a physical, vocal and sensory level. It involves a series of methodical and systematic exercises that investigate the entire *pre-expressive* part of working on a text: being present in the space, seeing, and building a relationship – with oneself, with the other, with space, with time, with objects, with those watching – in order to then take action. Working with a variety of organic movement dynamics, the idea is to increase the mind/body system's awareness through a range of exercises inspired by the Alexander Technique, aspects of Feldenkrais, contact improvisation, Biomechanics, View Points and status games. These will encourage a playful and experiential approach to the work, which the performer will then translate into a stockpile of discoveries connected to the senses and images that need to be conveyed. The aim of this gradual and entirely physical exploration is to make the performer more aware and receptive when listening to their own instrument in the space, in the present moment. By way of a guided and ordered sequence of coherent impulses, the ultimate objective is to devise a toolkit of exercises that can achieve an expressive agility, as well as a more conscious creative awareness, which can then be used as part of more 'dramaturgical' improvisations.

## Active analysis of the text-as-structure

First, the actions and events suggested by the text are identified: these provide vital coordinates such as "what/where/why/how/to whom" and should always take into account the present time and space, i.e. the 'reality' of the person acting.

The logical and structured progression of these actions constitute the performer's 'project' as the 'author' of their performance – a project that should, at least on paper, be traceable back to the character they are exploring. Thus, through a series of short improvisations, and thanks to the ongoing exchange between the guide looking in and the person acting, we will attempt to reconstruct the internal map (conscious or unconscious) that feeds and drives the narrative arc of the 'role' being studied (though at this stage we might refer to it simply as a *function* within the text). The 'life' of a scene is therefore sought and sounded out through the possible physical actions of the different characters within it, as they re-act to the circumstances and situations it presents. These actions may be defined in analytical terms, using a series of transitive verbs in the active voice which will, de facto, give a tangible direction to the actor/actress's action in that moment. The character analysis work will then be extrapolated from this, as a natural consequence of the actions and re-actions identified. The intention here is to rethink the material relationship between the actor and the "character" as a non-hierarchical system, one that is horizontal, open and dynamic; an interaction between two complex poles that feed each other through constant cross-contamination.

Essentially, this is a structural approach whereby the actor/actress is asked to recognize the textual signs and translate them into the 'here and now' of the stage event. They need to break down, test out and reconstruct a character's dynamics in order to maintain an active and creative outlook rather than a merely executive one.

## The Text

This approach therefore calls for us to interrogate the text not as a closed system of psychological characters with lines to be spoken in a more or less convincing way – or because of any intrinsic literary value it may possess – but to emphasize a fundamental feature of dramatic writing: namely, that it is a structure that seeks to become another structure; a (literary) language that must, by its very nature, be translated into the language of physical action. The textual 'system' is therefore treated as a moving, open map of causal events generated by the given circumstances which, in turn, hinder the characters' paths at opportune moments, pushing them to act, or rather to *re-act*. Lines therefore emerge from hidden intentions, their aims driven by latent desires and conflicts. A character's greater or lesser ability to pursue their objectives (conscious or otherwise), therefore clashes with the given circumstances and the objectives of other characters. Nurtured by the ongoing dramatic conflict, these events allow the action– and thus the narrative arc – to flow.

This analysis takes place during the table read in the first instance, before being queried through the stage work. Looking at a couple of scenes will allow actors to enter into an intentional relationship with the directions and events that ultimately underpin the words. This operation therefore delivers a complex emotional landscape that can be traced back, whether directly or by way of analogy, to the situation in the text.

The continuous refining of these scene studies will enable us to work out the real relationships and dynamics that lie beneath the words; it will make the actions and impulses that drive the characters tangible, allowing us to identify the arcs, purposes and tasks within a scene empirically. The specific objective is thus to develop an organic, internal relationship between the body, the voice, the senses and the imagination, which can then relate to the external world. The underlying principle is always to start from a basis of reality, creating the conditions that make the performance both possible, recognisable and therefore repeatable in the present moment. The final aim is to enhance the 'being onstage' in the situation provided by the text-as-structure. This means tearing the character away from literary flux and transmuting them into a concrete relationship that is immersed in the physical reality of the actor who draws strength from the character's complexity, rather than concealing it.

## Teaching Theatre Today

Teaching an art like acting today – one concerned with presence and relationship, which is based on a tradition but should not be ground down by it – demands that we be aware of both the formal tools that new styles constantly generate, as well as the theoretical contributions made by the adjacent and complementary media that give expression to today's new "forms". The artists of the future already exist; they already have their obsessions and their themes. The task of pedagogy is simply to critique absolute certainties and support new perspectives by offering dynamic and layered thinking that allows the development of knowledge and practice. Our task as theatre-makers is therefore not to represent reality (which is done much more effectively by cinema) but to translate it into the 'here and now' of stage life by virtue of a different code, different signs, and so create another reality, a sense of "organic artifice". In order to rediscover some truth (as opposed to verisimilitude) in this artifice as a performer, you need to know – to train and be able to use – every one of your expressive tools as consciously as possible, in such a way that, above and beyond any 'technique' you can lose and find yourself. What is necessary during rehearsals is to recognise or discover the language and the specific quality of acting you want to adopt for that specific text and in that given moment. The tools that I continue to draw on as a teacher – the eyes, the breath, direction of focus, rhythm, space and point of view – are therefore dictated by vital and elementary needs, before being translated into dramaturgical objectives and pathways. This immersion in the codified practice of "acting" allows us to *re-start* from the body-system with humility, lightness and attention. It allows the performer to identify and become aware not only of their strengths, but also of the superstructures and ideologies that limit them, offering a series of propulsive questions to reveal the complexity of what is already there.

Theatre is an unrepeatable event that actors and actresses must make happen every night; for this reason, it has a number of urgent, simple and vital needs, starting from what each of us has available: the body, the relationship, the structure or text, and what materially *is* on stage, not what we would like to be there. Ultimately, what we have to do is train ourselves to be present. No style or idea is therefore considered better than any other, here: it is the actors and actresses taking part that drive the research, for the time of the on-stage action, as they become genuine co-authors of the text or material at hand. This practice does not provide immediate assurances because it is constantly changing and constantly seeking organic stage material, while also promoting a sense of individual responsibility that is, by its very nature, the product of the present moment.

The most suitable verb I can think of to describe this course is 'to welcome'. Welcome the at times contradictory reality of the here and now, on stage – starting from the Self, above all. Welcome the error or difficulty as a fruitful opportunity for discovery – and refer not to abstract, spectacular ideologies, but to a few 'elementary' physiological rules.