

Structural Developments in The Pedagogy Of The Art of Acting: From Student To Actor in The New Dynamics of Performance Art

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Abstract: In this article, I will prove the urgent need to structure courses and adopt a new pedagogical system aimed at catching the attention as well as the interest of students. The use of technology has resulted in students having to face issues related to attention, motor skills, and even interest. Scientific research shows that, currently, even the mere presence of a phone near the brain affects individuals and reduces cognitive activity. Consequently, in pedagogical environments, the structure of acting courses and paradigms must undergo multiple stages of revitalization. This implies continuous adaptation to new social and technological realities, in order to ensure a better understanding and effective communication between educators and students. Additionally, it is necessary to encourage more flexible approaches that take into account the diversity of learning styles and the challenges contemporary students face.

Keywords: acting, pedagogy, evolution, student, digitized, viola spoling, stanislavski

Introduction

As the teaching system for the art of acting evolves, there's a need for new structural development, especially in the first year of study. While in the past, teachers managed to impose a fast-paced rhythm of development and study, the current social dynamics and new technology-centered visions as well as the individual's personal context focusing particularly on the financial perspectives lead educators towards developing new structures for the art of acting. Universities with acting programs face a particular impasse that must be acknowledged. Teachers need to be open to finding new practical solutions for engaging with the modern student who is significantly different from

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previous generations, raised in an era of speed and surrounded by technology that alters socio-emotional paradigms. Students have developed strong egos, they lack patience and are in search of quick results, being concerned merely with a niche of the educational spectrum in the art of acting.

The same way some time ago professor and director Ion Cojar changed the old perception of teaching and learning methods in the art of acting, we too must adapt the methods of Stanislavski, Viola Spolin, Michael Chekhov, Stella Adler, or Ion Cojar to the new social dynamic. Ion Cojar argued that, to create an authentic role, the actor should not anticipate their psycho-emotional processes or their physical reactions, such as gestures and physiological changes, which result from these inner processes. If anticipated, they would become fixated in preconceived ideas, and would thus lose their freshness and authenticity. Cojar also believed that the actor should not try to consciously control these processes, as self-observation while they're happening would disrupt the natural flow of experience. But how should we handle things nowadays, when psycho-emotional actions are heavily influenced by phones, tablets, and social networks, and when cognitive structures are negatively impacted by technology? What does a teacher do when faced with an audience of young students who guard their emotions and hide them behind a cold demeanor? I have encountered students who showed no facial feedback on directions or simply on newly received information: whether that feedback might be troubling for the teacher (e.g., boredom) or positive (joy, emotion, desire for novelty). The art of acting is a way of thinking. The art of acting is firstly a specific logical mechanism, and only secondly does it become a way of "doing".¹

Scientific research shows that, currently, even the mere presence of a phone near the brain affects individuals and reduces cognitive activity. This study, conducted at the University of Texas, involved an experiment carried out on 800 daily and addicted smartphone users. The experiment consisted of observing how two groups of participants would carry out routine tasks. One group worked on a computer while having their phones on the desk, whereas the other group left their phones in a different room. The results revealed that

¹ Ion Cojar, *O poetică a artei actorului* (The Poetics of the Art of Acting), Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 39.

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the participants whose phones were not nearby were significantly more efficient. Thus, these findings from researchers at the University of Texas prove that the mere presence of a phone, whether placed on the desk, hidden in a bag, or backpack, will negatively impact cognitive functioning.²

“Smartphones serve as consumers’ personal access points to all the connected world has to offer. We suggest that the increasing integration of these devices into the minutiae of daily life both reflects and creates a sense that they are frequently relevant to their owners’ goals; it lays the foundation for automatic attention. Consistent with this position, research indicates that signals from one’s own phone (but not someone else’s) activate the same involuntary attention system that responds to the sound of one’s own name (Roye, Jacobsen and Schröger, [2007](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462)).”³

Such demonstrations and studies are increasing in frequency. Therefore, one can imagine to what extent exposure to such stimuli since childhood may affect a young person. Online communication and the false interaction via platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, and Instagram chats, suppress the authentic expression of direct emotions, which are natural for any individual. Communication passes through an irrational filter that stifles authenticity. Consequently, it’s becoming increasingly challenging for an acting student to transition from online communication to stage communication, whether with a scene partner or a classmate. Experience working with young people reveals they have an inability to connect with and perceive various emotional nuances. The layers of communication become dry, direct, abrupt, and exceedingly cold. Some young students even struggle to explain what *friendship* means or to name its various forms. Others cannot grasp the complexity of emotions, such as to love and to hate simultaneously. These are communication and emotional barriers, that stem from a false existence in the virtual environment.

Understanding these new social behaviors is a difficult process. Such generational gaps have likely never existed before. While youth rebellion against systems (parents, teachers, the state, education) is a given, today’s

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462>

³ <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462>

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issue is not represented by these barriers, but rather basic communication in itself. Consequently, in pedagogical environments, the structure of acting courses and paradigms must undergo multiple stages of revitalization.

The Black Costume

Ever since Stanislavski, the importance of the black rehearsal costume has been emphasized in theater schools or universities. From the very first session, I inform the students that we will be using a black stage costume for the 'art of acting' classes in the following year. The neutrality provided by the presence of the black box in the classroom, along with the black costume, are fundamental elements of a theater class. Students receive comprehensive information about this, along with reference images and data about Stanislavski and his views on the subject. Stanislavski considered the stage equipment - a simple black costume (black blouse or t-shirt, black pants, socks, or ballet-specific slippers) - important for students, not from an aesthetic perspective. The great pedagogue argued that in the art of acting, the neutral costume is a tool that allows students to focus on the essence of developing their acting skills without visual distractions that could alter the perception of the character.

Nowadays, the personality of a student sometimes doesn't align with the directions presented by Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski in his book "Munca actorului cu sine însuși"⁴. The discipline that the educator imposes on young people is met with personal resistance and a completely radical perception of the surrounding environment and the rules imposed, even in an academic setting, which guide the individual towards performance.

"The actor, no less than the soldier, must be subject to iron discipline"⁵

I have observed some students' reluctance toward this information. They do not wish to use this equipment, nor are they interested in wearing

⁴ K.S.Stanislavski, *The Actor: Work on Oneself*, second edition, Nemira Publishing House, 2018

⁵ K.S.Stanislavski, *The Actor: Work on Oneself*, second edition, Nemira Publishing House, 2018, pg. 37

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appropriate footwear; though they struggle with large, uncomfortable shoes, they also firmly refuse to take them off. Sternness and moral theories taught by educators are no longer effective communication solutions but rather traps in current university methodology. So, what does a teacher do in this situation? They do nothing: they respect the student's opinion and they initially try to demonstrate the necessity for the black costume. The teacher guides the student step by step towards self-awareness of the need for that costume. If this path does not yield results, a hybrid approach is adopted without disrupting the class. I use their equipment, even if it is civilian, to make the student realize the need to not put on external performance, but rather act naturally, as they do in everyday life. Thus, the young person becomes aware of the necessity of stage rigor, starting with the famous black rehearsal costume.

“Sincerity and consciousness give birth to truth, and truth gives birth to belief...”⁶

Conclusion: Personal freedom, now more than ever, can lead to the desired outcomes. If an individual does not feel constrained, if they do not feel that a strict direction being imposed upon them, they are able to break emotional barriers and learn to communicate with the teacher. This is how the desire to wear the black costume - the neutral costume that is so essential for their own future development - emerges.

Theatrical Culture and New Courses

Viewership ratings show that streaming services have encroached upon the cultural/entertainment interest of young people, who have discovered the comfort of watching movies and series at home. The nowadays increasingly present social anxiety limits young people's ability to interact correctly via get-togethers at the theater or even the cinema. This has led to non-observance of social conduct norms even within cultural institutions, and it does not stem from malice, but rather from genuine ignorance and lack of cultural education. Young people no longer have real, valuable role models in

⁶ K.S.Stanislawski, *The Actor: Work on Oneself*, second edition, Nemira Publishing House, 2018, pg. 57

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artistic fields such as theater, opera, or art cinema. Subjects are outdated or affected by the mediocre universes of Generation Z, a generation extremely vulnerable to any type of criticism (even when it benefits the individual leading to normal development), social interaction, failure to follow basic rules (even from social or theatrical games), and openness to exploring new inner worlds – as proposed by certain types of games specific to the art of acting (e.g., Viola Spolin’s games).

Thus, I have personally come across the need for a new approach, which did not exist as a method in the 2000s, when I was a student at UNATC, under Adrian Pintea, Adrian Titieni and Mihaela Bețiu:

video projection of theater performances – This allows students to come into contact with a performance, even if a video projection does not convey the same rhythm as being in a theater hall.

development of attractive courses – Online acting – for YouTube, TikTok content.

Video Projection of Theater Performances

In the same framework, it is necessary to present the portraits of notable actors, both Romanian and international, who are no longer with us but are part of the gallery of theater history. Young people are reluctant to engage with true values, since they are victims of the new online paradigm: anyone, regardless of whether or not they have something valuable to showcase, can become known through simple means of expression that require minimal effort, especially of a cultural type (a well-timed phrase can make you rise from obscurity and transform you overnight into a model for young people, known throughout the country).

“If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn, and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach. 'Talent' or 'lack of talent' have little to do with it.”⁷

⁷ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, abridged edition, translated by Mihaela Bețiu, UNATC Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 14.

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In acting classes, performance studies, or film history courses, I present actor profiles, in order to demonstrate the power of cultural value to the students. The role models who laid the foundations of film or theater must not be overlooked. For example, I was surprised to find that students had not heard of Charlie Chaplin. I dedicate time to presenting the work and life of this great actor, director, and silent film genius - a model of perseverance and ambition. To their surprise, students discover new realms of inner exploration, artistic values of an actor, and, more importantly, real means of comic expressions, which today are often reduced to trivial humorous means. I intertwine aesthetic information - such as the symbolism of the costume: an overly tight coat, an undersized bowler hat, a cane, a fake moustache, baggy pants, and oversized shoes, the prop that would define his exceptional artistic career - with tabloid gossip details, which are nowadays necessary to keep students engaged.

Examples: In 1916, Charlie signed a contract with Mutual Film Corporation for an impressive \$670,000 per year, making him one of the highest-paid people in the world.

2. On July 6, 1925, Charlie Chaplin became the first actor to appear on the cover of the famous Time magazine.

Perceptions change with knowledge. Views on theater and true values are shaped through field-specific universities, where the educational role does not keep one stuck in the paradigm of the past but brings the past forward through current demands. You adapt teaching systems to carry on the value of the dynamic of Performing Arts, which should not be allowed to gather dust or be encroached upon by means of expression that are or devoid of substance.

“An idea without theatrical sense is, in fact, devoid of value. It's much more important for it to have an impact. And if you have theatrical sense, you need little to achieve such effects.”⁸

As the genius of silent film states, theatrical sense is essential in the art of performance. Whether we're talking about actors, directors, set designers,

⁸ Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, p. 366

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choreographers, or light designers, theatrical sense and cultural knowledge are cornerstones in building a show. Thus, educators have the task of refining, through information, the artistic theatrical sense of future actors. I find encounters with true values much more precious now than certain technical discoveries related to the abstract methods of the art of acting.

Through action and knowledge, through discovery and curiosity, we manage to alleviate the depression and anxiety of our students. “We have approximately 60,000 thoughts per day: 95% of them are the same as the day before, and, to have the full picture, 80% of them are negative. This is why we become depressed if we are not careful.”⁹ In an acting class, negative thoughts must be directed towards exploring the truth, through learning about models so that one can later discover oneself, explore new inner worlds that make one stronger and lead to the desired outcome: the truth!

The History of the Romanian and universal theater courses are absolutely necessary, but they must also be visually adapted to meet modern requirements: short, condensed courses with captivating information. The visual element is the new direction requested by students.

Although I believe radio theater develops an individual’s imagination, especially for the youth, I have encountered students’ “reluctance” to listen to such performances. And it does not stem from lack of willingness, but it is rather because the brain no longer has the capacity to connect with the realities depicted in such masterpieces. This theatrical genre is in decline. The ever-present visual and often delivered rapidly over short periods (e.g., TikTok videos) cognitively transforms individuals (disrupting attention and patience). However, experts in neural fields support the idea that education forms the foundation for developing such skills. We just need to find the means to succeed. “...we can say that schooling contributes to the improvement of attention-related skills and to differentiating educational modifications from the developmental process.”¹⁰

⁹ Latifa Gallo, *Negative Emotions*, Niculescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020, p. 18. 18

¹⁰ PHD Prof. dr. Leon Dănilă, *Neuroplasticity*, Bookzone Publishing House, Bucharest, 2023, pp. 82–83.

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Developing engaging courses - online acting - for YouTube or TikTok content.

When we create classes adapted to the new demands of younger generations, we have the chance to promote true acting methods and ensure professional quality even in these virtual environments. Young people are eager to explore new forms of expression, but once they understand that performing at a high level requires study, even there, things will change radically. Acting universities aim to make students realize that studying the art of acting, through work and discipline, is beneficial even in online projects. On YouTube, there are projects that benefit from considerable investments. Shows are produced at the quality level of a TV broadcast, and even series are created. Some content creators, who have joined the film industry, have felt the need to collaborate with acting coaches for their productions. Study and professional expertise are necessary, even in these virtual spaces in order to enhance the quality of productions. Universities with acting courses not only have the potential to become promoters of theater, but they can also adapt to the new, attractive environments that generate interest among young audiences.

Motricity and Physical Exercises

The early usage of mobile phones, the internet and computers has led to certain surprising factors. cognitive dysfunctions stemming from the virtual world that also impact the coordination and motricity¹¹ of an individual. Experts generally define motricity as a term that denotes a change in position and the transformation a body undergoes in relation to certain fixed points. Motricity is divided into two categories: *gross motor skills and fine motor skills*.

¹¹ DEX ONLINE - 1. The ability of higher nervous activity to quickly transition from one excitation process to another, from one specific dynamic stereotype to another.

<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/motricitate>

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Gross motor skills involve the ability to coordinate large body movements using major muscle groups, such as those in the legs, the arms, the back, and the abdomen. These movements include activities such as walking, running, jumping or lifting of heavy objects. They are essential for maintaining balance, stability, and performing broader movements, laying the foundation for the development of more complex motor skills.

Fine motor skills refer to the control of small, precise movements that require the use of small muscles in the hands and fingers. This includes activities like writing, picking up small objects, buttoning clothes, or using various tools. Fine motor skills are important for tasks requiring accuracy and detail.

In acting classes, it is necessary to develop a harmonious body, awareness of muscle groups, and tension areas that require targeted relaxation. These aspects are not new. However, in recent years, people of all ages live under generalized stress, leading to widespread body tension. In 1939, Edmund Jacobson¹² drew the attention of those interested in this field by discovering a physical relaxation method with minimal side effects. His method involves two essential steps: inducing tension and then relaxing it.

Students often struggle with coordination, may move with difficulty, and sometimes show a general lack of interest in their own bodies. Simple stepping exercises, which were once performed joyfully and effortlessly, have now become real challenges. Even basic tennis ball-throwing exercises, incorporating various tasks, have become obstacles for those attending classes.

The patience of both teacher and student, breaking down the game and adjusting the pace of teaching as well as exploring the essential areas of acting are vital nowadays. A simple tennis ball toss from one student to another nowadays requires specific training. I have been encountering this issue ever since 2019, from those in first-year acting classes at Politehnica Bucharest, Pitești University Center. Therefore, we start with individual work to increase muscle group awareness while emphasizing both physical and mental relaxation through specific exercises. We focus on rediscovering the joy of

¹² Edmund Jacobson, an American physician and psychologist, is renowned for developing the progressive relaxation technique (also known as "progressive muscle relaxation").

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play, then on understanding and learning the movement behind throwing and catching. Once these elements, which used to be instinctive, have been acquired, we move on to the next step: partner exercises involving throwing and catching the ball. Subsequently, new rules are gradually added, increasing the difficulty level.

Memory

Attention and memory games are paramount as well. And currently, they require a significant amount of rigor and perseverance. “Memory is the foundation of your existence. It determines the quality of your decisions, and thus, of your entire life!”.¹³

Kevin Horsley studied the mind and memory for 25 years, developing impressive mnemonic techniques, while observing that there are gaps between acquiring information and using it. He holds two world records for creating challenging memory tests. In the age of Google, young people tend to no longer correctly explore their brain through memorization. However, it is still Horsley who notes that without the correct information and by relying solely on “Google memory,” we may struggle to act correctly under pressure and might end up making decisions that are impulsive or detrimental, rather than beneficial.

“Improving memory and concentration is not only about what you need to do more of; it is also about what you need to do less of. It is amazing how quickly you can learn a new skill when you decide to give up excuses, judgments, and complaints.”.¹⁴

If you provide your student with time, patience and opportunity, you will help them leave behind the shell of excuses and negativity. You will help them take action, and through action, they will regain self-confidence and discover the truth, as well as the joy of their own correct actions and their

¹³ Horsley, K. (2023). *Unlimites Memory*, Bookzone, Bucharest, 2003, p. 13

¹⁴ Horsley, K. (2023). *Unlimites Memory*, Bookzone, Bucharest, 2003, p. 24

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persistent functioning and development during ‘art of acting’ classes but also later in the art of performance.

Students need to become aware of the fact that photographic memory is a myth, as it is stated in the book entitled: “Unlimited Memory” by Horsley. Each individual needs *long-term memory* to be able to enjoy and use their *short-term memory*.

Viola Spolin's exercises are complemented by new exercises, adapted from psychological memory development systems, such as those developed by Horsley. Thus, we intertwine two universes: the artistic, theatrical one of Viola Spolin and the practical, direct one adapted to new generations, such as that of Horsley and other psychologists.

The teacher’s role is to stimulate the student's curiosity, in these times more than ever. Currently, this curiosity faces a personal decline. Visual feeding extinguishes the youth’s curiosity. A single day’ information becomes an overwhelming task for the brain.

“Through the dopamine circuit, the pleasure of our desire to learn – or even just the anticipation of that pleasure – is deeply satisfying. Learning holds intrinsic value for the nervous system. What we call curiosity is nothing more than exploiting this value.”¹⁵

Conclusion

Structural developments in the pedagogy of the art of acting are necessary in this current era of speed and technology. New generations face different, more complex problems that can sometimes exceed the teacher's competences. Student motivation and the development of personal joy through play and discovery must be part of new university strategies. Adapting courses to the paradigm of the internet is another major challenge in modernizing the curriculum. We are encountering more and more students who do not aspire towards careers in professional theaters but wish to develop new artistic universes using YouTube or other social networks. The proportion of online

¹⁵ Stanislas Dehaene, *How We Learn*, Litera Publishing House, Bucharest, 2024, p. 268

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content creators is increasing. By taking quick actions to adapt programs so as to include what YouTube content or even stand-up comedy entails, we can attract more students. The universities that do not remain trapped within their own paradigms and methods, but rather use them as a foundation for evolution will benefit from this while delivering the indispensable quality inherent to high-quality content. Art can also function independently with the help of the internet. This way, we will help students; we will not merely confine them to dysfunctional universes, but we will open for them new paths of correct expression that have much greater chances of reaching the audience. YouTube artistic productions also need the quality gained through university-level study. Acting can also exist in new forms of expression. Content creators without formal training have realized that high-quality content requires trained “artists”. In the future, they will understand that it is more profitable to use young people who have properly explored the art of acting in a specialized university. Thus, theater will succumb neither to the dusty remnants of the past, nor to the mediocrity and lack of authenticity of the present.

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