

The Actor Between Discipline and Emotion

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Abstract: There can be no true emotion without discipline, just as there can be no meaningful rigor without emotion. To access the emotions, an actor must cultivate discipline—specifically, self-discipline. This means being aware of how deeply is he involved in the rehearsal process, and being honest with himself: am I here to earn a diploma, a paycheck, the audience’s admiration—or am I here to discover something about myself? On the other hand, rigor without emotion can turn an artistic act into a technical display—impressive, perhaps, but lifeless. Every great work of art combines technique with something more—something of the artist’s spirit. Every craft involves rejection, uncertainty, and moments of struggle. Whether in accounting, architecture, or medicine, failure is part of the journey. Choosing a profession does not guarantee success, nor does it shield us from obstacles. So, the fundamental question becomes: Should theater pedagogy focus on resilience—or on discovery?

Keywords: authenticity, theater education, self-discovery, ego, rigor

A theatrical performance should contain at least one of the two elements mentioned in the “pause for reflection” proposed by *Theatrical Colloquies*. Ideally, of course, it should contain both, but even the presence of just one can leave an impression on certain audiences. An unpredictable performance based on spontaneity (such as improvisation shows), or one rehearsed in a very short time without the opportunity to develop its own sense of rigor, can still contain intense moments that remain imprinted in the audience's memory. On the other hand, a calculated, rational performance based on emotional detachment can provoke an equally strong reaction. In this context, the recipient of art may go home impressed by the emotions experienced during an evening that seemed like a simple outing with friends or family. Or, on the contrary, they may leave feeling satisfied—satisfied that they have checked off a cultural activity for the month: an opportunity to show off the latest outfit, a new perfume, or to impress a current or potential partner.

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

And even if their comment at the end is simply “interesting,” days or even weeks later they may find themselves unexpectedly struck by an image, a thought, or an echo of the performance, even if they’ve forgotten its title. Emotion and rigor in art—separately or together—leave traces in the spectator's soul or mind.

Of course, in a theatrical performance, ideally both should be present. But realistically speaking, how achievable is this balance? For a show, whatever its nature, to truly integrate both qualities, every member of the team—from the performer to the director, set designer, lighting and sound designers, costume designer, coordinator, and even the doorman—must possess both.

It may seem strange that I emphasize the role of the doorman, but I asked myself: where and when does the team begin? Should the artistic team be separate from the technical team? Are they two distinct entities with different goals? Is the artistic side responsible for emotion, and the technical side for rigor? Or could their roles be reversed? And if there are multiple teams within one, all contributing to the creation of an artistic product, are they all making art? And if so, what kind of art? Is it art in the aesthetic sense, concerned with shapes, colors, and structures? Or is it a cultural product aimed at everyone and no one—a reflection of the times, an institutional necessity? According to the *Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1993–2009 edition), art is a “form of human activity and consciousness, consisting in the creation of expressive structures capable of generating and communicating complex specific emotions, in which sensoriality, intuition, affectivity, and intelligence participate, both in the act of creation and in the act of reception.” So is performance art just entertainment, or is it a form of free expression—a genuine artistic act based on originality and exploration, unbounded by predetermined techniques, styles, or structures?

The American psychologist Daniel Goleman, in his renowned work *Emotional Intelligence*, speaks of a “team IQ,” which sums up the talents and abilities of those involved in a project. This IQ is by no means academic, but rather emotional—it reflects how socially attuned everyone involved is: “*The ability of each individual to adapt, considering all others as equals, will make one group more talented, more productive, and more successful than another—whose members, with equal talents and abilities in other areas, do*

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

not fare as well in emotional intelligence."¹ In an artistic project, if the doorman understands that the way he greets the performers as they enter the building influences how the performance unfolds, if the costume team believes that preparing the costumes is the first step in a process that will end in applause and that, without them, nothing would be the same, if the ushers know they are, in fact, the first performers the audience sees—not to mention the lighting designer, sound designer, technical director, and so on—then the audience is likely to have a truly revelatory artistic experience. The harmony created within a group only enhances the talent of each individual. And everyone has a talent.

And if the team is the macrocosm, then through work in the microcosm we can say this: beyond the final product and its impact on the audience, one thing is certain—in the actor's inner work, there can be no emotion without rigor, and no rigor without emotion. To reach true emotion, the actor needs discipline. More precisely, self-discipline: he needs to be aware of how deeply he is engaged in what he is rehearsing, and he needs to be honest with himself—whether he is in rehearsals to get a diploma, to earn a salary, to gain the audience's admiration, or whether he is truly there to discover something about himself.

Great theater practitioners believe that acting is a journey of self-discovery. Lev Dodin says: "*We don't make performances, we explore ourselves endlessly.*"² Peter Brook adds: "*Acting is a life's work—the actor expands his knowledge of himself step by step, through the painful and ever-changing experience of rehearsals and through the shattering and punctuated moments of performances.*"³ And Jerzy Grotowski writes: "*The actor must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself.*"⁴

This raw honesty with oneself must be followed by motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties. It also involves postponing the

¹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2018, Bucharest, p. 262.

² Lev Dodin, *Journey Without End*, Cheiron Publishing House, 2008, Bucharest, p. 52.

³ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Nemira Publishing House, 2014, Bucharest, p. 91.

⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Cheiron Publishing House, 2009, Bucharest, p. 23.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

satisfaction of applause—which can often be merely formal—for the pleasure of labor, a deeply intimate process. And, above all, it requires persistence. Or, in Daniel Goleman's terms, at least the desire to know the trance: “*The trance is a state of self-forgetfulness. Even acting at full capacity when in such a state, people are no longer concerned about how they are doing, whether success or failure will follow—because the sheer pleasure of the act itself motivates them.*”⁵ If, while performing, an actor analyzes his chances of success—what the critics will say, how the audience will perceive him, whether he’ll win an award—the authenticity disappears. The only way he can succeed in all of this is, paradoxically, to give up such thoughts. On the other hand, if during rehearsals and the construction of the role he allows himself to be guided by these goals, he will not be able to descend into the innermost recesses of his being, and the performance will never reach the level of authenticity that could, ironically, bring him everything his ego desires. This is the paradox of the actor’s craft—and the hardest lesson to learn: it is only by letting go of the ego that we can achieve the success we seek. And this entire process, which goes against our human nature—dependent as it is on approval and appreciation—cannot take place without iron self-discipline.

On the other hand, unemotional rigor can turn our artistic act into a product that shows mastery but is lifeless. Every great work of art contains both technique and something else—something of the artist’s spirit. That something that makes it unique. That’s why the great characters of drama have been performed for hundreds of years: because they are always different, new, and surprising, depending on the artist who brings them to life. Audiences don’t come to the theater to see Hamlet—because Hamlet doesn’t exist. He’s just a string of words in a book. What exists is the actor who, with his history, soul, reason, and spirit, understands Hamlet and brings him to life.

This reflection takes me back to a recent experience: a second-year directing exam. The exam was well constructed—the space was clearly defined, the lighting was well chosen, one could sense the coordinator’s concern for pacing and precision, and the actors seemed familiar with the situations and stakes of their characters. However, at one point, the question came to my mind: how is it possible that on stage an actor is crying (with real tears) and tearing his hair out (both metaphorically and literally), and I, sitting

⁵ Daniel Goleman, op. cit., p. 163.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

in the audience, feel nothing? Why is it that, in the character's moments of crisis, I found myself looking at the clock and wondering how much longer it would last—and what I was going to cook for dinner when I got home? I felt bad, because I was failing to have the emotional reaction that, I knew, the actor was hoping I would feel. And so we return to ego once again: actors want to provoke a reaction in the audience. And this desire can become so intense that it turns into their sole purpose. We sacrifice our self to feed our ego. The perception of others becomes so important that what I feel, how I grow, ends up disappearing altogether.

But how can an actor juggle between these two extremes—between authenticity and the need for validation, between rigor and emotion? Perhaps the answer lies not in giving up the ego altogether, but in understanding it and turning it into a tool. The ego should not be fed, but educated. If an actor shifts his attention from the desire to be perceived as *extraordinary* to the living act of creation, to the joy of discovery, then the goal is no longer the spectator's reaction, but the truth of the moment. And, paradoxically, it is precisely this sincerity, this conscious abandonment of the desire to control, that creates the most powerful emotions. In art, as in life, the most profound impact comes not from what we want to show, but from what we are willing to share.

If authenticity and the discovery of individuality are essential to an actor, then the educational process should cultivate them, not hinder them. Very often, however, in the arts education system we have, formal education becomes more of a methodological course than an encouragement of creative imagination. And this doesn't stem from bad intentions, but rather from the way the system is structured: someone—the teacher—tells you exactly what and how to do, you perform, and you get a mark. In this context, the grade is perceived as an artistic value, which is confusing.

A teacher can be very young, just out of school, or have extensive experience in the theater, but may have spent their entire life as an actor or director—two roles profoundly different from that of a teacher. And yet, regardless of their background, the moment they step into the classroom, they become responsible not only for imparting information, but also for shaping future generations of artists. No easy task. And, in a system that values those who conform and deliver measurable results, how much room is left for experimentation, creative failure, and exploration? And more importantly, what chance does a young actor have to build their own artistic identity in an

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

environment where, at times, the teacher's voice is louder than their own intuition?

And then the natural question arises: what does theater pedagogy need? More emotion or more rigor? Do we, as pedagogues, enter the classroom as if for a military drill, preparing students for a *tough* world in which they will have to fend for themselves? Or, on the contrary, do we enter positive and open, ready to understand them, like a therapist offering the kind of acceptance they may never have received? There are two essential directions here. First: is theater a craft or an art? If it is a craft, then it must be taught with rigor, with constant practice, through a precise, almost mathematical method. But if it is art, then it involves exploration, intuition, sensitivity, and a process of personal discovery. In truth, theater is both. And its pedagogy should combine these two dimensions without canceling each other out.

Every job involves moments of rejection and uncertainty, plus difficult challenges. In any field—be it accounting, architecture, or medicine—there are failures. Choosing a profession does not guarantee success or the absence of obstacles. So the fundamental question is: should theater pedagogy be about resistance or discovery? I believe it is about discovery. Especially today, when higher education is no longer a rigid path to a particular profession, but rather an extension of the personal search that begins in high school. In a world where literature graduates work in corporations and theology graduates become communication specialists, education is no longer just technical training for a narrow field, but a space for personal development.

Of course, the balance between freedom and rigor would be ideal. But can it truly exist, or is it just a theoretical concept, difficult to apply in reality? A balanced system would mean more hours devoted to physical training—fencing, dance, stage combat, singing, voice, diction, improvisation—and not just a program structured to fit teachers' schedules. It would require that each course be taught by specialists in the field, without the classes becoming mere formalities in the curriculum. In addition, assessment methods should be reconsidered. If a teacher is expected to lecture, direct artistic productions, publish academic articles, participate in national and international festivals, and contribute to institutional projects—how can we expect them to do all of that well? In this context, are we talking about balance—or overload?

The impact of the teacher on the student is major. If I am a well-known actor, that does not automatically make me a good teacher. I must understand

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

that my success came from my own journey, my own unique style. My students will not succeed by copying me. No one can be “like me” because no one else has exactly the same experiences, emotions, or way of viewing the world. In art, style is deeply personal. Imitation, whether conscious or compelled, is not creation—it’s just a way to score high in a rigid system. History shows us that the greatest artists did not copy their teachers, but challenged and surpassed them. Are we, today’s pedagogues, prepared to be challenged and surpassed?

But what happens when the teacher is also an active artist, busy with personal projects, administrative duties, or their own career path? Pedagogy often takes a back seat. When time is limited, patience for each student’s individual process diminishes. Instead of allowing them to discover themselves at their own pace, the teacher ends up imposing a direction—because they “don’t have time” to let students make mistakes and grow organically. Sometimes ego also comes into play: *my class* must be the most appreciated, have the best reputation. It’s no longer about individual development, but collective performance—a teacher-coordinated, but not necessarily authentic, outcome for each individual student.

Finally, the question remains: how can we find a pedagogical formula in which teachers guide without imposing, and students learn without imitating? Is it possible to build a system in which individual discovery and artistic training are not stifled by academic rigidity? The answers are not simple. But perhaps this is where true theater pedagogy begins: in the willingness to search, to question, and to remain open to learning—on both sides of the desk.

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