

## Perspectives on Emotion and Stage Action in Acting

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**Abstract:** Emotions are a constant in our daily lives, and the way we manage them depends on our emotional intelligence, which cannot be the same for every individual in society. In the art of theatrical performance, emotion is the guarantee of a successful performance. As far as the actor's performance mechanisms are concerned, emotion is regarded with great interest by actors, believing that their performance must obey certain unwritten laws, leading to a result that will glorify the emotion in their acting. My article aims to debate what its role is in the actor's art, and whether it should be seen as an ideal towards which the actor should strive, or merely a consequence of something well done, which is based on other mechanisms, such as stage action.

**Keywords:** emotion, actor, action, theater

### *The emotional actor*

The art of theatrical interpretation is based on certain dramatic situations proposed by various authors, which the actors must assume as if they were living them. This idea has been debated over the years many times by renowned theater theorists, each of them proposing different methods of interpretation that actors should adopt, and construct their roles taking into account certain aspects that are either for the triggering of emotion organically within the actor, or against this form of emotional engagement. Put in the difficult situation of choosing one of these options, the actor chooses to follow either one path or the other. Jerzy Grotowski, an important Polish theater

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director and educator of the 20th century, leads the actor into realms where emotion is not confined within the limits of a technical interpretation. According to his theory, the actor has to explore, through physical and verbal action, the boundaries between interpretation and metamorphosis. The actor has to break the convention of the fourth wall, advocated by Konstantin Stanislavski, who established a unique theatrical system in the history of theater, which, although constantly improved, still serves as a benchmark for most actors, and enter into a direct relationship with the spectator, and the connection that will be established between them must go beyond the boundaries of ordinary communication .<sup>1</sup>

Placed in the context of an emotional engagement of such intensity, the actor explores beyond theatrical convention, putting at the service of his interpretation, all the mysteries of his resonatory apparatus. Following the path suggested by Grotowski, the actor gives voice to his feelings in the rawest possible way, in an attempt to use the dramatic situations proposed by the author to discover something more about himself and the person he is addressing, namely the spectator. Ion Cojar, the great Romanian professor of theater, supports the idea that the actor should not relate to his art as one of the interpretative ones, but as a way of identifying with the role, the latter being nothing other than a convention proposed by the author, which the actor must transform into an objective reality, but without leaving the human sphere, an essential quality for him. The ostentatious display of emotions, according to the great Romanian pedagogue, will lead to a demonstrative result, which will have nothing to do with the actor's art, as it will force the actor to forcefully interpret certain feelings that he does not feel.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theater*, ed. Unitext, Bucharest, 1998, pg.20

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Cojar makes a clear distinction between the art of the actor and the art of theatrical performance, considering that the two do not share the same objective. The actor must concern himself with his score, while the theater performance is subject to other laws, namely those of impressiveness and spectacle. The actor must work honestly, put himself in the situation as simply as possible, and always start from ground zero, from what he is at that moment, and not try to construct a reality parallel to life. Identifying with the role, according to Cojar's theory, must always take into account the personality of the person who puts himself in the situation, of the person. The actor will draw on his or her emotional baggage, and the result will be one that cannot be subjected to the technical mechanisms of interpretation. "He thinks and can even be two things at once. Him and someone else"<sup>2</sup> . The emotional commitment to which the actor will be subjected, following Ion Cojar's principle, will be significant, but without in any way forcing the message. The emotion will be triggered only by respecting the specific logical mechanism to which he refers, and not in the situation in which the actor will seek to be angry, sad or happy. Contrary to Grotowski, who asked the actor to explore as much as possible inside himself, going beyond the boundaries of words, Ion Cojar lifts this stone from the actor's shoulders, the main objective of the actor being to identify with the specific problem of the role, but without prefabricated feelings, but relating as accurately as possible to the specific feelings at the moment of interpretation.

### *The active actor*

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<sup>2</sup> Ion Cojar, *A poetics of the actor's art*, ed. Paideia, Bucharest, 1999, pg.39

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The actor's preoccupation with emotion is not to blame. Driven by the desire to be successful, they relate to their craft in an overly emotional way, placing too much emphasis on what is understood from the outside. His verbal and physical actions, watched by the spectator, may be more or less logical, but they will not be able to have a universal character, because there will be many people in the theater, different in terms of empathic processes. We are constructed differently, and the actor cannot manipulate this in any way. The only thing the actor can do is to act physically or verbally, and the spectator can draw his own conclusions. The actor who is not in control of his voice or his body can send different signals to those watching him, and this cannot be totally controlled by him. His vocal technique may not work at any given moment, as the actor is a living organism, subject to mistakes. "People's emotions are rarely put into words. More often, they are expressed through other cues".<sup>3</sup>

Theatrical language is subject to signs that need clarity in order to be properly understood by the audience. The actor's objective is to make this as clear as possible, without relying on emotion to achieve it. It is the actor's reasoning that will help the actor to construct a logical path, with the emotion coming as a result of what has just been realized. An actor who knows the map of emotions and manages them well in everyday life will be better able to control how his messages reach the audience and how they are received by them. An emotionally over-engaged actor will do many things at once without being able to talk about his actions afterwards because he has been engaged in a battle with an enemy he does not know. The actor needs to be the ally of his emotions, not their enemy. Emotions, according to the psychologist David

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<sup>3</sup> David Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, ed. Curtea Veche, fifth edition, Bucharest, 2021, pg.234

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Goleman, are contagious, and the way we pick up on each other's emotions says a lot about us .<sup>4</sup>

The main objective of the actor is to act on his partner and the environment. He does not need to complicate himself unnecessarily, and decide how he or his partner should feel. How the other receives his or her message, and transfers it into emotions, is no longer up to the actor. The specificity of the actor's art is that the action triggers an emotion, not the other way around. The way I act on my partner will make him or her vulnerable, and this effect, through empathic processes, will materialize in an emotion that the spectator will experience during the artistic act. The actor does not need to worry about what he is feeling either, because the moment he does so, he will block the relationship with his partner, which will take second place. The point of concentration, as stated by Viola Spolin in her theory on the actor's art, will help the actor to remain active in the scene, and not resort to technical tricks to trigger an emotion. The actor needs to focus on action, not emotion. "Acting and doing are the same thing. When you act, you do something, but you have to learn not to do differently when you act"<sup>5</sup>. Stella Adler attaches particular importance to stage action as the mainstay of the actor's psychological journey.

Specific actor's art training, built around simple actions, will help the actor not to overcomplicate by appealing to emotion when he has a goal to accomplish. In her exercises, Stella Adler tries to get the actor used to taking the simplest route to accomplishing an action. Psychologizing a simple gesture, such as flicking on a light switch, will lead to a block, as the actor needs to keep the route as simple as possible. How the actor feels when

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg.268

<sup>5</sup> Stella Adler, *The art of acting*, ed. Applause Books, New York, 2000, pg.36

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performing these ordinary actions is not up to him. The only thing they need to focus on is the quality of the action they are doing. The more the actor is in control and knows the context, the more powerful what he does on stage will be.

Stella Adler's account of emotions, as far as she is concerned, is as simple and straightforward as it can be. The actor cannot control the emotions he or she feels in a specific theater exercise, nor should he or she focus on this aspect. Repressing emotions through imagination, according to the author, is misunderstood by the actor. He does not need to focus on the emotions he felt at the specific moment of a specific situation in the past when he performed a certain action, but on the context in which it was taking place, trying to recreate exactly the past action, and not the feelings he experienced some time ago, as this can lead to a false play, without being truly connected to the present parameters of the specific scene you are working .<sup>6</sup>

The way in which an actor acts on his partner and the environment influences the smooth running of things, and disrupts order. When the action is well performed, the relationship between one actor and the other creates conflict, which is indispensable to theater. The partner will react to the action that the other proposes, and this is the main objective of the unfolding of the action of a theatrical performance, and not the search for excitement at any cost. If it happens that the events in the performance spread different feelings, it will be thanks to a job well done. "The fulfillment of our character's desires, juxtaposed with the circumstances and desires of the other characters, presupposes a real emission and reception. Cause and effect, receiving and doing something in relation to what you receive in response to an assumption

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg.115

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or imaginary stimulus - that's what acting is all about"<sup>7</sup> . Uta Hagen describes the stage action that an actor has to perform as decisive in changing the course of the characters and the plot of the play. The decisions that the characters make are closely connected to their goals, and their actions will clearly indicate the actor's path. The actor's creative ego should not take control of these simple goals that Uta Hagen finds essential to the actor's psychological journey. The actor needs to stand out, and the emotions he experiences on stage will convince the audience of his artistic ability, but the actor must not fall into this trap of following the course of fame. He must play the game correctly and follow the path set for him, first by the playwright and then by the director with whom he will be working.

Uta Hagen gives as an example William Shakespeare for the way in which he managed to provide dynamics to his plays, giving the actor a very good study material in terms of identifying the action as the main driving force in the development of the role, blaming the multitude of adjectives present in contemporary plays. This modern construction of the plays, confounds the actor, who can fall into the trap of "playing" feelings, instead of focusing on the goals of his character, for the most active path setting. The actor's habit of asking the director what he should feel at certain moments, or how his character feels as a result of some actions he has performed, should be adapted to the need to eliminate melodramatic acting that "mimics" certain false states, by directing the actor's attention to those mechanisms specific to the actor's art that guide him towards the need to act concretely on his partner and the environment with the data he registers in the present moment, and not by referring to certain inauthentic images in his mind.

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<sup>7</sup> Uta Hagen, Haskel Frankel, *Respect for acting*, ed. Jossey-Bass, New York, 2023, pg.188

## Conclusions

The actor's art is mainly concerned with the specifics of humanity, and emotions are an important part of our lives that affect our journey without us being able to change anything. Events in our lives will not take into account certain blockages that we may or may not be aware of. Emotion is an important part of the art of theater performance, without it, theatrical performances would not be of interest to anyone, as they would be a string of events that would convey nothing to anyone. The task of the actor is to record all these things, and to try to disregard all these aspects, concentrating on conveying the message as clearly as possible to the partner and the audience, and to make the emotion result from the stage action, which is realized simply and objectively by the actor.

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