

The Convergence of Past and Present in the Art of Acting Classes Reconsidering the Necessity of Pedagogical Models

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Abstract: The present article restores to pedagogical attention the urgent and pressing imperative to acquaint students with genuine cultural models, with the aim of awakening within them a love for the theatrical universe and, more broadly, for the wider sphere of culture. Relevant pedagogical models and landmarks will foster a meaningful articulation of past and present. The rigorous structures that underpin acting courses are an essential component of the student's developmental trajectory. The teacher does not hasten the didactic process, each successive step carries formative significance, allowing the student's engagement with the text to assume a symbiotic character. Improvisational practices, the cultivation of awareness in relation to surrounding realities, muscular relaxation, the acceptance of one's scene partner, the development of rhythms, the need for cultural inquiry, the necessity of understanding the past in order to master the present, the act of relating oneself to significant artistic and pedagogical models of the past, as well as the acceptance of these values, all of these constitute essential stages in the artistic evolution of students. The need for the text should arise organically, following sustained and assiduous labour directed toward the knowledge of one's own inner world. Through such an approach, the student is spared disorientation but will instead undergo a natural process of development. Against the backdrop of recent publishing developments, the distinguished actor and pedagogue Octavian Cotescu, alongside the exceptional American film actor Al Pacino, once again comes to the fore as an essential model within the cultural panoply of the younger generation of aspiring actors pursuing their studies at specialised universities. The great Romanian actor and exceptional professor is extolled for his devotion and pedagogical virtues in a volume published within specialist literature, authored by his former student, the late actor of the Bulandra Theatre, Răzvan Ionescu. Al Pacino's memoir moves beyond the confines of literary expression alone, emerging as a genuine pedagogical tool within the field of acting.

Keywords: acting, pedagogy, models, student, Octavian Cotescu, Al Pacino, Viola Spoling

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Introduction

The new psycho-emotional structures characteristic of the young individual entering a university-level acting class call for heightened and sustained attention from the teaching staff. The method of working alongside the young acting student assumes a precarious character in the absence of a vivid projection into their memory of pedagogical and artistic evolution, suspended between a past insufficiently known and a rigorous, demanding present. The realities that structured acting classes during the period of IATC - Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Art, ATF - Academy of Theatre and Film, or even UNATC - National University of Theatre and Film in the 2000s can no longer serve as operative structures for the contemporary pedagogical field. The forms through which the methods of the art of acting are put into practice must be conceived with the utmost care, so as to cultivate possibilities of connection between the student and the theoreticians, between the teacher and the method, and between the art of acting itself and a present increasingly shaped by ego-centredness, upon hypersensitivity, and the restructuring of the individual's attention.

Spatiality, understood as a form of relational proximity, points to the juxtaposition between the student's personality and the emergent forms of teaching mobilised by the academic teacher. Students of the present generation call for a different kind of personal space, whereas the shaping of emotions and the development of the competencies intrinsic to the art of acting, as well as the ensuing development of the stage character compel the professor to correlate past and present in a pragmatic manner, through creative resources that are carefully conceived and rigorously structured.

The practice of acting requires rigorous and unremitting labour, akin to the formation of a soldier thoroughly trained for the front line of battle. Within the art of acting, patience and inner personal strength constitute primordial elements in the process of artistic maturation. The struggle inherent in shaping the future actor, in moulding what they career will become, and in refining their personality, begins within the university environment. The responsibility borne by teachers is immense within the emerging paradigm of contemporary society, and even more so in the formation of future actors who are conscious of what this profession truly entails, of the labour it demands, and of the qualities that must be cultivated and continually sustained through steadfast seriousness of purpose. The most fundamental necessity of contemporary generations lies in their ability to relate themselves to sound theatrical and cinematographic reference points. More than ever before, young

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students stand in need of *solid cultural models*. These must be introduced within the framework of the courses, with the direct aim of persuading students that truly distinguished achievement is never the product of complacency or ease, but rather of labour, passion, and creativity firmly anchored in cultural pillars. A broader tendency can be discerned toward the invalidation of major figures of the past, even toward the refusal to acknowledge their importance in the evolution of Romanian, European, and indeed global culture.

The collective introduction of the portraits of important actors, directors, set designers, and choreographers, together with the stories that shaped their lives, constitutes an imperative within the fragile and unsettled pedagogical climate of the present. In a similar vein, in the present context, the meticulous presentation of the various working methods employed by the eminent figures belonging to the distinguished lineage of Romanian acting professors emerges as a necessity. Through such an approach, students are brought into relation with concrete examples, enabling them to comprehend and perpetuate the necessity of respecting methodical working structures that demand time, commitment, and seriousness.

In the effort to draw young students toward affiliation with rigorous didactic structures, governed by precise rules and set in contrast to surrounding reality, acting courses will establish a passage between past and present through the multitude of exemplary models brought into the foreground.

A Touchstone for the Present

The gallery of Romanian theatre and cinematography is marked by emblematic figures, outstanding artistic personalities, and major exemplars of the stage. The cultural landscape has preserved them in the foreground through their unwavering dedication to their craft, their seriousness of purpose, and their excessive labour, often pursued at the expense of their personal lives. The appreciation of solid models drawn from the cultural past does not entail the subjugation of the modern personalities of young artists. Quite the reverse, an engagement with the values of the past casts the present into the glare of the footlights, thereby recalibrating the current repertoires performed on the stages of various theatres.

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In my work with students, I introduce not only the values rooted in the history of the native theatre and to pedagogy, but also familiar figures from the silver screen, who have rendered world cinema a vital necessity within cultural life.

Octavian Cotescu¹ - *Pedagogue and Actor, a Singular Model*

The legendary actor Octavian Cotescu was likewise called "the Master", an appellation bestowed in recognition of his artistic accomplishment and pedagogical distinction. As a professor, he maintained from the opening class of the first academic year that humility is the foremost lesson to be learned in the actor's profession. What the great pedagogue had in mind was the constructive meaning of humility, that form of inward discipline which offers the future actor the hope of enduring on the great stages of the theatre or on the film set. Within acting classes, the student comes into contact with such figures so that they may understand that *scenic truth* can never be attained in the absence of continuous and rigorous labour.

"If you choose to follow this path with me, you must understand that your life will unfold under the sign of difficulty. That is to say, whatever is not obtained with ease, at first hand, everything which does not have at its origins an ordeal, a cost, should give us cause for reflection. Something is not right. (...) The obstinate rejection of easy solutions, the deliberate assumption of obstacles in the noble pursuit of perfection, this is the true meaning of difficulty."²

An actor who, in the most literal sense, gave his life upon the theatre stage becomes a touchstone for any first-year student. The tragic death of the actor Octavian Cotescu, which occurred on stage amid the severe cold that marked performance halls in the 1980s, endures as a powerful testimony to the artist's devotion and ultimate sacrifice for his art. In sharp contrast, contemporary generations, shaped within an environment of comfort, appear increasingly reluctant to assume sacrifice in the name of artistic vocation and service of art. This view is further borne out by the testimonies of students who attend theatre performances ever less frequently, gravitating instead toward other, more precarious modalities of artistic expression. It falls to the professor

¹ Octavian Cotescu (1931 – 1985) – Romanian actor of the Bulandra Theatre, noted for his performances in numerous successful films and stage productions, and professor of acting at IATC.

² Ionescu Răzvan, *Ce mult v-am iubit*, Braşov, editura Creator, 2022, p. 28

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to teach them how to discover a deep and enduring attachment to theatre, even in relation to contemporary productions, and how to face the spectacular dilemmas of the present. The bridge between the playful theatrical past and the ease-bound, lethargic present must be built from the outset of actor training, beginning in the first academic year.

What ultimately matters is, as Professor Octavian Cotescu himself maintained: *the truth*. Naturally, this is scenic truth, that truth by virtue of which the character is able to enter, and remain anchored within, the spectator's affective and mnemonic horizon.

The proper formation of the future actor requires, on the part of the teacher, a didactic strategy grounded in the foundational principles articulated by major theoreticians such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Viola Spolin, and Michael Chekhov. The working system must rest upon sustained labour, carried forward with patience and animated by passion. The legacy of the great teachers of the performing arts demonstrates how essential it is to approach classical methods without precipitating the pedagogical process, and not to introduce the dramatic text as a direct didactic instrument from the very first meetings of the first term in the first year of study. In the formative beginnings of actor training, Professor Octavian Cotescu worked with the student according to a different pedagogical logic. He shaped the student with subtlety and prepared them for the decisive encounter with the text, since the word constitutes the gateway both to the public and to the living embodiment of the character. The recollections of his students attest to his rigour and seriousness of purpose. For months at a time, he worked with them on improvisational practices and on the construction and comprehension of theatrical space. "For an entire term we engaged exclusively in exercises centred on states of being, delimitations of spaces, rhythms, all without a spoken word, because in THEATRE, however astonishing it may seem to Your Lordships, in the beginning there was not the word, but ... the THOUGHT. (...) The exercises involving memories, through which each of us entered, in turn, into the memory of the other, (...), constituted moments, hours of inexhaustible enchantment."³

The pedagogical process undertaken with the student, from the first term of the first year, is non-verbal, sustained through various exercises in improvisation, in the apprehension of space and of realities, as well as in the cultivation of the

³ Idem, p. 33

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imaginative capacities indispensable to the actor's craft. The word is introduced only at a later stage, through exercises specifically oriented toward its gradual integration. By the end of the academic year, priority is given to dramatizations. These are devised by the students themselves (an exceedingly important nuance - insofar as they are not produced by the professors) starting from a prose text chosen according to their own preference.

Within the contemporary pedagogical context, one may observe an increasing acceleration of the working process through the premature introduction of the text. Such precipitation of the didactic process places at risk the formation of the future actor, who thereby risks no longer internalising in a coherent manner the path toward *TRUTH* and may thus become an atypical result within the performative space, an actor deprived of the freedom proper to artistic becoming.

"The first step toward acting lies in the *awareness of personal freedom*. Before one can truly play (experience), one must first be free to do so."⁴

As Viola Spolin likewise argues, the first-year student learns to become conscious of personal freedom, whereas the premature introduction of the text tends to inhibit precisely that freedom. Viola argues that part of this process of becoming aware of one's own freedom is also fostered by a positive classroom atmosphere, one governed by equality between the acting teacher and the student. "*Dependence on the teacher*" cannot assist the student in recognising the creative force that resides within.

The role of the teacher is far more significant than that of simply conveying raw information. By articulating pedagogical objectives grounded in values, the teacher moves beyond this limited function and becomes the principal point of reference for the group of students. Octavian Cotescu stands as an incontestable example in this regard, his career having been shaped by rigour and brilliance alike, both his career at the university lectern and his career on the theatre stage or on the film set. His students themselves remarked upon the methodical discipline that structured not only his courses, but also the entirety of his artistic existence. For Octavian Cotescu, as for the majority of the foremost exponents of Romanian theatre, arriving in the dressing room several hours before a performance formed part of a personal artistic protocol. Octavian Cotescu became an example to be followed by all

⁴ Viola Spolin, *Improvizație pentru teatru*, ediție prescurtată, traducere Mihaela Bețiu, Bucharest, UNATC PRESS, 2014, p. 17

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generations, present and future alike. Discipline and rigour are, and will forever remain, defining strengths of the actor who respects and loves their profession.

A distinguished figure in the history of Romanian theatre, an actor of the Iași National Theatre, as well as of the Alhambra, Comedia, Victoria, and the National Theatre Bucharest, and a lover of comic roles, Ștefan Ciubotărașu held that *a role is not difficult to learn; The real challenge lies in forgetting it!* The text must become wholly one's own, it must be assimilated so deeply that it enters the very fabric of thought. This theory is reinforced by the words of the director Liviu Ciulei, who argued that the role should come to fit with the ease and familiarity of a shirt worn over time. Within actor training, students must accordingly learn how to understand the worlds of the author, the playwright, the theatre director, and the film director alike. At a young age, there is always the danger of dissipating attention in superfluous detail and thus drifting away from the essence of theatre. It is in this spirit that Octavian Cotescu wished his students to read *Chekhov's Journal*, so that they might gain entry into the universe of the great Russian playwright and fall irreversibly under the spell of the roles he imagined in the plays familiar to the wider theatre-going public.

The everyday should not exist in antagonism to the actor's inner constitution. Rather, it ought to function as the continuation and completion of the artist applauded in the theatre hall. In Octavian Cotescu's view, the actor was required to preserve a certain radiance even beyond the stage, whether moving through the public square or along the city's great boulevards. "His pedagogy, therefore, extended beyond the strictly artistic domain; he was deeply concerned with the position, status, and role that the actor must secure in society. (...) (...) His sharply critical remarks about the conspicuously 'uninspired' style of dress of one colleague were enough to bring a flush of shame to the latter's cheeks."⁵ Yet, as the author of the volume subsequently notes, years later that same student had become a cultivated and *accomplished man*, having ultimately grasped the deeper meaning of Professor Cotescu's vision.

On numerous occasions, Viola Spolin underscores the decisive importance of improvisational games during the first year of actor training. The accomplished actor has his origin in the solid foundations laid during this initial formative stage. It is here that the young student acquires confidence, bodily and psychic relaxation, and an inner depth of experience, enabling a later fusion with the dramatic text. "In

⁵ Ionescu Răzvan, *Ce mult v-am iubit*, Brașov, editura Creator, 2022, p. 39

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improvisational theatre, for example, where costumes, props, and scenery are scarcely used at all, the actor learns that *scenic reality must possess space, depth, and substance - in short, physical reality.*"⁶

Al Pacino - Sonny Boy

In the course of artistic maturation and self-comprehension, the actor inevitably collides with personal blockages that erode important dimensions of inner artistic life. To counterbalance and stabilize this form of psycho-artistic dysfunction, the actor, and, above all, the student, needs to become acquainted with the lived realities of major cultural personalities from both cinema and theatre. The analysis of the trajectory of a great actor, one who performed on the most celebrated sets of American cinema while remaining profoundly devoted to theatre and the stage, provides solid and highly specific points of reference for addressing problems arising within the scenic process.

Sonny Boy - Al Pacino's autobiographical volume, written by one of the most emblematic actors in the history of cinema, may become a method of ***cultural and actorial*** therapy for students standing at the beginning of their journey through university training in acting Michael Corleone, the unforgettable figure of Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece *The Godfather*, sets down on paper his sensitivities, crises, personality, solitude, and the process through which his great roles were constructed. His reflections provide young actors with a valuable framework of support at the outset of their formation. For students no less than for professional actors, the volume retains a therapeutic function within acting practice, particularly in those moments when weariness, helplessness, and distrust begin to surface.

"On one occasion, my friend Lee Strasberg⁷ said that this is real talent: a blade of grass growing out of a slab of cement!"⁸

⁶ Viola Spolin, *Improvizație pentru teatru*, ediție prescurtată, traducere Mihaela Bețiu, Bucharest, UNATC PRESS, 2014, p. 27

⁷ American actor, director, and acting teacher. He is considered the father of The Method. Artistic Director of The Actors Studio in New York.

⁸ Al Pacino, *Sonny Boy*, București, Editura Nemira, 2024, p. 16.

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Al Pacino belonged to that lineage of actors who studied at The Actors Studio in New York. Alongside many other actors, Al Pacino remains an exemplary figure of sacrifice in the service of the acting profession, while also embodying the figure of the cultivated actor, a consistent reader and rigorous analyst of dramatic literature, complementing his cultural universe with listening sessions devoted to classical music, including the works of Mozart and Stravinsky.

"Preparation for a role is always the same. One must marshal oneself so completely in such a way as to be able to inhabit that role. In doing so, one comes to discover another person within oneself. I am inclined to think that within me there exist many selves. When actors refer to the full extent of their instrument, they mean the entirety of their being, the whole person, body and soul together. It is through this total human totality that acting takes place"⁹

The deepening of one's engagement with Chekhov's dramatic universe remains an organic passion for the great values of the theatre. Like Octavian Cotescu, Al Pacino too is drawn to the universal paradigm of the dramaturgy of the great A.P. Chekhov. Concerning the books authored by the great Russian playwright, the actor stated that they were *read and reread, their corners folded over through repeated return*. Al Pacino, that singular genius of Hollywood cinema, offers a lesson in the preservation of personal decency and in the necessity, for the actor, of remaining anchored in the reality of his own existence; by the force of his own example, he demonstrates that in this profession at one moment, the actor may stand upon the crest of success, only to vanish from the public horizon, and later to return, once again, upon the same wave of recognition. Despite the fact that his performances had been recognized through Academy Award nominations, he was nevertheless dismissed from the theatre. In the course of constructing certain roles, he even suspended filming when his interpretive vision was not being understood. Al Pacino is thus remembered as an actor of exceptional force of personality, while at the same time remaining inscribed in cultural memory as a deeply sensitive artist, passionately attached to classical music and to the reading of the major dramatists. The awareness of one's own inner universe is indispensable in the actor's profession, insofar as it prevents self-limitation in the development of theatrical or cinematic character when roles unsuited to one's structure arise. The lucidity required to know one's own capacities constitutes a major advantage in shaping the future an actor may construct along the

⁹ Idem, p. 68

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path to success. The knowledge of one's limits becomes a necessary structuring principle of an acting career, lest one be overtaken by the illusion of false success. Director Francis Ford Coppola telephoned him directly and offered him, without any casting process, the role in the celebrated film that has remained in cinematic history, *The Godfather*, thereby crowning the labour he had invested in the small roles he had played up to that point. By studying such exemplary figures, the student comes to understand the importance of constant labour which, however insignificant it may seem at first, can propel one to the threshold of glory. "I was pragmatic. One thing alone I knew with certainty: that there were roles I could play and roles I could not play. In that conviction, I believed with all my strength."¹⁰

There exists a certain native malaise within the acting profession: the tendency toward stagnation within a single genre. From the very years of university formation, the student learns not to fall prey to this trap. When one plays the same role endlessly, across different productions, however rigorously one may work, one will eventually be compelled to criticise one's own regression. "Actors must take great care not to end up being cast in only one kind of role: our outward appearance defines us, and sometimes actors remain trapped within a label and reduced to one recurring character type. I do not believe that I could have endured such a condition for very long."¹¹ Al Pacino remains closely bound to the tradition of repertory theatre. His roles afforded him the opportunity of interpreting characters for which, under different circumstances, he might never have been cast. What distinguished the American star was the strength of his artistic personality and his capacity to bring roles to their fullest point of fulfilment. In one of the moments he recounts, he sent people out of the reading room, producers or others connected with the project, so that he might acquire the freedom necessary for the role. The actor enters progressively into a process of identification with the character in the period leading up to the première. Prior to the shooting of *The Godfather*, Pacino would take long walks and think about the role with obsessive intensity. Rather than functioning as a narcissistic performer, Al Pacino revealed a notable discernment in the artistic labour that accompanied his ascent to glory.

For the new generation, Al Pacino remains a point of reference and a figure of revelation; through his testimonies in the volume *Sonny Boy - Al Pacino*, one glimpses

¹⁰ Idem, p. 87

¹¹ Idem, p. 88

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a method of the art of acting - from the inner life, from lived experience, and only thereafter toward the role! Labour, passion, and culture assume primacy in the actor's life, beginning from the very benches of specialised universities.

Conclusion

Models and enduring points of reference are instrumental in the formation of future artists. With time, students will come to understand the necessity of labour, without which the art of acting would be in danger of vanishing in the very form by which we know it today. Those actors who work with passion, with devotion to the refinement of the role and of the career, themselves become, in turn, exemplary touchstones. Provincial universities have the duty to preserve, rather than dilute, the classical method of shaping the future actor and, by extension, the future artist. Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Viola Spolin, and Lee Strasberg therefore remain foundational theoreticians of university-based actor training. The didactics of the present incorporate into the student's horizon the awareness of the importance of great professional touchstones, two of which are foregrounded in this article. Bringing before students the exemplary figures of great artistic personalities, both exponents of Romanian pedagogical tradition and accomplished artists of the stage, strengthens the awareness that genuine models have increasingly disappeared from the individual horizon of experience. By means of these cultural values, the convergence of past and present acquires an attractive and immediately relevant form for the student's direct formation.

The major personalities of the past, insofar as they continue to function as models in the present, keep alive the correct methodological approach to the art of acting.

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