

Reality Acting

by Joanna Rotté

In October in Philadelphia the Curtis Institute of Music held a faculty recital in centennial tribute to Dmitri Shostakovich. Violinist Victor Danchenko played the Sonata for Violin and Piano, Opus 134, not just beautifully but also by audibly exhaling after particularly intense passages. At one moment, he turned to the pianist and asked, “Am I in tune?”. In August in (formerly East) Berlin at the Concert House, Katia Skanair was the soloist on Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto Number 3 in C, Opus 26. She played as if she were eating and being eaten by the piano, and not in the sense of chewing the scenery but in the sense of being and becoming the piano.

What strikes us about the Curtis violinist is the visibility of the performer in the performance, like an undergarment showing. Actually, more or less, we’re able to see the performer in all musicianship, right in front of us, as string players tune their instruments, as horn players shake out the spit, and as all adjust their postures and turn pages. We see the mechanics of the musician as he creates the performance. On the other hand, what strikes us about the Berlin pianist is her absorption, to the extent that the separation between performer and performance is dissolved. A combination or balance of the behavior of both musicians – exposing the self and dissolving the self – could be a useful and healthy approach to acting.

Today, after 125 years of realism in playwriting, the style of realistic acting systematized by Stanislavsky is ingrained in our actors as the path to take. Stanislavsky is honored as the spirit guide if not always (or not even often) followed to the letter. Actors try to apply Stanislavsky whether or not they have the time, stamina, understanding, training, confidence or courage to embody the role and pay the emotional price of identification with the dramatic situation of the character.

Theatre of today, whether in the style of realism or not, is beholden to the realistic acting style. Universally, actors imagine themselves the character, perform the behavior of the role, and don’t let the “actor-self” leak through. Actors persistently engage in their own willing suspension of disbelief that they are actors. Even in the case of empty acting or operatic acting, no matter how artificial or non-naturalistic is the acting, actors still don’t let down their guard, don’t step out of the role, and don’t for a moment relinquish the play. They don’t wipe off sweat, don’t fix a costume mishap without turning upstage to try and hide the fixing, and don’t ask for a line.

How did it happen, that the theatre of the 19th century, that used prompters, revolved into the modern theatre without a prompter? It happened because of realism. What if we were to take the edge off the stress of remembering lines and permit the actors a prompter, acknowledging that it’s a play? What if we were to encourage actors to become as reflexive, un-premeditative and self-reliant as musicians?

No mistaking, I immensely appreciate an actor embodying a role. When the casting is apt and the actor’s immersion is profound, the result is something wonderful.

Recently in Philadelphia, in the Wilma Theatre’s production of “The Pillowman” by Martin McDonagh (directed by Jiri Zizka) and in Iron Age’s production of “The Cripple of Inishmaan,” also by McDonagh, (directed by John Doyle and Randall Wise) the actors were dedicated to consistent identification with the character. For “Inishmaan,” set in rural Ireland in 1934, the cast commanded Irish accents and collaboratively depicted the claustrophobic frustration of village life. For the “Pillowman” role of chief

detective Tupolski, Lewis J. Stadlen fully inhabited the character's relentlessly threatening language, suavely upholding McDonagh's atmosphere of comic fear and loathing. Even Stadlen's native New York City accent brought to a play set in an undisclosed totalitarian dictatorship didn't crack the polish of his performance.

But does the actor's embodiment of the role really have to be seamless for the acting to be effective and the character believable? The price of consistency can be a lack of spontaneity. Actors memorize the lines and set the blocking so that night after night their input is the same – the same moves, same inflections, same gestures, same timing and pacing and pausing. Different audiences evoke shades of difference from one performance to the next, but essentially the actor of today in the style of realism is encouraged by the director and in some cases required by contract to deliver the fundamentally same performance over and over as if for the first time.

The actor's nightmare is that something will be different: that a prop will be missing, or the costume will split open, or worst of all that he will forget the lines – actually, that he will be caught forgetting the lines. If he can improvise on the spot, if he can fool the audience into believing he hasn't forgotten the lines, he'll be saved; in fact, among his fellow actors, he'll be heroic. But if an actor is seen to forget the lines, he becomes an actor on stage and no longer a character in the world of the play – which in the current protocol of theatre is unacceptable. Even as audience members evermore ask, "How did you learn all those lines?" Actors know the real challenge of acting is not memorization but truthfulness; and, like it or not, memorized lines (indeed, the whole memorized performance that is a result of rehearsal) can interfere with the actor's sense of truth: that is, the absolute artistic truth of being moment to moment faithful to the dramatic situation (no matter what).

But what of another kind of truth, a relative truth, which is the truth of the actor himself? What of the actor's reality on a particular night? What harm could there be if the actor would ask for a line or ask if he's in tune? If a prop is missing, couldn't he call for it? If the costume tears, couldn't he pause for a band-aid repair? Or couldn't he consciously work the tear into his performance, letting the audience in on the fact that he's an actor with a costume problem? At a club in New York, I once saw a flamenco dancer who was losing her false eyelash reapply it while keeping her hips and feet in motion.

I'm recommending a kind of yoga, where the actor uses a sixth sense to experience what's going on here and now: mind and body in tune. The yoga would invite the actor to settle his mind so as to be able to notice, to feel, to breathe, and to relax. In this way he could honor the truth of his own reality along with the artistic truth of the production. In this way, actors could catch up with musicians, free to let the mechanics show. Theatre actors could practice relative realism and leave absolute realism to the movies.

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