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Acting on Stage and Screen: The effect of medium on style and performance

Abstract. Screen acting, with its particular use of language and other means of communication, makes special but conflicting demands on actors and performers because of the pattern of development of television, rooted in radio and deeply indebted to theatre. Despite this indebtedness, however, the television has a rich history and clear pattern of its own evolution. Theatrical acting is of course, the ancestor of all other media, and the stage is where most actors start out and where they get their initial training. Performance on stage is generally based on a narrative linear structure limited by actual time and space presented before a live audience who can interact with the players.

The stage has its language, so does film, and any actor who desires to competently do well in either of the medium must develop the skills of vocal and bodily expressiveness which must be distinct and appropriate for both media. Most stage-trained actors usually find adapting to the peculiar demands of acting in the television or film medium challenging. In the same vein many actors who start out on the screen (especially without initial training in acting) generally find it hard to perform on the theatrical stage before a live audience. Only a few who understand the language of both media and have received some minimum education can adapt easily to their technical demands.

This essay explores the distinctions between Acting on Stage and acting on television and the film, focusing on the use of language and other communication methods. The discussion hopes to provide a background for the specific characteristics of performing on either medium while looking at the effect of each of the media on style, technique and performance dynamics to the actor.

Introduction

It is often argued that there is no single satisfactory comprehensive definition of acting. However we all do agree that it is the art of make-believe. Charles McGaw (1980.3) defines acting as “behaving as if things that are not real are real.” Readily, we can see that the make-believe games of childhood have been covered by this definition. That is, depending upon the quality of his imagination, almost every child is a good actor, provided he acts, as most Children do only for the benefit of himself and for others who are participating in the make-believe game. The foregoing pre-supposes that everyone is an actor from childhood or that everyone can act from the level of natural human instincts and practices, and also from social and psychological points of view. But the person who aims at professional competence in acting needs a more thorough and demanding preparation. He must be aware that the process of acting is highly complex, that the performance of a major role requires both talent and technical skills.

The successful stage performance, according to McGaw (p 5), is a feat of artistry that has to be carefully planned for the purpose of communicating with the greatest possible effectiveness the meaning of a particular play to an audience. In other words, the stage is not a casual world in which the actors behave impulsively and with mere self-determination, it is a world of careful design in which all the parts of the pattern serve to illuminate the purpose of the playwright.

Emphasizing this point, he writes

Acting is not as it may once have been believed to be, a God-given gift that enabled some special people to go on stage without training or experience and perform instinctively. / Good acting results from the practice of certain skills that can be learned if one has the aptitude and the determination to do so. These skills provide an external and an internal technique enabling the actor at each

performance to execute a series of specific tasks that taken together creates a design that reveal the purpose of a play (p 9)

It is this crucial requirement that Robert Benedetti (1976.1) describes as “The need for technique”. He believes that before the playwright’s conception or the director’s interpretation can live, the actor must translate them into meaningfully-patterned sensations communicable to his audience. Until this has been done, he insists that “theatre can exist only on an intellectual or literary level; the skill of the actor in creating expressive sensations is what makes theatre a potentially full human experience, the “liveliest” among all the arts. (p 1)

In the same view, David Margashack (1977.27) in his translation of Stanislavsky’s *My Life in Arts* and *An Actor Prepares* talks about the latter’s “psycho-physical” and “psychological” laws of acting, which place emphasis on the inner and the outer work of the actor on himself, and the inner and the outer work of the actor on his role.

Stanislavsky draws a clear distinction between the different types of actors namely: the **creative actor**, the **imitative actor** and the **stage hack**. For him, the creative actor is the one who has the ability to stimulate and direct nature, enter into the feeling of his part and give them an outward embodiment. He insists that his special method “psycho-technique” also referred to as “System” exists for that very purpose and must consequently be learned very thoroughly by every actor who wants to become a creative actor.

The main task of the creative actor therefore is not only to represent the life of his part in its external manifestations, but to re-create on the stage (or the screen), the inner life of the character he represents, adapting his own human feelings to this unfamiliar life and denoting to it, all the organic elements of his own soul. Christopher Lee’s performance in the *Dracula* series and Marlon Brando’s in *On the Waterfront* and exemplify this approach. The audience feels the

weight of futility and failure with him as Terry Malloy (Brando's character) confronts his brother, "I could have been somebody."

The difference between the creative actor and the imitative actor, says Stanislavsky, is that the latter enters into the feelings of his part only during the preparatory stages of his work, while during the actual performance, he does so only indirectly, that is to say, by imitating his former experience. Such acting, Stanislavsky points out, may be beautiful, but it is not deep, it is affective rather than powerful. In it, the *form* is more interesting than the *content*. It creates a greater impression on the spectator's sight and hearing than on his spirit, and for that reason, it thrills rather than moves him. One can see Meryl Streep brush her forefinger across her cheek in a gesture of helplessness and despair in various movies. This gesture conveys but is not a recreation of the experience of the character. The spectator admires rather than believes in such imitative acting. Its means are too superficial or too showy for the expression of great passions.

Stage hacks, in the words of Stanislavsky, merely reproduce the text of their parts by means of once-and-for-all worked out methods of stage acting. They are unable to enter into the feelings of their part. They never even achieve the external results of this creative process. All that remains for them to do, is resort to overacting, for which there exists a large assortment of every kind of theatrical imitative method which is supposed to convey by external means all sorts of feelings one may reencounter in the practice of the stage. These ready-made mechanical methods of acting however soon lose all resemblance to life and are transformed into mechanical stage tricks, devoid of all real feeling. A number of Nigerian and Indian actors who work in popular films fall into this category.

Although the basic rudimentary knowledge and the general technical skills required by the actor are not to be covered within the scope of this essay, a brief summary shall however suffice. Derek Bowskill (1977); Robert Benedetti (1976); Charles Mc Gaw (1980); Constantine

Stanislavsky in David Magarshack (1977) and many others have written extensively on these basic skills. They include, relaxation, concentration, imagination, observation spontaneity, expressiveness, flexibility, development of skill of analysis and instincts for role-playing. They all agree that these qualities and pre-requisites are more often than not dormant in every actor until they are discovered, developed and nurtured.

Having established that the actor needs to discover himself, acquire certain skills and develop a technique notwithstanding the media through which his art is to be expressed, we shall now proceed to examine the differences in the methods of application of these skills and techniques in the different media of the stage and the screen. That is, those elements and factors which affect or influence the pattern of performance delivery on both media. They include:

1. Space
2. Gestures
3. Voice and Speech
4. Emotions
5. Continuity

Space

Film takes away live audience and frees the actor from the limits of actual time and space. Film places the actors in the broadcast context of their environment. According to Hindman, Kirkman and Monk (1982.19),

actors work on stage in environments that are only suggested with limited scenery, indicated by a single room, or created by several sets that must be changed during scene breaks, film on the other hand can show the actual background fluidly.

The environment in film may easily be as important as the performers, yet a paradox exists in the way the film actor can freely make use of the real space available to him because essentially he is

performing for the camera, and unless the camera lens can contain the entire acting space, he will be limited in his movements. The stage, on the other hand, can only simulate the space of the particular setting, either the entire space or part of the space on the stage; the actor is expected to be elaborate in the projection of his words and actions much more than the screen actor who purportedly has a realistic spatial advantage for his motions, which nonetheless must necessarily be constrained.

In the stage tradition, actors create scene by scene. For the film camera, actors usually create frame by frame. A total performance can be as brief as a glance upward or a simple turning of the head sideways. One shot of an actor's face can say a great deal without dialogue, without action. Burrows and Wood (1978:208) state that in television actors must learn to work with *physical precision*. Compared to the stage, television blocking is very precise, every move and tiny gesture have to be carefully planned and controlled. On the stage each movement may be accurate to a few feet. In television (the screen) the action must be measured by inches.

Hindman, Kirkman and Monk (1982:60) describe this factor as *positioning* and argue that the space actors have to work in as they create frames is constantly changing. Stage actors may be upset by how close they have to play some scenes for film, but the screen emphasises the smallest distance between characters. Let us take a political meeting situation for instance, where the delegates are sitting with not more than an inch between their chairs, such toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose arrangement can look normal on the screen but in a stage situation, it would be awkward. The psychological distance that one might think is demanded in a situation by a storyline can put actors abnormally apart. The actor has to learn to create space with posture and with body position rather than floor distance.

Nonlinguistic communication

The scale of significant movements necessary for effective stage work is generally a liability on the screen. The actor must reduce normal theatre gestures and control stage projection. Theatre training encourages a type of performance that appears overdone under the close scrutiny of the camera.

It is interesting that an untrained actor who would be quickly dismissed for incompetence in stage work might sometimes have an initial advantage over trained professionals in screen work. Such actors as Anna Paquin, who won an Oscar for her performance in *The Piano*, and the now famous Renee Zellweger have played important roles in some of the great films. The untrained “real person” can often present a natural image on the screen; yet the screen doesn’t just record real life without technique. To this extent, the untrained real person will still need training to acquire technical skills especially in order to play different roles at different times flexibly; he might fantastically well in one role and be a disappointment in another.

No doubt, training and experience in acting are essential for sustained and credible performance on the screen. It is better therefore to work with trained screen actors than what we might call “just real people” or untrained real people. The screen actor is able to generally scale down from a stage performance, creating gestures that fit the size of the shot within an illogical working space that seldom reflects the action as it would occur in real life. According to Burrows and Wood (1978:207), Screen actors must adjust to smaller scope of projection instead of the exaggerated movements and sweeping gestures that must be seen in the back row of the theatre, the actor has to restrict all actions and movement to a camera only about ten feet away. For example, in the scene with his brother in the car in *On the Waterfront*, Brando’s eyes widen slightly as he tilts his head toward his brother.

Dolman and Knaub (1973:176) identify twelve types of stage movements including those dictated by the plot and prescribed by the playwright as essential action, such as dancing, fighting, serving stage meals, hiding, eating, telephoning & so on. While all these are also applicable to the screen, Hindman, Kirman and Monk (1982:63) identify three categories of specific gestures and movements for the screen:

1. Beyond the frame movement
2. In-frame movement
3. In-body movements

The first are movements that carry the body or a part of the body beyond the frame—an entrance or exit, a waving gesture to signal another to enter, etc. Next are movements that keep the actor in the frame but which change his or her relationship to the edges. Movement such as slumping on the chair, bending, leaning on something to the left or right are in-frame movements. Third, in-body movements are small but significant gestures that occur within the space the body occupies and they do not change the actor's relationship to the frame. Examples include crossing the arms, rubbing the arm, turning the head, raising the eyebrow, and stroking the cheek, as Meryl Streep frequently does in her films. Stage-trained actors often find it extremely difficult to use these small natural movements as they are accustomed to working on a broader scale. These are, however, movements that give density and texture to the actor's image on the screen.

Prop handling may also become particularly difficult. A coffee cup that may be held in a normal situation comfortably at breast level might need to be held after each sip just under the chin level in order to be used in a shoulder shot.

An awareness of these possibilities combined with an understanding of the relative nature of size and space in the T.V image should help actors choose the correct gestures and scale them properly. While a frame may at first seem limiting and unnatural to an actor with experience, he

or she will find a whole new range of expression and movement available to communicate the reality depicted in the film to the audience.

Voice and Speech

Voice and speech are very important elements in the achievement of believable role-playing, whether in the medium of the stage or on the screen. Cicely Berry (1992, 14) says that the actor should know that the audience wants to be let into his character and that this will happen to a large extent through his voice and speech. Evangeline Machlin (1992.vi) also writes that the actor should be concerned with the quality of his speech and ensure that it is “pleasant to hear, easy to understand and compelling to follow”. To achieve good speech quality, “The actor needs breath control, resonant tone, clear articulation and variety of pitch, speed and stress” (p 2). Benedetti (1976.98) also informs us that speech and vocal sounds are highly expressive of our personality and emotions and to this extent the actor needs to be consciously aware of the resource and work towards developing it for effective application on the job.

Hindman, Kirkman and Monk (1982.97) say voice and speech create at least fifty percent (50%) of a character’s image. They reveal age, sex, mood, social class, regional origins as well as such qualities as credibility and sensuality. Screen work both limits and increases the effect of a performer’s voice. A resonant voice with great pitch variety and wide volume range is far less important on the screen than on the stage. On TV, in contrast to on stage, an actor gains a significant degree of vocal gesture and detail. The subtlest shading of the voice is heard. On Stage, where the spectator is two hundred feet away must hear, the small vocal gesture, the click of the tongue, the sign, the caught breath or the half-spoken words is not effective, where as on the screen, all these means are useful.

Special caution must be given to projection for screen acting. While it is necessary to speak clearly and intelligibly, the T.V actor rarely needs to speak louder than called for in normal

conversation because his voice, speech and sounds are being recorded through a microphone placed very near the action. And according to Hindman, Kirkman and Monk, “If the nearest camera operator can hear, so can the microphone” (1982,100). According to Burrows and Wood, “Instead of projecting his or her voice so that every line is heard clearly sixty or seventy feet from the stage, the screen actor must restrict voice volume level without losing emotion or intensity” (1978.207). Brando’s character speaks in a near monotone, catching the details of pronunciation of his character’s local speech patterns while remaining intelligible to the film audience.

The difficulty for most stage-trained actors is that, even when they reduce volume, the voice still has a projected and stagy quality. Hindman, Kirkman and Monk (1982) advise that, it is necessary for the actor to constantly be aware of the people to whom he is speaking if this quality is to be avoided. First, he should avoid thinking of all the studio personnel or production crew before him as his immediate audience. Secondly, he should remember that the viewing audience would most probably be about four or five people (for television) who are just a few feet away. With these thoughts in mind, he should be able to adjust the volume quality appropriately.

Emotions

In the T.V medium, the actor constantly performs in the context of simulated real pain and real accidents. The contrast between real events and fiction creates more subtle actors and at the same time destroys the empathy the stage actor is able to build, since screen actor reaches the audience through the camera which is the intermediary agent that only shows selected parts and moments of the performers work. Real rapport with the audience is not existent with film, unlike the theatre audience. Rapport with the television audience is an illusion because the actor is under a video microscope. In the close up, according to David Beal (1974.96) “we can be brought face to

face with a character, so that the minutest change of emotion is clear to us. And according to Hindman, Kirkman and Monk (1982.139),

Communication using the body is secondary (on the screen) and is mainly used to support the face, Reactions must be strong and clear. Inner monologue can never stop, so that the actor is constantly extending and illustrating the action in the script in responsive silences. David Beal (1974), though, believes that, in fact, the close-up need not be confined to the face. A character's emotion "can be effectively portrayed by close-ups, of fingers drumming impatiently on a table, a cigarette being swiftly crushed in an ash-tray, or a fist being tightly clenched" (p 96).

Continuity

The recording in film is done in a pattern that is not necessarily sequential or continuous as written in the script. In other words, while stage performance is based on a linear narrative continuum (interrupted only with scene changes), the film or Television drama is recorded at different times and different places. And this has implications on the actor's performance. The actor has to learn to work within the timing established by the planned editing sequence. The actor is responsible for creating an overall rhythm that fits both the character and the material. The way the scene is shot or edited might create a rhythm, pace (speed), accent or coloration that replaces or even negates the actor's interpretation.

Filmed dramas are almost always shot out of sequence, utilizing an approach whereby each scene in a given locale are shot "during the same set up" (Burrows and Wood, 1978). Once the camera, audio and lights are set up for a drugstore exterior, every bit of the action that takes place in that locale will be filmed. Sometimes at the end of one scene, it may be up to one hour or more before an actor is needed on the set again. And the next sequence may not be sequential to the previous one. Language use in communication situations occurs in a context with given presuppositions, but in film, all takes requiring a certain set up will be taken at the same time

without regard for chronology. This demands a great deal of concentration and training on the part of the screen actor, who therefore needs such a firm grasp on the plot and character that they can enter the story at any moment.

Performance on stage begins and ends there and then before a live audience, whereas a performance for the screen is finalized in the editing studio. Actors may not even know in what order their scenes will appear, so they must give up much in terms of controlling their rhythm and timing. The actor must have sufficient skill to work within the editing requirements, even if these may seem arbitrary and awkward at the time of shooting.

Lines and Meaning

Apart from the general study of the entire play in order to understand the main action, the actor must specially scrutinize his lines when learning them in order to find their underlying meaning. The actor needs to understand that the real significance of a line rarely is in the meaning of the words themselves or in the literal information they convey, but in the pragmatic situation. According to Mc Gaw (1980.149), finding the meaning of the lines is a matter of discovering what the character desires to happen from what he is saying. A line rarely serves solely to give information. It has more to express than its surface meaning and it is the duty of the actor whether on the stage or on the screen to find out this inner meaning or subtext.

For instance: the following simple dialogue,

A: what time is it?

B: it's eleven O'clock

has no dramatic significance until the meaning beneath the lines is known. Why does one character ask the time? What is in the other character's mind when he answers?

The dialogue can convey a number of different meanings depending on the circumstances under which they are spoken:

1. A might be in the death cell awaiting execution and the lines might mean.
 - A. How much longer do I have to live?
 - B. Exactly an hour. You are to be executed at midnight
2. The situation might be that the speakers are listening to a dull and seemingly endless lecture and the lines might mean
 - A. When is this going to end?
 - B. The bell will ring any second.
3. The speakers might be engaged in some engrossing activity and the meaning might be
 - A. We've completely lost track of the time
 - B. We're already late for our appointment with Mr. Okoli

Therefore, in the words of McGaw,

The actor must know and think his subtext. The subtext is what the line means to the character who is speaking, which frequently is not what the line says on the surface (p 150)

Stanislavsky is reputed to have said people come to the theatre to hear the subtexts in the dialogue of play from the actors; if the audience were only interested in the text, they could have stayed in the comfort of their homes and read the script.

The interpreter of the meaning of the subtext is rarely the other characters, it is usually the audience itself. In fact, often the audience is given information that other characters do not have at that point in the drama. For the screen, the camera can help underscore the subtext through point of view or reaction shots, whereas, on the stage there are no technical devices except through the communication skills of the actor before the live audience.

Conclusion

We have attempted to examine the different technical requirements in acting for the stage and the screen from the point of view of means available to the actor to communicate his character, the action of the drama, and the meaning of events to the audience. Each of the media, stage, screen, and television make different demands on both the vocal and nonverbal communication skills of the performer.

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