

Introduction

Acting is a human activity that seems so natural it can at times be difficult to recognize as art. Role-play is inherent in the notion of society. In the process of becoming a human individual the baby learns to play a role, using an instinct for mimicry to define its own identity in relation to its mother and father, and developing a consciousness of self in a process that involves the rehearsal and enactment of a primal family drama. Consciousness of the distinction between self and other is concomitant with an awareness that it is possible to pretend. As the child learns to perform deliberate actions, it learns to *play*.

Some kind of theater-making activity is common to most cultures; however, the verb *to act* has two different meanings. These meanings are complementary and in some respects overlap. In one sense, acting signifies *doing* (i.e., action in the real world); in a secondary sense it signifies *pretending to do* (i.e., symbolic action), usually through the assumption of a role that may be indicated by the wearing of a mask or costume. In virtually all societies, acting in the sense of symbolic action has an important function, not only as theater but also in the rituals and ceremonies, both religious and secular, through which the society defines and advertises its identity. Every individual plays more than one social role. Social role-playing is a spontaneous human activity. Children learn to act in this sense by playing games. The instinctive aptitude for such role-playing provides the foundation for the development of acting as an art. Acting in the sense of *doing* is thus intimately connected with the sense of acting as *pretending*. Although doing and pretending (purposive action and playacting) may often seem indistinguishable, the child already possesses a subtle ability to separate one kind of acting from another.

For the student and teacher of acting, the apparent “naturalness” of acting as a human function is both a blessing and a problem. Most amateurs assume that because they have some intuitive talent as mimics, they can act. Although in some sense this is true, acting as an art requires the performer

to make a break with the spontaneous activity of mimetic role-play in order to cultivate its craft as a conscious form of representation. To be artistically effective, acting must be removed from the context of lived experience and viewed as a part of the artistic process of theater-making, even while it may employ much of the behavioral repertoire of social role-playing. The subject of this book is acting as an aspect of theater art.

All theatrical performance starts from the assumption that a performer is using her body to represent a virtual body. The actor's creation of a virtual body transforms an actual place demarcated as a playing space into a virtual place. Real time is transformed into virtual time for the duration of the performance. For the actor, the central paradox of acting is always the way in which her real body is used to represent a virtual body. No matter what aesthetic forms are employed, or how abstract the conception of the performing body is, the actor's body must always be cultivated as an instrument capable of varied and subtle expressive forms. All theories of acting start from this point, but each proposes a different solution according to *what* each aims to represent, and *for what purpose* the representation is being made.

Methodologies and Myths

Perhaps because acting is a practice at the core of all cultural expression, articulating social values “invisibly” as well as being overtly the medium in which dramatic writing is communicated, the question of what acting is and what constitutes “good acting” is hotly debated. Battles between rival schools of thought and practice on the subject of actor training are common today, as indeed they have been at various times throughout history. The actor's body and voice may themselves become the subject of argument.¹

Most handbooks on acting aim to persuade the student actor that there is *one* correct approach to acting—that a particular set of techniques and attitudes will produce good acting, whereas others are unhelpful or even harmful to the student. Discourse is commonly framed in such a way that one is led to assume that the word *acting* signifies a coherent body of practice—that at its best there is one thing that acting *is*. Teachers will often point out a famous actor as exemplar of “great acting” without making the necessary observation that he demonstrates the values of a particular tradition of performance. Each acting tradition consists of the peculiar possibilities and limitations formed by an ideology constitutive of a particular culture.

Today's actor should understand the relationship between the techniques being acquired in rehearsal and training and the meanings they are designed

to express. Acting technique is never devoid of social or political significance. *What* is expressed is a product of *how* it is being expressed. In surveying the relationship between twentieth-century ideas about acting and its techniques, this book aims to comprehend the different possibilities offered to the practitioner and the spectator by the major aesthetic traditions that constitute Western theatrical performance in the new millennium.

To talk about acting in a theatrical context today, one may need to consider such diverse kinds of performance as the delivery of an aria in a grand opera, the real behavior of a group of people at a street event, a clown act in a circus, and a completely “lifelike” portrayal of a fictional character in a television drama. At one level, each of these is a distinct mode of performance, entailing a particular methodology of training and a unique technique of presentation. Most actors today are trained according to the one method favored by their particular teacher or school. Most often the specific approach is not taught in a conscious or critical process, but is absorbed *experientially* by the student as a unique set of practices. During the course of their training, students are transformed into competent expressive instruments, able to actualize the performance aesthetic that they have unconsciously absorbed, and to function effectively as a particular kind of performer. Problems occur when, during the course of their professional careers, actors are asked to create performances utilizing techniques and stage conventions other than the ones in which they were schooled. These problems arise not merely because actors are unfamiliar with the alien conventions and techniques, but also because their performing identity has already been formed by the aesthetic they have unself-consciously absorbed in training. Asking a Strasberg-trained actor to perform in a Brechtian style is a bit like asking an American football player to adapt his particular physical skills to the demands of a game of tennis.

In order to be able to utilize the wide range of performance vocabularies that are current in contemporary theater, an actor needs to be aware of the variety of aesthetic traditions that coexist in opposition or parallel, or that cross-fertilize to produce new traditions. Few actors can or wish to encompass all the different aesthetic modes available at any given historical moment, but as we become increasingly aware that we live in a culturally diverse world, it is more important than ever for actors to be conscious of the limitations of the tradition within which their initial training has located them, in order to be free to learn and adopt new methodologies of performance if necessary.

Recurrent debates among practitioners and critics in Britain and the United States are often formulated in terms of the following questions:

- Are there universal acting problems that can be addressed in forms of “preexpressive” training, innocent of cultural or ideological bias?²
- More specifically, does the notion of training the voice and body carry with it inherent values that ultimately ensure that the actor’s identity is tailored to fit a stereotype of “normality”?³
- Should the actor work from the “outside in” (commonly associated with the traditional British acting practice of characterization through techniques of voice and movement) or from the “inside out” (some-what misleadingly assumed to be a Stanislavskian approach)?⁴
- Does Stanislavski’s system involve an exclusively naturalistic approach to acting and production, or can it be used as a training and rehearsal method for other kinds of theater?⁵
- Is Lee Strasberg’s influential “Method” a faithful version of Stanislavski’s system?
- Is the actor an interpreter who must remain “faithful” to the text or a creator who reinvents the play in performance?⁶
- If the former, how is it possible for her to ensure fidelity to the text?
- Should the actor work “intuitively” in rehearsal (as is common in the British theater) or follow a systematic approach to the rehearsal process (as is more often the case in the United States and eastern Europe)?
- Should the actor be conscious of style in acting?⁷
- What is the status of Brecht’s performance theories? Should his plays be performed in accordance with his acting theories?
- Is the actor preeminent in the theater-making process, or is she merely an instrument manipulated by the director to produce signs with no more status than stage props or lighting?⁸

An exploration of these questions reveals that in most cases no general answer can be given. Although very commonly raised by Western practitioners and critics, each would be differently answered by practitioners in accordance with the viewpoint represented by the acting tradition in which they were situated. As generally expressed, each question conceals assumptions and problems that reflect the particular perspective and set of prejudices of the questioner. This is because when theatrical innovators propound their ideas or theorize their practices, they do not usually explain what they do in wholly rational terms. Like most artists, they have recourse to rhetorics aiming to persuade us (and themselves) that their approach is the “true” way to creativity. Each of these rhetorics becomes a kind of shorthand by means of which they can indicate the particular attitudes and meth-

ods of their craft, but at the same time each rhetoric constructs an aesthetic vocabulary that aims to validate the artistic process it ostensibly describes. These rhetorics function as myths, *justifying* the principles they express. As with any discourse of culture, these “myths” are themselves the product of ideology. Therefore, when we try to make sense of the ideas and working methods of various theater practitioners, it is important to identify the “myths” or systems of belief (with their concomitant ideological inscriptions) that generate their rhetorics.

The Purpose of Playing is an attempt to introduce conceptual clarity into discussions of twentieth-century Western acting by identifying the ideas that underlie the major alternative traditions as manifested in the rhetorics and practices of rehearsal and training. My analysis of key practitioners and theorists in their historical contexts is intended to suggest the outline of a conceptual framework. The taxonomy of categories I have produced is intended to enable the reader to grasp the dialectical relationship between major traditions of performance, arguments over which are obfuscated by the lack of an agreed terminology.

This is not a technical handbook of current theater practice, although I believe it will stand as a guide to contemporary practice. It is rather an attempt to relate theory and practice in an effort to locate the theorized practice (praxis) that manifests itself in the various modes of acting current in the new millennium. All of these modes have their origins in traditions formed during the twentieth century. To do this successfully, I must at times demystify and demythologize areas of practice. Discussions of acting have, on the one hand, long been dominated by artists, teachers, and “gurus” who have tended to produce highly personal books describing their own working methods in the form of manifestoes. On the other hand, performance has been analyzed by scholars of performance studies, with its various critical methodologies derived from anthropology, semiology, sociology or cultural studies. This book attempts to bridge the gap that exists between these two modes of discourse, to provide practitioners with a conceptual vocabulary and knowledge that will permit them to contextualize their own practice within the wider field of performance, and conversely to encourage theorists and scholars to be more sensitive to the material realities of artistic practice.

My choice of exemplary practitioners is not intended to privilege either mainstream or avant-garde, but to examine the work of those practitioners without whose contribution the contemporary traditions of Western acting could not be properly understood. By identifying the tensions between mainstream and alternative theatrical practice I intend to map the points at

which actual changes have occurred in the practice and conceptualization of theatrical performance, as well as those where alternatives might promote change within the mainstream.

Six Major Approaches

Six major approaches to acting can be identified in twentieth-century Western theater, each valorized by its own “myth” or explanation through which each asserts its value (chapters in which the approach is discussed are listed):

1. Realistic approaches to characterization: acting as psychological truth (chap. 2)
2. The actor as scenographic instrument: performance as artifice (chap. 3)
3. Improvisation and games: theater-making as play (chaps. 4–7)
4. Performance as political praxis: acting as rehearsal for change (chaps. 8–9)
5. Exploration of the self and the other: acting as personal encounter (chaps. 10–11)
6. Performance as cultural exchange: playing one’s otherness (chaps. 12–13).

The terms of modern acting were established between Stanislavski’s foundation of the First Studio in 1909 and the start of World War II. Six practitioners—Craig and Meyerhold (who independently elaborated consonant conceptions of the actor), Stanislavski, Copeau, Artaud, and Brecht—replaced the paradigms of nineteenth-century acting with new models appropriate to modernist notions of theater. From the matrix of their ideas developed the first five traditions listed above, the first phase in the history of modern Western acting. A wide range of recent and contemporary practices take one of these traditions as a starting point, although more recent practitioners often try to synthesize specific ideas and practices from opposed or parallel traditions in attempts to establish new performance aesthetics with new techniques and training methods. At this moment, the sixth category demands recognition as a tradition distinct from the others: performance as cultural exchange. This derives from the idea of performance as personal encounter, but by the late 1970s had differentiated itself from the earlier tradition sufficiently to constitute a distinct category. The new idea is that personal encounters with alien performance traditions pro-

vide a necessary technique of alienation from the performer's own inherited culture, allowing her to discover a unique performing identity through an intercultural exchange with a foreign tradition.

In the twenty-first century the six traditions I have identified continue to underpin and motivate the development of theater performance, both mainstream and avant-garde, even though the practices themselves may draw as much on techniques and models from other art forms (visual art, music, and dance) as they do from models of theater performance. The first and third categories have in common a conception of acting as an organic process. Both approaches emphasize the immediate empathic connection between the actor, the character, and the spectator. Opposed to this organic notion is a semiotic view of acting as merely one of the signifying systems within the whole ensemble of theatrical signs that in performance can be identified as *mise-en-scène*. Associated with a conception of theater-making as an artificial process, this notion of acting is variously exemplified in the work of Craig, Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Piscator, Brecht, the Futurists, the Dadaists, Merce Cunningham, Robert Wilson, and Pina Bausch. The second and the fourth categories share a conception of theater-making as a synthetic process in which the actor merely animates a number of the signifying systems in the process of generating meaning. The fifth and sixth approaches, while insisting on the organic process of the *actor*, regard the principle of montage as the *director's* structural device. The director thus mixes the artifice of a semiotic approach to scenic composition with the actor's organic process, permitting the human presence of the actor to remain the definitive component of performance. In an increasingly globalized world, this postmodern tendency to "mix and match" forms and techniques of performance from around the world may well herald the start of a new epoch in the history of performance.