

# OTHERNESS

Charles Marowitz (September 30, 2009)

When I started in the theatre, I believed a director was the chessmaster, the stage the board and the actors, the chess-pieces. In my mind, the actors' prime function was to delineate a preconceived pattern of the director's making. The hardest thing, I found as a director, was getting actors to move about the board - for I realized that every cross, every sit and every rise was an expression of some intricate inner necessity which either told the story or obfuscated it. I spent a lot of time doodling diagrams on the margins of scripts to insure that people would execute my choreography.

Most of these preparations were in vain. Invariably my actors' instincts sent them in different directions and inevitably, my master-plan would be upset by their maddening unpredictability. Gradually, I abandoned the whole notion of a master-plan and came to rehearsals with no prescribed moves at all, armed only with a grasp of what I thought the scene was about. As we worked, I allowed myself to be guided by impulses received during rehearsals - a cross here, a turn there - allowing things spontaneously to combust. I took this to be a great step forward because I had stopped directing myself and began instead to find the 'directions' indicated by the actors in the give-and-take of rehearsals.

It is generally agreed that the pattern-of-movement in a play is the externalization of the way a director visualizes it and, by and large, actors tend to accept the spatial relationships imposed by the director. But after I had relinquished my prerogative to work from a blueprint, I was taking my cue, not from my own preconceptions, but from what I took to be the spontaneous impulses of my actors. I was still 'directing' in that I accepted certain moves and modified others, but in a very crucial sense, the fulcrum had shifted.

As time went on, I came to realize that the natural impulse of most actors was towards what one might call conditioned social reflexes; rising to greet someone who had come into the room; pacing about to convey anxiety or confusion; slumping into a chair to express contemplation of fatigue. It was not so much that these movements were false but that they signaled emotional responses which had as much to do with ingrained stage-custom as they did the patterns of human behavior. It soon occurred to me that contrary motion or contradictory movement could be just as effective since people often moved in order to compensate for what they were feeling, and what they were feeling was usually very different from what they were saying.

Later I came to understand that behind the realm of psychology there lurked a deeper motivation, one which characters themselves were often unaware. If you dug deeply enough, you could uproot a physical pattern which stood in the same relation to social behavior as the latent content of dreams did to their manifest content. I came to see that physical movement, by and large, was a language, like verbal language, which had as many layers as the individual had secrets to hide or emotions to suppress. Behavior, far from being motion reflected in a looking-glass, was more like light refracted through a prism.

I started to reverse all of my earlier findings. Rather than accept the signal impulses which 'came naturally' to actors and actresses, I delved into what was deeper than their apparent 'natures,' seeking that which their 'natures' were avoiding or denying. As I could not accept my own first instincts in regard to the geography of the scene, so I could not accept those of the actors either. We both had to go further than our first instincts - into areas which were as clouded for them as they were for myself.

But a director, not being an actor, has not conditioned his body to ferret out and then express what is most deeply embedded in his psyche. He may divine it or probe it intellectually, but only the actor can find it kinetically; can bring it to the surface. The director's job was to provide the logistical support needed by the

actor to make those self-discoveries and to reject the practiced impulses that frequently blocked the way towards unearthing what lay deeper.

It appeared that inside of every actor there was a hidden actor. Although he could occasionally be glimpsed behind language or characterization, he never wholly surfaced. He often had 'moments' or 'flashes' where certain remarkable things were glimpsed. Through exercises that transcended his normal social functioning, the hidden actor could occasionally be revealed. His uniqueness stood in striking contrast to the more conventional personage that normally negotiated on his behalf. He was much freer and uninhibited than his surface-self and in much closer contact with his deeper instincts. More essence than matter, he could nevertheless shape matter so that it became essential. Although intrinsically abstract, he was constantly looking for ways to make his abstractness concrete. When given free reign, he could transform his characters, investing them with the uniqueness of his own being. The shell of studied characteristics would split apart to reveal a fascinating human being unlike anyone else. When that hidden nature coalesced with inspiration, it brought inert material to life and the hidden actor, now revealed, astonished everyone with whom he came into contact.

How to reach that hidden actor and marshal his resources became the object of intensive labor; a task made more strenuous by the fact that no formula existed by which he could be routed out. It was as hit and miss as everything else that took place in the rehearsal-situation. But in this case, one knew what one was searching for could never be found in the superficialities of rehearsal; everything in the production-procedure militated against its discovery. It was in the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the hidden actor that the surface-actor could break through and install the best part of himself on stage. But ironically, it was the timidities and anxieties of the surface-actor that created the barrier which obstructed his emergence. The prime object of rehearsals then, was to create the conditions by which the surface-actor could be usurped and the hidden actor installed. The way to bring this about depended on a delicate conjunction between director and performer. The certainty that this 'other actor' was there justified all the anguish and frustration involved in working with his superficial counterpart.

Insights about acting-chemistry threw the written word into a different perspective. Text yes, and behind that, sub-text, but what was behind that? Character yes, but from what stage in a person's life? Their adolescence, their childhood, their infancy? If the child lives on in the adult, what portion of the adult is made up of the child? What cloaking modifications have been made by the adult? At what point in the civilizing process does the savage get entirely eliminated leaving only the socially-adjusted individual? If a successful and effective black General, fiendishly manipulated into vengeance and jealousy, can turn into something primitive and murderous, does that mean that the upright General was merely a facade? Would the facade have remained in tact if the psychological pressures had never been applied? What would Hamlet have become if never prodded by the visitation of his ghostly father? Would he simply have adjusted to the new dispensation, married Ophelia, suppressed his regal ambitions, made up with his mother and settled for a cabinet post, perhaps Minister of Education, in the new regime?

All of these questions are prompted by the underlying question: what does the inner-structure of a character consist of, and to what extent should these non-manifest possibilities be taken into account in his social persona, given the fact that, under extraordinary circumstances, anyone of them can rise to the surface.

If each character's personal motivation was unique unto himself, was it not false and arbitrary to try to unify them according to one man's (the director's) vision? But then, if every character was given free reign, what did that portend for the unity of the whole? Was a disparate and unvariegated result justifiable on the grounds that it more faithfully reflected the way people actually behaved? But then art, I reminded myself, was not primarily concerned with verisimilitude. The artists - playwright, director and acting-company - made their own unity in the work of art which paralleled or augmented the reality on which it was ostensibly based.

The business of rehearsals was finding things which were not immediately apparent, but if one fell into a formulaic search, it became something of a child's treasure hunt - unearthing only what had already been planted in order to be found. But what was one looking for and where in the actor's psyche and the playwright's material, did one conduct these searches? And with what tools does one carry out these investigations?

Intellectual analysis was a given - no sooner did one read a play or examine one's role than the mind began to suggest a number of interpretative possibilities. The actor could 'experience' information through improvisation and exercise which might cast light on hidden areas of the work. Then there were the leads provided by fellow-actors who, in trying to solve their own problems, threw up provocative challenges to others. One had to make sure there was an open line of communication to fellow-actors which meant reaching out to them without impeding one's own inventions. But in gainfully employing all these tools, there was an initial obstruction which had first to be removed and that was the most formidable obstacle of all.

Just as the actor had his baggage of tricks, mannerisms, short-cuts and inculcated clichés, so the director was burdened with prior assumptions, coagulated beliefs, old admirations unconsciously yearning to be duplicated - not to mention a whole storehouse of received wisdom which, once acquired tended to go unchallenged. The commencement of rehearsals was like the meeting of two magicians each balancing his own bag of tricks on his back and each assuming his was the largest and most valuable. Before one ever got to the issues of the play, one had to negotiate the smoldering but tacit demands of each participant. This involved wheedling, deviousness and dollops of child-psychology on the part of the director; treachery, elusiveness and duplicity on the part of the actor. Meanwhile the author stood by watching his work unravel and wondering if, when it was all put together again, it would ever resemble his original creation. Illusions of grandeur and premonitions of disaster hung heavy in the air. To make matters worse, the tyrannical clock forbade experiment or time spent investigating tantalizing side-turnings which, if explored, might have yielded marvels.

The attitude behind the work became defensive - to ward off those conditioned reflexes which like diseased cells prevented healthy ones from forming. A new strategy was required to avoid the old pitfalls. The notion of ur-text was considered valuable, if only because it held out the promise of life beyond sub-text. Taking an oblique path to the material via improvisation and root-exercises was also beneficial in that it widened the parameters of a written work and allowed ideas to enter its air-space from every point on the compass. As soon as one saw a play as part of a greater entity, it gave actors an opportunity to discover more ramifications than could be found in the closed-circuit work-of-art. It also reminded artists that a slice-of-life, no matter what its dimensions, had to be sliced from something greater than itself and, by identifying that larger mass, it widened the actors' scope and encouraged them to look beyond the parameters set by the playwright. The actor was raised to the level of both the playwright and the director, releasing him from his traditional subjugation to text and mise-en-scene. He was offered a major role in collaboration rather than the self-effacing role of dutiful interpreter. It also, I must admit, opened certain floodgates which encouraged egotism and idiosyncrasy to run riot - but there never is a genuine breakthrough either in art or science that doesn't carry with it the danger of abuse.

The secret at the heart of theatre - if not all art - is complexity. By fastening onto one reductive system which seemed to explain and codify it, we were evading much larger issues. Experience was not there to be compressed into a formula but translated into as many theorems as seemed to pertain to its endless variety. The quest was not for a system or a method, but a state of mind which succeeded in capturing the theatre's ever-changing multiplicity. Systematization and methodology fostered the delusion of having cracked the nut but no one system or methodology could crack every nut. There were more nuts than there were systems to contain them.

In order to achieve the most definitive theatrical result, a technique was needed which was at least as complex as the problem. One that didn't complacently accept the notion that acting was merely projected personality and theatre, the automatic assembly of the playwright's words. It was precisely this kind of niggling dissatisfaction with prevailing standards which had inspired earlier artists to probe more deeply, to reject the familiar and the customary, the manufactured replicas and the reasonable facsimiles. Just as Stanislavsky, Brecht and Artaud had rejected the reactionary practices of their predecessors, so it was beholden upon us to challenge the implicit social and behavioral customs which ran beneath what we, parceling them off from larger in- divisible things, called acting-technique. To be an actor then, meant being a critic of both art and life and, to be an effective

actor, that criticism had to be converted into practical maneuvers which combated the banalities of art in order to avoid reproducing the clichés of life.

Ploddingly, through a series of stumbles and detours, collisions with stone-walls and wanderings up blind-alleys, I came to realize that the actor doesn't so much 'build a character' as step into a magnetic field where he is affected by emanations from the ideas, impulses and environment dictated by the production. He doesn't so much 'become a character' or 'live a role' as absorb actions, feelings and experiences relative to his character and, in so doing, triggers like-actions, like-feelings and like-experiences in his own being; that the actor is a conductor-of- energies already mobilized and ready to leap into parallel situations; that he doesn't 'perform' so much as allow the psychic functioning of his character to release universal information already bred in his bone and etched in his memory; that phylogeny precedes psychology and that the physical is only the most conspicuous aspect of the metaphysical. The whole notion of constructing a performance - brick by brick, beat by beat, choice by choice - is a bogus linear illusion fostered by over a hundred years of outworn acting theory and inculcated by a mechanistic philosophy which modern science has effectively refuted, although its residue remains lodged in the actors' mind and locked in his musculature.

The actor is not the walking duality described by thinkers as diverse as Gordon Craig, Constantin Stanislavsky, Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht but a force-field where memories and habits originated in pre-history and the primordial slime, dynamically interact, and that every evolutionary development which has refined the human organism over the millenia plays some part and exerts some influence in the living present. Being an actor is not so much a question of 'training' and 'development' but of awakening susceptibilities to the play's situations, stated and implied; the playwright's intentions, latent and overt; the director's interpretation, articulated and inchoate.

What needed to be abandoned was the idea that an actor was an accretion of conscious maneuvers such as memorization, blocking and psychological intent instead of a catalytic agent which synthesized all of these things, filtering them through an acting-metabolism which enabled him to recreate past experience rooted in conscious and pre-conscious memory and which, under favorable conditions, could manifest itself. Acting was not something you 'do' but something done to you if you were free enough to discard clogging formulae and reductive egotism and open yourself up to a kind of eternal consciousness of which personal psychology 'was only the tiniest fraction.

If one recoiled from abstractions such as these and took refuge in nuts-and-bolts, in 'units and objectives,' in provable premises and common practices, one was cozying oneself into an hermetically-sealed capsule which, though it looked like the macrocosm, was actually a microcosm.

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The theatre is a serial art; actors and directors go from play to play often working in very different circumstances and on highly contrasted material. Unless blessed with the continuity of a permanent ensemble working in the same venue, each production represents a new start. The insights and refinements created with a previous group of actors do not automatically transfer to a new company. One has to begin all over again and the tendency to do so tends to mechanize a process which should be ongoing and regenerative. Many of the problems thrown up by work in the theatre would either be solved or considerably reduced if the same director worked with the same actors for an extended period of time. After a while, a group intelligence is engendered which becomes greater than the director's and the actors' intelligence combined. But so long as the theatre remains an ad hoc art form, it will be necessary to formulate a modus operandi to enable it start afresh each time.

The key is to maintain a kind of flexible skepticism - a deep-seated reluctance to accept what comes too easily (often automatically) and then construe it as being 'natural.' What comes most 'naturally' to both actors and directors is the tendency to repeat themselves; to print out yet again what has been pre-programmed.

Whenever a company of actors assemble, the onus is always the same: they must for the sake of the work before them, form an ensemble, provide a gloss peculiar to themselves and their work-situation, realize a joint conception of the work in conjunction with the other members of the artistic team and resolve not to repeat what has been done before or promote novelty for its own sake. Because the theatre has to a large extent become routine, play-production has become standardized. No sooner do rehearsals begin than artists feel the pressure to deliver results. Because the text is the most tangible element in the process, it is clung to for dear life. Language is memorized, organized, physically circumscribed and, before the most elementary secrets of the play are explored or discovered, coagulated. During the process, there are gestures to characterization, allusions to sub-text and lip-service to thematic ideas, but the object of the journey is to arrive at one's destination as promptly as possible. The landscape is never glimpsed and, like suburbanites having dutifully caught the 7:04, the commuters conceal themselves behind newspapers so as to have only the most minimal contact with their fellow-passengers. When the train finally pulls in to the station, everyone goes their own way.

But the actor's journey must be the antithesis of the commuter's. There should be dialogue, discussion and the vigorous interchange of ideas all along the way. Every bit of landscape needs to be assimilated; every passing observation analyzed and disputed. On arrival, everyone should jam into the same taxi and be driven to the same address. The arrival should be thought of as the springboard for a new departure; the performance, not the pay-off of rehearsals but, the first phase of the grander journey which is the run-of-the-play.

What hampers us are age-old obstacles: complacency, habitude, ego, and the irresistible tug of the familiar. The economics of the theater promote the idea that an actor is a unit-of-labor purchased at the lowest possible price and then inserted into a larger mechanism which, like him or herself, has limited usefulness and is easily replaceable. But the transient nature of the actor's art is belied by the fact that it has been extant for countless centuries and although generations come and go, varieties of perception contained in timeless artifacts survive in a world without end. That sense of being part of something vast and endlessly renewing is what should give the actor a sense of higher calling which no amount of professional indignity can demean. The actor who feels he is being 'slotted into a role' will act accordingly. The actor who believes that he is being summoned to perform a task which has exercised the keenest sensibilities of both antiquity and modern times, will recognize that only the most strenuous personal effort will qualify him to take his place in the history of the art to which he aspires.

We're all lying in the gutter, said Wilde, but some of us are looking at the stars. The angle of one's head makes all the difference.