


AnActorPrepares
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A blog for actors, actresses and directors who would like to acquire professional tuition about their crafts without enrolling in a theatre-academy or a formal university context. The blog consists of essays, insights, exercises and observations that will help theatre-artists achieve their professional aims.



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PUNCTUATION

Charles Marowitz (December 9, 2009)

A play is like a sentence consisting of both words and actions and, like a sentence, needs to be correctly conjugated and contain correct grammar and syntax. Most important, it needs to be properly punctuated. When a sentence is properly punctuated, its commas, colons, hyphens, parentheses and periods help make it comprehensible and impose an appropriate rhythm. The same holds true for a play.

On stage, a comma may divide one thought from another or it may distinguish the end of one mood and the start of another. On stage, an ‘indentation’ denotes the start of a new unit signaling the end of one ‘beat’ (or section of emotional content) from the one that follows. The equivalent of a period (i.e. full stop) may denote the conclusion of one objective and the commencement of another. An exclamation point may be used for emphasis, in precisely the same way it is used in writing. The absence of punctuation will suggest a continuum of thought or an unbroken succession of thoughts over a fairly long period of time (i.e. a lengthy speech, a monologue or an extended stretch of dialogue.) Not only must the actor’s text be punctuated for clarity and precision, but the scenes that make up each act need to be shaped for maximal effect – just as one would shape a series of paragraphs written to be read.

On stage, the lack of dramatic punctuation can be damaging to the narrative line of the play. It may blur meaning and combine things that are intended to be separated. It may elongate a tempo which needs to be accelerated or retarded, fragmented or integrated. If in the first scene of *HAMLET*, Francisco and Barnardo’s text is not broken up with the tensions attendant on their guard duty, the arrival of the Ghost will be neither frightening nor suspenseful. If, in the first Court Scene, Hamlet’s asides are not played in a tonality different from that of Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius, his attitude to both his parents and life at the Court, will be unclear. In the first soliloquy that begins ‘O that this too too solid flesh would melt...etc’, if the disjointedness of Hamlet’s thought, its interruptions and sudden stops and reversals are not clearly punctuated, we will not get the full impact of the character’s inner turmoil, the moral confusions that are swirling around in his brain. Proper punctuation on stage, as in writing, is an invaluable tool for clarity, and virtually every moment of rehearsal is concerned with ‘making clear’ insights which actors and directors have discovered in the play. The quest in rehearsals is always to find meaning and then make it meaningful and dramatic punctuation is the means by which ‘meaning’ is pried out of the text.

Let me switch metaphors.

A play is also like a piece of music the tonality of which is determined by changing key signatures and applying different dynamics. Speeches, scenes, units, beats can often be characterized by descriptive musical terms: largo, presto, allegro, allegretto, forte, fortissimo, piano, pianissimo, andante cantabile, sforzando, rallentando etc. --- all of these musical terms have dramatic corollaries. The start of the

Balcony Scene in “Romeo and Juliet”, because it is taking place at night in hazardous circumstances, may begin largo and pianissimo although as soon as Romeo reveals himself to Juliet, it becomes forte and presto. When the danger attendant on Romeo’s rash visit has been put aside by the mutual affections expressed between the would-be lovers, the off-stage voice of the Nurse calling Juliet back into her bedroom may introduce a sforzando which leads to a spirited and somewhat agitated Allegro. The scene is as much about fear as it is love and when emotions such as fear and love are intertwined on stage, one has almost entered a kind of operatic convention and musical terms are not all that alien to describe what is taking place.

Dynamics and punctuation are ways of creating variety in dramatic material and the instinct to vary what actors are doing is a constant factor in rehearsals. The fear is always monotony or not finding those changes which are inherent in a script which usually denote related changes in the sub-text. The director is always using his personal mine-sweeper to discover what is lurking beneath the surface of the text and the actor is always trying to divine what a character is really feeling as opposed to what he or she is saying. Once those discoveries are made, they need to be translated into rhythms and tonalities, pauses and continuums, highs and lows. Once those discoveries are made, they need, via punctuation, to be grooved into the mise-en-scene.

It is important to realize that a script, despite containing conventional grammar and syntax, does not arrive, theatrically speaking, punctuated. It is the director, in conjunction with his actors who are obliged to turn its words into actions, its actions into units, its units into tempi, its ‘lines’ into throughlines. An unpunctuated play is like the ingredients of a stew thrown into a pot that never gets cooked.