


An Actor Prepares
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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.



The Casting Couch

Charles Marowitz (January 30, 2010)

Although it is generally assumed that this is an item of seduction invented by men, it is just as often employed by women on the make. It would be ridiculous to assume it is simply part of theatre-mythology. There are too many anecdotes, both apocryphal and verifiable, to attest to its existence and its usage. What, you may be asking yourself, has this got to do with staging a play. I will try to demonstrate.

It sometimes happens that a ‘sweet young thing’ auditioning for a role for which her talents are not particularly suited, tries to compensate for that insufficiency by insinuating herself with a director on the basis of physical allure and personal accessibility; a promise of rewards to come if she is allowed to place her dainty feet firmly on to the inside track. The director (usually male, but females are just as prone to the tactic) sometimes weakens and, in responding to temptation, casts the ‘sweet young thing’ either with an eye towards future payback or because he deludes himself that she can actually deliver the goods – professionally and sexually.

Once the fatal decision is made, the die is cast. If the tacit bargain between the two parties becomes evident to the company and a cloud of suspicion begins to form over the director’s head, his stock with the cast sinks appreciably. A certain umbrage is taken. It is not necessarily expressed but it is experienced and gradually, it may subvert his relations with the other members of the company; particularly the female members. If, as often happens, there is a subsequent realization on the part of the director that he has made a foolish decision and that co-opting the ‘sweet young thing’ is in fact jeopardizing the success of the show, his situation becomes even more untenable. Now he has to try to remove the weak link without acknowledging the disreputable circumstances under which she was first included. Almost always this sours the relationship between the ‘sweet young thing’ and the director and, instead of receiving pleasurable rewards, he finds himself in a constant state of agitation trying to eliminate an artist who is threatening the quality of his production and probably being privately rebuked for breaking a promise.

In extreme cases, the interloper digs in her heels, cites the relevant clauses of the Equity contract on unauthorized dismissal and, if the director persists in attempts to remove her, infers that allegations of sexual abuse may ensue. Meanwhile, the esprit de corps is in tatters, and the mounting antagonism of the company is rapidly taking its toll on the production. Everything begins to go to pot and the director’s momentary folly suddenly looms as a dire threat to the entire enterprise.

Outraged feminists will immediately insist this is examining the Casting Couch only from the male point of view. They will point out that the director, being the more powerful figure, has the opportunity to wield it for selfish purposes. He, and not the ‘sweet young thing’ is the true villain of the piece. Often he is. But just as often, the problem has been instigated by a ‘come on’ on the part of the actress and if men are lascivious (which they are) they are also vulnerable, and particularly to female allure. The

circumstances under which the Casting Couch is introduced into a theatrical context are many and varied and in describing one possible scenario, I am not intending to accuse either conniving women or depraved men but simply to illustrate that cast-selection is a delicate consideration and subject to unexpected hazards, and the greatest of these is the temptation to mix business with pleasure. A faux pas can turn into an awkward situation, a collective embarrassment, a mini scandal and a groundswell which saps the energies of the entire project.

‘Casting couch’ is a loaded term and makes the philistine’s hair stand on end, but it need not be construed as a lurid and diabolical stratagem, an embarrassment or a disgrace. It often happens that women are genuinely drawn to their directors, and directors to members of the opposite sex with whom they are working. Many long-term liaisons have grown out of the intimacy that rehearsals naturally breed between actors and actresses and this is as common in the theatre as it is in colleges, businesses, factories or any human endeavor where men and women are thrown into close proximity for long periods of time. When women first entered the acting profession in the 17th century, their presence in revealing costumes, their faces embellished with cosmetics bred desires in many men; often they were aristocrats who appropriated them either as mistresses, wives or both. Acting is predicated on intimacy. People embrace, kiss openly, lust after each other and simulate intimate feelings which occasionally segue into personal affairs, extended friendships and marriages. Many a casting couch turns into a marital double bed; many a transient affair into a satisfying, long-lasting union.

Given the sexual mores that now pervade the 21st century, the ‘casting couch’ has become something of a period-piece like love-seats, roll-top desks, rocking-chairs or oil-lamps. If they do still exist, they are no longer the preserve of one gender rather than the other.