

DRAMA *Works*

Styletasters 1
(Stanislavski, Artaud, Grotowski)

EXTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

With an awareness that some syllabuses require less detailed knowledge of practitioners but rather an understanding of different styles in more general terms, this series is designed to serve that purpose. The emphasis, as in all my work on practitioners, is on understanding the work through practice. Once again, theories are clearly explained in terms that any student can understand and each theory is then explored and tested through practical exercises. The practical work helps fix the understanding of the theory.

The work of Artaud and of Grotowski are in some ways very similar but you may find the grouping of these two with Stanislavski an odd choice. In my view, though, any practitioner can be bracketed with Stanislavski, even if their end-styles are completely dissimilar because, consciously or unconsciously, every twentieth century practitioner's starting point is Stanislavski. No one before Stanislavski had investigated and identified the art and technique of acting in such a complete way so that no practitioner after him can be unaware of his findings and theories. He is thus a starting point for all the practitioners, who often use him as a platform either from which to spring out or against which to react.

The main link I see between the three practitioners introduced in this handbook is that all three are concerned with the inner state of the actor. The theatrical effect of the end-result springing from this central concern is very different in each case but nonetheless these three practitioners are interested in the actor's personal journey whilst most other practitioners are more concerned with the medium of theatre and its role in society or of the theatrical result of which the actor is merely a part.

The format of the book is as follows:

1. Such biographical details as help with an understanding of the practitioner are given and followed by a clear exposition as to how those details help explain the theories.
2. The essential theories of each practitioner are clearly explained. These are easily photocopyable should you want students to have a copy in front of them.
3. Each theory is then explored with one or two exercises. Students should be encouraged to try the theories through this practical work in an enquiring manner, seeking to understand the reasons for the practitioner's emphasis on such and such a theory, but not being afraid to find the limitations of a theory either.
4. A final project is set in which the students are expected to explore the practitioner as fully and as 'truthfully' as possible.

The work on each of these practitioners should take between four to six weeks. This is sufficient for an informed taster but may not have enough detail for an 'A' level in-depth essay on that practitioner alone; it would be sufficient, though, for comparisons between practitioners and the work throughout invites this approach.

Note: should you want to cover a particular practitioner in more depth there are Study Programmes on Stanislavski, Brecht and Artaud where all the theories are very thoroughly explained and explored through a wealth of practical exercises. The work in each of these Study Programmes is sufficient for one term's exploration of that practitioner. The Study Programmes apply the theories in each case to a variety of texts, something which this series can do no more than suggest.

Extract One

detail they are able to add to it. Most importantly, the interest is not just increased for the audience but for the actor himself. *It is his interest in his own story that holds the audience captive.*

2.BELIEF.

Imagination is an essential aid towards the actor's belief in what he is doing and belief is the most essential ingredient of the whole System. Basically, the System taken together is a structure to *help* the actor believe in what he is doing. It is not as easy as it may seem to believe you are, for instance, locked in a room when blatantly you are not. But the last exercise done on imagination should help prove that the more the imagination can add to flesh out a person and a situation, the easier it is to believe in them.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

Belief makes the difference between 'pretending' and reality. An audience is quick to spot the insincerity of a pretence. Try this exercise to test the difference between 'truth' and 'pretence.' It is a useful one because it hones the audience's observational faculties as well as proving this important point.

Divide the class into pairs. Each one of the pair is to tell each other about a real event that has happened to them to them recently. Then they decide which of their two events they are going to use for this exercise. This event - which can be as basic as something experienced last weekend whilst shopping or, more usefully, can be some incident perhaps from childhood - is then put over to the audience of the rest of the class by both people, one at a time. One of the people is going to be telling the truth but for the other it will be pretence yet both speak as if it happened to them and the one who is pretending it happened to them - the 'actor' - is trying to convince the audience that it is their true experience.

Can the audience tell whose story it is really and who is the actor? In my experience, it is always possible. The 'actor' will give himself away by any of the following:

being too slick;

not giving enough detail;

a tense or unsure expression or body language;

hesitation;

trying too hard;

lack of sincerity, feeling, colour...

The group should analyse what it was about the performance that did not ring true. It may turn out to be as vague as just a feeling: 'I did not feel that it was true.'

This should be followed by the student who 'acted' the story analysing why it was difficult for him to believe in what he was saying. This might simply boil down to 'It was difficult to believe because I had not experienced it. I did not know the colour of the dress or the sound of the angry man's voice' - whatever.

This is a very important clue to the nature of Stanislavskian acting. As closely as possible one has to live through a character's experiences, hearing the voices of the other people in his life, seeing the colours of the countryside, tasting his food, feeling the enclosing walls of the character's home. And these details can only be built up by the imagination.

Extract Two

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Ask the class to come up with imaginative reasons for the following Given Circumstances:

A man who hoards his money.

A woman who has plenty of money but cannot help shoplifting.

A woman who always talks in a little girl voice when addressing men.

A serial killer.

A woman who compulsively tidies her house.

A married man who spends most of his free time at the pub with his mates.

2. Next they should return to the same pairs as for the two young people scenario. In that exercise they invented some extra information for the characters and for the situation of being locked in a room. This time they are to see those details as facts - Given Circumstances - and, using them as their starting point, they are to improvise the scene.

After the scene has been played, they should analyse how their characters behaved. What imaginative details emerged out of playing the scene? Did the characters start to build and become more believable? Were they consistent? Through discussion and analysis they should be working on a more and more believable characterisation. Members of the audience who observed the scene can help in this process. Then when they feel satisfied

that they understand not only the shape of the scene but why the characters behaved in the way that they did they should try the scene again.

This is the process that would be happening on any text too. The students have here combined Given Circumstances and Imagination with the Magic If. This last ingredient is what Stanislavski uses to propel the actor into action, into trying something out. It is the important step from an intellectual process - my character *is* twenty, *has* a bad homelife, *is* insecure etc - to adopting that information and playing it as IF it were your own set of circumstances - I *am* twenty, insecure, etc...I *am* feelingwhatever comes out in the playing of the scene.

Thus a character within a play is built up through intellectual investigation based on the facts researched from the text and other relevant sources, to which is added imaginative details that make sense of those facts. Then the facts together are played with through improvisation which will illumine and explain the character and text. Improvisation can be used both to investigate a particular scene in a play - exploring the motives and general sub-text - or to add to the understanding of a character's actions within a play by exploring some incident or relationship that does *not* occur in the text.

Extract Three

3.RHYTHM AND RITUAL

Artaud talks about bringing audiences back to ancient forms of theatre, with their emphasis on religion and ritual. In his own time, he saw a Balinese folk theatre troupe, who performed a piece about the battle between Good and Evil represented by a dragon and a witch. He was impressed by how the troupe could communicate the story through strong symbols, ritualised movements and rhythms to stir the audience's imagination. It did not matter that the language was not French, it communicated anyway and in a more exciting way - by stirring the emotions and the instincts.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1.If possible, have some percussive instruments handy for this exercise. If the music department is unwilling, it is easy to make some out of tins and boxes of different sizes filled with different-sounding contents, e.g. woodshavings, pebbles, grit, lentils, etc. Different textures of sound can thus be created.

Hand these out to some of the group and instruct the others to use claps, stamps, thighslaps or breaths. If no instruments are available, the exercise can still be done with just these.

Now, standing in a circle, establish a strong, steady beat. Each one in turn round the circle must now add their sound and rhythm to fit in with the central beat. They are not trying to change the rhythm; instead they must match it or add counterpoint to it till by the end of the circle a rich and intricate pattern of sounds is produced.

2.Capitalising on this exercise ask them to create a tribal ritual dance based on either war or a prayer for rain. They could use the instruments to help plus rhythms created by their voices and bodies. Simple movements will need to

Extract Four

d] Add whatever can be added in your particular space and circumstances to enhance the action and the moods: amplified sound, light, cloths or costumes, and so on. If some or all of these are impractical then they should at least come up with ideas that they could use in ideal circumstances.

7. THE AUDIENCE: THEATRE AS LIFE

Artaud believed that theatre should be a participatory event for the audience. It should express modern life and the universal concerns of mankind nowadays in such a way that the audience will recognise and 'discover' their true selves. Followers of Artaud took this idea in two different directions. One direction, which actively involved the audience by making them actually take part is the Happening or Event. The other way was to involve the audience less directly by carrying them along emotionally through the elements of Total Theatre.

Happenings were very popular in the Fifties and Sixties and ranged from simple scenarios such as a group of people smashing a piano up in the middle of the street and inviting passers-by to join in, to quite complex ideas where audience were taken on a kind of magical mystery tour, often exposed to nudity or sexual fantasies, never being quite sure whether what they were experiencing was 'real' or not.

In both types of scenario the audience were often invited to break rules or taboos and those who participated often found this a very liberating experience. They were able to observe how they reacted in such strange circumstances and gained an understanding, a discovery of themselves which often shocked them.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Your students could try both kinds of these happenings. Here is a suggestion for the first kind:

Take a number of helium balloons, some gift tags and pens to a crowded pedestrian precinct or square. Recite, in a choric way, a piece of

moving verse, or read out a newspaper report of something that has happened recently, or sing a stirring protest song. When a number of people have stopped and are watching, tell them they can take a tag and write their own message on it, of hope perhaps, or protest, attaching it to the balloon of their choice. Then when all have done this, devise a simple ceremony at the end of which all who are now participating, read out their message and release their balloon.

2. For the second type of Happening, prepare a treasure hunt [no actual treasure is necessary] using written clues, perhaps set in riddles, that send participants from one area of a room or building to another. Invite a small number of people to participate in this event. They should not be close friends of the students; it is better if they are a different year. It is necessary that the drama students running this event remain strict and firm at all times. Blindfold the participants to start with and keep them apart from each other and in silence. Allow one at a time to go into the treasure hunt area and remove his blindfold. Talking only in whispers to him, tell him he has only five minutes to solve all the clues and find the treasure. If he fails ... allow this to hang threateningly in the air. Those who fail [and they all do - make sure that at least some of the clues are impossible] are herded into a small darkened room and left there with strict instructions not to talk. They will. Turn bright lights on them all at once. And instruct them to clap. Anyone who stops clapping will be punished ... Then the students should turn their backs on the participants. The clapping will continue for a little but first one, then more, will stop and when nothing is said or done, all will stop. Students leave a silence before turning round with a huge smile and moving round the participants to congratulate them.

Afterwards make sure that the students ask the guinea-pigs what they felt about the experience.

Extract Five

second; it must be moved on instantly.

The group will probably only be able to sustain the success of this for brief moments. It will give them an insight into the sort of concentration needed for such exercises as Grotowski's one where a constant flow of bodies move in and out from all four corners of a room somersaulting over each other in the centre.

3. CORPOREAL EXERCISES

By picking out samples from Grotowski's own exercises - those that are within the range of untrained students, at least to some extent! - I have made a list, slightly adapted from Grotowski's originals, as follows:

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Walk as a group in strict rhythm, following a piece of music or a handclap, whilst rotating the arms. Vary this by walking with arms held outstretched, rotating the hands alone.

2. Walk with knees bent whilst gripping the ankles firmly.

3. 'The Cat' : Lie stretched out on the floor on the stomach, hands stretched above the head with palms flat on the floor, legs apart. Pull the hands in towards the chest keeping the elbows pointing out and palms firmly on the floor supporting the body. This is the cat waking. Now tiptoe the feet towards the hands. Taking alternate legs, stretch each one out whilst lifting and stretching the neck. Once both legs are done stretch the full spine, feeling it extending. Then roll over onto the back and relax all muscles completely.

Try to repeat this exercise, each student establishing his own rhythm in which to do this. Rhythm and repetition are important in all the exercises, since they are another way of blocking out calculation.

Try the cat slowly, as a cat itself might do it, and then translate it into a series of movements done at great speed.

4. Lying on the back, roll the body from side to side as violently as possible.

5. Squat down on the heels and curl up the body. Hop from foot to foot like a bird, flapping with the hands as if about to take off into flight. Still hopping, straighten the body whilst still flapping the arms like wings, trying to lift the body from the ground.

6. Now divide into threes. One person repeats the above whilst the others wait at each side of him ready to catch him when necessary. The 'bird' now uses his arms in an action like breast-stroke, propelling his body forwards. It is important he allows his body to give in completely to the impulse to 'fly' forwards, trusting that he will be caught by the two waiting on either side.

Make sure that each of the threesome has a turn at being the bird in flight.

Stop and talk about findings. Grotowski himself said that all the exercises should be done in an investigative way; they are not simply a way of 'massaging the muscles' ; each participant should be constantly investigating the workings of his own body and identifying his own particular blocks in order to eliminate them. How far were they able to yield to the forward impulse, for instance? I would imagine the main blocks would be whilst performing this exercise.

Students should remain aware that these are only a sample of exercises and that the real thing would take a long time and thoroughly test out and stretch all areas of the body, not just the few delineated here.

Extract Six

out tense and 'squeezed'.] Can they discover a memory or reason for the voice not sounding at full strength in that position?

This would be the same kind of work that Grotowski actors would be undertaking on their journey towards eradicating their blocks and freeing their voice to a fullness that will occur in any position.

6. EXPLORING DIALECTICS

In a sense the plastique exercises are already exploring the realm of dialectics: the parts of the body are put in contradiction to each other. Grotowski was particularly fond of exercises that used opposites in the plastique exercises, such as beautiful versus ugly or fast versus slow.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. Start with an idea that is in Grotowski's section called 'Exercises in Composition.' In it he suggests an exercise that in its early stages will be familiar to all drama students: walking over a variety of different surfaces [imaginary] with bare feet and then with shoes but reacting as if with bare feet. Thus, one can start on familiar ground:

**walk over ice;
hot coals;
on a slippery surface;
on a sticky surface.**

Try as far as possible to stick to opposites like this: wet and dry, hard and soft, and so on.

Ask the students to show their reaction with their feet and let it reverberate from feet up through the whole body, a section at a time.

2. Next try to react with hands to touching different imaginary surfaces; once again stick to opposites:

rough and smooth;
furry and scaly;
wet and dry;
soft and hard.

3. Then try reacting with feet and hands alone to, say, a prickly surface or a slimy one.

4. Finally try to use hands and feet reacting at the same time but to opposite stimuli, e.g. :

**the hands react to touching a furry surface while the feet experience
slime;**
**the hands pack snow into a snowball whilst the feet dance on hot
coals.**

These exercises will seem intensely difficult and even perverse to some students. Perhaps there are some pianists amongst them. It is common practice for a pianist to be moving their fingers to one rhythm with their right hand whilst following another with their left. Reminded of this, the pianist will realise that he doesn't even think about this skill. In fact, it is a mistake to think too consciously about what one is doing - that is when the blocks start preventing you from achieving. If you can block out the mind which tells you the skill is difficult then you will achieve far more.

5. Move on to some visual images which explore opposites. An example might be a tableau in which some are starving to death whilst others are feasting. Perhaps the tableau could be made more powerful still if those who are feasting are mindlessly eating the body parts of the starving. Make sure that facial expressions contrast the greed and jollity of the feasters and the agony and horror of the starving.

This could be done as a frozen picture, a tableau, or as a moving 'moment'. Personally, I prefer the latter because then sounds can be employed and the contrasting movements of the two factions can be

explored.

Try some others too:

guilt and innocence

creation and destruction

freedom and repression

Bear in mind whilst producing these that Grotowski is keen to expose the contradictions within our society - and by society I mean the society of the whole world. Is there a way of showing the 'fatness' of the West to put it in cruel contrast to the starving masses in the third world? This way of working is a shockingly visual way of exploring the ills in society.

Note that before attempting this work it might be a good idea to go through the short part on symbolic language in the Artaud section. Just as pertinent to Grotowski is this way of working through powerful visual imagery which leaves a lasting impression on the audience's mind.

Working 'dialectically' is a very immediate theatrical way of using irony. Take for example, a scene where a politician meets his potential voters and speaks sincerely about all he is going to do for them; add someone, or a number of people, jeering and undermining everything he says, casting in doubt the sincerity of what he is saying through mockery .

We have social comment; we are offered more than one viewpoint. But Grotowski is not really like Brecht, trying to lead an audience to a particular point of view; rather we are being shown alternative viewpoints, different truths. Grotowski, just as he wants actors to strip the masks away from themselves wants them to expose the masks in the world around us and attempt to strip them away too to find whatever truths, even uncomfortable ones, lie behind the fabric of society.