

THE ACTOR

lems which I have experienced through living and practice.

I believe in my work and in what we are doing at the HB Studio. I pray that with patience and foresight a first-rate acting company will develop out of the Studio, a company guided by first-rate young directors, and, hopefully, young playwrights. When this happens, it will be a company of people who have grown together, who are united by common aims and by a way of work which has a common language and results in a homogeneous form of expression. The four walls to house such a group will follow, and then perhaps we will be able to make a real contribution to the American theater. But should it never happen, it will still be a goal worth working for!

1 CONCEPT

IF YOU HAVE the opportunity to visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York City when they are showing the film series "Great Actresses," you will see performances by Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse among others. Both actresses lived and acted at the same time; both were considered great. Yet their approach to acting differed. Sarah Bernhardt was a flamboyant, external, formalistic actress, reflecting the fashion of her time. Duse was a human being on stage. Today, Bernhardt's mannerisms make you laugh. Duse moves you; she is more modern than tomorrow.

I mention these two ladies from the past in a book meant for the actor of today because they represent two approaches to acting that have been debated in the theater through the centuries. The two approaches have names that annoy and confuse me, but since you will hear them again and again, let me name them now, and hopefully get rid of them. One is the Representational (Bernhardt), the other the Presentational (Duse).

The Representational actor deliberately chooses to imitate or illustrate the character's behavior. The Presentational actor attempts to reveal human behavior through a use of

THE ACTOR

himself, through an understanding of himself and consequently an understanding of the character he is portraying. The Representational actor finds a form based on an objective result for the character, which he then carefully watches as he executes it. The Presentational actor trusts that a form will result from identification with the character and the discovery of his character's actions, and works on stage for a moment-to-moment subjective experience.

For an example of the above, let me again refer to Bernhardt and Duse. Each, in her native tongue, had played the same popular melodrama of the time, the high point of which was the moment when the wife, accused of infidelity by her husband, swore her virtue. "Je jure, je jure, JE JUUUUURE!" Bernhardt proclaimed in a rising vibrato of passion. Her audience stood to scream and shout its admiration. Duse swore her virtue softly and only twice. She never spoke the third oath, but placed her hand on her young son's head as she looked directly at her husband. Duse's audience wept.

One night, after having received accolades for his performance from the audience, the nineteenth-century French actor Coquelin called his fellow actors together backstage and said: "I cried real tears on stage tonight. I apologize. It will never happen again." His approach to acting was obviously Representational. For him, a genuine experience on stage was rejected in the belief that it would muddy or blur the acting.

I believe that the illustration of a character's behavior at the cost of removing one's own psyche, no matter how brilliant the performance that results, creates an alienation between audience and actor. The audience may yell "Bravo!," they may even rise to their feet and cheer, but they are reacting in the same manner they would to an acrobat or a high-wire performer—they are cheering the visible skill, they

Concept

are applauding the feat pulled off. But the vital empathy with human behavior, the emotional involvement between actor and audience will be lacking.

Formalized, external acting (Representational) has a strong tendency to follow fashion. Internal acting (Presentational) rejects fashion and consequently can become as timeless as human experience itself.

I think now you know where I stand. Certainly it is with the Duse who, once accused of being too much alike in each of her roles, answered that as an artist the only thing she had to offer was the revelation of her soul. But if I stand with Duse and with the Presentational approach to acting, I do not reject *in toto* the Representational. To do so would be to reject actors of brilliance who have found their way along that path. I reject the Representational only for myself, as actress and teacher. I must work on an approach to the theater that functions for me. As a teacher I can teach only what I believe.

For a would-be actor, the prerequisite is *talent*. You can only hope to God you've got it. Talent is an amalgam of high sensitivity; easy vulnerability; high sensory equipment (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting—*intensely*); a vivid imagination as well as a grip on reality; the desire to communicate one's own experience and sensations, to make one's self heard and seen.

Talent alone is not enough. Character and ethics, a point of view about the world in which you live and an education, can and must be acquired and developed.

Ideally, the young actor should possess or seek a thorough education in history, literature, English linguistics (foreign languages are so much gravy), as well as all of the other art forms—music, painting and dance—plus theater history and orientation.

THE ACTOR

Essential to a serious actor is the training and perfecting of the outer instrument—comprising his body, his voice and his speech. This instrument is the violin on which he will play. He should be aware that it can be comparable to a Stradivarius and that he must turn it into and treat it like one.

Since voice, speech and body work are not in my realm as a teacher, I must simply assume that any actor serious enough to read this text will never cease to develop his physical capacities through dancing, fencing, gymnastics, etc., or work for the mastery of voice production and correct standard speech. All parts of his instrument should be limber enough to respond to the psychological and emotional demands he may make on it when he springs into physical and verbal action in the character in the play. A young actor who fails as Romeo—no matter how brilliant his inner technique—because he hasn't been able to shed his Brooklyn speech or his pigeon-toed walk, has only his own laziness to blame.

Physical beauty is not a prerequisite to becoming an actor. Few of our present-day stars are physically beautiful in the conventional sense. However, the best of them, men and women, can create beauty for an audience. If you think of a beautiful baby you may remember that it graciously accepts the admiration which comes to it voluntarily. The homely baby must reach out to others and quickly learns from necessity to clown and do a hundred things to win attention. The homely baby learns what the actor must learn to say through his art, "Here I am, look at me!" The physically beautiful actor is often cursed with the passivity of easy conquest. He accepts and expects everyone to come to him, instead of reaching out to them.

Mental brilliance is not essential. An intellectual actor can intellectualize himself out of real acting impulses, while his less mentally endowed brother, provided he is not dull

Concept

and insensitive, may function magnificently if he has understanding of human behavior. (By this I do not mean to imply that if you are highly intelligent or exquisitely beautiful you don't stand a chance in the theater.)

It is necessary to have a point of view about the world which surrounds you, the society in which you live; a point of view as to how your art can reflect your judgment.

To rebel or revolt against the status quo is in the very nature of an artist. A point of view can result from the desire to change the social scene, the family scene, the political life, the state of the ecology, the conditions of the theater itself. Rebellion or revolt does not necessarily find its expression in violence. A gentle, lyric stroke may be just as powerful a means of expression. To portray things the way they are, to hold up a mirror to the society, can also be a statement of rebellion. You must ask yourself, "How can I bring all of this to the statement I wish to make in the theater?"

When you have decided what it is you wish to express, you must decide what kind of a theater you would ideally want to be a part of. And now your real problems begin!

Many other fields of artistic endeavor offer the choice of working as an artist or as a commercial craftsman. As it stands now, our theater is by its very set-up commercial. The finest and deepest play on Broadway has been produced to make money, not just to serve, enlighten or enrich the lives of those fortunate enough to afford the price of a ticket. If the play *does* serve, that's so much velvet and extremely rare. If you have decided to become a commercial actor (an honorable profession to which I attach no stigma) you will have endless practical problems in the theater, television and films. But if you want to be a serious theater artist, these problems will be multiplied endlessly by emotional frustrations, guilts and longings.

In the late 1950's, Jean Louis Barrault complained about

THE ACTOR

the theater in France. He said that it was too much like Broadway in that the theaters were becoming like garages. At first I thought he meant dirty and overcrowded. Then I realized he meant the theaters were simply being hired as space to park in for a while, instead of representing *your* theater, *your* home with its own identity where all of the productions should express your point of view about the world in which you live; in which you could even reveal your soul (Duse) through art.

Barrault had a romantic, liberal, slightly mystical point of view in his own *Theatre* which manifested itself in his choice of plays and his conception for presentation, as opposed to, let's say, the Socialist, political *Theatre Nationale Populaire* of Jean Villard and Gérard Philipe, or the traditional, academic approach of the *Comédie Française*. All three subsidized theaters played simultaneously in Paris for many years along with other groups who had their own points of view. Sometimes, more than one theater produced the same play at the same time, but each with its own distinct viewpoint. Barrault feared that these individualistic theaters were threatened by the "commercial" circumstances encroaching on the Parisian theatrical scene.

In America we don't even know what Barrault feared. Our theater with a point of view isn't threatened because it has never existed except in the minds of individual artists. Consequently, we have no true theater-going tradition. The theater is still not a part of our lives, not a necessity, not a sustenance for our spiritual lives. We actors have never had a "home" as Barrault understood it.

West Germany has over 275 subsidized repertory theaters, and West Germany is smaller than the state of Wisconsin. Its theaters are subsidized by the state, the municipality, industry and labor. The people *expect* this subsidy. They revere and honor the artist who serves in the theater—for a living

Concept

wage, but not huge amounts of money. In America, our audiences, friends, families and neighbors think we are no good if we work for less than fortunes. Yet, surely, the compensation of respect is far greater than money.

In the United States, we have had a number of theaters with a point of view that almost made it—or they made it for several years. Many years ago we had the Provincetown Players, the early Theatre Guild, the Civic Repertory and the Group Theater. Since then, each decade has brought us further attempts in the establishment of meaningful and permanent companies. I'm sure you are familiar with many of them. The eventual failure of these noble ventures has almost always been connected with the success of one or more individuals who scored and then left to go on to a personal success in a film or commercial play. The venture that had served them was left behind, just a launching pad to be abandoned by those who had used it to reach personal heights. The potential of these theaters was devoured by the commercial theater.

Countless other ventures have wondered why they failed to acquire their own audiences. Their purpose is often simply to do "good" plays. Usually they present these good plays without any point of view reflecting the problems of the day. They should stop wondering and make their own statement. They will find their audience.

To maintain one's ideals in ignorance is easy; to maintain them with the full realization of the existing circumstances is not. To accept "the way it is" is the opportunistic way out or the way of the ostrich; to attempt to battle it takes knowledge and character.

I have often heard both professional, working actors and young beginners proclaim with passion, "I want to be the *best* actor in America!" But what is that? Merely a statement of a competitive goal. It epitomizes the American disease of

THE ACTOR

ambition for success—accompanied by fame and fortune—as proof of worth. Steak, chicken, lobster, lamb are all delicious but which is *best*? One may be the favorite of a certain group, but others have a different preference. Who is *best* among Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven? These three musical giants worked and created in Vienna at the same time. We may prefer the music of one composer to that of another, but there is no *best*. Each worked to create his *own* best, not to be *the* best.

A prominent actress once said to me: “I get so confused. Who am I trying to reach? The gas-station attendant or Brooks Atkinson?” She didn’t understand that they both have needs for an offering, for sustenance. I explained to her that I was confused for a while when I got rave reviews in *The Sea Gull*. They went straight to my head and stayed there until I attended a matinee of another young actress who had received equally good reviews. In my judgment her performance was poor. I was forced to reevaluate my thinking. If I dismissed the critical raves for one actress, what value could I place on my own? Who, ultimately, outside myself and a few of my peers whose opinion I valued, was to be the judge of my work? I began to learn to work for standards designed neither for the gas-station attendant nor Brooks Atkinson, but for my own. Set your own goals, set them for your own approval, and those of your colleagues whom you truly respect.

By the very nature of our profession we seem to develop slothful rather than disciplined habits. A great dancer to his last days cannot—and will not—perform without hours of daily practice. The pianist Artur Rubinstein and the violinist Isaac Stern cannot—and will not—play a concert without daily practice. While an actor may be forced to work as a waiter or a typist to sustain himself while waiting for the call to play King Lear, there is no excuse for his frittering away

Concept

the hours that belong to him—and his true work—with partying, and fun and games.

Every actor must demand total discipline of himself if he really means to be an actor. It can be acquired if it’s not already in his bones. A very gifted actor may be surpassed and outrun by a lesser talent simply because he is lazy, buck-passing, superficial—an actor settling for the easiest choices. The less-talented actor can win with a thorough, back-breaking discipline in his work, in his examination of his materials and his relationship to it, in the dedication (that much-abused word) to his work.

Let me say something about ethics in the theater. Another reason for the collapse of well-intentioned venture after venture is sloth and egomania. We must accept that the theater is a communal adventure. Unlike the soloist we can’t perform alone in the theater. (Only Ruth Draper, the monologist, was able to do that.) The better the play, the more we need an ensemble venture. We must recognize that we need each other’s strengths, and the more we need each other’s professional comradeship, the better the chance we have of making theater. We must serve the play by serving each other; an ego-maniacal “star” attitude is only self-serving and hurts everyone, including the “star.”

We must aim for “character” in the moral and ethical sense of the word, compounded of the virtues of mutual respect, courtesy, kindness, generosity, trust, attention to the others, seriousness, loyalty, as well as those necessary attributes of diligence and dedication.

Often a young actor reads that John Barrymore or Laurette Taylor was a heavy drinker, and decides that this is what made them successful, and so begins boozing it up. Or he may cloak himself in the exhibitionism of another star, or the vanity of still another, thinking that these detrimental traits are the key to success. I believe that personal vanity is a

THE ACTOR

disease like alcoholism, or a cancer which can eat up the initial talent and sensitivity and capacity of an individual actor. Self-glorification and narcissism block the spontaneous behavior, the genuine give-and-take of any actor. Guard against it the way you would any other destructive disease.

Unfortunately, our theater has few examples on which an aspiring actor can pattern himself. Most of them seem to show us that the actor who serves himself in the play *can* succeed. This must make, and has made, for chaos in the American theater as a whole. If we want a theater to be respected in America, a theater which is needed, we must each make ourselves personally responsible, far more than in a country where the actor already has a "home." Now we are migrant workers, fruit pickers working where we are momentarily wanted and being exploited and then moving on. We have many of the same emotional and character problems of other migrant workers.

Stanislavsky's statement is always with me: "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art."

I vividly remember a conversation years ago involving the brilliant French actor Gérard Philipe and some American actors, myself included. We were all envious of his position in the *Theatre Nationale Populaire*—envious of his being in a position to choose the kind of theater with which he wanted to align himself, the permanence of that theater, and what it represented to the nation as a whole. One actor screamed in frustration, "We *can't* have that kind of theater in America!"

Philipe answered quietly, "That is your fault."

I knew he was correct, but it has taken me many years to define in which way. Actors are as responsible as any other group in the theater for its present state. We continuously mouth our objections and our revolt against the status quo *individually*, but we feed the status quo *collectively*. If we realize our individual responsibilities to an art form, we must

Concept

not only live up to it as individuals, but remember the collective form of this art, and that more than anything else it is one for all and all for one.

I have referred to specific examples of European theaters and European artists in order to avoid direct criticism of the home scene. Despite evidence to the contrary, I refuse to believe that the American theater in all of its branches—Broadway, off-Broadway, repertory companies, regional theater—is incapable of change, revolt, or a development into true service to its public.