

Short Thoughts at Length on The Actor's Paradox

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Abstract: Why the actor's paradox? I would not even bother with this question if I didn't see so many acting students desperate to do well what they are given as "course material" and so much outdated, dusty, outmoded, mannered acting on stages in their home countries. And even the latter would not interest me – since they are largely kept alive by public taste and public satisfaction (of very dubious value for me) – if they were not based on the same criteria on which I base my ideas about acting. So, under the pretext of the apparent contradiction in Diderot's words, I will examine where I might have started in a different direction. At which fork in the motorway did I drive wrongly onto the motorway and go against the traffic? Because it is obvious to me: I am in the minority. Perhaps the paradox is not in the acting, but in the way we think about it.

Keywords: Actor's paradox; "given circumstances"; "what if"; "let's say..."; playing the reality; emotions; repetition; the two bits of the mind.

*Anyone can exist mechanically.
As humans, few can afford to do so.
On stage, this is even more true.*

Reading Ananyo Bhattacharya's book² reaffirmed for me some of the perspectives that shape the way I think about acting in theatre:

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² Ananyo Bhattacharya, *Neumann János – Az ember a jövőből*, translated by János Kepes (Open Books, n.d., 2023). Original title: *János Neumann – The Man from the Future*.



1. The indirect effect is more direct. The exceptions to this are the workshops in which I have just experimented. Without any end goal.
2. Understanding is not exclusively rational. Understanding is equally emotional. That is why we see the world as we have learned to see it from those we love, have loved, have been emotionally dependent on.
3. The world is unknowable. Therefore, whatever system we set up, it is valid only within itself, and can interpret so small a proportion of phenomena that, in relation to the whole, their proportion is almost nothing.
4. All points of view are valid because everything that happens has already happened and will happen.
5. There is no language that can describe what it is aimed at.

The above list is not definitive. As I am in a constant state of change, new perspectives open to me. Although it may be that only the existing ones are given different emphasis, because the way I see phenomena remains the same, but I try to approach things from a different angle. I don't know. I don't see myself to the extent that I think about myself independently. And I am not so complete that I am simultaneously myself, not myself and everything. Although I often have the feeling that if I don't rely only on my mind, I am surrounded and filled with something else, something much simpler, something lighter.

I will not explain these five starting points. If you are interested, ask me, I will be happy to discuss it with you. At least I think I feel it now, although I am bound to believe that anyone is interested. My previous writings have remained as inaudible as this one will no doubt sink into the mass of endless discussions. I am writing all this for myself.

Why the actor's paradox? I wouldn't even bother with this question if I didn't see so many acting students desperate to do well what they are given as "course material" and so much outdated, dusty, outmoded, mannered acting on stages in their home countries. And even the latter would not interest me – since they are largely kept alive by public taste and public satisfaction (of very dubious value for me) – if they were not based on the

same criteria on which I base my ideas about acting³. So, under the pretext of the apparent contradiction in Diderot's words, I will examine where I might have started in a different direction. At which fork in the motorway did I drive wrongly onto the motorway and go against the traffic? Because it is obvious to me: I am in the minority.

Diderot's actor's paradox for me is, very briefly: does the actor feel real emotions on stage, or is he just acting them out? Because if he/she really feels them, he/she cannot reproduce them. And if he/she repeats them, he/she doesn't really feel them.

And the actor has to repeat. If not at other times, then at least for the time it takes to prepare a public performance. Even if it is only in his/her head, in the sketching out of a simple plan. "I'll come in here, I'll do this here, I'll say this here. And then I'll feel this." Or not.

But what is the "real" feeling? Who can define it? And why should the actor "really" feel it? Out of honour? Because it is not proper to lie? Is the man who makes a statement about himself/herself a liar, and I pretend to believe him/her, and then he/she bows at the end and I applaud him/her?

Magician vs. comedian. Pretending vs. showing off. It's not all about acting, it's about the mind thinking about acting. And the mind is "two bits". Yes or no. Zero or one. The same principle is at work in the most complex computer. It just performs a series of decisions much faster and manages a much larger amount of data and information. In this, it is statistically immeasurably better than us humans⁴.

³ This does not mean that I do it better or see it better. It doesn't even mean I'm good at it. That's not what this text is about! I'm simply interested in how it is possible to come up with such different acting from the same point of view, based on the same expectations? Or would that be like music? The same notes are used by Bach and any cheap musician.

⁴ Moreover, the mind may not even think about acting. Rather, it seems to seek an ideology for the tastes of the thinker who uses it as a tool, to build up a whole system, to establish a series of rules (often contradictory, sometimes tending towards the mystical), ambiguous theorems called regularities. Purple mists. I do the same myself, even when I try to formulate my assumptions from my own experience. No matter how much I question the evidence, no matter how much I try to discover instead of justify, I am driven first and foremost by the question: do I like what I see or not? But this, I repeat, does not mean that the acting I have experienced (and hope to experience again) is better or worse.

But what if, instead of classical determinism, I deal with what lies outside it? In other words, I try not to talk about its opposite, not about the other pole of the Newtonian, Euclidean, Darwinian world view, because on the one hand I want to avoid repeating dualism, and on the other hand I cannot put it into words. What if I do not deny but deal with what this dualistic world cannot answer? What if I listen to my experience, and do not try to push what I experience into the Procrustean bed of learned evidence? Because I increasingly feel that my intuition, my irrationality, that something unnamable that I experience on stage, is becoming a fog before my intellect, and I am not making any progress towards understanding. Not to mention that without it, what can I say to my students?

But is that what education is? The transmission of knowledge that can be reasoned and described?

For I find that acting is outside the above dichotomy(-ies) (magician/comedian, transcendence/revelation, etc.).

But it is not only acting! The same happens with all phenomena. Each pair of opposites – apparent or not – does not describe even in the slightest degree the phenomenon itself, which it tries to capture by their joint statement. A and its opposite, minus A – note: not non-A! – no matter how much detail the human mind tries to define the phenomenon they are designed to understand, can tell us nothing about the range defined by non-A and non-minus A outside of them. Which is much larger than what can fit into the set of A and minus A. And yes, I know, defined is not the best term, but at the moment I know of no other. And even if I did, see point five above.

It may be that rationalism, which divides everything up, takes it apart, analyzes it in detail (meticulously and seemingly ever more profoundly), the mind that creates logical order out of chaos results in the actor's paradox. It separates two elements that coexist. Just as in the human body an infection of the toe affects the functioning of the heart, so the emotions that are acted and real do not exist separately but are present simultaneously in a different quality. And the more "real" we want to make the emotion on stage, the more "acted" it becomes, and vice versa: the more we act the emotion, the more real it seems.

Moreover, rationality not only separates, but juxtaposes elements that are not contradictory.

Perhaps the paradox is not in the acting, but in the way we think about it.

Yes, it would be effective to pause here now and let ourselves nod sagely in response to the above. Or to reject the previous sentences altogether, to classify them as a search for an idea, and to continue with the irreconcilable division: acted vs. lived. That is life after all: yes or no! No?

Not sure...

But if not, let's also consider Stanislavsky's statement about the magic "what if". And the (seemingly unintelligible) "given circumstances". In fact, the one that all children use when they declare at the beginning of a game that "let's say..."⁵

The same is the starting point of the theatrical performance. "Let's say" this is Verona, or this is the Serebryakov's living room. "Let's say that" you are Hedda Gabler and you are Jörgen Tesman.

But it is precisely this starting point that I interpret differently. And that's why I'm going in a completely different direction. Not better, not worse – different.

I will not think any further about the proposal. I don't infer anything from "let's say" I am Jonathan Peachum⁶. I don't attribute anything to him from what I might assume about him, about such a man, about the situations he finds himself in, and which I ultimately just assume might happen. I am not concerned with what it **must be**.

As an actor, I consider the person in me, as a director, the person appearing before me, who I know has the primary intention of being "let's say" someone who is not the self he/she thinks he/she is, or what the rest of us think he/she is⁷.

⁵ And then it consistently delivers. While never forgetting for a moment that he is now caught between two realities. The reality of everyday life, and the reality of the game. Just like in the story. Because fairy tales are not about reality, but they are not about imagination either. A fairy tale is about what **once** happened in the world between the two (reality and fiction). Like a theatre performance.

⁶ János Páva in a performance by the Csík Theatre.
<https://www.csikjatekszin.ro/hu/eloadasok/koldusopera> (17 March 2024).

⁷ Donnellan writes in his book (Original title: *The Actor and the Target*, Nick Hern Books, 2006) (Declan Donnellan: *A színész és a célpont*, Corvina, Budapest, 2021, trans. Gábor M. Koltai) in his foreword (p. 7) that "**At the moment when the actor begins to act, at that sacred moment, he says to the audience: 'Look! I am not just one thing! I am not playing myself a little bit. I am playing someone else.'**" (Declan Donnellan's emphasis.) And I've been thinking about that ever since, that we are **playing** ourselves.

I have a perception, not a concept.

I see reality as something else. Not the situation that “let’s say that” is directed at, but that this situation is now about “let’s say that”. That is, the object of my attention is not the reality of the Peachum/Peacock, but that of the man who declares himself, and who we all know is now **pretending to be** “say that” Peachum/Peacock.

The theatre has reality, not the story. I measure the “realness” of the actor’s emotions against that.⁸

In an older text of mine (*On the reality of the actor and what we see*)⁹, I make the same point, but I don’t connect it to the actor paradox. Indirectly, I ask the question: what has reality on stage? Is it the story, or the attempt to bring the story to life in the public space? Because I have the feeling that they are two completely different things. It’s not the same whether you’re looking at the reality of Verona or the reality of “let’s say this is Verona now”.

The first case (“This is Verona now!”) is the perfect breeding ground for the actor paradox. A prime example. For we are no longer concerned with “let’s say you are the Nanny”, but with “if you are the Nanny, what must you be like”? The Nanny becomes a reality, and not that you are someone who is now “let’s say you are the Nanny”. Already we are not dealing with what is (someone pretending to be the Nanny), but what should be. The Nanny. Which is not. There can’t be.

Can I play the reality of Andras Hathazi? No. In theory, I should be the most authentic person to play Andras Hathazi. But I can’t. I mean Andras

⁸ This is how I interpret it, the statement that the actor should think of himself not as an object but as a subject. For he is not thinking of Peachum/Peacock, who is not only in the singular third person, but **does not exist at all** (!), but of himself in the sense that he is now “let’s say” Peachum/Peacock. It is the self who can now, through the position of “let’s say that”, do **whatever** is possible within the framework of the game.

As if simultaneously “alienated” and “identified”. Which is possible because I am “alienated” from Peachum/Pava and “identified” with my own playing self!

The puppet theatre shows us this most precisely, most vividly. There is the role(s), the puppet, and there is the puppeteer. The one who shows and plays at the same time.

This is how I understand Gordon Craig, as far as I know and understand him...

⁹ András Hatházi, *A színész valóságáról, és arról, hogy mit látunk*, in *A semmitmondó szöveg* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană/Cluj University Press, 2021). English title: *The inexpressive text*.

Hathazi, when I play Andras Hathazi. Because as much as I would try to be Andras Hathazi, I would only be Andras Hathazi playing Andras Hathazi. Who is less than Andras Hathazi himself. Because I would only be András Hatházi's opinion of András Hatházi. I would only be a Hatházi András imagined at a given moment.¹⁰

Likewise the actor, who tries to portray the reality of the Nurse, the Nurse herself, as valid in the "reality" of Verona. He/she will never be the Nurse. He/she will always be just an actor desperately pursuing the idea of the Nurse that appears in him/her.

In the second case, on the contrary, there is no actor's paradox¹¹! Because the actor is simultaneously acting and living "real" emotions! (To stay with the example above: the actor playing the Nanny, while "acting" the emotions named by the Nanny, is living his/her own emotions, which are not always the Nanny's emotions, but are always real! How he/she can reproduce them, I will tell you below.)

For there is a reality in "let's say that this is Verona"! Because if "we say that you are now the Nanny", then you are not the Nanny, but only "we say" that you are the Nanny. Your reality is not the reality of the Nanny, it is the reality of you who "say" you are the Nanny.

¹⁰ For me, this idea is also confirmed by quantum physics, when it states that it is impossible to know at the same time how fast a given particle is moving and where it is located. Speed and location cannot be determined at the same time. If I am watching the continuous transformation of Andras Hathazi, I have no idea where Andras Hathazi is? And if I determine his location, I have no idea at all at what speed he is transforming. András Hatházi, as a "character", as a "performer", is the point, the place where András Hatházi reveals himself to me for a moment. While András Hatházi, who plays András Hatházi, is already in a completely different place.

¹¹ Make no mistake, I am not against the actor paradox, I am not trying to invalidate it. I am talking about the fact that there is an acting in which the actor's paradox has simply become obsolete. It does not exist. It is not a problem. It is not a problem! It's like Bolyai Square. Euclidean laws do not apply.

What I'm talking about is that the acting I've come to is different from what I was taught at the time. So, we should rethink all the things we say about realism, character, acting, etc. that continue to result in actors who are stuck in the grip of the actor paradox. All the while lying to themselves, to each other, to newer generations, that this is the peculiarity of their art.

So, if we “say that” I am now Andras Hathazi, then I am much closer to Andras Hathazi’s reality, because Andras Hathazi’s reality is that of the person in process.¹²

But in acting schools and theatre rehearsals we still talk primarily about emotions. We talk about “what we should feel here”. Based on what we can only assume the people on stage might feel. And the student actors and actresses try to meet these expectations. They are terrified to search for real emotion. Which “really” has no basis in reality, because we only imagine what might happen to the people we imagine.

But what happens when the actor’s goal is not emotion, but the “given circumstance”? What if, before he/she starts to feel anything purposefully, he/she first creates the “given circumstance”? For example, by starting to speak in whispers. Muffled. Just like that. Without any reason. And let the “circumstance” of your own making reflect back on you. He/she might get excited, as if he/she’s telling a secret. And then let that condition determine how he/she sees, how he/she thinks... (Or if he/she absolutely needs a trigger, he/she should be careful that unauthorized people don’t hear the secret fly that Romeo is preparing. Let’s say the audience will hear it anyway. True, they are – perhaps – not unauthorised. But we are already in the “reality”

I am talking about!) Until he/she suddenly – say – makes a fist. And then – maybe – he/she will be angry. (And the actor playing the Nanny is likely to find a reason if he/she looks for one. But not necessarily important¹³!) And so on, from shift point to shift point. And only after shift points from one emotion to another.¹⁴

¹² I discuss this “boundlessness” in more detail in my article “*Playing with Words*” (original title: *Játék a szavakkal*), in András Hatházi: *A semmitmondó szöveg*.

¹³ This note is more for film actors. Who often do not even meet their film partner, while in the editing room, the filmmakers are putting the frames together as if the actors had spent the time together!

¹⁴ Yesterday evening (14 March 2024), we were talking with our architect friends about how people show everything, everything that is stirring inside them. And how they try to hide what is obvious. It’s true that we can’t define exactly what is visible, but we can sense that it’s not what the person is showing us. (And often, very often, almost always, we go wrong here: we assume what we see to be real, we take it as reality, and we think about the situation in the light of this “fact”. Like the “reality” of Verona, the Nurse, Hedda Gabler,

Well: if the actor's task is to make his public identity credible (and it seems to me that this is a basic requirement, since only taste can say that one or another performance is not credible), then I feel that this order is very important: circumstance – emotion – thought. In other words, once I create the circumstances, I start to feel them, and the emotions I feel will influence the way I think. Whatever my task is. Whether I'm an actor, a character, myself, or someone I'm not expecting to be.

But at the moment, I see that in acting, in the actor's work, thought comes first. Acting students, actors, invent their existence and call it presence, when it is only presence in thought, in fiction¹⁵. To stay with the example above, the excitement created in thought does not produce excitement, but only a perception of excitement. What may be "exciting", but the object of that excitement is itself (the excitement is excited by the excitement), not the phenomenon to which it must be related by the events and regularities of the stage¹⁶.

Jürgen Tesman, Peachum/Peacock and every other situation and character on stage. But that situation exists only in our minds, it has nothing to do with the reality of what is going on in the other person's mind!) Based on this observation, if the actor starts to speak in a whisper, after a few seconds (and really, a few seconds are enough!) even the most skeptical spectator, who needs a well-recognised reason to "understand" every phenomenon, starts to feel what the actor feels. He/she doesn't know why, but he/she will feel it. (Because we, humans, willingly or unwillingly, take on each other's tension, joy, state.) And this state – because it is emotion, and emotion is always "real" – begins to determine the way he/she thinks. And you may just find the reason you needed before the scene. Not guessing but **finding**.

¹⁵ On March 17, 2024, during a filmmaker workshop at FreeSZFE, one of the students asked, "What is presence? When is the actor present? And what I think about this is that an actor is present when he/she doesn't know he/she is present. Presence cannot be consciously striven for. Presence cannot be "shown". Presence, as soon as we have noticed it and become aware of it, dissolves, and all we know is that we were just present. And we only hope that we will be present. I associate presence with Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's **flow** theory.

To become aware of presence is to grasp that **now**.

¹⁶ On the one hand, even today, one can often hear the advice that it is enough to think of a similar memory to feel on stage what one "should" feel; on the other hand, I know it is an exaggeration to call the phenomenon I think of as a law of presence. Yet everyone refers to it. Romeo and Juliet must love each other. It's okay if they don't love, it's enough if they just think of something similar, and they can act out their love more easily.

But here we are again where the shore breaks.

And why **should** they love each other at all?

Thought is always sterile. It always creates the same measure because it knows no measure outside itself. On the other hand, if I create the circumstance which may cause me to become excited, and then, after the feeling has been strengthened, I begin to think as a result, I see things differently. I see what the excitement allows me to see. It will not be my opinion of it, but the "blindness" it contains. I start thinking from the inside. That's what I mean when I say: the text should not be known from the outside, but from the inside.

Indeed, the actor changes not because he/she starts to feel different, but because circumstances change. Because he/she changes the circumstances. Our emotions do not come out of nowhere, even if it often seems to us that there is seemingly no reason to feel one way or the other. We don't. Our emotions have a reason. Even if they come to us independently of our consciousness, as a result of internal chemical processes. If this were not the case, then there would be no point in spiritual counselling, in exploring our past experiences. (Let's assume there is...) But the actor doesn't have to go that deep, that far! The actor is not a psychologist, the actor just feels the person. He/she observes and experiences without judgement.

For me, the goal is the "given circumstance". Emotion is only a consequence. The actor will feel. "Real" emotions. And he/she will never be completely absorbed in the emotion, because there will always be another, more important, bigger "given circumstance" that will awaken another emotion in him/her.¹⁷

And only then comes the thought, the rational.

(Although, in truth, this term "real" emotion is a misnomer. There are no true and false emotions. There are emotions. And we live them openly or try to cover them up. We hope that with another emotion. But the emotion we try to cover up does not become a "false" emotion. Because it is not an emotion. It's a pretend surface. Emotion is one: what we feel.)

The actor is not going to replicate the emotion. Because it cannot be. The actor will always replicate the "given circumstance". For example, he/she will speak in a muffled voice, in a whisper. As if he/she were telling a secret. And because of that he/she will be really tense, excited. And then he/she'll clench

¹⁷ Because it is also a matter of choice.

his fists as if in a rage. And before long, he/she'll be really angry. So, from that moment he/she takes the stage to the applause. And at the next rehearsal, at the next performance, it all starts again.

Just like in life. Because there too: even if we decide not to be angry when X or Y says or does this or that – we will still be angry. The circumstance triggers the emotion in us, the reaction to the circumstance. We cannot “produce” emotion “just for you”. But we can produce a circumstance!

The actor repeats (circumstances) and feels. There is no paradox in this. It only seems a great mystery from the outside. Moreover, the emotions are added to, magnified by the spectator. From this point of view, the actor does not have to “fully live” the emotion. He/she just starts it in the spectator, the audience does the rest.

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