

First Impression in Theatrical Casting

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Abstract: In theatre, casting is a complex process that is less frequently approached by specialized analyses, in comparison with film casting. This article seeks to emphasize the mechanisms involved in the shaping of the *first impression*, which matches the first chronological stage in the casting process. I will define the *first impression*, in the context of theatrical casting, as the manner of establishing the *actor's image* following the analysis of his/her **appearance** and **attitude** – shown more or less knowingly – by a stage director, within several seconds of their first meeting. Usually, the directors' trust in their own intuition, in the "reading" of the face, of the behavior and skills of those who appear in front of them, is absolute. But there have been quite a few cases where appearance has been contradicted by reality. On the other hand, of course, impressions cannot be shaped by the strict rules of logic, since the director is not a machine, but a human being who does not act only on rational factors, but also on affective and emotional ones. In the shaping of the first impression – a process that occurs in a limited timeframe, having a spontaneous and almost unconscious nature – an important role is played by **perception, attention, observation**, during which various *errors of assignment* may occur. All these elements turn casting into a unique event that focuses on a living, condensed and dramatic relation between the projections of two protagonists, the actor and the director, observers and observed alike².

Keywords: casting, director, actor, first impression, error, observed, observer.

The casting is a process that takes place in the form of a competition during which actors take various tests in front of the director, in a limited timeframe. From the perspective of the director's creation, however, the

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casting is the time when the director's vision of the show first makes contact with reality, when the characters, envisaged by the director based on the text, become actual possibilities. As a situation, the casting involves a "close" and basically uninterrupted and reciprocal supervision. In a relatively short time, a cyclic permutation of attention occurs between the actor and the director; each of them becomes observer and observed. A permanent exchange of information is performed between the two parties. Each of them thus evolves from a potential partner to a person identified as artist and as man.

When we look at the directors' statements regarding the manner in which they choose their actors for their cast, we may see that, although they assign substantial importance to the casting process, they define rather ambiguously the method by which they arrive at the roles. The "first impression", "a particular feeling", "intuition", these are just some of the reasons why they made a specific choice, they say. Logic and reason are often secondary. We will look at several examples. When asked about how they select their actors at the Théâtre du Soleil, Ariane Mnouchkine says:

How do I choose the people with whom I work? I expect from the people with whom I will work a number of things that are difficult to define. I may be trying to guess their childhood, their fantasies, their imagination, guts, sense of humor. Sometimes I may be wrong, but I realize that Théâtre du Soleil has a 44-year history and that, in this whole time, those who tried to harm us deliberately were at most six and, of them, three were insane. [...] The thing I'm looking for may be beyond the simple work done, beyond the correct execution.³

In an interview to the *Capital Cultural* magazine, director Alexandru Dabija is asked how he selects actors for the roles. His initial answer "If only I knew it, if only I knew it..."⁴ (he laughs) is completed with important information when doubled by another question of whether his choices rely on intuition. Here is his answer: "I think so, yes. Yes. In the end, it's intuition, it's like choosing what to wear. Sometimes, I try to explain it to myself, too. Usually, this is what I do: I meet a group of actors, I look at them, we talk, and then I read the text again and imagine how they would look if they

3. Beatrice Picon-Vallin (ed.), *Ariane Mnouchkine*, trans. Andreea Dumitru (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu & Revista Teatrul Azi - supliment, 2010), 62-63.

4. "Regizorul nu e o născocire divină", *Capital Cultural*, last modified February 22, 2017, <http://capitalcultural.ro/alexandru-dabija-regizorul-nu-e-o-nascocire-divina/>.

played various characters. This is it, it's not an exact selection, it's something extremely subjective, in the end it also relates to intuition, mood, and ideas."⁵

Director Vlad Mugur recalled his first meeting with actor George Constantin, while he was an assistant in the Bucharest Theatre Institute, class of professor Nicolae Bălăţeanu. It all happened during the admission examination⁶. Vlad Mugur says: "...you know, I had a quality, I *guessed* talents, and I found in that thin and lean boy who moved incoherently a smiling look that could only mean talent."⁷

Such examples only illustrate the share of subjectivity in the decisions made by directors during casting. Closely related to the subjectivity of directing choices is the issue of the director's *first impression* on the actor standing in front of them: how is it shaped and what is its weight in the final choice? I will speak here about the **sources** of the first impression, about the actor's **evaluation** and the director's **decision**, but also about several **psychological processes** involved in the shaping of the first impression: the actor's *appearance* and *attitude*. The former, i.e. the appearance, called by the famous American sociologist Erving Goffman "expressive equipment"⁸, relates to *clothing, sex-, age- and race-related features, body stance, speech particularities, face expressions, gestures, etc.* – i.e. the overall information that we obtain by using our senses when we interact spontaneously with someone. The second source of the first impression is the "attitude": as said by Goffman, it may produce the first emotional reaction. Of course, says the American sociologist, we often expect a decisive correspondence between *appearance* and *attitude*. But we should not forget that the indicated sociologist is considering the "actors" of everyday life.

In the case of theatre, more often than not, the *exception from the rule* stirred the directors' interest and "exception" means here the cases of the actors at whom the appearance and the artistic skills are contrasting, which frequently led to immediate decisions of the directors. One example I'd like to emphasize here is Raymond Andrews', a 13-year old deaf-mute boy, deemed uneducable, who, nonetheless, had a significant influence on the work of

5. Ibid.

6. Entry in the faculty of acting, a sub-species of theatrical casting.

7. Florica Ichim, *Conversation with Vlad Mugur* (Bucureşti: Teatrul azi, 2000), 34.

8. Erving, Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, romanian edition, (Bucharest, Comunicare.ro, 2007), 52.

American director Robert Wilson, inspiring the projects in which he also played various roles. Conversely, there is the case where the contrast between the artistic skills and the appearance may prompt a director to abandon an actor that he was considering initially for the role. Director Vlad Mugur had selected the well-known actor-poet Emil Botta for the role of Solness in Henrik Ibsen's *Master Builder*. Because the actor failed to show up for the first rehearsal, the director searched for him at home, where he found him, as recounted by him later, "sitting in bed covered with something like an army blanket, a plateful of cigarette butts, a plateful of grapes... He wore a content smile". Illuminated, Vlad Mugur dismissed him.

The first impression has a spontaneous and almost unconscious nature. Two important processes contribute to its appearance: *the evaluation* and *the assignment*. I will approach them individually.

I.

The *evaluation* process occurs, first of all, based on the information that is obtained verbally, non-verbally and para-verbally⁹ and, on the other hand, by psychological processes that are activated, especially at the director, in the first minutes of a casting. The first I would like to approach is perception.

In casting, we deal with a double **perception**: first, we are obviously speaking about the director's perception of the actor, according to the end purpose of the meeting, i.e. the casting in a specific role. Second, however, we are dealing with the reverse perception, from the actor toward the director; the former adjusts his or her behavior and performance depending on how he or she "senses" the director and of how he or she senses that he or she is perceived by the latter. American scientist Solomon Asch¹⁰, a pioneer of social psychology, interested in how we operate with perception of unknown people, says that we can speak about "forming impressions" rather than about "forming judgments or knowledge". The impression, a first step in the direction of knowing the other, may equate with a strong emotion, which can be enough in a director's choice of an actor. During the casting for the *Medea* play, staged

9. Additional information can be found in my doctoral thesis *Observer and Observed in the Theatrical Casting Process. Socio-psychological Determinations of the "One-to-One" Relationship*, chapter III, not published.

10. Solomon Elliott Asch, "Forming impressions of personality," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 41 (3/1946): 258.

for the famous La Mama company, director Andrei Șerban was approached on the theatre halls, “by a young woman, her hair bright red, who wore a guitar around her neck” and who asked him whether he needed a composer for the performance. She was Liz Swados and, according to Andrei Șerban, her eyes and her stance inspired such strength that Șerban knew he could trust her; he decided right there and then to include her in the team.

In the forming of perception, **attention** and **observation** play a key role, since perception is an activity of analysis and synthesis. In casting, the correct orientation of **attention** is fundamental for the director. Decisive information may appear from a detail such as a movement of a hand or a particular tone in the voice; it may appear because of some awkward mishap of the actor or because of a word that he or she repeats. Psychologist Anne Treisman notes that the manner we operate our attention acts on what we see¹¹. Selective attention will be either inner-oriented - the director and the actor must not forget what they are searching - or oriented toward the other. Inner attention is calibrated with intuition and with cultural information; attention toward the other opens the communication and it places us on the same frequency with “the whole”, to allow us to see the big picture.

The director’s talent is also seen in his or her capacity of guiding his or her attention in the right direction at the right time. Director Yury Kordonsky, recounting his first meeting with Victor Rebengiuc, says:

You talk to someone about life for half an hour, you approach very carefully specific topics and you see how your interlocutor’s eyes change color. You then see whether you are dealing with a good or a bad actor. That’s what happened with Victor. From the very first meeting, it was obvious that I would work with an exceptional actor.¹²

The basis of the observation of a person is given by the “superficial” elements that are the easiest to determine: physical appearance, bearing, physiognomy, gestures, or voice. Interviewed by Florica Ichim, director Vlad Mugur recounts how, when he had to stage A.P. Chekhov’s *Seagull* at the Konstanz Theatre (Germany), he chose actress Adelheide Loch, as Nina, only following a conversation over the phone.

11. Anne Treisman, “How the Deployment of Attention Determines What We See,” *Visual Search and Attention* 14, no. 4-8 (1/2006), 411-443.

12. Simona Chițan, and Mihaela Mihailov, *Victor Rebengiuc – The Man and the Actor*, Romanian version, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 118-119.

II.

The process of evaluation is followed by the process of assignment of the actor's behavior and artistic performance. Practically, after having been evaluated, the actor is now classified based on the director's interests, purposes and needs. If the actor did not stir the director's interest, the evaluation will rely mostly on categories of membership. Once the image is formed, good or bad, there is a tendency that the subsequent information on that actor is processed in such a way that it reinforces the already shaped impression.

The assignment is a psychological process whereby, for example, a director tries, on the one hand, to analyze an actor's behavior, in order to obtain as many pieces of information as possible about the latter's behavior and, on the other hand, he or she analyzes the latter's artistic performance. These operations of interpretation of the causes of an actor's behavior are called heuristics or errors.

A distorting factor is known as *the halo effect* and it relates to the impact of some features on the overall picture that we have of a person. The observer may be impressed or, on the contrary, may be upset by a specific trait of the actor, without considering other characteristics. If the director knows that the actor in front of him or her is sociable, he or she may also consider that the latter is also smart or efficient.

The leniency/strictness error is present when the evaluator becomes overly generous or, on the contrary, overly strict in relation to the actor's performance, based on the relationship that they have with the latter.

The accessibility error is seen in the tendency to estimate the changes of a performance depending on how easily we can envisage the actor in different situations. For example, we are focusing on a specific actor only because, back in faculty, we worked extremely efficiently. However, at present, perhaps that actor has no longer been cast in important roles, his artistic skills may have decreased significantly and his taste has no longer developed.

Distorted thinking occurs often, because we find it easy to imagine "what if...?", when real events are not fully satisfactory or if we were one step away from a great success or from a catastrophe. If the thing that we imagine gives us a better image than reality, we feel disappointed, frustrated and furious; on the contrary, if our imagination offers us a potential situation much worse than the real one, we feel relieved. For example, by a casting error for the role of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, a play staged in 1991, director Tompa Gabor chose, euphemistically stated by him, a different direction,

much less fortunate than the initial project. Another example, this time of a performance that turned out to be better than imagined, comes from the same director. This was Mrozek's *Tango*, which he had staged during faculty. Although the first cast formula was changed completely¹³, at the moment when the director made the replacements, and Petrică Nicolae obtained Stomil's part at the recommendation of Octavian Cotescu, the play found its direction, a direction better than the one foreseen.

The recency effect. The forming of an impression about an actor also depends on the director's most recent professional or private experiences. They tend to turn up frequently in one's mind or in conversation, and they have an impact on how a director interprets the final information, hence his or her opinion on the others, but also on his own behavior. Frequently, says George Banu¹⁴, when directors work in another country, they complain about the mediocrity of those actors, thinking that they are inferior to the actors in their own country. The phenomenon is perhaps lined with the nostalgia of a specific manner of directing, which is much more familiar. Thus, at Vlad Mugur, according to his own statement, the work with German actors - at the Konstanz theatre - had meant a permanent fight with the need of motivation and the refusal of the spontaneous indication frequently considered by the actors as excessive authority.¹⁵

The primacy effect or the anchor effect. The order in which someone's traits come to be known may act on their effect on the overall impression. Frequently, a piece of information has a stronger impact if it is the first one to be known about the other, even when the following pieces or the last piece of information that one receives contradict it clearly¹⁶. Once the observer

13. The first cast was: Vali Popescu -Arthur, Vali Vlădăreanu-Stomil, Costică Bărbulescu-Edek and Cătălina Bărcă-Eleonora.

14. George Banu, *Beyond the Role or the Unruly Actor. Theoretical Miniatures, Portraits, Sketches*, trans. Delia Voicu (Bucharest: Nemira, 2008), 34.

15. Florica Ichim, *Conversation with Vlad Mugur*, (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, 2000), 145.

16. Jim Luchins conducted an experiment in which he presented to a number of subject the description of a boy as an extrovert in a context and an introvert in another one. When the subjects were asked to express a general impression about the boy, those who had read first the paragraph that described the boy as an extrovert, perceived Jim as an extrovert, while those who had read the paragraph who had read the paragraph that described the boy as an introvert, perceived the latter as an introvert. See Pierre Feyereisen, "Brain pathology, lateralization, and nonverbal behaviour," in *Fundamentals of Nonverbal Behavior*, ed. Robert Stephan Feldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50.

finds that they have an adequate impression, they no longer pay attention to the subsequent information.

In order to be able to identify, more accurately, the casting-related psychological aspects, I have drafted and sent two questionnaires consisting of ten questions each to directors, on the one hand, and to actors, on the other hand. One of the questions asked from the directors was: *How important is the first impression about an actor, during casting?* I will quote below some of the most representative answers that allow me to move toward my conclusions. Thus, the reactions were: “[The first impression] It is very important. I think I know from the very first seconds whether I am dealing with someone who stirs my curiosity or if I don’t want to work with them. Moreover, I find that the man with whom I work should be morally ok and emotionally balanced. This may be a disadvantage at times, because talent does not always mean fine behavior.”¹⁷ Or, another statement: “I don’t believe in a first impression, but in the feeling that you get from an actor at the end of the casting process. During casting, for a moment, you may like the person in front of you and next you may not like them any longer. I think the selection involves the average impression.”¹⁸

Leta Popescu, a Romanian stage director working mainly in the independent theatre speaks about the the first impression in the following terms: “Very important. But not final. You may consider the fact that actor X had a bad day and may give him or her another chance, but those who did not have a bad day will always win. Those who are not late, those who change their regular outfits, those who have opinions and who let themselves guided without let or hindrance. And you can feel and see this during casting.”¹⁹ David Schwartz, on the other hand, states: “I almost never do casting. I need to know people better, to see how they react to various theatre technique. Therefore, I need to spend more time, at least several hours, if not even days, with the actors and actresses, to see how they work together, how they improvise, and especially – WHAT THEY ARE THINKING. Since I am putting on stage performances that carry an overt political message, I need actors who are largely tuned into it.”²⁰

17. Radu Alexandru Nica, Romanian stage director.

18. Delia Gavlitchi, Romanian stage director.

19. Leta Popescu is a Romanian stage director.

20. David Schwartz is a Romanian stage director.

Conclusions

If I had to formulate conclusions, I would note that the forming of impressions cannot follow the strict rules of logic and objectivity, since the director is not a machine. In our mind, rational processes coexist with affective and emotional ones. At the same time, the forming of the first impression is a process that occurs in a limited timeframe. During casting, i.e. in the very short time, directors operate quick but imprecise, hence risky assessments. The directors' trust in their own intuition, essentially in the appearances of the human face and behavior, is so wide that they are stunned every time when appearances are challenged by reality. But the first impression resembles some kind of reflex and to control it voluntarily is very difficult. The difficulty of identifying the accuracy of the first impression prompts me to note the fact that it is not the truth value that is essential – because, in this case, there should be at least one unequivocal criterion of validation of the first impression; instead, the emotion that the actor communicates to the director is indispensable.

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