

*About the Actor's Reality and the Things We See.
Can an Actor Create Reality Through Fiction,
or Does He Merely Imitate It?*

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Abstract: In this article, award-winning stage and film actor András Hatházi challenges, from the viewpoint of his prestigious career as an artist and pedagogue, the relationship between actor, role, reality, and fiction. Can the actor create reality through fiction? In order to answer this question, the author turns towards the way children are playing, finding therein both truth, and inspiration.

Keywords: actor and role, reality and fiction, training, to play

I know more about two acting schools: the one in Cluj Napoca (where I work) and the one in Târgu Mureş (where I work sometimes, and where I graduated thirty years ago). At the same time, I see the actors in Romania and in Hungary, who – in terms of their working methods – are likely to have received the same training as the students of the schools mentioned earlier. I also have the opportunity to gain insight into the training of actors in the former Yugoslav Republics through the annual Dioniz Festival organized by the acting school in Osijek, Croatia. And from the point of view of the question I asked at the beginning of my writing, it makes absolutely no difference which of the aforementioned schools the actors graduate from. They (apart from a few, rather random than consciously sought-after moments) do not create reality, but merely imitate it. They can't do otherwise. As due to

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their persistence and diligence, they learn in three, four or five years of training what their teachers, audience and they themselves expect from them: how to sing, dance, articulate and form a character.

And the latter is one of the obstacles that make them unable to create reality.

Because there may not be a character.

At least not in the sense in which it is used.

Not only is the actor the one, who – given his profession and the expectations towards him – consciously defines himself as someone else (role, character) for the time of the theater performance, but we all play different roles (characters) in different situations. Whatever we think of ourselves, however we define ourselves. We always play the role of the child around our parents. The role of the subordinate in front of our boss. Or, in a reverse situation, we will be the bosses for our subordinates.

This is not the problem, but the way we think about these roles.

We believe these roles are *real*.

We create expectations towards them, we create an idea, a perfect character, compared to which the roles that appear are better or not so good, authentic or false. In fact, there are cases, when we say something that varies from our usual schemes and we simply say, this cannot be!

But we are the only ones who think – based on our previous experiences – how these roles *should* be.

Of course, we do not study these characters in everyday life the way the students of these schools, later actors do, but in any case, we follow a pattern. We learn how to be parents from our parents, how to behave as bosses from our superiors. We grow into our everyday roles almost automatically. But being parents, bosses or subordinates, lovers, murderers or contemplators doesn't mean that being a parent or a boss, a lover or a meditator is a real role. There is no such thing as the Parent. The Boss. The Lover doesn't exist. There is no Romeo. No Hamlet.

But there are situations when we become lovers, and we may listen to witches when we are preparing to attack the Scottish army at war with us.

So, it seems that in all probability the environment determines our role. Our character. Because if we do not behave according to the situation and the occasion (we get confused about our role) our environment recognizably points it out to us that there is no such thing, this cannot be. (And it only depends on us, on our ability whether we consider these signs or not.)

And if the environment determines us, who is the actor on the stage? Is he not – quite simply! – just an actor? Whatever he might declare about himself and however he might be considered by the others (viewers and partners)?

Because during the theater performance – whether they pay attention to this or not – the environment (and obviously he himself) knows that the actor who determines himself as someone else is in fact not the person he says he is. He's just an actor that we can sometimes see in another situation. In the street, in the shop, in the office, in the bar – wherever we have the chance to meet him. And in the theater, only the goodwill of his observers (I repeat, spectators and partners) makes the actor's "character" believable. (The history of the ephemeral works of actors also preserves the *actor's name*, not his character. XY what a great Vershinin so-and-so was! And at the end of the performance, the actors might get the applause and not their roles. Although this may not be the case... The actor is always the one who receives criticism.)

In addition, he is an actor only in the theater. He is not an actor in the market. When he is sitting in the dental chair, he is primarily a patient. Not a *bon vivant*.

And then why are the actors struggling so desperately to be the character, the role? Maybe this effort is superfluous? Or maybe they should try differently. Maybe they should care less about the manipulation of the environment.

The actor creates the role, the character to influence his environment. Normally, he is not trying to be Lucifer because he feels a great urge to become Satan, but because he wants to show it to the audience. And if he is lucky and maybe loved, then his environment – as I mentioned before – tries benevolently to please the actor and fulfills the invitation. They accept

the actor's suggestion and watch as if the actor were Lucifer. Or the one he declares to be. While, I repeat, they all know exactly that it's just an actor who declares something about himself.

Because Lucifer, the role, the character, is made up of fictitious conventions that are consciously or unconsciously created in our minds by our thought patterns.

In fact, we as personalities – we are fiction. We've made a lot of (pleasant or uncomfortable) decisions until we've turned out this way, and we try to consolidate ourselves in vain, we're just a process, and we'll stay that way until we die. A constantly changing set of conventions and customs. A change in our environment can occur at any time, turning us into a completely different person, different personality. (On the never-ending self-searching path, maybe the first, most significant milestone is the recognition: I am what cannot be taken away from me. But my personality – as an "artificial" construction – can be taken away. It can be changed. Either by my environment or through my personal decision.)

And if I look from this point of view, then the actor doesn't have to struggle to be Lucifer or any other character. Because he's just an actor who can create reality through fiction.

But how?

I can hardly change the image of my environment about me. And I'm not free from this process either. Our opinion about the others (most often after the first, superficial impression!) turns into such a strong belief that it is very difficult to do away with it or perhaps we can never completely get rid of it. If we are able to form a somewhat different opinion of our fellow human beings, a little signal that strengthens our old, previous convictions is enough for us to declare, well-well, the cat is out of the bag! Still our former conviction is true! And we are surprised that – perhaps people close to us – have a radically different view of the same phenomenon.

Well, this general opinion creating process will be the first step in the search for reality.

If I enter a room and declare that I'm a pilot, there is no real reason for anyone to believe anything else about me. Because I have no real reason to lie about myself. This is a normal process of getting acquainted with someone. (And this is being used successfully by frauds, impostors.)

So, from the point of view of an actor, I don't have to be an imaginary character as I am *someone* anyway. The people around me, as well, form an immediate opinion of me either way based on the first moment and the preliminary images they already have of similar situations and people. Not because they want to do that, but because they *can't* do otherwise. One of the essential functions of our mind is to keep us safe. Thus, it is irrelevant in what kind of situation we find ourselves: our brain tries to identify – previously experienced - similar situations based on previously known patterns, keeping almost all the escape routes “alive.” In case of any danger. Be it physical or spiritual. This is an automatic process that we cannot influence in any way. There is no point in presenting our kindest self, if this kind of kindness and the situation in which we appear to be occur as a negative experience in the preliminary experiences of our viewers. We have no chance of influencing this first encounter because the audience's response does not come from this moment, but from a previous experience that has long been ensconced in their subconscious. What we can do is to shade this view through *personal contact* with the viewer. And that depends largely on us.

This is the most important step in the “creation of reality through fiction.” This connection is really taking place now and is valid only for this moment. In this case, people are really speaking here and now, even when they present a (real or fictional) story from the past. Viewers do not visit a museum, but – possibly - they feel that they are really taking part in the events. They are privileged because this is all for them. To put it more precisely, the actor forms an *actual* connection with the viewer. He greets him. Looks at him. If he asks something from him, he waits for an answer. And he won't continue the performance until the viewer answers. And if he has to (because perhaps the answer he receives does not help him to continue the events), he stops, discusses the options and then continues unfolding the events.

Because the viewer is also a partner, a playfellow. Perhaps the most important one. For the creation of reality proposed by me, the other actor on stage is not enough. In this case, the basis of “authenticity” is only the well-known fellowship between the actors. I pretend to believe that you are the one you declare yourself to be, you pretend to believe me that I am the one I declare myself to be and we both do as if it were okay.

However, the viewer must be convinced. Even if he watches the events unfolding in front of him with the utmost benevolence and he really wants to *believe* what he sees.

But self-deception also has its limits. Differently for everybody.
Because this reality must be established *emotionally*.

I mentioned that at the first encounter the viewer forms an opinion based on a set of (conscious or subconscious) previous experiences. And it happens involuntarily. He creates it without wanting to and unable to avoid its influence. His mind *knows* in vain what is happening in front of his eyes, if he doesn't *feel* that deep inside. Remaining at the already mentioned example of kindness, the viewer knows in vain that the figure before him is kind – if he doesn't feel the same, then the reality suggested by the actor will not be created.

But there's a good chance that it can be created – at least during the performance – through personal connection. If we spend enough time with our fellow human beings, there is a risk that we grow fond of them. We have a chance to get to know them. And this experience is only enhanced if they want to get to know us. If they are curious about our opinion. If we see that our presence affects them. If we feel that we can influence them. Because then we also let ourselves be influenced. A kind of *trust* begins to develop.

The first exercise of the clown studies applied by me is linked with this. In this, the clown comes in, stops in front of the audience, and stands in front of them for at least two minutes and does nothing. But nothing.

He just watches them.

Experience shows that the greater the interest the clown shows towards the audience, the more curiously they turn to him. The more he opens up to the audience, they will show at least the same degree to him.

They strengthen each other.

And finally, a very strong *emotional* link appears between the artist and his audience. Even in such circumstances when the artist has *actually* done nothing.

And this whole thing is based on a lie.

A comes in, declares that he is *B*, and together with the audience they pretend to believe all this. Even though they know exactly that *A* is not *B*, not even for a moment. He is an actor, *A*, who is now playing *B*.

And this is the other important element in the search for reality: the play.

We say this very often, and apparently everyone agrees: the actor is playing.

But does he really do that?

Watching children I find that actors do not play. They are really trying to *achieve*. They want to seem real, even though they are just a *possibility*. (I'm not even going to go into the fact that not only the role is a possibility, but the actor as well. In other circumstances, he could have been a completely different person with the same genetic material!) I see that in this process, the actors are desperately trying to watch out for their role. But what is the role of the actors?

While playing, children fluctuate without interruption between their real identity and their identity in the play. They often warn their playfellows and their surroundings that "we're just playing games." It's not for real. And yet it is so real! Maybe because it's just playing!

Because what happens now? *A* is a man, an actor who says he is now *B*. And that's it. Nothing more. *A* doesn't want to be *B*. *A* knows he is *A*. Because if we call him by his name, he reacts! He wears the costume as a costume and not like his own clothes! He knows exactly that the prop master is behind the set door, who quickly puts the sword into his hands. And what a nonsense: fighting with a sword in the 21st century!

But if all this is just playing, then it seems that the situation is different. We accept it. We shape it together. We introduce new rules for the moment if we have to. We improvise.

Here, not only the actors but also the spectators will be allies.

Because in the end the performance is born within the viewer.

So (to make the above discussion infinitely simpler) I consider these three elements to be important in creating reality through fiction:

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1. It doesn't matter who I want to be, my surroundings will look at me the way they want to;
2. A real connection has to be maintained with the audience;
3. Acting has to be done the way children are acting – by playing.

ANDRÁS HATHÁZI is an actor, director, writer, university professor. He has acted in over 100 theater and film roles and has directed several theater and puppet shows. He has published articles on the actor's art, plays and scenarios in various journals and magazines. Own volumes: *Daniló* (2004), *A heterák tudománya* (2006), *Improvizáció és személyiségfejlesztés* (2007). He had translated into Hungarian David Zinder's book: *Body-Voice-Imagination under the title: Test-Hang-Képzelet* (2009). He has over 50 individual and collective national and international awards and nominations including: *Jászai Mari Prize* (Hungary, 2011), *Gábor Miklós Prize* (Hungary, 2011), *UNITER Prize* (2008, 2014), *Best Actor Award ex aequo at the International Film Festival, Thessaloniki, Greece* (2011), *the Debut Prize at the Romanian Writers Union* (2005), *the Látó Prize for Excellence* (2004), *the Best International Film Festival* (2002), *Prize for artistic and pedagogical excellence awarded by "Babes-Bolyai" University* (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010).