Some Remarks On Sacred Cows: Revisiting Method Technique

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Theater historians often speak of *theories* of acting (Carlson, 1983), although the term tends to shift in meaning across much of their commentary. Theories of broader sweep, as instanced in the writings of Grotowski, Brecht, Craig, Artaud, Chaikin, Lecoq, or Copeau involve alternative theatrical directions, and differ in scope from those about processes necessary for actors to achieve stage reality. For example, propounding a theory of alienation (Brecht's *Verfrem-dungseffek*) does not involve advancing a hypothesis subject to empirical confirmation. It is more akin to introducing a theatrical tradition as a fresh perspective on acting or play production. Theories in this category I propose to call *programmatic* theories. They seek to institute the form a theatrical tradition should take, rather than propounding hypotheses subject to confirmation from the standpoint of truth or falsity.

On the other hand, there are "theories"—including one advanced by Diderot (1959)—that come closer to the meaning of the term honored in the sciences. I propose to call these *process* theories, since they involve causal hunches about certain phenomena, and can be scrutinized from the standpoint of testability. The most publicized polarity within the process-theory rubric is the one between the emotionalist and antiemotionalist theories of acting. The two are in conflict over how much the reality or believability of stage performance depends upon performers experiencing the emotions of characters portrayed. The controversy here involves hypothetically testable claims about whether an actor's feeling certain emotions does or does not enhance performance, or is or is not necessary for great acting.

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Hard and fast distinctions between programmatic and process theories cannot be pressed too far; their independence from each other is not etched forever in stone. After all, even programmatic theories can likewise suggest implicit causal relationships between technique and product. For example, in Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints* approach, as she perceives it freed from a narrower conception of technique celebrated by Stanislavsky and Strasberg, physical and vocal dimensions implicitly subserving the creation of the final stage product are integrated in performance (Bogart and Landau, 2005). Accordingly, even here process-theory type assumptions underpin causal relationships between technique and product.

Bogart's other innovations include a revised conception of the relationship of director to performers, the central importance of ensemble work and a fresh look at what she takes to be the proper approach to emotion on stage. In this, she emphasizes and broadens a theme germinating both in Stanislavsky's later emphasis on the method of physical action (Moore, 1965; Carnicke, 2005) and B. F. Skinner's operant psychological approach in the control of covert emotional states through the physical manipulation of external contingencies of reinforcement (Skinner, 1953). These separate traditions sidestep a direct focus on emotion; it becomes in effect a by-product of physical arrangements in time and space. Bogart holds that in dealing with emotion one cannot go "through the front door to get to paradise." While her interest in emotion has been abiding, it is a directorial focus forsaking, as it were, a "hands on" policy.

Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, published in 1830, decades after its author's death in 1784, is widely considered to be the most historically important formulation of the antiemotionalist position. In it, emotions are relegated to a subordinate or non-existent role in great acting, whereas cognitive functions like intellect or imagination control portrayals. Here, great acting hinges upon the sway of capacities like studious planning, judgment and foresight, while emotional states or passions, exemplified in what Diderot called *sensibilité*, are kept in strict abeyance. Needless to say, Diderot's formulation stands in stark contrast to principles enshrined in the early phase of Stanislavsky's System, and in those of his American counterparts, like Lee Strasberg's Method. Controversies triggered by *Paradoxe*, however, predate the Russian and American contributions (Archer, 1880; Kemble, 1882; Jenkin, 1882; Coquelin, 1887; Boucicault, 1887).

For Diderot, the actor is no longer in the driver's seat when at the mercy of internal feeling states. Open to their influence, performers become encumbered by what the *philosophe* felt to be impulses emanating from the seat of the emotions, the diaphragm. The individual ruled by *sensibilité* can no longer moderate stage action; he or she becomes incapable of processing ongoing information in a collected state of mind, forfeiting the very foundation of the highest artistic accomplishment.

According to *Paradoxe*, the actor under the unruly stamp of emotion will render characterization inconsistent and unpredictable. Because of this, Diderot believed great acting is the capacity to communicate consistently to audiences emotions the performer cannot permit himself or herself to feel, except during "origination" or the rehearsal process (Kreitman, 1973). The "cannot" here marks an inverse relationship between level of achievement and emotional experience. To the extent the actor distances himself or herself from the latter, to that extent was performance for Diderot enriched. When engulfed by the emotions of the character portrayed, the caliber of the artistic product is correspondingly lessened. The irony here is that Method theorists claim that theirs is the set of techniques ensuring consistency across performances, a virtue Diderot insisted was guaranteed only by divesting acting of all emotional components. Another historical irony is that *Paradoxe* in effect reversed dramatically Diderot's earlier position on the defense of passion and emotion in his 1746 *Pensées philosophiques* and 1758 *De la poésie dramatique.*

When Method instructors proclaim that performers in a role are always aware of being on stage, such a realization is born of a cognition that can be distinguished conceptually from whatever feeling states, emotions or passions an actor experiences at the same time. A questionable feature of Diderot's formulation is his insistence that cognitive and affective functions cannot coexist in, as it were, equal time. He perhaps confused a necessary cognitive component of acting with a specialized technique in crafting a role. Maybe this was partially a result of the 18th century metaphysical scheme he was promoting, perhaps not. But states of awareness of being in a role that can be distinguished from its emotional concomitants do not trump or exclude the latter; they only belong to a different category of analysis. In other words, what is fundamentally a necessary dimension of consciousness should not be confused with a particular technique that may or may not be necessary in crafting a theatrical role.

The reliance on internal emotional states or techniques predicated on them in order to craft the most realistically delineated character in a play is the hallmark of the emotionalist approach. Yet it is ironic that there is little systematic or scientific attention given to its claims in the vast literature on acting theory, despite some exceptions (Konijn, 1997). Rather, evidence for the emotionalist position seems to have been confined to anecdotal reports about relevant processes on the part of instructors, students and performers, or reviewed by historians in expository essays about what it preaches or promotes.

To take an example of a more searching approach to acting theory, suppose a researcher were to pose the question, "Is training for the actor necessary?" without prejudging what many consider to be the obvious answer. The research might take the form of a double-blind study in which performance based upon experienced training in techniques like Method acting (experimental group) is systematically compared to that of performers with no training but comparable

stage experience (control group). The result of such an investigation, however momentous the methodological difficulties in conducting it, would have enormous consequences for the importance or redundancy of actors' training.

As a matter of record, negative sentiments have already been voiced concerning the value of teaching acting techniques popularized across the American landscape (Brustein, 1958; Counsell, 1966; Hornby, 1992; Mamet, 1997; 2010). Hollinger (2006) has referenced similar contrary attitudes among several screen actresses. Stars like Jodie Foster labeled acting classes "nonsense," while Susan Sarandon attributes her talents to experience performing in soap operas. Gwyneth Paltrow maintains she acquired her acting skills merely by watching her mother, Blythe Danner, perform. Incongruities among opinions about what many consider necessary to achieve optimal realism in roles is rife in commentary on the subject. For example, Sanford Meisner (Meisner & Longwell, 1987) maintained that accomplished acting takes twenty years to learn, which aptitude is acquired by ongoing instruction.

Other commentary on the virtues of Method instruction are clear about the acting problems this pedagogy is designed to address. In his 1987 treatise on acting, *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method*, Strasberg wrote:

> The actor will say in character, "I don't understand,'" and will therefore pretend not to understand. But a real character who says, "I do not understand," is at that moment actively trying to find out what it is that is being said. Thus, the actor may suggest the *results*, while the character is actually concerned with thinking and discovering what it may possibly mean (p. 108).

The difference here, implies Strasberg, corresponds to the one between the representational and Method approaches to acting. The latter, usually assimilated as the result of studio instruction, is directed toward enabling the actor to "actively try to find out," which skill imbues his or her performance with a reality that "pretending not to understand" (i.e., simulating "not to understand" from the representational point of view) lacks. In implementing this, the goal is not to obliterate the distinction between performance and reality, rendering the former impossible or chaotic. The aim is to facilitate for an audience a projection of "actively trying to find out" that has the stamp of truth, in contrast to its pale facsimile, "pretending to act trying to find out." According to Strasberg, whatever techniques are recruited for this purpose depend uniquely upon the application of Method-oriented exercises instrumental in achieving the desired result.

Of course, such an approach to performance implicitly suggests that "actively trying to find out" as an action can be reliably distinguished from "pretending to act trying to find out" by both instructors and audiences privy to the portrayal in question. The student of the requisite Method technique who

learns and applies it appropriately is said to be capable of successfully replacing the latter lesser accomplishment with the more realistic one. Nonetheless, any scholar tracing the history of controversies over acting technique would be hard pressed to cite instances of when they are resolved by an experimental approach or methodology. One such possible research project might be a study in which suitably designated experts like seasoned Method instructors are asked to sort performances as to level of accomplishment without prior knowledge of the training actors are given, after which resultant judgments are systematically compared. Should there turn out to be substantial inconsistencies among sortings, troubling conclusions would be inevitable. Among these might be that certain ideas central to actor training have little standard meaning or reliability.

Many other questions arise over sundry techniques that actualize performance goals. One of these might be why Method-oriented instruction differs for students in schools sharply divided about ways to capture Stanislavskian ideals. One possible source of the disagreement might be contrasting ideas about what the Russian theorist actually propounded. Constantin Stanislavsky was a theatrical figure who has not been easy to pin down when it comes to clearly formulating what theories of acting he was promulgating at any point in time during his tenure at the Moscow Art Theater. The approaches he developed, collectively called "The System," are often seen as inspiring techniques referred to under the umbrella term "the Method" in America. Yet even this facile identification has been disputed by some who consider the American version a bastardization of the views of the Russian director (Carnicke, 2009). Closer attention to variations in his thinking about acting technique over consecutive stages of his career reveal sharply divided emphases, going from relaxation, sense and affective memory to yoga and the method of physical action

It would appear that Method teachers as a group propound the advantage or superiority of their approach as though disparities among them were not as wide as those between their own diverging techniques and the representational approach. Internecine disagreements among the neo-Stanislavskian fold often seem to be regarded as inconsequential variations among enthusiasts who are nonetheless on the same plate when it comes to broader goals of acting theory. In a notable clash between Method instructors vying for the Stanislavkian mantle, the conflict between Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg is noteworthy. Adler's repudiation of Strasberg's pedagogy took on a heated form: "It will take a hundred years before the harm that man has done to the art of acting can be corrected" (Hay, 1990, p. 359). And there are other documented skirmishes over Method among an elite echelon of its practitioners, including Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Robert Lewis and Elia Kazan (Gray, 1967). These flare-ups, while documented, are less publicized in public eyes. Perhaps this is because promotional campaigns for something called "the Method," as they

seek to establish an approach opposed to representational acting, obscure in-house rumbles that would be stage-front were there no contrarian viewpoint to challenge.

Considering the different ways Method instruction can be imparted from school to school, we might ask whether a given approach within the fold could be the wrong technique for a particular stage reality, or the right exercise for an altogether differing conception of reality. When Coach A's judgment that "I have found technique X is the best way to get an actor to project emotion Y" contrasts with Coach B's pronouncement that "On the contrary; I have found approach Z is the best way to achieve the result," are such disagreements those between different technical means in realizing similar ends, or actually those over contrasting acting goals? Ironically, the issue has never been addressed in a rigorous way. There is no record of a systematic comparison of the judgments of different Method instructors about the same performances. And any resistance to such a research project on their part might be another roadblock to obtaining an answer.

In what Carnicke (2009) describes as the foundation of a technique introduced by Vakhtangov and adopted by Stanislavsky, the actor asks, "What would motivate me to behave in the way that the character does?" The question prompts the performer to "replace the play's circumstance with a personal one." Carnicke goes on to provide examples of this method of substitution:

> (1) Successively change your relationship to an object and treat it accordingly. What if this were a letter from my mother, from a close friend, from Stanislavsky, from a civil war soldier? (2) Pass an object around the room and imagine it to be other than it is. What if this stone were a diamond, radioactive, a carving from ancient Egypt, etc. (p. 221).

The technique has been popularized by other method instructors, like Uta Hagen, who used the term "transference" to denote a procedure that sets the performer on a "path that leads to identification with the character." The latter was realized in her own case by means of tapping personal experiences "in order to make a selection of relevant 'transferences' to those of the character. The difficult journey ended with the creation of a new 'I' " (Hagen, 1991, p. 60). "Personalization" is sometimes the term used to describe the same technique when it is recruited to substitute a person, rather than some other object.

The method of substitution poses problems about a technique requiring a match or correspondence between performers and the characters they portray on stage. Assume an actor is cast in a play in which the character portrayed savors the memory of an orange popsicle. The purpose of the substitution technique is to recruit a sense memory of a taste from the past that would advantage the actor in creating a certain stage reality. However, he or she can only revert to a sense memory of what actually had been savored in the past,

say, that of a grape-flavored popsicle. Accordingly, the method of substitution in this case depends on a memory of a grape-flavored, not orange-flavored item. We have the hunch that this substitution will satisfy the acting challenge; the exchange of "grape" for "orange" will not materially affect the caliber of a finished performance, since we might assume that the former flavor is the functional equivalent of the latter one for the acting challenge posed.

Another way of framing the issue would be to say that if the actor actually had a memory of having tasted an orange-flavored popsicle, the reality of the resultant performance would be the same as it is for the grape-flavor memory. Here we are inclined to assume that "grape = orange" on a sense memory continuum, since the reality on stage of savoring either in memory would be the same for any intended enactment. In other words, the audience would perceive no difference in performance should one flavor be substituted for another in the sense memory exercise.

It goes without saying that all substitutions do not boil down to those on such a simplistic level. They may run a gamut of applications, including Strasberg's student who, acting the role of a person hooked on drugs, recreated from memory sustaining a cold with the nose-sniffing and eye-wiping stigmata of drug dependency. Other examples of sense memory equivalence include "eating mashed potatoes but creating the reality of ice cream; drinking colored tea but creating the reality of whiskey—the smell, taste, burning in the throat; taking a sugar pill but creating the taste, smell and subsequent pains in the stomach of poison; or handling glass jewelry as if holding precious stones and not worthless junk" (Hull, 1985, p. 42)—and so on.

When the method of substitution is used in connection with more significant emotions dependent upon affective or sense memory, falling back on presumed functional equivalencies may raise questions about the technique. As an example, suppose an actor is in a scene in which the character mourns the death of a brother. Should the actor in question have no brother, the director might suggest that the affective memory to be relied on involve the death of a close relative, like a parent, sister or cousin whose passing the performer likewise grieved. The director in question might assume that a functional equivalence for the purpose of conveying emotion on stage is "brother" = "mother/father/sister/cousin." And it would be correct to so assume so, *should a hypothetical audience fail to discriminate among a substituted range of presumed equivalencies.* In other words, it is taken for granted that were the actor to substitute "mother" for "brother," no informed theatergoer would sense a performance dissonance when the actor expresses emotion that is mother-sourced rather than brother-sourced. This may be because the remembered emotion of grieving can straddle contrasting objects that are its sources. Thus, grieving for a dead brother can, as far as emotional reality is concerned, be substituted for grieving for a deceased mother. Naturally, the permutations for simulated grieving for the departed are not limited to persons actually deceased

in a performer's personal life. Should the actor have no brother *nor* deceased parent or relative, the substitution necessary for the reality of a role could conceivably involve the imagined death of a loved one who is still living, or even a pet. But in such cases, it may be gratuitous to assume that in using the substitution technique there are no differences in performance between enacted grieving relying on the memory of an actually deceased parent and a parent, who, while not deceased, is imagined to be so.

In the 1964 Actor's Studio production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* directed by Strasberg, the actor Kevin McCarthy, who played Vershinin, noticed that his co-performer Kim Stanley, who was playing Masha, had struck out the name "Vershinin" in her script, substituting "Father" for it. The actress had a less than loving and more turbulent relationship with her own father and was making use of the substitution to enrich her relationship to the character played by McCarthy (Krampner, 2006). Had the emotional impact of Stanley's portrayal exceeded the demands of the Chekhov script (we do not assume that such was actually the case), the substitution involved would have resulted in an emotional overreach. This possibility underscores certain problems in the use of substitution, particularly when issues arise over the likelihood of misplaced substitutes for which either exaggerated or underemphasized realities are the result.

There is no mention in the vast literature on Method instruction of those points at which assumed equivalencies break down or resist being established using the method of substitution. In general, major affective states like grief, fear, surprise, hatred, anxiety, disappointment, puzzlement, shock and the like tend to be viewed by instructors as categories of emotion for which countless different originating sources can be put to ersatz use in order to achieve the requisite stage reality. The irony here is that Method instructors claim to be able to discern the difference between an accomplished use of affective memory and "indicated" or "represented" emotions. Such differences are regarded as obvious (although the issue has likewise never been properly researched incorporating the aforementioned double-blind methodology). On the other hand, there seems to have been little or no discussion of incongruous substitutions in which the source of portrayed emotion in the actor contrasts dramatically with the cause of a mental state in the character. Thus, when enacted emotion achieves a requisite level of reality, it is assumed its sources may vary substantially for actor and character without any imagined loss to the integrity of performance. It is as though instructors were mindful of the caliber of staged emotion created by a particular technique, but inattentive to the disparity between its sources in real and dramatized life that are out of whack with each other.

Gordon (2000) for one displays the insouciance that by now is routine for Method instructors. In referring to an actress playing Ophelia in Act III, scene 1 of *Hamlet* at the point she gives her former lover back the letters he sent to

her, Gordon takes up the issue of substitution in an actress who perhaps "never had a significant other that [she]…felt particularly special about." Maybe she really didn't "really know what love is "(p. 139). Despite this, could the actress "approach the actor playing Hamlet as if you were dealing with your mother under similar circumstances?" (p.139). And Gordon's response is a resounding:

> Of course! It isn't difficult. You simply *endow* the actor with those attributes you found in someone special. Once you develop the habit of substitution, the choices begin to come to you rather quickly, and you commit to the give-and-take of the scene without missing a beat (Gordon, p. 139).

Gordon implies that from an audience point of view there would be no visible difference between dealing with Hamlet and with one's mother as far as emotional analogues are concerned. When Vakhtangov (1955) declared that it was essential for actors to live their own temperaments on the stage and not from a conceived image of the character, either he was unmindful of differences that might register in emotionally reacting to one's mother versus reacting to the Prince of Denmark *or* was taking it for granted that there were no salient differences between the two reactions when it came to realistically crafting a role. But what if his assumption were false? That is, what if hypothetical audiences *could* discern a difference in cases in which the method of substitution embraced complex emotions that were far apart when it came to the performer's personal life and that of a character?

What makes discussions of the use of substitution even more paradoxical is that there is a wide divergence among performers in the way they come to express common emotions. During a scene in which a character is overcome by anxiety, one actor using the method of substitution might become agitated or hyperkinetic, whereas another might tremble, cower or seek distance from others. Accordingly, the "reality" of such performances does not seem to depend upon agreed on commonalities in sundry ways of expressing emotion, but on the mastery of a technique, whatever the topography of ensuing physical realizations.

Cases of substitution can be viewed as containing two possible pitfalls: (1) instances in which the substituted, more personally-sourced emotion is incongruous with that of the character portrayed, and (2) instances in which the substituted emotion is an appropriate one, although either too exaggerated or scaled down in magnitude for the character portrayed. In any case, the court of last resort in determining such matters would be audience reaction, although who and what constitutes or defines an "audience" may be a sizable problem in its own right.

In summary, considering the approach in Method instruction to emotion, believability of performance, the necessity of actor training, resolving disagreements over performance caliber among seasoned practitioners and the

use of the method of substitution, a consequential yet barely visible theme fairly cries out for elucidation. How can proponents of acting theories support their ideas systematically, other than by merely promulgating them or through bandwagon effects around which fans clamor ardently? All too often, today's influential approach becomes yesterday's forsaken darling, while the ever-changing face of acting-theory is perhaps the only lesson history guarantees.

The foregoing remarks are not meant to highlight the falsity of assumptions underlying certain Method techniques (nor the techniques of any other system of training). It's only to maintain that their truth cannot be taken for granted prior to systematic study as provided by the relevant research. If this threatens to become the dreadful prospect of a "science of acting-theory" in the minds of misty-eyed proponents of this or that system of actor training, so be it.

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