

# INTRODUCTION

Acting is a mystery, and so is theatre. We assemble in a space and divide into two parts, one of which enacts stories for the remainder. We know of no society where this ritual never happens, so it appears that humanity has a profound need to witness acted-out representations, from television soap opera to Greek Tragedy.

A theatre is not only a literal place, but also a space where we dream together; not merely a building, but a space that is both imaginative and collective. Theatre provides a safe frame within which we can explore dangerous extremities in the comfort of fantasy and the reassurance of a group. If every auditorium were razed to the ground, theatre would still survive, because the hunger in each of us to act and be acted to, is genetic. This intense hunger even crosses the threshold of sleep. For we direct, perform and witness performances every night – theatre cannot die before the last dream has been dreamt.

## **‘I am therefore I act’**

A baby is born not only with an expectation of ‘mother’ and ‘language’, but also with an anticipation of ‘acting’; the child is genetically prepared to copy behaviours that it will witness. The first theatrical performance a baby enjoys is when its mother acts out appearing and disappearing behind a pillow. *‘Now you see me; now you don’t!’* The baby gurgles away, learning that this most painful event, separation from the mother, might be prepared for and dealt with comically, theatrically. The baby learns to laugh at an appalling separation, because it isn’t real. Mummy reappears

and laughs – this time, at least. After a while the child will learn to be the performer, with the parent as audience, playing peek-a-boo behind the sofa; and eventually the game will evolve into the more sophisticated ‘hide and seek’, with multiple performers, and even a winner. Eating, walking, talking, all are developed by observation, performance and applause. We develop our sense of self by practising roles we see our parents play and expand our identities further by copying characters we see played by elder brothers, sisters, friends, rivals, teachers, enemies or heroes. You cannot teach children how to act out situations, precisely because they already do – they wouldn’t be human if they didn’t. Indeed, we live by acting roles, be it father, mother, teacher or friend. Acting is a reflex, a mechanism for development and survival. This primitive instinct to act is the basis of what is meant by ‘acting’ in this book. It is not ‘second nature’, it is ‘first nature’ and so cannot be taught like chemistry or scuba diving. So, if acting in itself cannot be taught, how can we develop or train our ability to act?

### Attention

Our quality of acting develops and trains itself when we simply pay it attention. In fact, all we can be ‘taught’ about acting are double negatives. For example, we can be taught how *not* to block our natural instinct to act, just as we can be taught how *not* to block our natural instinct to breathe. Of course we can learn a multitude of stylised developments of our natural reflexes. The Noh actor in Japan may take decades to perfect a single gesture, as the ballerina will sweat years developing feats of muscular control. But all the Noh master’s

virtuosity will go for little if his ornate technique reveals nothing but ornate technique. This highly controlled art must appear, in some way, spontaneous. Those who appreciate this specialised form can discern the flicker of alertness that quickens each ancient gesture. The difference in quality between one performance and another is not in technique alone, but in the surge of life that makes that technique seem invisible; the years of training must seem to evaporate in the heat of life. Truly great technique has the generosity to vanish and take no credit.

Even the most stylised art is about life, and the more life there is present in a work of art, the greater the quality of that art. Life is mysterious and transcends logic, so the living thing can never be fully analysed, taught or learned. But those things that apparently cut out life, or seem to conceal or block it, are not nearly so mysterious as they pretend. These ‘things’ are bound by logic and may be analysed, isolated and destroyed. The doctor may explain why the patient is dead, but never why the patient is alive.

Therefore this is not a book about how to act; this is a book that may help when you feel blocked in your acting.

### Two provisos

It is not easy to write about acting. Acting is an art, and art reveals the uniqueness of things. Talking about acting is hard, because ‘talking about’ tends to make us generalise and generalisation conceals the uniqueness of things. Good acting is always specific.

There is also a problem here with vocabulary. The words ‘actor’ and ‘acting’ are devalued. For example,

we say that people are ‘putting on an act’ when we mean that they are lying about themselves. The word ‘acting’ is often used as a synonym for ‘lying’. Plato argued that there was no difference between acting and lying, and roundly condemned the theatre. Diderot’s *Paradox of the Actor* asks how we can speak of truth in performance, which of its very nature is a lie.

### Emotion and truth

But we can never fully tell the truth about what we feel. Indeed, the more we feel, the more useless will be the words we find to express ourselves. The question ‘*How are you?*’ becomes increasingly banal the more the relationship matters; the words work reasonably well to greet the postman as he delivers a package, but are woefully inadequate to a friend with cancer.

There will always be a gap between what we feel and our ability to express what we feel. The more we wish for the gap to be smaller, and the more we want to tell ‘the truth’, then the wider this perverse gap yawns. We act constantly, not because we are purposely lying, but because we have no choice. Living well means acting well. Every moment in our lives is a tiny theatrical performance. Even our most intimate moments have a public of at least one: ourselves.

At times of crisis this inability to express ourselves causes great pain. Adolescence can be a journey through hell when we feel completely misunderstood; ‘first love’ seems unalloyed bliss only in nostalgia. We are tormented not only by the spectre of rejection, but also by the creeping hopelessness that we will never be able to express what we feel. The emotions are turbulent, the stakes seem impossibly high: ‘*Nobody understands*

*what I am going through. And what’s worse, I just hear myself spouting the same old clichés other people use.*’

As adolescents, we discover that the more we want to tell the truth, the more our words lie. But to mature, we must get on with the humble process of performing, because acting is all we can do. Acting is the nearest we get to the truth.

We do not know who we are. But we know that we can act. We know that there is a greater or lesser quality to our performances as student, teacher, friend, daughter, father or lover. We are the people we act, but we have to act them well, and with a deepening sense of whether our performances are ‘truthful’ or not. But truthful to what? The real me inside? To others? Truthful to what I feel, want, ought to be? The question marks hang with the observation that the above and all the following are not necessarily true, but may prove useful.

### Block

Rather than claim that ‘x’ is a more talented actor than ‘y’, it is more accurate to say that ‘x’ is less blocked than ‘y’. The talent is already pumping away, like the circulation of the blood. We just have to dissolve the clot.

Whenever we feel blocked the symptoms are remarkably similar, whatever the country, whatever the context. Two aspects of this state seem particularly deadly: the first is that the more the actor tries to force, squeeze and push out of this cul-de-sac, the worse ‘it’ seems to get, like a face squashed against glass. Second is the accompanying sense of isolation. Of course, the problem can be projected out, and ‘it’ becomes the ‘fault’ of

script, or partner, or even your shoes. But the two basic symptoms recur, namely paralysis and isolation – an inner locking and an outer locking. And, at worst, an overwhelming awareness of being alone, a creeping sense of being both responsible and powerless, unworthy and angry, too small, too big, too cautious, too . . . *me*.

When acting flows, it is alive, and so cannot be analysed; but problems in acting are connected to structure and control, and these can be isolated and disabled.

### Other sources of block

Many different problems arise in rehearsal and performance that can damage acting. The room may be ill lit, badly ventilated, echoey or cold. More significantly, there may be a difficult atmosphere in the group, or a bad relationship with the director or writer. External problems over which the actor may have little control can also coagulate the work; but circumstantial difficulties will not be dealt with here.

When things go wrong we must distinguish between what we can change and what we cannot change. We also have to divide the problem into two parts: first, the part that comes from outside, over which we may have little or no control, and secondly, the part which comes from inside, over which we can learn to have increasing control. This book only addresses that second part.

All serious acting problems are interconnected, so interdependent that they seem to be just one huge rock cut into blinding facets by a demonic jeweller. To define the stone by describing its facets is misleading because each facet only makes sense in the context of all

the others. Therefore much of what is said at the beginning of this book will make little sense till the end.

### A map

This book is like a map. Like all maps, it is a lie, or rather, a lie trying to tell a useful story. A metro map bears no resemblance to the city street system and will mislead the pedestrian, but it will help you if you want to change trains. And as with many maps, it takes some familiarity to help you find your way.

So before we continue it will help to revisit some basic terms.

### Rehearsal

Broadly speaking, we can divide the work of the actor into two parts, rehearsal and performance. More controversially we can also divide the mind of a human being into the conscious and the unconscious. The rehearsal and the unconscious have certain things in common. Both are normally unseen, but both are essential. They are, in their different ways, the four-fifths of the iceberg that are concealed. On the other hand, like the tip of the iceberg, the performance and the conscious are both seen. We can easily see the tip of the iceberg, but we need wisdom to infer the other four-fifths.

However, this book makes a slightly different division: here the actor's work will be divided into the visible work and the invisible work. In fact actors normally work to a similar division; but then this is just a new map to make an ancient landscape clearer. We can begin with some features:

1. All the actor's research is part of the invisible work, while the performance is part of the visible work.
2. The audience must never see the invisible work.
3. The rehearsal comprises all the invisible work and passages of visible work.
4. The performance consists only of the visible work.

### The senses

The actor's flow depends on two specific functions of the body: the senses and the imagination.

We are completely dependent on our senses. They are the first antennae that detect the outside world. We see, touch, taste, smell and hear that we are not alone. As tortures go, sense deprivation is theatrically weak but surprisingly efficient. When the stakes rise our senses become more acute. The interface between our bodies and the outside world becomes more sensitive and intense. We recall exactly the place where we heard astonishing news – no wonder that so many remember not only when but also where they heard that President Kennedy had been shot.

Three remarks may help here: first, it is dangerous to take our senses for granted. Occasional meditations on blindness and other sensory loss are nearly as life-affirming as the regular contemplation of death. Secondly, the actor's senses will never absorb as much in performance as the character absorbs in the real situation. In other words the actor will never see the asp as acutely as Cleopatra herself. Finally, this graceful acceptance of inevitable failure is an exhilarating release for the artist. That we will never get there is an excellent starting point; perfectionism is only a vanity. The actor

needs to accept the senses' limitations in order for the imagination to run free. The actor relies utterly on the senses; they are the first stage in our communication with the world. The imagination is the second.

### Imagination

The imagination, the senses and the body are interdependent. The imagination is the capacity to make images. Our imaginations make us human and they toil every millisecond of our lives. Only the imagination can interpret what our senses relay to our bodies. It is imagination that enables us to perceive. Effectively, nothing in the world exists for us until we perceive it. Our capacity to imagine is both imperfect and glorious, and only the paying of attention can improve it.

The imagination may be mocked as reality's understudy: '*That child has an over-active imagination*' or '*You're just imagining things!*' However, it is only imagination that can connect us to reality. Without our ability to make images we would have no means of accessing the outside world. The senses crowd the brain with sensations, the imagination sweats both to organise these sensations as images and also to perceive meaning in these images. We forge the world within our heads, but what we perceive can never be the real world; it is always an imaginative re-creation.

The imagination is not a fragile piece of porcelain, but rather a muscle that develops itself only when properly used. It was an eighteenth-century view that the imagination was an abyss that might swallow the unwary, and this mistrust persists; but to shut down the imagination, even if possible, would be like refusing to breathe for fear of catching pneumonia.

### The dark

Everything we see in the outside world is manufactured in our heads. We do not develop the imagination by forcing it into prodigious and self-conscious feats of creativity; we develop our imaginations by observation and attention. We develop the imagination when we use it and pay attention; the imagination improves itself when we simply see things as they are. But seeing things is not so easy sometimes, particularly when it is dark. How then can we light up the darkness? Actually there is no such thing as the dark; there is merely an absence of light. But what could be casting this shadow over everything I see? There is a clue. If I examine this darkness I will see that it has a familiar outline. It has exactly the same shape as . . . me. We make darkness by getting in the way of the light. In other words we can only nourish our imaginations by not getting in the way; the less we darken the world, the clearer we see it.