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Theatrical Emotion: a Less Noble Approach

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Imagine that you have two options of comparing THE MODERN actor, either to an airplane, or to a perfume-bottle. Where the airplane is a symbol of rationality, enlightenment, science, efficiency and reason. And where the perfume-bottle is a symbol of desire, longing, craving, affect, dreams, appearance and surface. The modern actor as either a fast and fierce airplane, or, a nice smelling, nice looking perfume bottle!

Let’s look at these two options a bit closer!

Comparing the story of modern acting to the story of modernity, at least as far as the Swedish acting climate is concerned; I have noticed a similar pattern. There is a main story, and I will call it the noble approach. There is also a marginalized story, and I will call it the less noble approach.

The main story of modernity, where modernity is that historic epoch when the human became its own authority, its own master, when change and breaking with continuity was embraced, is a story of modernity which captures the modernity of the airplane, of: rationality, enlightenment, science, efficiency and reason. But not quite the perfume-bottle of: desire, longing, craving, affect, dreams, appearance and surface.

Now, in this traditional story of modernity, it is the man who plays the main role, the woman on her part is placed outside of modernity, she doesn’t have a role but she has a function in that she is an outsider – somebody outside of time, space and development. Either a threat of regression, standing in the way, or else, a promise of something lost, a momentary way out, none of which grants her agency. She is the perfume-bottle, a passive object and not an active subject.

In The Siren’s Song, which the outline of this presentation is indebted to this far, the famous Swedish journalist and academic scholar Nina Björk takes on the mission of writing woman in to the story of modernity. That is, the modernity of the perfume-bottle, an object in relation to whom woman can become a subject. In order to see woman’s change and development other aspects of modernity than the usual has to be the focus. One has to shift the attention from the “usefulness” of production to the “uselessness” of consumption – to shopping– one of the major activities that allowed women to enter into public space, which is a way of examining modernity that Björk has borrowed from Rita Felski’s The Gender of Modernity.

What happens then if we use this pattern of the main story of modernity and the marginalized story of modernity, of the airplane and the perfume-bottle, the “usefulness” of production and the “uselessness” of consumption as an interpretative tool and apply it to the whereabouts of the transformation in to modern acting, the becoming of the modern actor, as a hierarchical opposition between a noble approach and a less noble approach?

The main story of modern acting, the noble approach, which by today has become the norm, is very much about erecting a production side of acting, of becoming rational while creating, of incorporating modernist concepts like the individual, the autonomous subject with a will and translating it into acting.
terminology and practice. It is about efficient methods of building the airplane of acting.

The father of modern acting Constantin Stanislavsky was the first to do this. Stanislavsky modeled his thinking about acting after the science of the day and in inventing a systematic approach to creating a role he came up with the concept of action, or physical actions as it is usually referred to as. By our time action has become the normative approach, a stand in for reason, and of sort our airplane of acting.

But before moving on to the present time, I would like to mention a few more of the modern makers of theatre, speaking to Robert Leach and his Makers of Modern Theatre where he introduces Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud. Where it can be put to the record that both Meyerhold and Brecht, just like Stanislavsky did, followed the logic of the airplane. While Artaud was more like the typical dandy-appropriating the perfume-bottle as a means to protest against the airplane ideal!

With this airplane type of acting, where action becomes the usual approach to character work, functioning as a kind of acting norm – the makers of modern theatre left the passions of rhetorical acting behind, following the manners of how Stanislavsky went on from his first phase of investigation where emotion was an important part into a second phase where the focus was fully on the exploration of physical action.

Which not only brings us to the marginalized story of modern acting, the less noble approach- equaling emotion- but also to the present time and that which has become of the inheritance of the airplane acting conceived by the bulk of our modern makers of theatre.

Just like “woman” in the main story of modernity emotion has no role in the main story of modern acting, as it is carried out by practitioners in Sweden today, but is rather - a function. Emotion has no role in the sense that it is perceived as useless in the technical work on a role, which will show in the examples coming up. Instead emotion is placed outside of modern acting, becoming a function, in that emotion is considered to be for the audience/for the consumers of theatre and not for the actor/producer, which will become clear in the examples as well.

Placed outside the modern acting of today, it, in the very same way as in the main story of modernity only shifting from “woman” to emotion, is perceived as either a threat or a promise.

As a threat: in relation to an airplane frame of mind, emotion awakens a fear of regression back to an earlier stage of acting conventions, sometimes referred to as rhetorical acting and/or sometimes as classical acting, conventions that with some significant modifications during the 18th century and so smaller ones throughout lasted all the way from classical time up until the birth of modern acting during the 20th century.

A quick glance at the heart of classical acting shows what Joseph R. Roach calls the dominance of the player’s passion. That is emotion, affect. Also, when the Danish scholar Svend Christiansen attempts to locate stable conventions of classical acting in the period from 1700-1900 he claims the portrayal of affect to be the centre of these stable conventions.

In addition, emotion is a threat in a different way as well. In Roach study of The Player’s Passion he demonstrates the close connection between the coming of new scientific paradigms and the changing conventions of western acting traditions. Throughout the early paradigms the interplay between the player’s passion and scientific answers was compatible. But in the scientific paradigm of modernity, and
this is entirely my claim and not at all anticipated by Roach, there is the othering of “woman”. Since emotion according to the various conceptive myth’s on woman’s nature, thoroughly discussed by Nancy Tuana in The Less Noble Sex where she cross examine the overlap of beliefs between science, religion and philosophy- emotion is part of woman’s nature, it has female connotations and is a sign of inferiority.

So, one important point is that along with this passionate past of acting comes the branding of acting and actors as womanly, as a female artform.\(^5\)

As we have learned from the main story of modernity, the leading role is a he, and that he is to be a producer. Then, how to solve this if acting is perceived as a she, associated with consumption? In order to avoid any blurring of boundaries between the actor as an object of consumption, a perfume-bottle, an emoting she, and, the actor as a rational producer, there has simply been no other way then to do away with emotion, the number one threat of airplane acting. Even more so today then during the time of the modern makers of theatre!

But, placed outside of modern acting emotion is not only a threat, it is also a promise, of the more passionate past, as well as a way out, an escape in to those mysterious inner resources, those private internal chords emotions are commonly believed to be, that you can not control, that are out of direct reach, that are of no reliance, that are strictly personal and as such no part of an actor’s technical work of creating a role and therefore never to be more than a gifted promise followed by a question mark.\(^7\) Indeed very much like the woman who has to die at the end of the movie/the novel/the play, in certainty treated as a dead end all along!

Thus, in modern acting, as it is expressed in the Swedish context, emotion is treated more like a threat than a promise.

Then finally let look at a few examples chosen from some recent dissertations on Swedish acting practice, where the rational actions of the airplane are reproduced as noble and the emotions of the perfume-bottle are reproduced as less noble, consequently disposing the hierarchically organized divide between action and emotion.

The experienced Swedish actor, director Leif Sundberg has in the book Theatre Language. Words and Concepts in the Practical Work collected more than 600 words and concepts which together, he claims, make up the core terminology at use in the Swedish theatre today, a study that was produced as part of the working group for artistic development a collaboration between academics and artistic practitioners at the Dramatic Institute, The Södertörn Collage and the Academy of Dramatic Arts, all located in Stockholm.

In Theatre Language he writes: “To feel or feeling and thereof closely related words and expressions are more useable outside than inside the walls of theatre. They belong to a higher degree to the onlookers than to the actors”(Sundberg, p. 91). Sundberg continues: “Feeling is born from the experience of action. That is why the actor during the work sometimes can speak about the sensitivity of the character or a feeling moment, level in the acting sequence or refer to a character’s emotional memory. The feeling is the consequence of an action, not it’s beginning. In the practical work language words like experience and experiencing are being used instead of feel or feeling in order to describe the actions that in the onlooker, the audience shall create emotions”(Sundberg, p.92) (My translation from Swedish).

Another example. In his doctoral dissertation The Actor in Action, in which he elaborates on the concept of theatrical action as a means to develop the Stanislavskij originated term further, the teacher expert of physical performance skills At the Malmö Theatre Academy Kent Sjöström explains: “There is a reason why I want to
accentuate the discussion of bodily action and it’s relation to feeling. I dare to believe that the public belief about what an actor’s work consist of is that it is more anchored in feeling than I have described here”(Sjöström, p. 186) (My translation).

To counter this public belief Sjöström quotes the senior Bergman actor Max von Sydow’s opinion, who claims that feeling and emotion is “romantic mumbo jumbo” and as von Sydow puts it: “Instead it is the will, the direction of the character that is important. What does he want? What is he striving for? What is his goal”(Sjöström, p.185) (My translation)!

Also Anders Järleby, a Swedish actor, director and teacher, give witness to the focus of action over feeling in the Swedish acting climate. In his dissertation From Apprentice to Acting Student. The Actors Basic Education, where he aims to describe the rise of the modern actor’s education covering the period from 1964 up to the 21st century, Järleby makes the point: “Despite of the fact that one can not prove that neither Brecht nor Stanislavskij were against the training of actors explicit emotion, I want to point out, that in the educational legacy these two left behind in Sweden, here teachers of acting prefer to refrain altogether from speaking about emotion. Most teachers I have talked to don’t want to speak about explicit exercises on feeling and emotion in their teachings. Their model is to find efficient actions that evoke the personal feeling to a scenic expression”(Järleby, p. 250) (My translation).

At last, in the final example taken from Action Reconsidered. Cognitive Aspects of the Relation between Script and Scenic Action by the Swedish scholar and teacher at the Malmö Theatre Academy Erik Rynell, he argues for the central position of action contrasting action based drama and acting with drama and acting without action (read postdramatic theatre in the footsteps of alternative theatre from the early modernism onwards) where he takes new findings within cognitive science that challenge established ideas about man and mind and applies them onto the actor’s process in order to present new openings, like situated action and embodied action.

Remarkably enough he does this without ever referring to any feminist theory on the subject. More so, despite both hermeneutic and phenomenological attachments Rynell reconsiders action to be of a neutral past. Thus, in Rynell’s reconsideration of action there is, once again, absolutely no consideration of emotion as useful and as such Rynell writes: “acting is considerably more complex than the question it is frequently reduced to: the one of applying or not applying empathic emotionality at the moment of performance”(Rynell, p. 28).

And what is this complexity that Rynell is referring to if not the complexity of the airplane, of action, an approach who’s superiority is closely linked to the reiterating of the inferiority of the perfume-bottle, of the less noble approach - of emotion, for it’s validity claim? Emotion on the other hand is left out of this complexity – partially as we have seen because of the promise of too much complexity!

So on the one hand, agreeing with Rynell about the complexity of the acting process, I believe on the other hand, that it is important to understand the relation between the two, between action and emotion, between the production and the consumption side, between the airplane and the perfume-bottle. I believe an actor should be both an airplane and a perfume-bottle. I believe emotion ought not to be constructed as an outside, as threat or an untamed promise and for there to be no divide between a noble approach and a less noble approach. I believe emotion needs to be written in to the story of modern acting, but not as a promise of the passionate past or way out, an escape in to a messy privacy. No, rather like an upheaval of thought, speaking to Martha Nussbaum, or a cultural politics of emotion, speaking to
Sara Ahmed. In order to ennoble emotion as an approach of acting we need to let emotion out of the private, and when this happens I think, in a balance with action, emotion is the future of modern acting.

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1 Not to make things unnecessarily complicated, having in mind the debate of the origins of modernism, I date the breakthrough of modern acting to the first half of the 1900, to first and foremost Stanislavski, but also to some of his contemporaries.

2 It is important to point out that this is a study of predominant acting practice in Sweden, using Swedish examples, which may or may not be applicable to modern acting practices elsewhere in the world.

3 Compare Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where they attempt to write the primal story of modern identity.

4 Where I would like to make a reference to Jonathan Pitches *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*.

5 Mainstream acting is still very much a product of the inheritance after the main makers. In *The Purpose of Playing* Robert Gordon talk about 6 major approaches to modern acting, a few of these approaches described by Gordon are not included in my argument, since they are not part of mainstream acting and moreover have had minor impact on the Swedish acting tradition.

6 A branding that the Swedish scholar Ulrika von Schantz touches upon in her doctoral thesis *Myth, Power, Meeting. About a Gendercultural Rootsystem Contemplated through Actor’s Education*.

7 Unless you are a method actor, but there are not really any of those in Sweden. Within the main story of modern acting Method Acting would be THE sophisticated promise, yet definitely a dead end.