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Feel For Acting: A Summary

Having emotions or doing emotions?

During the Enlightenment, there was a significant debate taking place in the French theatre about whether or not the actor should actually feel the emotion that is to be expressed or not. In other words, the debate was over involvement versus detachment. Two leading actresses – Hippolyte Clairon and Marie Françoise Dumesnil at the Comédie Française – served as opposite examples of these two sides. In relation to emotional display, Clairon was calculative while Dumesnil was intuitive. At the center of the debate stood the philosopher Denis Diderot – the author of *Encyclopédie* – who in his treatise *Paradox of the Actor* from 1773 argued against experiencing the emotion and instead promoted a rational approach to expressing feelings. Since then, the question at hand has frequently been pondered upon among theorists of the theatre as well as by actors and various other interested persons – and it has become a core dividing subject in the theatre and in acting circles of the western world.

In this thesis I argue that it is time to move the focus away from the issue of the actor either feeling or not feeling the emotion that is to be portrayed, from pitting warm against cold performance, because this is an outdated paradigm based on scientific findings that have been replaced by more recent discoveries. What is presently at stake is something utterly different; and it is a question of *having* versus *doing* emotions.

Modern society at large still follows the common assumption stemming from ideas associated with the Enlightenment, that a human being has emotions inside him- or herself – whether they are conscious of them or not – that can be accessed from the inside-out or from the outside-in. In terms of the actor, she or he is expected to evoke these inner states using one or the other of these two courses and to project them outwards for an audience to pick up on. I call this a *possessive* acting model. Furthermore, I argue that the assumption of *having* emotions underpins the realist tradition based on the popularized aspects of Stanislavski's system for actor training that was established in the middle of the twentieth century.

However, this assumption about emotions as something that humans *have* has been challenged, first by Michel Foucault who questioned the idea of an interior life centered around an authentic soul or a spirit, and later by many others who were inspired by him and who developed the implications of his critique in various directions. As part of what is usually referred to as the “performative turn”, many scholars have shifted their focus away from the “nature” of objects, subjects, and phenomena – in other words, what they *are* – and have begun to focus instead on what they *do*. Judith Butler talks about how we “do” gender and sex, and Sara Ahmed talks about doing emotions as opposed to having emotions. Drawing primarily on Ahmed's theory, I propose in this thesis a *situated* acting model to replace the *possessive* model. The situated model is founded on the idea that emotion is something that actors *do*. Because the actor is someone who uses actions to depict a story, which Aristotle claimed is what distinguishes the dramatic form, the actor is a doer. Starting from this point of view, I am suggesting that the actor “does” emotions as well.

Aim, research questions, material, and method

To do feelings is a process that is based on so-called tacit knowing, that is, what one knows in practice but has a hard time articulating in words. Thus, in this study I am going to address such matters that usually remain unspoken.

Applying a gender perspective, the purpose of this study is to examine how actors in modern times do emotions, but also to identify the turning points in

terms of how they have been done historically and to look for new cornerstones of understanding to start building future theories around. The following research questions are asked in this thesis. How is the actor doing emotions? Are emotions done in one or several ways? How is the doing of emotions related to action? Is it possible to talk about a collaboration between the two? If that is the case, how is that interplay expressing itself? Is there a difference between doing emotions during rehearsal and doing emotions during performance? And finally, in what ways are gendered conceptions influencing an actor's doing of emotions?

For the material in focus in this thesis, I take both a contextualizing and a theoretic perspective. The contextualizing perspective places the actor's doing of emotion in a historic context. The theoretic perspective concentrates on how performing emotions is realized in practice and proceeds from an analysis of two contemporary Swedish examples: the actresses Lena Endre in the role of Lady Macbeth at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in a 2006 production of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Mia Skäringer in her stage show *Horny as Hell and Really Holy* from 2010. In exploring this material, a combination of Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" and Paul Stoller's "sensuous scholarship" is applied.

Outline

The first half of *chapter one* introduces and defines the basic scoop of the study, and the second half of the chapter focuses on the major concepts and ideas of the modern acting tradition. *Chapter two* explores emotion as a form of symbolic expression and provides a brief history of emotional portrayal. Here, particular emphasis is placed on the actor's depiction of crying. Starting from Denis Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*, chapter three discusses vulnerability and the intentionality of the actor. *Chapter four* uses the example of Lena Endre's performance of Lady Macbeth to rethink the embodied process of building a character by taking into account the notion of an actor's "devotion", which in turn touches on the more painful sides to playing a stage role. *Chapter five* analyzes the idea of doing feeling as an emotional surface using the example of Mia Skäringer in her stage show *Horny as Hell and Really Holy*, in which she uses her experiencing body to stage her own story about being and becoming a woman. *Chapter six* puts forward the situated acting model partially in dialogue with

Antonin Artaud, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari and partially through a further exploration of the two examples of Lena Endre and Mia Skäringer.

In this thesis I propose that emotions are done in three different ways. First, they are done symbolically as an expression, which is described in chapter two. Second, they are done phenomenologically, which is covered in chapters three and four. The interaction between the symbolic and the phenomenological ways of doing emotion is analyzed in chapter five. Third, they are done as a becoming, which is presented in chapter six.

Theory

A synthetic theoretical approach is employed that is set on a phenomenological foundation in combination with theories of emotion and affect as well as gender theory and theatre theory. The discussion is informed by Michael Polanyi to gain an understanding of tacit knowledge and the role of kinesthesia; by Simone de Beauvoir to establish a perspective on the body as a situation; by Sara Ahmed to see the potential for a cultural politics of emotion and a queer view of intentionality; by Erika Fischer-Lichte to make use of her concepts of “feedback loop” and “perceptual multistability”; by Bert O. States to see how phenomenology and semiotics can be joined in a binocular vision; by Alice Rayner to learn about the three dimensions of action: to act, to do, and to perform; by Karen Barad to get a rare perspective on touch, “respons-ability”, and “respons-ibility”; and by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to propose a way of looking at the human being as *of* the world as opposed to *in* the world. Interpretations of a few of Gilles Deleuze’s & Félix Guattari’s concepts such as rhizome, becoming, and Body without Organs are added to this list to give an impression of what the third way of doing emotion is about.

A situated acting model

The situated acting model presented in this thesis gets its name in reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the body as a situation”. If a situated understanding of the lived body is Beauvoir’s contribution to the acting model, and to the field of ontological inquiry in general, then an apprehension of a multiple mode of being and becoming where the actor is simultaneously carrying out a performance *in*, *of*, and *with* the world on stage is offered here. This concept owes its origin to the notions put

forth by Merleau-Ponty of being *of* the world and by Deleuze & Guattari of being *in* the world versus being *with* the world. Thus in the situational model proposed, three interconnected body processes are taking place at the same time, and the actor produces meaning and experience while oscillating between being *in*, *of*, and *with* the world in a response loop together with the audience.

In talking about a response loop, Fischer-Lichte's notion of a feedback loop is put in dialogue with Barad's account of "respons-ability" and "respons-ibility" as well as with Deleuze's & Guattari's definition of affect and percept as responses to affections and perceptions, respectively. To this a definition of devotion as a response to desire is added in the thesis, an idea that deals with the small amount of artistic control available while the artist is *with* the world. Rayner also talks about a "feedback loop" that connects the three dimensions of action in a "complex interaction". One of the major traits of the response loop is that the processes of doing emotions are interconnected with the processes of doing action. In fact, it can be argued that the relationship between emotion and action is causally complex – it is impossible to say what comes first. Fusing the interplay between the three different ways of doing emotion described so far with Rayner's three dimensions of action provides the first glimpse at the situated acting model.

The actor does emotions symbolically *in* the world as part of the dimension of action, phenomenologically *of* the world as part of the dimension of doing, and as a becoming *with* the world as part of the dimension of performance – all of which result in the creation of emotional and thought-provoking surfaces for audiences to engage in.

In order to speak of a phenomenology of doing, there is yet one thing missing, an understanding of the role of in-sensing and out-sensing. This sensing process takes place *of* the world and can be described in terms of *experiencing*, which is a concept that was used by Stanislavsky in his time. Seen through the metaphorical lens of the response loop, an actor is firstly in-sensing a character through phenomenological experiencing in order for the characterization of the role to be perceivable *in* the world in terms of action and/or motif. Secondly, this character may or may not be out-sensed in a becoming *with* the world. The use of the word *may* is

significant because staging an expressive becoming is a daring quest that involves maximum vulnerability and merciless devotion, something that far from every actor is up to at any given time. In other words, this is not a straight process, it is as queer as queer can be – yet the reward is what the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls flow, or an optimal experience. Thus it might very well be that an intimate knowledge of the third way of doing emotions – how to go about staging a becoming and opening up the body to greater forces of nature and society – is that which distinguishes what Diderot referred to as a “Great actor”. There is currently not very much hands-on knowledge about this third way of doing emotions, and it has yet to be researched, to be compared and contrasted to similar findings, and to be tried out by actors in their work. All of these must be considered for this to become an accessible acting model, but at least it is no longer an entirely tacit phenomenon, and this thesis is a first step in bringing the model to light.