

“How long (wide, tall, thick, short, high, low, deep) are your feelings?”

by
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Stanislavski tells us of actors playing the role of Hamlet, making their first entrance at the start of the play and having, written upon their face and in every cell of their being, the clear awareness of someone who knows perfectly well that by the end of Act V he will be dead.

Such a presentation of the self, on the part of such actors, would – I presume – qualify as being “expressive”.

Let us say I wasn't being too ironic, there... “expressive” of what, therefore? Of their feelings, one would presumably say. Of their feelings as the character? Or of their feelings for the character? Difficult to answer... how do you keep the two separate... or how do you fuse them, even...

Stanislavski complains that most actors perform by proceeding from one peak moment to another, slurring over the in betweens indifferently, ineptly, with no care for creativity, staking everything on the powerful impact that key parts of the narrative will have on the audience. But it is not to hear a story that an audience goes to the theatre. It goes to see HOW that Performer, that artist, will perform, how he will move the audience.

What must Performers do, if they wish their Performances to be alive, night after night, asks Stanislavski? The Performer wants to be creative for each night's audience, because each audience is made up of people who would only see the Performer's work on that particular occasion. If, therefore, on a particular night the performer does not keep his performance alive – that is, CREATIVE – then he will not touch, he will not move, that night's audience. One of the fundamental strategies Stanislavski identifies is laid out clearly in his analogy of the train journey from Moscow to St Petersburg. It is true, yes, that at the instant when one purchases a train ticket, one already gets the feeling of nearly being at the desired destination. The journey, however, will have to go through a considerable number of stations along the route, and each must be well manoeuvred. In like manner, the performer must break down the journey into the number of train stations. Breaking it into stations evidently lacks the required analytic depth, when compared to its further breakdown into the wagons constituting the train, and then into compartments, into benches, individual seats. Having done that, then – the performer has to measure out designs for action for each of those individual fragments, for each one of that infinite number of mini dramaturgies.

Each fragment is a complete dramaturgy in itself, with its beginning, marked by the stimuli that would eventually spark off the sophisticated response in impulses, and then in complex intentions. Each intention clamours for a decision to be taken in its favour, for some reason or another – to satisfy a want, a liking, a need, an urge, a wish, a desire, or to ward off a fear, an apprehension, a worry, or to give vent to possible despair, to give space to love, to explode in a frenzy of hatred... anything, everything is possible, at that stage... until the play of intentions and counter intentions is resolved on the basis of the feelings that those sensations would give rise to and, also on the basis of those feelings, decisions are taken – and an action is initiated, bringing that fragment to its fulfilment... or, to put it in terms neuroscience would use – until an action-potential is fulfilled. And at that point, the action is finally taken... and its consequences come about, and a new cycle, a new fragment, is generated, sparked into being. All that is at play in any one of those myriad fragments.

Ryzard Cieslak elucidates further – to keep his work alive, whenever he feels he would have mastered a complex sequence of mini dramaturgies perfectly, he breaks down each one of

them further, to estrange them again, to distance himself further from them, to re-discover them and move again towards fresh possibilities of creativity.

This art form, it seems, just cannot tolerate stability. It thrives in flux, in constant change. Narrative works similarly. It is nothing but a continuously unfolding flow of events and insights which fulfil anticipation, or keep it in suspense, or thwart it, in a flux that grips us only if it is always changing. It is the same with the performer himself, it seems, as he strives to be creative each night, night after night. Yesterday's was an acclaimed result, maybe. Today, however, he wishes to shun it, desiring to go beyond it again, surprising himself with the power of change, and thus surprising his audiences.

And what those changes seem to be all about, apparently, are feelings. Emotions. The performer, it seems, is doing little but expressing feelings, representing them, fabricating them.

The question of "playing on or not playing on emotion" is beyond the scope of my discourse today. Focusing on it would carry us into well-trodden territory, anyway – the *querelle* between Riccoboni father and son, Diderot's *Le Paradoxe de l'Acteur*. Also beyond the scope of my discourse is the question of whether theatre is a representation of emotions or not. Gordon Craig's stupendous, emblematic statement swept that question off the map of theatre-making and theorising. It framed the Performer's work in the only manner that befits it: "Today they impersonate and interpret; tomorrow they must represent and interpret, and on the third day they will create."¹ That, incredibly enough, was 1911. It is unacceptable that its powerful truth is still not recognised by many who speak of theatre. Clearly they did not read Craig. There is much that is unsuitable and inadequate in discussing the Performer's work. I will thus proceed in the direction of my focus: *not* the expression of feelings, *nor* their representation, *but* their measuring.

Stanislavski confessed that emotion sometimes got the better of him and he found himself playing on it, intensifying it beyond what he wished. He designed a simple strategy to reduce that intensity. Whenever it happened he would press a fingernail into his palm – the jab of pain would bring him down to earth, reduce the feeling's intensity and restore his control. Though the strategy is interesting in itself, what is really important is what his words reveal: the performer is constantly in measured awareness of what, in everyday jargon, one could call "feeling". He is, moreover, constantly aware of what he believes that measurement should aesthetically be and of how close he is to (or far away from) his desideratum.

How do theatre makers measure such factors? How do they measure the passage from one feeling to the next, from one frame of mind, one intention, one line of action, to another... and if feelings are caused by – and result in – actions, how do theatre makers measure actions? How to measure these fleeting states as each replaces the other only to be replaced by the next?

Change. "Panta rei", says Heraclitus. How does change come about – in circumstances, in fortune, in the train of events, in a person's nature, a role? It is facile to speak of "chance" or "destiny". Or we can speak of will, free, or unfree. Had Laius not "known the future" (which knowledge made him try to intervene² upon it) would Oedipus have killed him? Maybe, but certainly not in the way he did³. But let us go further. We know the end result of the Oedipus myth – which is why we can narrate it. But – which infinitely small details led there? We

¹ Craig, E.G., *On the Art of the Theatre*, 1911, reprinted Heinemann, London, 1980, p61

² And could we, perhaps, say that his so desiring to intervene upon the future was his hubris? And if we see it like that, then – whose hubris would we say it was?

³ Which is indicative – because Laius did a thing and its opposite - he **both** changed the future **and** he did not change it.

know the big ones – Oedipus and Laius were walking along two roads, they met at a crossroad, Laius did not want to give way, and Oedipus killed him. We get the mighty flow of that potent narrative through five different narratives the text gives. We know the painting's bold brush strokes. But – do we see the underpainting? Any artist tells you it's the invisible underpainting that makes the painting possible. What intentions drove Oedipus to leave his home that morning, to arrive at that cross roads at that moment? And what intentions made Laius leave his palace to bring him there at that moment too? Which infinitely small decisions taken and actions undertaken, in the hours leading up to that moment, in the days, months, years, preceding them, forging that causal chain? What myriad events in the course of the two lives of this father and son, in their history, situations, lines of action they had considered, decisions they had taken, actions undertaken, what doings of theirs, all their lives up to that point, had made of them two persons who behave as they both did at that crossroad in that meeting on that fateful morning? Would somebody else, with his different baggage of doings, have refused to give way too, or would he, perhaps, have given way? What did they share, in their phylogenetic baggage, that urged them to behave that way? That impressively vast history of events eludes everybody's knowledge – including Laius and Oedipus themselves. Lacking that knowledge, can one truly narrate? Once upon a time, a thin trickle of water started to wend its way across a vast plain of dry, golden sand where, perhaps, no water had ever flowed before. Gradually, it washed sand away in front of its driving head, and more water followed in its wake, to fill the gradually deepening path being formed by the humble water, carrying equally humble grains of sand away. And so it went on.. Until that flow became the mighty Yellow River. Some like to sit and watch that mighty mass of water flow. What *I* truly wish is to have been there at its smallest beginnings, laden with potential, resolute, defying my imagination. Had I been there, and had I possessed the foresight (as Laius had) of what that humble but cataclysmically important trickle would become, I would have been mesmerised and humbled by its resoluteness, and seen it in a new light – as truly Monumental. THAT would take some narrating, indeed: “And then – along came this little thread of water, sparkling in the sunlight, along the arid sand...” That, however, would mean being able to look at – *and* being able to *see* – change taking place.

The Performer cannot. And that is the crux of the matter.

He cannot see – or hear – the work of art he is generating. And so it is not possible for him to do what other artists can do: to stand back from his work and evaluate it, judge it. He can neither see it, nor “see” it. He cannot see its visual qualities, *this* moment as it happens in the here and now of his creating it. Neither can he “see” the totality of his work, its compositional qualities as an emerging whole, a development of eventhood, a composition emerging as a totality, as a graspable continuum, as events and context, as the weave of present, past and future.

The Performer can do no such thing. The best he can do is what Stanislavski says to his performers: “feel your muscle tones”, and “because in our language, to understand is to feel”.

The complexity of reading one's own feelings is, however, great – of reading them, that is cognising them, articulating them, properly, in words. Not only the complexity of reading one's own feelings but also one's own responses to stimuli, the considerations one makes before deciding, reacting and taking action, the complexity of reading one's decisions sometimes, even of one's awareness of actually being in the process of taking such decisions.

Yes, of course – our linguistic faculty scans the entire process of action, expressing that scanning in words. That scanning is similar to that of a computer. The scanner breaks a subject down – a face, for instance – arbitrarily into millions of little pixels, each one a perfect little square of colour. There are no colour squares in a human face, however, no right angles, straight lines. The human face is a living organism, at one with the rest of itself and with the

life process. What language does it precisely that – it breaks down the organic process, the flow of life.

Our doings appear to us like those pixels, like a series of points plotted on the curve of time and space. Points marking the curve of a graph, however, are arbitrary moments where difference in the continuum of events becomes noticeable. We come to note change, however, when the process brings about such a big degree of difference that we finally manage to sense it. That noticed difference is in a continuum of change that is without respite, however, so fine that our perception fails to grasp it – till a particular moment when we suddenly note, *afterwards*, that change would have occurred, and we remark upon our having noticed that, and we observe it as if it were a singular event in a defined point in time. We can never see grass grow. We know it grows, but we only notice its having grown. This is because human perception of what we call “the present” is of a duration of 2.3 seconds. If it were longer we would see grass grow. If it were shorter, we would see the beating of a fly’s wings. Our noticing change is a statement about the past, and we point it out, and we plot it on the graph of time – thus arriving, in theatre, at speaking of “a plot”.

Etienne Decroux captures this wonderfully in his analysis of the performer’s work – if the performer wishes to grip us with the truth of his action he must move as the sky moves. “One does not notice the sky changing. One only notices, afterwards, that it would have changed.”⁴

This difficulty of articulating our feelings – of cognising them, even – is remarkable. Commenting on actions and feelings, Meyerhold once questioned whether it is true that the feeling of fear precedes the action of running away. He did not agree that the right way of putting it is “I see a bear. I am afraid, and then I run”. Our doings in such extreme situations seem to confirm that things work otherwise, he says – *first* we react to the perceived danger and only *then* do we recognise fear. “I see a bear. I run. I feel fear” seems to put it better, he holds. On reflection this rings familiar – personal recollections of shock seem to make us recall that *first* we reacted and *then* recognised fear. Cognitive Neuroscience now sheds light on the matter – our motor actions are actually started off no less than 0.8 of a second before we actually get to know we are going to take such action. We should thus re-word it as: “I see a bear. Before I have time to realise it, I become afraid. Before I have time to realise that I have become afraid, my motor actions of running have already started – indeed, I would have *decided* to start them off and I would have *started* them off no less than an amazing 0.8 of a second before I came to know that I wanted to run! In the initial steps of running, then, I suddenly realise that I had become – and still am! – afraid.”

I watch a performer working. A myriad intentions flash vividly from him each moment, in front of my amazed presence. They crystallise into thousands of infinitely small actions – most of them escaping my knowing observation. To me, and to me alone, the mere handful of them that I manage to grasp becomes my private narrative, sometimes cognised, sometimes not. That handful of actions, however, is so limited, they are so few, when compared to the mental upheavals of intentions and counter intentions that the performer working in front of me would have given birth to. Stanislavski’s train journey rolls on.

I have no “time” to “think”, to “analyse the meaning” of what he is doing. His work is too charged, too fast, for me to be able to structure, on the declarative plane of meaning, my response to his meaningful doings, all of which are a continuous process that spells change. Our ability to only see distinctly “large” changes precludes us from seeing the myriad, infinitely small phases of constant change – each a meaningful intention, decision or action.

⁴ My translation from the Italian edition of his book, *Parole sul mimo*, Dino Audino Editore (Rome) 2003. p. 60

As a consequence, my very starting point as a director is to intervene on dynamics. I cannot cognitively discern the myriad intentions themselves. The dynamics which those intentions and their resolution (or suspension) bring about are, however, perceptible to trained eyes and ears of theatre directors, as well as to their trained memories. Incredibly vivid registrations of those dynamics are stored in what neuroscience calls “working memory”... retained in unbelievably sharp detail, as effectively as a video recording. For years now, I no longer need to take notes during the preparatory changes.

By speaking of measurable dynamics

- I can make interventions WITH GREAT SPEED, in a desperate race to signal to him my responses to the myriad stimuli his actions spark in me,
- I can formulate interventions WITH GREATER CLARITY,
- the Performer can relate WITH GREATER CLARITY to my interventions,
- the Performer can relate WITH GREATER SPEED to my interventions.

I don't say “the Performer understands what I would have felt”. What I do say is that he can relate to what I would have said to him. More often than not, I myself am unaware of whatever meaning there may be behind my own intervention. Meaning starts off most obscurely, even for myself as director. I let it clarify itself in time, drawing itself out of me without my forcing it, growing in depth, and growing out of me. It is as in any other art form. In this one, however, it is even more important that it be so, for there, in front of me, is no inanimate medium, but a fellow human being, whose work I encounter. And for that encounter to be true, then the mean of meaning must be allowed to take form.

In discussing what he calls the theatre-maker's “dilated mind”, Eugenio Barba expresses a desire that may appear bizarre to the uninitiated. Directors who try to force a shared meaning so as to eliminate the distance of non-understanding that separates actors from them, “jeopardise the collaborative relationship”, says Barba. What he desires, instead, is to “reinforce the polarity between director and actor.” He further insists that he desires to “intensify the difference between the actor's way of seeing and the audience's”.⁵

Presumably, the Performer responds to my dramaturgical interventions on dynamics in a manner similar to the way I respond to his doings. In his case, however, the response is such that it alters the very formation of his presence and of the manner in which that presence is organised. Joints change their angles, limbs change the way in which they were related to each other, arms move further away from the chest, for instance, or hands move closer to the face, say, or closer to each other. Muscles change their involvement – they relax or they tense up. Equilibrium is altered. The tempo and the rhythm of movement are reformulated. The spatial relationship of the entire presence to its surroundings is redefined.

Infinite, apparently small changes start occurring in the Performer – not only qua artist but also qua himself as material for art *and* qua work of art, himself elevated to the plane of an Opus by his own artistic act. It is as if clay were plastically shaping itself into a work of art, as if paint were spreading itself on a surface as a work of art – no clay and no paint can do that, they both need the artist to become Opuses. With the Performer, it is otherwise.

That infinity of changes is apparently small. In truth however, those changes are fundamentally vital. And for one simple reason they are of much greater importance: the actor is not paint. Paint stays where I put it. The Performer is not paint. The Performer takes up the promptings of the outside eye, yes. In so doing, however, he does much more – he feels the changes taking place in his very bearing, in the very way he is holding himself. He feels.

⁵ Barba, E. *The Dilated Body*, Zeami Libri, Rome, 1985, p 25.

Even in the Performer's case, however – quite as it is in my case – those myriad changes are too fast, too small, for the actor to “think”, to “analyse the meaning” of what he is feeling. He just feels – and in that feeling he responds. And as he goes through that changing opus, time after time, developing it – “rehearsing” it, as the English word goes – he gets to obtain a certain comprehension of those changes, a comprehension that is totally his and not mine, a comprehension, more importantly, that keeps changing itself, as his own work grows. Because, as Stanislavski says, the Performer “feels his muscle tones”, and because, as he says “in our work, to understand is to feel”.

And each night, as I observe, there, waiting reverently in the background of his doings, I see miracles.

I feel – but I still do not know *what*.

The iterative processes go on.

As for meaning, where does it reside, in the measurability of dynamics? It resides in those dynamics, waiting to spark off chains of meaning – and feelings – in the readership of others, in the very beingness of others, in that which is meaningful to them. From someone who presents a tragic character, the Performer is shifting to the role of someone who, as artist and as person, seeks to encounter other persons who share the same (tragic) conditions of life that he, the Performer, lives. From narrator of little, tragic stories, he is today becoming a builder of bridges, *Pontifex*, as Grotowski calls him, casting bridges over the immense voids of the chasms of tragedy, of human beings having to live lives below that level at which one wishes to – and should have the right to! – live them.



(Sequence 1. Performer: Glen Calleja in training for his one-man performance 'Ir-Rikkieb tat-Tempesta')

I now wish to project two sequences of photographs. Each sequence shows a number of stages (6 in the first one and five in the second one) in the forming of a single specific action on the part of a performer, Glen Calleja, upon whom I was intervening through an approach that I refer to as “dramaturgical intervention through dynamics”.

Each photograph in Sequence 1 captures one of six chronological stages in the development of one specific instant (literally – an instant) of performance; it is a chronological record of how that one instant developed as we worked on it – as each development occurred at one of six chronologically different stages of a phase of work lasting altogether some two weeks.

Glen and I had been working for about two weeks on the opening two minutes of his nascent work. In observing him work, I was often aware of feeling something I could not articulate... something that was at times causing fleeting but extremely strong responses in me. I was nowhere near identifying and verbally articulating that response. Indeed, I still am nowhere near doing it. Undoubtedly, however, some fleeting moment was touching me profoundly. Without even considering trying to grasp what it may have been that was drawing my attention, I started making occasional “dramaturgical interventions through dynamics”... at times asking for an increase or a decrease in rhythm, or tempo, at other times for a wider or

narrower turn, of the performer's entire presence, or merely of his head, at times for a more (or less) pronounced angle of a limb, or of the torso, or the head, or for an alteration to the angle of the glance, or for the lips to be slightly separated. At each intervention, Glen responded *in his own* manner, each time receiving the dynamic message and seeking to execute it. The interventions were crystal clear, precise as a surgeon's scalpel, but he had to translate the words that left my mouth into muscle functions, joint functions, into the enormous complexities that we are. Moreover, as he started to embody the intervention, his very being started responding to it in a live manner, and I could see it come to life differently in him. It encountered his own feelings, his own images, the physical alterations he felt as his equilibrium started getting altered, as his inner tensions started changing, as his energies started getting redistributed. Often enough I noted strange parallel events in myself... on the one hand, as his being started undergoing alterations, I desperately kept trying to clarify and strengthen the image I was trying to chase; on the other hand, new possible images started materialising vaguely in my mind... I wanted to bring those new ones to life ... and I found myself juggling with all of them! Few were the instances when his response came anywhere close to an image that gave me a feeling that it may have indeed been truly that image which I had in mind, when I had made that intervention. The six photographs present six major *qualities* of that one instant... each one a stage in the development of that which, at the end, we chose to regard as a desirable action that was to be set into the structure of the work. The six photographs record six stages in this two-week phase of work – stages which, I hope, will cast light on the “measurability of feelings”.



(Sequence 2)

Sequence 2 is made up of 5 photographs. Each photograph, as those in Sequence 1, is of a chronological stage in the development of an instant of action. In this case I know what it was that I was giving chase to. At a very early stage of Glen's showing me his work, I had noted a beautiful disposition of his costume, which had fallen for a brief instant in a number of sharp, clean, rich folds, like those of a Giotto fresco. The next instant – they had gone, never to come back again. I started looking for what it may have been that had caused those folds, and I did so by intervening, yet again, on the dynamics of Glen's action. As the working days went by, the folds started coming back, but they took a long time to really come out as they had been originally... and the reason soon became clear. To obtain and hold that particular flow of the cloth, Glen had to gradually discover and control a highly demanding combination of tensions in joints and muscles – a configuration that had not been visible to my eyes, as the wide and ample cloak had not allowed me to see the body underneath it. That combination had somehow originally occurred for a fleeting moment, as a result of some mental event, or image. To restore it demanded a highly complex process of construction. And as I had not actually seen how the body had been configured, I could not guide towards it – all I could see with a degree of clarity was the occurrence or the non-occurrence of the folds. Gradually the folds started reappearing, and my eyes started understanding what it was in his posture that enabled them to appear. My dynamic interventions started guiding him towards that, whilst he, by grasping the dynamic qualities of my interventions, started getting unexpected and necessary insights. As the work went on, however, the inner tensions he was experiencing – which I could in no way perceive – started informing him, and he seemed to be discovering a

meaningful quality to his own work, making it grow by leaps and bounds. His entire being started changing, new actions started appearing, actions that had not been there before. Limbs moved where they had never been, the head shifted completely, the glance of the eyes started searching. None of this had happened before, hidden and smothered as everything had been in the closure of his former action, not to mention that of the voluminous cloak. At the end, we had arrived at a series of actions that were completely new. And yet – the folds had come back ... exactly as they had been when they first struck me as being beautiful and worth chasing.