

ON THE PROBLEM OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE ACTOR'S CREATIVE WORK¹

The problem of the psychology of the actor and theatrical creative work is at one and the same time old and completely new.

On the one hand, it seems there never was one even somewhat great theatrical pedagogue or critic, not one man of the theater in general, who might pose this question one way or another, and who, in practical activity, performance, teaching, or evaluations, would not proceed from one or another understanding of the psychology of the actor. Many who were active in the theater produced extremely complex systems of the actor's performance in which they found a concrete expression not only of purely artistic aspirations of their authors, not only the canons of style, but also systems of practical psychology of the actors' creative work. Such, for example, is the famous system of K. S. Stanislavsky, full of theoretical staging, which, unfortunately, we do not have to this day.

If we try to trace the sources of theatrical psychology, they will take us far back, and we will see the great and very difficult problems of this area, which over the course of a century and in various forms, agitated the minds of the best representatives of the theater. This problem, which D. Diderot² poses in the remarkable "Paradox of the Actor," already anticipates the sharpest arguments between various contemporary theatrical systems, but he, in his turn, was anticipated by a number of thinkers of the theater who long before Diderot put the question in a somewhat different form, but on the same plane as Diderot sets it.

There is something basic in this formulation of the question, and when one begins to study attentively its historical development, one is inevitably convinced that, obviously, it is rooted in the very essence of the creative work of the actor as it opens up to direct understanding, which is still wholly guided by a naive amazement before a new psychological phenomenon.

Thus, in theatrical systems, if the problem of the psychology of the actor with all its changes retained as central the paradox of the actor's emotion, then in the new time, investigations of a different type opened paths applicable to the same problem. New investigations begin to involve the actor's profession in the common circle of investigations of the psychology of the profession, bringing to the forefront the psychotechnical approach to the actor's craft. The problem usually at the center of attention is how certain general qualities and traits of human giftedness should be developed to ensure the person who has them success in the area of theatrical creative work. Tests are created to study fantasy, the motor system, verbal memory, and excitability of the actors, and on that basis, a "professiogram" of the actor's work is constructed according to exactly the same principle as analogous psychograms for any other professions are constructed; then, according to the register of established qualities, people are selected for this profession who best correspond to this register.

Only very recently did we note an attempt to overcome the inadequacies of this and another approach to this problem and formulate it differently. In this respect, works of a new type have come into view; in this respect also, we have called the problem of the psychology of the actor a problem that is completely new and almost not studied at all.

It is easiest to define the new approach to the old problem by comparing it to two former trends. They had a common inadequacy over and above the unique, radical methodological flaws that characterize each of them separately and which to a certain degree is opposite in the one and the other system of investigation.

The common inadequacy of former trends is the complete empiricism, the attempt to proceed from what is on the surface, to establish facts that are directly grasped and to elevate them to the rank of a scientifically discovered pattern. Although the empiricism with which people of the theater work is frequently an area of phenomena profoundly unique and extremely significant in the general sphere of cultural life, although facts such as the specific works of great masters are dealt with here, the scientific significance of these materials is not beyond the limits of the collection of factual data and general deliberation over the formulation of the problem. Also marked by the same radical empiricism are the psychotechnical investigations of the actor's craft which cannot rise to any extent above the directly factual data and include them in the general, previously determined methodological and theoretical understanding of the subject.

Moreover, as has been indicated, each of these trends has a specific inadequacy.

Stage systems, from the actor, from theatrical pedagogy, from observations of rehearsals, and during performance, which are usually enormous generalizations of the producer's or actor's experience, set specific, unique, features of experience, inherent only in the actor, as being of paramount importance, forgetting that these features must be understood against a background of general psychological patterns, that the actor's psychology comprises only a part of the total psychology in both the abstract-scientific and the concrete-life significance of this word. However, when these systems reach to general psychology for support, the attempts prove to be a more or less accidental connection in the manner of that which exists between the Stanislavsky system and the psychological system of T. Ribot.

Psychotechnical investigations, on the other hand, lose sight of all specificity, all the uniqueness of the actor's psychology, seeing in the creative work of the actor only a special combination of the same mental qualities that are found in a different combination in any profession. Forgetting that the activity of the actor is itself a unique, creative work of psychophysiological conditions, and not analyzing these specific conditions in all the variety of their psychological nature, the investigators-psychotechnicians dissolve the problem of the actor's creative work in general, and at the same time, banal test psychology, paying no attention to the actor and all the uniqueness of his psychology.

The new approach to the psychology of the creative work of the actor is characterized, first of all, by the attempt to overcome the radical empiricism of the two theories and to comprehend the psychology of the actor in all the qualitative uniqueness of its nature, but in the light of more general psychological patterns. At the same time, the factual aspect of the problem assumes a completely different character—from abstract, it becomes concrete.

If formerly the testimony of one actor or another or one epoch or another was always considered from the point of view of the eternal and unchanging nature of the theater, now investigators approach a given fact mainly as a historical fact which is finished and which must be understood most of all in the full complexity

of its historical condition. The psychology of the actor is formulated as a problem of concrete psychology, and many irreconcilable points of view of formal logic, abstract contradictions of various systems, identically reinforced by factual data, are explained as a living and concrete historical contradiction of different forms of the actor's creative work, which changes from epoch to epoch and from theater to theater.

For example, Diderot's paradox of the actor consisted of the fact that the actor portraying strong heartfelt passions and agitation on the stage and bringing the audience to a high emotional pitch, himself remains devoid of even a shade of the passion that he portrays and that shocks the viewer. The absolute formulation of the question by Diderot is as follows: must the actor experience what he portrays, or is his acting a higher form of "aping," an imitation of an ideal prototype? The question of the internal states of the actor during a stage play is the central node of the whole problem. Must the actor experience the role or not? This question was subjected to serious discussion, but the very formulation of the question suggested that it would allow only one answer. Moreover, contrasting the work of two actresses, Clairon³ and Dumenil,⁴ Diderot knew that they were representatives of two different systems of the actor's craft, equally possible, although opposite in a certain sense.

In the new formulation of the question that we are considering, the paradox and the contradiction contained in it find a resolution in the historical approach to the psychology of the actor.

In the beautiful words of Diderot, "first of all, pronouncing the words, 'Zaira, you are crying,' or 'you will remain there, my daughter,' the actor hears himself for a long time and he hears himself at the moment when he touches you, and all his talent is not in feeling, as you might think, but in transmitting most subtly the external signs of feeling and thus deceiving you. The cries of his grief are distinctly revealed in his ears, his gestures of despair are imprinted in his memory and were preliminarily learned in front of a mirror. He knows completely precisely at which moment to take out his handkerchief and when his tears will flow. Expect them at a certain word, at a certain syllable, not sooner and not later. The trembling voice, the interrupted words, the muffled or drawn-out sounds, the shuddering body, buckling knees, the swooning, the impetuous outbursts—all of this is the purest imitation, a lesson learned by heart in advance, a passionate grimace, a splendid "aping" (D. Diderot, 1936, pp. 576-577).

As Diderot says, all the passions of the actor and their expression enter as a component part into the system of declamation, are subject to no law of unity, and are selected and harmoniously disposed in a certain way.

In essence, two things that are very close to each other, but never completely merged, are mixed in Diderot's paradox. First, Diderot has in mind the most superpersonal, ideal character of the passions that the actor projects from the stage. These are idealized passions and movements of the soul; they are not natural, live feelings of one actor or another, they are artificial, they are created by the creative force of man and to that extent must be considered as artificial creations, like a novel, a sonata, or a statue. Because of this, they differ in content from corresponding feelings of the actor himself. Diderot says: "A gladiator of ancient times is like a great actor, and a great actor is like an ancient gladiator; they do not die as people die in bed. They must portray before us a different death so as to please us, and the viewer feels that the bare, unadorned truth of movement would be shallow and contrary to the poetry of the whole" (*ibid.*, p. 581).

Not just from the point of view of content, but also from the aspect of formal connections and couplings that determine their course, the feelings of the actor

differ from real, live feelings. Diderot says: "But I want very much to tell you, as an example, how an actor and his wife, hating each other, played a scene of tender and passionate lovers in the theater. Never have two actors seemed so strong in their roles, never have they aroused such long applause from the orchestra and the loges. We have interrupted this scene dozens of times with applause and shouts of delight. This is in scene three, act four of Molière's *Le Dèpit Amoureux*" (ibid., p. 586). Later, Diderot brings in the dialogue of the two actors, which he calls a dual scene, a scene of the lovers and a scene of the husband and wife. The scene of the declaration of love is interwoven here with the scene of a family quarrel, and in this interweaving, Diderot sees the best evidence of his being correct (ibid., pp. 586-588).

As we have said, Diderot's view is based on facts, and this is the source of his strength, his unsurpassable significance for a future scientific theory of the actor's creative work. But there are also facts of an opposite character which do not in the least refute Diderot. These facts consist in the fact that there is still another system of performance and another nature of artistic experiences of the actor on the stage. If we take an example close at hand, the evidence is all the stagecraft of the Stanislavsky school.

This contradiction, which cannot be resolved in abstract psychology with the metaphysical formulation of the question, has a possibility of being resolved if we approach it from the dialectical point of view.

We have said that the new trend poses the problem of actor psychology as a problem of concrete psychology. Not eternal and unchangeable laws of the nature of actors' experiences on the stage, but historical laws of various forms and systems of theatrical plays are in this case the controlling direction for the investigator. For this reason, in the refutations of the paradox of Diderot that we find among many psychologists, there is still the attempt to solve the problem on the absolute plane regardless of the historical, concrete form of the theater whose psychology we are considering. Moreover, the basic prerequisite of any historically directed investigation in this area is the idea that the psychology of the actor expresses the social ideology of his epoch and that it also changes in the process of the historical development of man just as external forms of the theater and its style and content change. The psychology of the actor of the Stanislavsky theater differs much more from the psychology of the actor of the Sophocles epoch than the contemporary building differs from the ancient amphitheater.

The psychology of the actor is a historical and class category, not a biological category. The idea central to all new investigations that determines the approach to the concrete psychology of the actor is expressed in this one aspect alone. Consequently it is not biological patterns primarily that determine the character of the actor's stage experiences. These experiences comprise a part of the complex function of the artistic work that has a definite social, class function historically established by the whole state of the mental development of the epoch and class, and, consequently, the laws of coupling passions and the laws of interpreting and interweaving feelings of a role with feelings of the actor must be resolved primarily on the historical plane and not on the plane of naturalistic (biological) psychology. Only after this resolution can the question arise of how, from the point of view of the biological patterns of the mind, one or another historical form of the actor's work is possible.

Thus, it is not the nature of human passions that determines directly the experiences of the actor on the stage; it only contains the possibility of the development of many most varied and changeable forms of the stage implementation of the artistic forms.

Together with recognizing the historical nature of the problem that interests us, we come to the conclusion that we have before us a problem based in a dual respect on the sociological prerequisite in the study of the theater.

First, like any concrete mental phenomenon, the actor's work represents a part of the social-psychological activity that must be studied and defined primarily in the context of that whole to which it belongs. The function of a stage performance in a given epoch for a given class must be revealed as must the basic trends on which the actor's effect on the viewer depends, and, consequently, it is necessary to determine the social nature of the theatrical form in the context in which the given stage experiences will have a concrete explanation.

Second, admitting the historical character of this problem and at the same time touching on the experiences of the actor, we will begin to speak not so much of the individual psychological context as of the social-psychological context in which the experiences are included. In the happy German expression, the experiences of the actor are not so much a feeling, of "I" as a feeling of "we." The actor creates on the stage infinite sensations, feelings, or emotions that become the emotions of the whole theatrical audience. Before they became the subject of the actor's embodiment, they were given a literary formulation, they were borne in the air, in social consciousness.

The melancholy of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, presented on the stage by actresses of the Arts Theater,⁵ becomes the emotion of the whole audience because it was to a large degree a crystallized formulation of the attitude of large social circles for whom its stage expression was a kind of means of realization and artistic interpretation of themselves.

In the light of the aspects indicated, the significance of actors' awareness of their work becomes clear.

The first thing we come to is the establishment of the limited significance of this material. From this point of view, the actor's awareness of his sensations, the data of self-observation of his acting and his general state do not lose their significance for studying the psychology of the actor, but cease being the only and universal source for making judgments on their nature. They show how the actor recognizes his own emotions and what their relation to the structure of his personality is, but they do not disclose for us the nature of these emotions in all their actual fullness. Before us, we have only partial, factual material that illuminates the problem from only one point of view—from the point of view of the actor's self-awareness. In order to extract from such material its whole scientific significance, we must understand the part it plays within the system of the whole. We must understand the psychology of one actor or another in all his concrete historical and social circumstances; then the normal connection of the given form of stage experience with the social content that is projected through this actor's experiences to the audience will become clear and understandable for us.

We must not forget that the emotions of the actor, since they are a fact of art, go beyond the limits of his personality and make up a part of the emotional dialogue between the actor and the public. The actor's emotions experience what F. Paulhan⁶ felicitously called a "fortunate transformation of feelings." They become understandable only if they are included in the broader social-psychological system of which they are a part. In this sense, one must not separate the character of the stage experience of the actor, taken from the formal aspect, from the concrete content that includes the stage image, and relation to and interest in that image from the social-psychological significance and from the function that it fulfills in the given case of the actor's experience. Let us say that the experience of the actor trying

to laugh at a certain structure of psychological and life types and of the actor trying to give an apologia for the same images will, naturally, be different.

Here we are approaching close to an extremely important psychological moment, the inexplicability of which was the cause, in our opinion, of a series of misunderstandings of the problem that interests us. For example, most of those writing about the system of Stanislavsky identified this system in its psychological part with the stylistic tasks that it initially served; in other words, they identified the system of Stanislavsky with his theatrical practical work. True, all theatrical practical work is a concrete expression of a given system, but does not exhaust the whole content of the system, which can have many other concrete expressions; theatrical practical work does not present the system in all its range. A step toward separating the system from its concrete expression was taken by E. B. Vakhtangov,⁷ whose stylistic aspirations were so very different from the initial naturalism of the Arts Theater, but who, nevertheless, was aware that his own system was an application to new stylistic tasks of the basic ideas of Stanislavsky.

This can be demonstrated with the example of Vakhtangov's work on the staging of *Princess Turandot*.⁸ Wishing to project from the stage not simply the content of the tale, but his own contemporary relation to the tale, his irony, a smile "addressed to the tragic content of the tale," Vakhtangov creates a new content for the play.

B. E. Zakhava⁹ tells of a remarkable case from the history of the staging of this play: "At the first rehearsals, Vakhtangov used this device. He proposed the actors play not the roles indicated in the text of the play, but Italian actors playing these roles . . . For example, he proposed that the actress playing the role of Adelma play not Adelma, but an Italian actress playing Adelma. He improvised on the theme, supposing she were the wife of the director of the troupe and the mistress at the opening, that she is wearing broken shoes, that they are too big for her and when she walks, they flap at the heel, slap the floor, etc. Another actress playing Zelima is an idler who does not want to act, and she does not at all hide this from the public (she wants to sleep)" (1930, pp. 143-144).

Thus, we see that Vakhtangov directly changes the content of the play he is given, but in the form of its presentation, he depended on the same foundation that was put in place in the system of Stanislavsky: Stanislavsky taught that finding the truth of feelings on the stage is an internal justification of each stage form of behavior.

Zakhava says: "Internal justification, the basic requirement of Stanislavsky, remains as before one of the basic requirements of Vakhtangov, only the content itself of these feelings is entirely different with Vakhtangov than with Stanislavsky . . . If the feelings now become different, if they require different theatrical means of expression, still the truth of these feelings is as it was and will always be unchangeably the basis of the soil on which only the flowers of genuine great art can grow" (*ibid.*, p. 133).

We see how the internal technique of Stanislavsky and his mental naturalism come to serve completely different stylistic tasks, opposite in a certain sense to the one that they served at the very beginning of development. We see how certain content dictates a new theatrical form, how a system proves to be much broader than the concrete application it is given.

For this reason, the declarations of the actors on their work, especially summary declarations, are in themselves incapable of explaining their character and their nature; they are made up from generalizations of the actors' own and most various experience and do not take into account all of the content embodied in the actor's emotion. It is necessary to go beyond the limits of the direct experience

of the actor to explain it. Unfortunately, this real and remarkable paradox of all of psychology has not, thus far, been sufficiently assimilated by a number of trends. In order to explain and understand experience, it is necessary to go beyond its limits; it is necessary to forget about it for a minute and move away from it.

The same thing is true also with respect to the psychology of the actor. If the actor's experience were a closed whole, a world existing within itself, then it would be natural to look for laws that govern it, exclusively in its sphere, in an analysis of its composition, a careful description of its contours. But if the actor's experience also differs from everyday life experience by the fact that it comprises a part of an entirely different system, then its explanation must be found in laws of the structure of that system.

In conclusion, we would like to note briefly the conversion that the old paradox of the actor experiences in the new psychology. In the contemporary state of our science, we are still far from resolving this paradox, but we are already close to its correct formulation as a genuine scientific problem. As we have seen, the essence of the problem, which seemed paradoxical to all who wrote about it, consists in the relation of the artificially produced emotion of a role to the real, live, natural emotion of the actor playing the role. We think that solving this problem is possible if we take into account two points that are equally important for its correct interpretation.

The first consists in that Stanislavsky expresses the involuntary quality of feeling in a certain situation. Stanislavsky says that feeling cannot be commanded. We have no direct power over feeling of this nature as we have over movement or over the associative process. But if feeling "cannot be evoked . . . voluntarily and directly, then it may be enticed by resorting to what is more subject to our power, to ideas"¹⁰ (L. Ya. Gurevich, 1927, p. 58). Actually, all contemporary psychophysiological investigations of emotions show that the path to mastery of emotions, and, consequently, the path of voluntary arousal and artificial creation of new emotions, is not based on direct interference of our will in the sphere of sensations in the way that this occurs in the area of thinking and movement.

This path is much more tortuous and, as Stanislavsky correctly notes, more like coaxing than direct arousal of the required feeling. Only indirectly, creating a complex system of ideas, concepts, and images of which emotion is a part, can we arouse the required feelings and, in this way, give a unique, psychological coloring to the entire given system as a whole and to its external expression. Stanislavsky says: "These feelings are not at all those that actors experience in life" (*ibid.*). They are more likely feelings and concepts that are purified of everything extraneous, are generalized, devoid of their aimless character.

According to the justifiable expression of L. Ya. Gurevich,¹¹ if they passed through the process of artistic shaping, they differ according to a number of traits from corresponding living emotions. In this sense, we agree with Gurevich¹² that the solution of the problem, as usually happens in very stubborn and long controversies, "lies not in the middle between two extremes, but on a different plane that makes it possible to see the subject from a new point of view" (*ibid.*, p. 62). We are compelled to this new point of view both by the accumulated documents on the problem of stage creativity, the testimony of the creators-actors themselves, and by the investigations carried out in recent decades by scientific psychology (*ibid.*, p. 62).

But this is just one aspect of the problem. The other is included in the fact that the transfer of the paradox of the actor to the ground of concrete psychology immediately eliminates a number of insoluble problems that were formerly its component parts and replaces them with new problems that are productive and resolv-

able and place the investigator on new paths. From this point of view, there is not a biological-aesthetic and eternally given explanation, but each given system of the actor's performance is subject to a concrete-psychological and historical, changeable explanation, and instead of the once-and-for-all, given paradox of the actor of all times and peoples, we have before us from the historical aspect, a series of historical paradoxes of actors of given environments in given epochs. The paradox of the actor is converted into an investigation of historical development of human emotion and its concrete expression at different stages of social life.

Psychology teaches that emotions are not an exception different from other manifestations of our mental life. Like all other mental functions, emotions do not remain in the connection in which they are given initially by virtue of the biological organization of the mind. In the process of social life, feelings develop and former connections disintegrate; emotions appear in new relations with other elements of mental life, new systems develop, new alloys of mental functions and unities of a higher order appear within which special patterns, interdependencies, special forms of connection and movement are dominant.

To study the order and connection of affects is the principal task of scientific psychology because it is not in emotions taken in an isolated form, but in connections combining emotions with more complex psychological systems that the solution of the paradox of the actor lies. This solution, as might be expected even now, will bring the investigators to a position that has a fundamental significance for all of the psychology of the actor. The experience of the actor, his emotions, appear not as functions of his personal mental life, but as a phenomenon that has an objective, social sense and significance that serves as a transitional stage from psychology to ideology.