

Printing and Triggering Emotion

Being an artist means being an artist every day. A part-time artist, or an artist who only applies their artistic skills and beliefs when they are employed as an artist, is at best a mercenary and at worst the definition of mediocrity. Being an artist means having clear, articulated beliefs about art: how to make it, why to make it, what it isn't. It means having the courage to be discriminating in a relativistic and escapist age.

True artists hone their art every day. This can take place in microscopic or macrocosmic ways. Singing, reading a poem or a play, speaking the words of a book aloud to practice diction and breath control; physical training or taking a class that enriches one's understanding of art (that can be interpreted widely, but not indiscriminately). On a day when an actor performs she will not simply *do*; if she is an artist she prepares adequately beforehand to make art, and reflects afterward upon her attempt, in order to further it. On a day when she is *not* performing, she spends time absorbing the nuances of human and animal life, through her observation of others or herself. This may be conscious, present tense or forward (*I will sit at this café and watch the humans*), or Unconscious, present tense or backward (*I became aware of how my entire body tenses when I talk to Z*).

We experience trigger moments from our memory all the time. We are bombarded by memory. Memories produce levels of emotion that can be equivalent or lesser than those experienced at the time the event occurred. The lie of the "Affective Memory" exercises as practiced in the neo-Stanislawski, American Realism school of thought is to insist that the actor recall a specific event from their lives in order to access the emotion demanded in the beats being played¹. But this is not how the creation of emotion works. As Stanislavski himself indicates, the subconscious is resistant to command. And as observers of Affective Memory from Robert Lewis² to the present day have demonstrated, recurrent calls upon the same emotional event produce diminishing returns.

How many people have the voluminous, nearly infinite range of actual experience to recall a specific event which matches not only appropriate level of an emotion for a given beat but the nuances of its circumstances? Few of us, mercifully, are murderers. Few young actors have failed so spectacularly, in love or ambition, as to produce something from their own lives to match the desperation of Shelley "The Machine" Levene, the aging real estate salesman in David Mamet's classic evocation of American capitalism *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

Yet the most extreme of emotions exist, and have been expressed, by many, if not all. Most of us have experienced moments of murderous rage, for example. Unlike plays, the circumstances which brought forth the rage may be, in real life, mundane, or sharply distinct from those of the play. The rage we felt may, for instance, have been wholly unjustified. In trying to recall this extreme emotion the actor, following Affective Memory, recalls the event—and the feeling of being ridiculous it produced. The recalled past in a person's life is always coloured by the subsequent. Few of us can

¹ "Beats" being the English-language term for what Stanislavski referred to as "pieces" in "Problems and Pieces", one of the ten tools he listed in descriptions of his System. Simply put for the uninitiated, these are events in a play which call for an action. They do not have to be physical in nature; a realisation can demand an action. There are proponents of beats who use the term to describe sub-sections of a scene. This, while useful, can lead to missing many of the actual beats of a scene, which should be regarded more like musical notes. A sub-scene can therefore be comprised of several beats.

² A member of the Group Theater and an early instructor at the Actor's Studio, who wrote *Method or Madness?* in response to Strasberg's wilful mutation of Stanislavski's teachings.

remember a moment of over-reaction—an extremity of emotion—without feeling an after-emotion; shame, guilt, sheepishness, wonder. This subsequent emotion dilutes the retrospective one.

The artist *prints* emotions as they occur, without the extraneous action of writing down the circumstances for future use. It's safe to say that *no* past event an actor has experienced fits perfectly within the world, or the psyche, of a character they are playing. The emotions, of course, are the same—though heightened—on stage and in daily life. So the actor, in her daily work on herself, should not busy herself with the prosaic and unartistic task of recalling the minutiae of events. She has two ways of printing emotion for practical artistic use. She watches herself in the past (not the scene). Or she opens her emotional expression to events of the present moment.

In both cases she focuses on the emotion and its expression. She *prints* it. Later, when she is performing, it is enough for her to command herself internally through recognition. A complex scene in which her character is sad, defiant and fearful—Nora, say, in the concluding scene of Ibsen's *A Doll House*—will *trigger* real sadness, defiance and fear in her, because the actor has worked on herself, day by day, to have these emotions at hand for immediate use, at all the levels of their intensity and in all their myriad variations. This triggering process maintains the music of the play (made up of its beats) whereas it would be unimpeded by an actor's repeated attempts to recall specific events. How many times, as a director, have I watched an actor indulge themselves in extra moments on stage to find and build the necessary emotion! How many times have they changed the music to suit themselves, and thus elevated their ego above the needs of the play!

Instead of being imprisoned by an event which has nothing to do with the play, the scene, or her character, the actor allows the actions of the play to trigger real emotions she has previously printed, and which come forth modulated, as they should be, by the play's score. This is crucially applicable to improvisation, when it is used in rehearsal as a tool for building character or narrative. A fundamental principle of acting—*live in the moment*—is constantly undermined by actors going looking for emotions they should be able to *create*, not recall, instantaneously. To be able to do so requires constant practice: artistry is equal parts skill and sensibility, and both must be constantly exercised. An actor who confines their work to the rehearsal studio, or to the job they are employed for, is an actor in a constant, unrealised state of diminishment and erosion.