

The Actor and the Target

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"This new Advice to the Players cuts open every generalisation about acting and draws out gleamingly fresh specifics. Behind the joy and humour of the writing, Donnellan is subtly leading young actors to an awareness of the living processes behind their work. He brings as evidence the rich field of thought and intuition that direct experience has made his own."

Peter Brook

"Like his stage work, Donnellan's lightness of touch belies its true depth; reading The Actor and the Target is as thrilling as seeing his Boris Goudonov"

Vrema Novostei (reviewing the Russian edition)

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Introduction

Acting is a mystery, and so is theatre. We assemble in a space and divide into two parts, one of which enacts stories for the remainder. We know of no society where these rituals never happen, and in many cultures these events are at the very centre of that society. There is a persistent need to witness acted-out representations, from television soap opera to Greek Tragedy.

A theatre is not only a literal space, but also a place where we dream together; not merely a building, but a space that is both imaginative and collective. Theatre provides a safe frame within which we can explore dangerous extremities in the comfort of fantasy and the reassurance of a group. If every auditorium were razed to the ground, theatre would still survive, because the hunger in each of us to act, and to be acted to, is inbred. We direct, perform and witness performances to communicate with ourselves as we sleep; theatre cannot die before the last dream has been dreamt.

I am therefore I act'

We live by acting roles, be it father, mother, teacher or friend. We construct our sense of self by playing roles we see our parents play and develop our identities further by copying characters we see played by elder brothers, sisters, friends, rivals, teachers, enemies or heroes.

A baby is born not only with an expectation of 'mother' and 'language', but also with an anticipation of 'acting'; the child is genetically prepared to copy behaviours that it will witness. The first theatrical performance a baby enjoys is when its mother acts out appearing and disappearing behind a pillow. 'Now you see me; now you don't!' The baby gurgles away, learning that this most tragic event, separation from the mother, might be prepared for and dealt with comically, theatrically. The baby learns to laugh at a potentially appalling separation, because this time, it isn't real. Mummy reappears and laughs — this time, at least. After a while the child will learn to be the performer, with the parent as audience, playing peek-a-boo behind the sofa; and eventually the game will evolve into the more sophisticated 'hide and seek', with multiple performers, and even a winner. Eating, walking, talking, all are developed by copying and applause. Whatever human instinct is latent, it only reaches virtuosity after acute observation, repetition and performance. You cannot teach children how to act out situations, precisely because they already do — they wouldn't be human if they didn't. 'I copy my father eating his toast. I copy my mother reading the paper.' Acting is a reflex, a mechanism for development and survival. This primitive instinct to act is the basis of what is meant by 'acting' in this book. It isn't 'second nature', it is 'first nature' and so cannot be taught like chemistry or scuba diving. So, if acting in itself cannot be taught, how can we develop or train our ability to act?

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Attention

Our quality of acting develops and trains itself when we simply pay it attention. All we can be 'taught' about acting are double negatives. We can be taught how not to block our natural instinct to act, just as we can be taught how not to block our natural instinct to breathe. Of course we can learn a multitude of stylised developments of our natural reflexes. The Noh actor in Japan may take decades to perfect a single gesture, as the ballerina will sweat years developing feats of muscular control. But all the Noh master's virtuosity will go for little if his ornate technique reveals nothing but ornate technique. This highly controlled art must appear, in some way, spontaneous. Those who appreciate this specialised form can discern the flicker of alertness that quickens each ancient gesture. The difference in quality between one performance and another is not in technique alone, but in the surge of life that makes that technique seem invisible. The years of training must seem to evaporate in the heat of life; truly great technique has the generosity to vanish and take no credit. We can neither define nor control this spark that eclipses the structure of past procedure. But we know that the word cannot live without human breath.

Even the most stylised art is about life, and the more life there is present in a work of art, the greater the quality of that art. Life is mysterious and transcends logic, so the living thing cannot be analysed, taught or learned. But those things that apparently cut out life, or seem to conceal or block it, are not nearly so mysterious as they pretend. These 'things' are often bound by logic and can be analysed, learned and unlearned. The doctor may explain why the patient is dead, but never why the patient is alive.

Therefore this is not a book about how to act; this is a book that may help when you feel blocked in your acting.

A proviso

It is not easy to write about acting. Acting is an art, and art reveals the uniqueness of things. Talking about acting is therefore hard, because 'talking about' tends to make us generalise and generalisation conceals the uniqueness of things. All block, which we will discuss later, is both cause and result of generalisation. So writing about block is doubly dangerous. First we have to imagine a problem, and then struggle to suggest solutions for this vagueness that are as specific as possible — for you can never be too specific. These generalisations may not be true, but they have proved useful.

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Acting and lying

There is a problem with vocabulary. We often say that people are 'putting on an act' when we mean that they are lying about themselves. Over the centuries the word 'acting' has been used as a synonym for 'lying'. Plato argued that there was no difference between acting and lying, and roundly condemned the theatre. Diderot's Paradox of the Actor asks how we can speak of truth in performance, which of its very nature is a lie.

But we never tell the truth. We cannot properly 'tell' the truth, because our words are crude tools to express something, 'the truth', which may well exist, but which we cannot define. Indeed, the more we feel, the more useless will be the words we find to express ourselves. If I ask for 'some coffee, black with no sugar', there is usually very little at stake, and the words give a reasonably accurate account of what I feel and want. But when Chimena says to the King in *The Cid*, 'My father is dead', these will be the best four words that she can find and they cannot express fully what she feels and needs. The three words 'How are you?' become increasingly banal the more the relationship matters; the question means one thing to the postman as he delivers a package, another to a friend with cancer.

Emotion and truth

Adolescence can be a journey through hell when we feel completely misunderstood.

'First love' only seems joyful in nostalgia. We are tormented not only by the spectre of rejection, but also by the creeping hopelessness that we will never be able to express what we feel. The emotions are turbulent, the stakes seem impossibly high, and: 'Nobody understands what I am going through.'

The time-honoured lament sounds original only to those who say it:

'They say it was just the same for them but it's different for me; it's much, much, better, and it's much, much, worse. Words suffocate me because I just hear myself spouting the same tired old clichés other people use.'

Adolescents discover that the more they want to tell the truth, the more their words lie. They can feel doomed to generalisation, an abyss where their unique voice will echo unheard. When they accept this they will accept that they must act. They must get on with the humble process of performing, because acting is all we can do. Acting is the nearest we get to the truth.

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There is always a gap between what we feel and our ability to express what we feel. The more we wish for the gap to be smaller, and the more we want to tell 'the truth', then the wider this perverse gap yawns. No three words are as inadequate as 'I love you'. We act constantly, not because we are purposely lying, but because we have no choice. Living well means acting well. Every moment in our lives is a tiny theatrical performance. Even our most intimate moments have a public of at least one: ourselves. I can never be truly alone if the other 'I' can see what I am doing. I can never purely 'be'.

We do not know who we are. But we know that we can act. We know that there is a greater or lesser quality to our performances as student, teacher, friend, daughter, father or lover. We are the people we act, but we have to act them well, and with a deepening sense of whether our performances are 'truthful' or not. But truthful to what? The real me inside? To others? Truthful to what I feel, want, ought to be? The question marks hang with the observation that the above and all the following are not necessarily true, but may prove useful.

Emotion and truth

Rather than claim that 'x' is a more talented actor than y, it is more accurate to say that 'x' is less blocked than 'y'. The talent is already pumping away, like the circulation of the blood. We just have to dissolve the clot. Removing things isn't always negative; what could be more positive than the surgeon teasing out the tumour? The surgeon can't make life; but he can try to stop life being stopped. Getting rid of things may be inspired: it is said that Michelangelo, when asked how he imagined the statue, replied that he just looked into the marble and chiselled away what shouldn't be there.

Whenever actors feel blocked the symptoms are remarkably similar, whatever the country, whatever the context. They feel sluggish and lost; occasionally, the actor starts to feel exposed, with a sense of being judged emanating from outside and within. Two aspects of this state seem particularly deadly: the first is that the more the actor tries to force, squeeze, and push out of this cul-de-sac, the worse 'it' seems to get, like a face squashed against glass. Second is the accompanying sense of isolation. The problem can be projected out, and 'it' becomes the 'fault' of script, or partner, or shoes. But two basic symptoms remain the same, namely paralysis and isolation — an inner locking and an outer locking. At worst this causes an immobility from eye to brain to heart to lung to lips to limbs, and an overwhelming sense of being alone, a creeping sense of being both responsible and powerless, unworthy and angry, too small, too big, too cautious, too, too, too . . . me.

When acting flows, it is alive, and this cannot be analysed; but problems in acting are connected to structure and control, and these can be usefully analysed.

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Other sources of block

Many different problems arise in rehearsal and performance that can damage acting. The room may be ill lit, badly ventilated, echoey or cold. More significantly, there may be a difficult atmosphere in the group, or a bad relationship with the director or writer. External problems over which the actor may have little control can also coagulate the work; but circumstantial difficulties will not be dealt with here.

When things go wrong I must distinguish between what I can change and what I cannot change. I also have to divide the problem into two parts: first, the part that comes from outside me, over which I may have little or no control, and secondly, the part which comes from inside me, over which I can learn to have increasing control. This book only addresses that second part of the actor's difficulties, the part that seems to come from within.

The senses

What actually is locked within is the actor's flow, the actor's inherent right to act well. This flow depends on two specific functions of the body: the senses and the imagination.

We are completely dependent on our senses. They are the first antennae that detect the outside world. We see, touch, taste, smell and hear that we are not alone. As tor- tures go, sense deprivation is theatrically weak but surprisingly efficient. When the stakes rise our senses become more acute. The interface between our bodies and the outside world becomes more sensitive and intense. We recall exactly the place where we heard astonishing news — no wonder that so many remember not only when but where they heard that President Kennedy had been shot. The world shifts and sharp- ens as the stakes rise, and each of the senses wakes — the smell of the whiskey at the funeral, or the taste of coffee in another bed. We will explore this further on page 139, with the mugger's knife.

Three remarks may help here: first, it is dangerous to take our senses for granted. Occa- sional meditations on blindness and other sensory loss are nearly as life-affirming as the regular contemplation of death. Secondly, the actor's senses will never absorb as much in performance as the character absorbs in the real situation. In other words the actor will never see the spectral dagger as acutely as Macbeth himself. Finally, this grace- ful acceptance of inevitable failure is an exhilarating release for the artist. That we will never get there is an excellent starting point; perfectionism is a vanity.

The actor needs to accept this dependence on the senses' limitations for the imagina- tion to run free. The actor relies utterly on the senses; they are the first stage in our communication with the world. The imagination is the second.

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Imagination

The imagination, the senses and the body are interdependent. The imagination is the capacity to make images. Our imaginations make us human and they toil every millisecond of our lives. Only the imagination can interpret what our senses relay to our bodies. It is imagination that enables us to perceive. Effectively, nothing in the world exists for us until we can perceive it. Our capacity to imagine is both imperfect and glorious, and only the paying of attention can improve it.

The imagination may be mocked as reality's understudy: 'that child has an over-active imagination' or 'you're just imagining things!' However it is only imagination that can connect us to reality. Without our ability to make images we would have no means of accessing the outside world. Our imaginations are the nearest we can get to reality. The senses crowd the brain with sensations, the imagination sweats to organise these sensations as images and then perceives meanings in these images. We forge the world within our heads, but it is never the real world; it is always an imaginative creation.

The imagination is not a fragile piece of Dresden porcelain, but rather a muscle that develops itself only when properly used. It was a popular eighteenth-century view that the imagination was an abyss that might swallow the unwary. The mistrust of the imagination persists, but to shut down the imagination, even if possible, would be like refusing to breathe for fear of catching pneumonia.

The dark

We develop the imagination when we use it and pay it attention; the imagination improves when we simply let it see things. But seeing things is not so easy; sometimes it is dark. How then can we light up the dark? Actually there is no such thing as the dark; there is merely an absence of light. But what could be casting this shadow over everything we see? There is a clue — if I examine this darkness I will see that it has a familiar outline. It has exactly the same shape as ... me. We make darkness by getting in the way of the light. So we nourish our imaginations simply by not getting in the way; the less we darken the world the clearer we see it.

Everything we see in the outside world is manufactured in our heads. We do not develop the imagination by forcing it into prodigious and self-conscious feats of creativity; we develop our imaginations by observation and attention.