

MARTIN GRUBER, NOVI SAD, MAY 2012

DEMIGOD OR SERVANT ON THE VULNERABILITY OF THE ACTOR

- Position Statements -

Contemporary theater is in the process of searching for new forms and fields. Influenced and sometimes driven by the coexistence with the rapidly developing new media, the crossover of disciplines, and international collaborations, the core themes in theater are in general shifting noticeably in the direction of an unconditional physicalness. What does the emphasis on physicalness and an unconditional “pre-expressive” presence mean for the performer?

I. FORMS OF VULNERABILITY

1. The Janus face: the actor-performer, the enslaved artist

A new type of actor is demanded: the actor-performer. An insoluble conflict is implicit in this type: self-determination vs. being subject to instructions. The performer implements his or her personality in a self-determined manner; the actor should do this in the manner of being subject to instructions. The actor-performer should do both at the same time. Through these two, abhorrent demands the performer's shelter is diminished – it makes the performer even more vulnerable.

For an actor, the shifting from representation to presentation means the actor suddenly stands on the stage as his or her own function. With a pure performer, this is an autonomous decision, with a reference to the performer's authenticity as an artist. With an actor, in most cases this has to do with a pseudo-autonomy, as this is usually demanded from and also controlled by the director. The problem with this is in this moment the actor is open to criticism as an individual and no longer as an actor in his or her role. With a performance artist, there is no director criticizing the performance artist. The audience or the art critic evaluates the performance act according to its artistic effectiveness. On the other hand, the actor can be attacked and criticized at all times by the director. Whereas previously the actor tended to be more the representation of a character, in director's theater the actor is now the deputy of a director and the director's performance concept, the actor is material for the director's artistic expression. In the meantime, directors are resorting more and more to what the actor offers them as a quasi-personal state, beyond a representative style of acting. This is not alienation in the Brechtian sense, which had the goal, in regard to contents, of integration in a superior concept of theater, but rather it frequently has to do with pure entertainment, whose sole orientation is to be "well received," a performance based on ratings.

2. Vulnerability through enslavement: oppressive structures in theater

The fundamental conflict runs through several levels. One level is based on the structures in theater. The problem of vulnerability through enslavement is based on the usual hierarchal and organizational structures in theater, in particular the German-language state-run theater. This includes the director's undisputed supremacy, who is seen as being the actual artist. The director is above the actor in the hierarchy, and the director's power is virtually untouchable.

The conflict is also visible on the level of the creative discovery process, which for the most part takes place between the director's/the dramaturges' own needs, experiences and visions and the actor up on the stage, who is supposed to translate all of this.

There is also no economic or human obligation that involves the length of engagement. Through these structures as well, the actor is becoming more and more an interchangeable, exploitable material. The "letting oneself fall" is hard to be done with an unknown director, who was chosen by the theater management and not the actor, and it cannot be done when one is simultaneously a cast member in more than five different plays with more than five different directors. In a hurry it appears to be legitimate to replace the "letting oneself fall" with the quarry of the "personal."

Roles are not selected mutually, but rather assigned; the actor does not have the right to have a say in the matter. As an actor under contract, one also cannot have a say in choosing the director. All of this is intensified by the economic imbalance between the actor and the director, who earns much more than the actor does. With the exception of a few famous actors, this means the director always holds the scepter of the power of decision. In a normal case, actors also do not have any room to negotiate regarding work times and the substance of work – yes, they do not even have a say in where they can be: As a rule, they are not allowed to leave the city where the theater the actors are under contract to is located without the theater's prior permission, so that they are always available and nearby if a recasting is necessary.

Form and content of the auditions for the managers of theaters at the acting schools reminds one of a slave market in many aspects: notes with physical measurements, age and special talents are distributed, and young graduates can be "bought" for two years. Without further conditions and for a salary that is below the salary of a supermarket cashier. To the present day, counter concepts, such as being accepted into an artists' collective or the vision of forming one's own independent group/ensemble, hardly play a role in this process.

3. VULNERABILITY THROUGH THE EMPHASIS OF PHYSICALNESS

The emphasis on physicalness in practice on theater stages increases the danger the actor will be reduced to an idealized physicality, and that the actor will be objectified and no longer perceived as a whole person.

3a. *Physicalness as crossing frontiers*

Physicalness is the downfall of acting when physicalness is mistaken for the essential essence of acting. There are productions where the actors have to slide across dangerously slippery stages. Or an actor has to run up a wall for so long until the actor is completely exhausted. Drag around "corpses" for so long until the actor falls over from physical exhaustion. In theater this must be repeated during every performance, evening after evening. This borders on assault and battery. And it is even more: it is mistaking personal experience for theatrical performance.

Exhaustion is not depicted, but rather genuine exhaustion is shown. Experience is not intensified and enhanced. This is not art, it is simply just personal. An immediate presence requires profound artistic and personal processes of experience and the unconditional freedom of choosing the means and contents in the depiction. Only in this way can the artistic act at that moment become an event. Only in this way can it attain that magic, that maximum uncertainty that draws the audience into the process and provides the audience with space for

its own experience. The uncertainty of an individual is sloppiness; it always refers simply to the past, it is a look back and is, to be precise, not a projection of openness or of the future. One wants to shorten the long, painful process, one wants to have the short effect. The real failure of the actor.

3b. Nakedness and vulnerability

The nakedness of the actors practiced so frequently on stage has little to do with being naked, it has more to do with voyeurism and a lack of imagination. A constant visible proof that one does not bow to civic demands is, in the long run, more or less seen as a sign of conformity rather than as a sign of resistance or subversion, or even physical freedom and self-determination. Just the opposite: As for the most part clothes are shed under the orders of the director, this is a precise display of the suppressive mechanism one would like to denounce by this action. A self-determined nakedness such as in the performances of the artists Annie Sprinkle or Marina Abramovic has a completely different impetus and consequentially a completely different effect. The subdued look is missing. That is why such a performance seems like a divulgement, a disclosure, shocking in its vulnerability. What Abramovic and Sprinkle do they do through their own decision, as their artistic statement. The actor-performer is forced to do it. Cutting a red cross into your skin should not be ordered by a director.

Here "oscillation" becomes a dangerous act, because on the presentation side one can very easily fall into this abyss, where one will only be sold off as media material. The actor is used as a material, as a quarry.

II. CONSEQUENCES / PROPOSITION FOR EDUCATION

How does the educational system react to these partially disparate demands? Education and training are still orientated to the actor as a service provider, and not to the actor as an independent artist. The latter would require completely new educational formats, and the schools are far from this. However, this question is equally as important: What can the actor do to keep his or her dignity and to resist the temptations of superficial effects? And how can one help the actor do this during the actor's education and training?

As for physicalness and vulnerability, during an actor's education I am concerned with training the body and instruction in movement, which do not incorporate the formation of a socially acceptable image of the body as a protective armor. I am concerned with an education that sees itself as a medium of acquiring knowledge in order to achieve an inner independence from trendy influences. That is why movement classes serve as a medium of deconstructing confining, obstructive, social and individually acquired patterns – by omission, by freeing oneself from external and internal constraints and from "ornaments" in a Kleistesque sense. The artists should also become sensitized by this to refuse contexts that only are trying for a short effect and result in unnecessary deterioration.

In the area of movement, it can no longer be about simply learning by heart certain series of movement or techniques, but rather about learning fundamental laws of movement and breaking down obstructive patterns. This means becoming aware of one's own possibilities, and attaining a high degree of flexibility and freedom of choice in expression. It is about learning a phenomenology of perception, about efficient reactions in a system that is always open. Alongside the approaches in modern, neurophysiological work with the body – such as Feldenkrais, Rolfing or Talmi – Asian martial art forms such as, for example, Aikido, are very

helpful here, where form in its qualitatively highest expression has always been merely the medium to attain the freedom to act through the stringency of the form.

It actually has to do with learning to learn. An actor will never be able to compete with trained acrobats, trained singers or dancers. The required long years of preparatory training are simply missing. What particularly distinguishes the actor, however, is that the actor should master the magic, the wizardry of comprehending existential processes and then to constantly be able to refer to this essence, to this mystery.

In the future, we will hardly be able to avoid discussing a fundamental form of ethics of the performing arts, which incorporates all of the mentioned aspects. And therefore also to formulate a criticism of existing structural and economic relationships, in particular those at state-funded theaters and schools.

III. TWILIGHT OF THE DEMIGODS?

And finally: How can pure presence and energetic exchange with the audience be generated? Or, as Erika Fischer-Lichte expressed it: "The actor's action on stage continuously oscillates ... between signifying procedures and a 'pure' manifestation of the corporeal (physical); representation and presence; to signify and to be." How does the performer get there? After all, that is an enormous demand, an almost superhuman demand: combine absolute presence, scenic fantasy, perfect endurance and physical mastery with the desire to perform, and then to "oscillate" freely under the direction of an outside source as a non-interchangeable personality at a certain time of the day.

Is this demand, this functioning, not subject to failure from the start? Is this what the audience wants to experience? The failure of demigods as an expression, as a lightning rod for one's own failure in an accelerated, utopialess world?

Or is the contemporary era of acting in all media only the transition to a time where the old division between what is real and what is virtual simply dissolves? On the path to a new magical era, where demigods performing onstage create an exemplary world? Full of freedom of choice and vitality?

(transl. by Robert Rowley)