

ACTING IN SOFT FOCUS. THE STUDY OF ATTENTION IN THE ACTOR'S TRAINING

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ABSTRACT. The following paper approaches the primordial role attention has in the actor's art. The author begins by mentioning the thorough study of the attentional mechanisms in Konstantin Stanislavski's theatrical system and applies the results of this study to a practical example taken from the work of a great actor and improviser, Robin Williams. Filip Odangiu's demonstration carries on by analyzing what he describes as the *attentional technique* specific to the actor's profession, a technique that involves the *circles of attention*, *affective attention*, *divided attention*, *observation* etc.

The author's declared goal is to gradually define the concept of *creative attention* and to present its practical application in the actors training. The study explores another key aspect in the actor's work: the *soft focus* state of the *body-mind unit*. In his conclusions, the author asserts that playing in the *soft focus* state, the actors are not escaping reality, but on the contrary, by reconstructing it, they are able to grasp it more acutely.

Keywords: *circles of attention, creative attention, soft focus, observation, target, acting, actor's training*

1. ROBIN WILLIAMS AND THE CIRCLES OF ATTENTION

Ladies and gentlemen, for the extent of four minutes, we will watch an actor's performance (*The speaker projects in front of the audience a short sequence from the television show "Inside the Actors Studio", hosted by James Lipton. In the shot, the actor Robin Williams does an improvisation using a scarf taken from an audience member.*¹)

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¹ Thanks to William's acting talent, the scarf transforms its function, helping the actor to impersonate a whole gallery of representative characters, ranging from an Indian female film director or a Muslim woman, to a French chef or a rabbi etc.

Thank you. Two months have already passed since this actor chose not to act for us any longer, but, perhaps, for the residents of other dimensions. On August 11, the actor, comedian, stand-up artist Robin Williams killed himself in his home in – ironically – Paradise Cay. My choice of this fragment and of this actor is not accidental. I believe the example is very fit to my topic today, namely the primordial role attention has in the actor's art.

Robin Williams has been described as a “comic genius”, “impeccable improv performer” and many other things; but these classifications can barely grasp the complexity of his talent. Satire, parody are part from a genre whose construction is perhaps the most challenging: the comic genre. And comic invention relies first on observation, on the acuity of attention. By paraphrasing Camil Petrescu's famous say, “there's drama for every dash of lucidity, of awareness”, we could say that, in the Actor's case, “lucidity matches the expanse of comic genius”.

Theatre and the acting practice have always advanced the topic of Attention. There are various viewpoints on it. At the beginning of the 20th century, in Russia, with Constantin Sergheevich Stanislavski, the study of acting withdrew from the field of empiricism and was approached with scientific instruments. Stanislavski, whose insights manage to stay remarkably topical, established the actor's obligation to train first his **external attention** and only then the **inner** one. Very precise correlations link the two. In his work – fundamental for the entire stage practice until today -, *An Actor's Work on Himself*, Stanislavski discusses the circles of external attention, by arranging them hierarchically. For their illustration, we will consider again, concisely, the improvisation we've just seen. *The small circle of attention* is restricted to Williams's body – “the instrument body”, to the shapes and movements he chooses to lend to his body and, thus, to be able to express his ideas. His self-control, his capacity to evoke images by bodily creation are remarkable and they hint to a flawless coordination of the means of expression. We also include here the way he controls his voice, its modulations, its changes, which are a perfect match for the purpose of the communication – metamorphoses in various characters. *The medium circle of attention* is how the actor manages to cover the immediately proximal space, the setting, the stage, the stage partner (the show host, mr James Lipton) and, most of all, the spectators in the first row. The most eloquent proof of *medium circle* control is that, at a point during the improv, without premeditation (we wonder), the actor picks a scarf from a spectator, to be able to continue his act. Finally, *the large circle of attention* includes the stage and the hall, the entire space and everyone included in it. Here, Williams completes the demonstration of his skill by the capacity to feel the entire audience, to communicate the vibration to the last rows, to monitor carefully, at the same time with the act, the audience's subtlest reactions. The reward is the enthusiastic participation of all the spectators in the actor's demonstration.

Intimately, in accordance with Stanislavski's theory, the *circles of external attention* are matched by *circles of inner attention*. Here, too, Robin Williams's art speaks. Thus, *the small circle* could be represented by how the "body-mind unit" (a cognitivist term prefigured by Eugenio Barba's "body-spirit" notion) works at Williams. I want to draw your attention on a brief moment of performance stop, when the actor seems to pause and think. He holds the scarf, folds it, his look is somewhat absent, nevertheless highly intense. You can feel that the body-mind thinks.² The idea rushes in and it is immediately taken over and used in the improvisation: the scarf movement suggest a car wash and, perhaps metaphorically, brain wash. *The medium circle of attention* could include the way in which the actor reprises and processes the information received from the circumstances, the spectators' reactions, and the links he operates between them and his massive stock of memories and images. Finally, *the large circle of inner attention* relates to the "great connections", the universal important topics approached and comically wrapped by Williams. Thus, we can identify references to a civilization that abandoned spiritualization, to the hollow form of religion and even to the fate of the comedian who is bound to entertain his audience at all costs.

The spectacular nature of this type of act (like Robin Williams's) also results from the fact that everything happens spontaneously, without prior preparation, given that the actor cannot know, for example, that a spectator would eventually provide precious props. Spontaneity, as suggested by Daniel Goleman, relates to bottom-up attentional processing. The unplanned character of the actor's improvisation is, however, the most enigmatic element of his art. And here's the secret: in fact, improvisation is never fully spontaneous. In a cognitivist approach, we could say the actors have "mental maps" of the improvisation. Perhaps a study would be interesting, which would approach the recurrence and the mental patterns contained by the improvisation canvases of the Renaissance commedia dell'arte actor and by those on which the contemporary stand-up artist relies.

Why have I chosen, for this topic, a stand-up comedy moment rather than a traditional show fragment which would include several actors and would rely on text? First, because the improvisation is the foundation of theater. Second, because one of the actor's supreme virtues is the capacity of "solitude in public" (see Stanislavski, David Zinder etc.), capacity to stay still, not to make anything on stage (apparently) and, nevertheless, to galvanize each and every spectator. Robin Williams is categorically placed at this level of the performance.

² This act is illustrative of the "thinking in motion" idea borrowed by Eugenio Barba from John Blacking and described in *O canoe de hârtie. Tratat de antropologie teatrală*, translation from Italian and preface by Liliana Alexandrescu, Editura Unitext, Bucharest, 2003, p. 138.

2. DIVIDED ATTENTION, A MYTH

Some believe divided attention – involved by the stage action – is the most spectacular aspect of the performer’s actions: how to be at the same time focused on the text, on the character’s traits, on the director’s indications, on the partners, on the lighting, on the “audience’s temperature”? But a skilled circus juggler does wonderfully with a lot more difficult tasks, risking his life when he has to balance his body and legs on a racing horse, look at the cane balancing on his forehead and on which a large plate is spun. At the same time, he has to juggle three or four balls.

Dexterity in the management of divided attention, like athletic and acrobatic mastery, is an implicit requirement for the present-day actor; all these are only a preliminary level of the stage action. The actor, ideally an “athlete of the heart” (as Antonin Artaud said), must push things further. At the actor, we speak about *creative attention* (Stanislavski).

3. CREATIVE ATTENTION

What is “creative attention”? What is it made of?

The actor’s pedagogy acts paradoxically. It suggests concrete physical methods and techniques for a profession where the “leap in the void, blindfolded”³ is constant and mandatory.

The images by which theatre prophets describe the actor’s creation, the performance, are not soothing: pyre, voyage, leap into the Unknown, labyrinth, tightrope walking above a precipice, blindfolded leap in the void, hunting a ubiquitous monster, the taming of a beast etc. All these relate to extreme situations. In an extreme situation, attention has a crucial role, most of the times. Reaction speed and efficiency can make a difference between life and death. Brain processes, required in such a context and known as bottom-up processing, ensure rapidity, intuition, impulsiveness.⁴ We know that the development of attentional mechanisms occurred through decisions that targeted solutions to extreme situations – mainly, survival. Thus, the brain has evolved for millions of years. Nowadays, cognitive psychology confirms the existence of two semi-independent mental systems, of different ages, operating modes and tasks, but nonetheless complementary. Daniel Goleman calls them “the two minds”: the one that feels, *the emotional mind*, and

³ Mihai Măniuțiu, *Despre mască și iluzie*, Bucharest, Editura Humanitas, 2007, p. 15.

⁴ Daniel Goleman, *Focus. Motivația ascunsă a performanței*, transl. by Iustina Cojocaru and Bogdan Georgescu, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucharest, 2013, p. 35.

the one that thinks, *the rational mind* (at the neocortex). The rational brain, it is said, appeared long after the so-called emotional brain.⁵ We recall Stanislavski's words "...in art we cannot work with a cold heart. We require some degree of inner ardor and affective attention."⁶ Therefore, the future actors must know and develop **affective attention**.

On the contrary, top-down mind is voluntary, in charge of analysis/self-analysis, planning and it is the heart of self-control, which, at times, can quiet down emotionally led impulses.⁷ Reflexive attention, will power and deliberate choice are top-down; spontaneous attention, impulse and routine are bottom-up. Assimilating a technique, a text or the character, requires from the actor to have an *active attention*, at the expense of an energy use, many times pushed to exhaustion.

But, as shown by Goleman, the more you rehearse a new routine, the more it becomes mechanical practice and it is assimilated in the bottom-up brain circuits; in other words, it is automatized. **Repetition** is the activity that occupies most of the actor's time throughout his professional activity. Naturally, repetition is one of the most important pedagogic instruments in acting, of course adjusted to several purposes. There are some almost ritual rehearsals, in each class, repetitions of procedures such as "Threshold Crossing" or the "Physical Warm Up" and "Creative Warm Up", exercises that contribute to the learning and the automation of a series of expressive behaviors (self-learning mechanism). On the other hand, in an the exercise platform like "Move to Form – Repeat (Body Memory)", the purpose of the countless repetition of a movement is to refine the form, to remodel it, to reach a satisfactory result. Other exercises introduce the idea of "inner repetition" of the movement, in conditions of external stillness, an occasion to engage the "radiation and the transmission of energy" (Michael Chekhov), the Presence.

All the elementary, even the plainest actions we perform change when we are on stage, in front of an audience. This is why, on stage, you have to learn to walk once again, to move, to stand, to sit, (...) to be.⁸ To be able to put aside the spectator (who supervises him, and thus could paralyze him), the actor should be captivated by what occurs on the stage. The actor needs an object for his attention. According to Stanislavski, **the small circle of attention** acts like a shield for the

⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Inteligența emoțională*, 3rd edition, transl. by Irina-Margareta Nistor, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucharest, 2008, p. 37.

⁶ Konstantin Sergheevici Stanislavski, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, vol. 1, transl. from Russian by Raluca Rădulescu, preface by Yuri Kordonski, Editura Nemira, Bucharest, 2013, p. 221.

⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Focus. Motivația ascunsă a performanței*, p. 36.

⁸ K.S. Stanislavski, *id.*, p.183.

actor, which could save him anytime he feels he disperses.⁹

The outward orientation of the attention is essential, according to Declan Donnellan, one of the most interesting theatrical scholars of our days. Inspired by Stanislavski, but going a lot farther, Donnellan structures a whole theory on the notion of **Target**. He warns the actor: “You never know what you do until you know on what/whom you exert that action. For the actor, any act must be conducted toward something/someone.” (The connection with the Stanislavski’s famous method of the physical actions¹⁰ is obvious) Donnellan adds: “I CANNOT act only verbs, each verb must have a target (i.e. a direct or indirect object, a specific thing, seen or felt and, to some degree, necessary)” Examples: I warn *Rome*; I deceive *lady Capulet*; I open *the window*; I remember *my family* etc. You yourself can be the target: I reassure *myself*...”¹¹ Donnellan also says: “The actor cannot act ‘I am dying’ because there is no target. What can be acted is: I embrace death; I fight death; I mock death. I fight for my own life”.

We do not forget that the eye of the actor who looks and sees draws attention on it from the spectator and thus also draws his attention to the correct object of the gaze. The famous man of theatre and of letters Dario Fo, winner of the Nobel prize of literature (1997), assumes each spectator’s head includes a remote camera. The actor has to know to guide it, sending it the correct impulses, so that the spectator should change the ‘lenses’ and the ‘shooting’ angles. This complicated montage conducted in the spectator’s mind makes the stage action more precise, more alive and more interesting.¹²

The cognitive psychology expert Mielu Zlate offers a suggestive example that can describe the process by which an actor identifies the theatrical potential of a situation. Zlate refers to the hypothetical situation of the captain of a drifting ship, at night, on the sea.

⁹ “...in the small circle it’s easy ... to examine the smallest details of the objects within its circumference, live with the most intimate feelings and desires, carry out the most complicated actions, solve the most difficult problems, and analyze one’s feelings and thoughts, to establish close communication with another person, confide to him one’s most intimate thoughts, recall the past and dream of the future” (K.S. Stanislavski, *id.*, p.193).

¹⁰ *The method of physical actions*, considered by many as K.S. Stanislavski’s most important contribution, focuses on the creation of the role based on the principle: through conscious technique toward the character’s subconscious. Based on a thorough analysis of the play and of the characters, we establish the “Main Theme” (end purpose described in the continuation of “I want to...”) and the “cross-action” (read thread of the action). The character’s intents, actions and replies are condensed and translated in physical actions, action verbs. (see K.S. Stanislavski, *Munca actorului*, chapter V, p. 552 et seq.).

¹¹ Declan Donnellan, *Actorul și Ținta. Reguli și instrumente pentru jocul teatral*, in Romanian by Saviana Stănescu and Ioana Ieronim, Editura Unitext, Bucharest, 2006, p. 27, 28.

¹² Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie. Tratat de antropologie teatrală*, p.188.

It's one thing that the captain simply sees the North Star and it's a completely different one to see it as being the North Star.¹³ The two ways of "seeing" the star have different psychological and behavioral consequences. One of these, the one involved by the representation, is definitely superior to the other, because it is additional information input, useful in the process of knowledge. Likewise, the actor's observation is not dis-engaged; it is not a mere data record; instead, it is active perception that builds relationships, overlaps images, finds significations.¹⁴

The observation also relates to the processes of the imagination. If we accept the definition of psychologist Paul Popescu-Neveanu, according to whom, in the approach of imagination, "its combinational and transformative dynamism that leads to the appearance of new images" is primary, then we understand why observation is, at the actor, a way to arm his "stock" of images, source of subsequent stage inventions.

The complex relationship between the actor's attention and the spectator's leads to a very interesting study by Kieron P. O'Connor and Frederick Aardema¹⁵ on the creation of a *possibilistic model of consciousness*. O'Connor and Aardema evoke the new approaches of the "active perception theory". These theories relates the sense of reality to the feeling of identity. The loss of one challenges the other. Active perception theory claims that the process involved in the imaginaries are the same with the perceptive ones; this allows us to see things either as they are or as they could be, depending on the analysis/interpretation of their features. An equivalence between the mental image and the visual perception relies on the hypothesis that both of them use the same psychological and physiological apparatus. Viola Spolin, one of the most prolific creators of games for actors' training, has a message that reverberates in her four hundred pages training method: "Train actors to handle theatrical reality not illusion."¹⁶ Reality is defined by general consensus rather than by objective criteria, say O'Connor and Aardema. One way to understand how the sense of reality emerges and how tightly linked it is to the sense of identity is to

¹³ Mielu Zlate, *Psihologia mecanismelor cognitive*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999, p. 185.

¹⁴ Max Reinhardt, the famous Austrian stage director, when he spoke about the world that stimulates his imagination, wrote "...I am surrounded by images. Imagine that, on the street, you are in a studio and the passers-by are characters in a play or in a film, they are not there by chance, they have purposes, intentions. What do they tell you?" As per the laws of memory, your capacity to recollect an image depends on how well you perceived it. Artistic sensitivity is educated through attention to detail and to specific things. By analyzing mnemonic systems, cognitive psychology draws surprising conclusions: "forgotten" information is not practically erased from the memory, it is merely "under-activated".

¹⁵ Kieron P. O'Connor, Frederick Aardema, *The imagination: Cognitive, pre-cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects*, in *Consciousness and Cognition* no.14 (2005).

¹⁶ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 3rd Ed., Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 42.

see what happens when they are absent. The cases of those who, because of accidents, traumas, disorders etc. lost their sense of reality are described by a psychological condition called *derealization* or *depersonalization*. Therefore, O'Connor and Aardema conclude that the triggers of derealization are: "discontinuities in normal experience, a trauma, an accident or a sudden change in arousal or even perceptual incoherencies in the world (seeing something out of place) or dysfunctional self-awareness". Could theatre, as event-situation, contain all the aforementioned elements? The performance is an "extra-ordinary" space and time, within which "unordinary", even paradoxical images may appear, which could generate "sudden changes in arousal". Sometime, theatre can generate reception phenomena similar to *derealization*, thus become a condition for the institution of theatrical reality.

One of the most efficient ways of overcoming *derealization*, show the two aforementioned researchers, is to engage, to get involved in the reality, to hang onto anything that emerges on its territory. The solution is expressed imperatively: stop looking into your chasms, get your attention outside. Thus, behaving "as if" you were immersed in the reality counteracts the "as if" you were far from it. To persuade the spectator that the events on the stage are more real than life itself is one of the most challenging stakes for the actors.

4. APPLICATIONS IN THE ACTOR'S TRAINING

Back to our topic, the resulting question concerns the way in which the student-actor can obtain *creative attention*.

Most of the actor's training methods favor attentional training. In fact, all of the games and exercises for actors include an attentional component, which adds to the awareness of the two fundamental categories of attention, the spontaneous ("bottom-up") attention and the voluntary ("top-down") one, cognitively speaking. Exercise of "sense update", of development of divided attention, of increase in the ability to observe, expressive techniques of directing the spectator's attention target the unveiling of one's own routines/automatisms and their "reformatting" toward a "stage ethos", a "double profile of the actor's energy".¹⁷ In stage practice, ethos means the mastering of a psychological-physical technique, the adoption of work ethics, of specific mentality.

The practice of "creative imbalance" also relies on attention, more precisely on the alertness of senses put to use. In the actor's training, *creative imbalance* relates to a conditions required for the stimulation of creativity. The actors are often

¹⁷ Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie. Tratat de antropologie teatrală*, Editura Unitext, Bucharest, 2003, p. 100.

given tasks that are listed in such a way that, by inducing uncertainty, expectation, (obviously controlled) danger, they could generate an activation of all the attentional and creative resources. One of the training purposes is to educate, at the student, the ability to restrict temporarily the action of their own defense mechanisms (inner cause of hindrances) and to understand that the “Leap into the Unknown” is a condition to the manifestation of creativity. According to Stephen Nachmanovitch, David Zinder and others, creativity emerges only in times of imbalance. This can be obtained by avoiding the personal *comfort zone*. Viola Spolin encourages the teacher: “Always throw them off-balance”. Most of the improv themes include the risk component (“Danger Works”), and some exercises target it directly. For example, the cycle of cane exercises or “Who/What is on the other side?” exercise etc.; acting teachers always encourage their students: “Get out of your comfort zone!” or “Take a risk!”

(at this point of the speech, two students are prompted to perform the “Mirror” exercise)

5. ACTOR AS OBSERVER

Director Robert Cohen, professor at the University of California, Irvine, in one of the most captivating books on the actor’s training, *Acting Power*, believes that, although less ostentatious than the exchange of replies or the stage movement, the observation is “one of the most powerful stage actions that can be acted.” Cohen exemplifies his assertion through a simple exercised called “The Fisherman”¹⁸. The American teacher says that many of the problems and hindrances that appear in the acting of an episode will be overcome if the teacher/director suggest a shift of perspective to the actor/student, namely to image they act or say their reply as if they tried to “fish” something, not if as if they “stated” something. This subtle reversal of perspectives will make the actor, says Cohen, concentrate on the always present intentions rather than on motivations (past oriented) or on attitude.

¹⁸ “The role of a fisherman is a good exercise to test an actor’s ability to observe, because fishing is a subtle example of *feedback*. When asked to play a fisherman, any actor who knows something about fishing, will know how to put an imaginary hook on an imaginary line, cast the line into an imaginary river. In this exercise, what distinguishes the good actor is that, additionally, he will wait for the fish to bite! He will feel the imaginary tug of the line and will wait for its movements depending on the information received in the initiated situation. They now *want* to catch the fish! He will play an intention (to catch the fish) rather than a mere demonstration of fishing techniques. In his case, the situation is lived, not merely shown.” (Robert Cohen, *Puterea interpretării scenice. Introducere în arta actorului*, transl. by Eugen Wohl and Anca Măniuțiu, Cluj, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, 2007, p. 82).

The fundamental notion on which Cohen's research relies is *feedback*. When two people talk to each other, a simple *feedback loop* is activated; through it, both of the participants are engaged in the sending and the reception of information. Such pieces of information make them adjust their behavior for the fulfilment of their own intentions and, sometimes, even change their intentions. The actor who approaches his character's situation approaches, therefore, his *feedback loop*. The actor who "lives his character's life", as said by Stanislavski, undertakes the character's interactions. (At the same time, the actor is caught in the *feedback loop* with his instrument).

The attitude of Cohen's "fisherman" does not differ from the "hunted hunter". The expression relates to an exercise in the method of David Zinder, direction and acting teacher at the Tel Aviv University. In the first part of the exercise, devised by Zinder, the actors are hunters. Their task is to find the "prey", get ready to attack and even perform the attack leap. In order to provide the participants greater freedom of imagination, the teacher does not describe or name the prey, naming it "something" or the "creature".

Among the many gains of this exercise, one is essential, namely reaching and practicing the *Zero Point*. The *Zero Point* relates to the "sats" used by Eugenio Barba, meaning "impulse" or "readiness"¹⁹. Meyerhold's work terminology includes a similar notion, "otkaz" (literally meaning "rejection"). At Viola Spolin and then at David Zinder, we find the multivalent phrase No Motion. This means what the actor can keep in a state of underactivation and potentiality shadowed someplace, ready to become active energy.²⁰ The *Zero Point* is characterized by dynamic stillness, a state of supreme vigilance: the body and the mind are ready for anything – the "body-mind unit" works optimally. That is when the actor is present. Paradoxically, this state of alertness is not total tension, but in accordance with the contrast law described by Yoshi Oida: "Ideally, the interior and the exterior should be contradictory. Look at a spinning top: when it wobbles about all over the place, it is spinning slowly. It is ready to fall over. When it is upright and fixed on a single spot, it is spinning extremely fast. On stage, your body is the same: when you are required to be calm or immobile, there is a huge inner dynamic. The reverse is also true. When you undertake strong or violent physical actions, you must retain a core of tranquility... This is a paradox..."

¹⁹ "In the language of our work it indicates, among other things, the moment in which one is ready to act, the instant which precedes the action, when all the energy is already there, ready to intervene, but as if suspended, still held in the fist, a tiger-butterfly about to take flight." (in Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie*, p. 72).

²⁰ David Zinder, *Body Voice Imagination: A Training for the Actor*, Second Edition, Routledge, New York, 2009, p.198.

Actors need to experience this duality. When you discover physical stillness, it is not total stillness; there is also an inner dynamism. When you discover physical dynamism, you must balance it with inner calm.”²¹

The actor’s self-observation, simultaneous with the conducted action (obviously, a metacognitive skill) is essential to the dynamics of an improvisational moment. The actor’s presence means a complex of actions, a blend of attitudes: withdrawal, standby, non-focused attention (“soft focus of awareness”), “intent listening”, peak energy intensity, a slowing down “at the inside”. This type of attentional attitude is one of the most complex aspects of the actor’s training.

6. ACTING IN SOFT FOCUS

Therefore, *creative attention* embraces several “categories” of attention, we could count, for example, under the *attentional technique* specific to the acting profession, which involves: the circles of attention, affective attention, divided attention, observation and so on and so forth. But these are not enough when we try to describe the quality of the actor’s attention during the improvisation. The moment of creation is a solitary moment of stability between structure and spontaneity, between discipline/technique and freedom. Experience tells me there is a connecting state among all the aforementioned types of attention: the *soft focus*.

Last year I was invited to conduct an acting workshop for people suffering from sight deficiency. I had worked with hearing deficient people, but I had never worked with blind people. When I started my preparations, I could see immediately the challenge of the task ahead. The series of techniques and exercises I had thought of initially was inapplicable in the given situation. I understood, however, that perhaps if I stopped looking at those with whom I was to work as if they were people deprived of an essential type of sensitivity and if I accepted that they hold, by compensation, increased modalities of perception, I would find the working solutions. By searching through the “treasure of activities” any acting teacher gathers, like a tireless squirrel, throughout his life, I was surprised to find that many training exercises and techniques include the recommendation to work with eyes closed (e.g., at Augusto Boal). Obviously, this indication targeted, by the deliberate closing of some channels, an openness to a greater, more inclusive type of attention.

Then I was able to recall a larger number of aspects in my own experience as an actor. For instance, I remembered that, when we worked with Ferruccio Soleri, one of the best known interpreters of Arlecchino’s masks, we felt “intimidated” by the

²¹ Yoshi, Oida, Marshall, Lorna, *Actorul invizibil*, transl. by Maia Teszler, Oradea, Editura ArtSpect, 2009, p. 17.

requirement of self-monitoring our body expression while wearing the mask. The famous and superb leather masks were unfortunately adjusted for only one face (as to the holes made for the eyes) and did not match another actor; practically, we were working blindfolded. Instead, we had to know/see, anytime, how our body looked from the outside, what it communicated, what his relationship was with the space and with the partners. The venerable Italian actor was having loads of fun when he saw how we struggled to “steal” with our eyes, through tiny holes, to adjust our posture or our position in space. Soleri would speak incessantly about the actor’s need to develop his “inner eye”.

I found the same work conditions later, when I worked with Izumi Ashizawa, an actress trained in traditional Japanese theatre and initiator of the Neo Noh trend²². This time, the Noh theatre mask was the occasion of an even more frustrating experience. Made from burnt porcelain, small, heavy, the mask had two tiny holes, instead of eyes, which allowed very little visibility. Therefore, in fact, the challenging Noh training took place often with our eyes closed. When open eyes were allowed, Izumi would ask the actors to “kill the look”. Of course, this opposed anything I knew about the actor’s look, deemed one of the most powerful means of expression in the European theatre.

Indications such as “kill the look”, “close your eyes and see yourself from the outside”, “try to develop a *third eye*” (as my acting teacher, actress and exceptional researcher Miriam Cuibus, would ask) or the notion of *soft focus*, which I found later, made me ask myself whether the actor’s technical attention is enough to this art and whether *attention to attention*, a degree of meta-attention, could be indispensable. At the same time, contrary to the general trend of opinion, could this self-observation increase the actor’s “presence” rather than damage it?

To understand *soft focus*, we need to read Declan Donnellan’s opinions on “the difficult choices” the actor has to contemplate: the idea of attention, as attitude superior to concentration. According to Donnellan, concentration invariably destroys attention. We cannot pay attention to something and concentrate on it at the same time. Attention means Target. If you concentrate intensely on another object or on another person, you will see them less and less, because you will see *how you want to see*. You need to “see” things as they are, to pay attention to them. The British director concludes that concentration removes virtual possibilities; therefore, we should prefer attention, because it leaves room for “anything” to appear, which stimulates creativity.²³

²² The movement suggests the approach of classic European dramaturgy tragedies by means of expression specific to traditional Japanese theatre.

²³ In cognitive psychology, the removal of related possibilities is called “lateral inhibition”.

Basically, the notion of *soft focus*, read as technique involved in the actor's work, appears in David Zinder's method and also in *The Viewpoints Book* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau²⁴. Mainly, this is a technique of relaxation of the look, through which the field of view increases more than 180°; thus, the peripheral view becomes as efficient as the frontal view²⁵. Once this technique is learnt by the body, we can later use it to understand the notion and to practice a "soft focus of the mind", meaning a paradoxical state that joins vigilance and mind relaxation required for the spontaneous manifestation of imagination. Therefore, *soft focus*, a middle state between perception and imaginary, is one of the modalities by which the actor exceed *derealization* and also subordinates it to his creative purposes.

Soft focus is the *look from outside* of the Buddhist Vedas, from where Grotowski, too, borrows the text "we are two. The bird who picks and the bird who looks one. The one will die, the one will live"²⁶. Viola Spolin's system and the Viewpoints theories mention constantly the terms *Awareness* and *Evaluation*; Yoshi Oida talks about "fluid awareness".

These metaphors borrowed from the poetics of the actor's art relate to metacognitive knowledge, experience and monitoring. Cognitive monitoring is the capacity to do and to monitor at the same time an action, without hindering pulses of creativity. Theatrical exercises, games and activities help the participants acquire and use their metacognitive knowledge in a dramatic action; in other words, in the middle of an event, they allow the actor to select, to evaluate, to rectify and to drop, if necessary, dramatic tasks, purposes and strategies, depending on the relationship with his partners and with the energy of the performance. In spots, in team games, (it is said) sometimes some players have an exceptional ability to overview the execution and the dynamics of the game. What happens suggests an osmosis phenomenon, a fusion between the subject and his activity.

In *Free Play*, one of the most important books on improvisation, Stephen Nachmanovitch states: "For art to appear, we have to *disappear*."²⁷ Obviously, this does not mean the author's disappearance; it means the moment of creation

²⁴ Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Theatre Communication Group, Inc. New York, 2006, pag 31.

²⁵ The "soft focus" related phenomenon was also emphasized by a series of experiments conducted by psychologists Moran and Desimore, who, in 1985, showed how by switching focus when sight is immobile, we can also process stimuli different from those present in the foveal zone, the most sensitive retinal zone.

²⁶ The text is also mentioned in C.G. Jung, relating to the psychological category of the double.

²⁷ Nachmanovitch, Stephen, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, New York, Penguin-Tarcher, 1990. p. 51.

itself. Creative flow is compared by Nachmanovitch with our state when the senses are fully engaged in an event, such as a beam of light suddenly reflected by the soaking ground or a guitar chord heard at a window etc. In such a moment, says Nachmanovitch, the mind and the senses are briefly suppressed by experience. All the surrounding elements disappear, the self and the environment fuse. Attention and intention merge. We can see things *as they are* and yet we are able to lead them in the direction designed by us. In such moments, *we become what we do*, concludes Nachmanovitch²⁸. The name given to this state of grace by sportsmen is “to be in the Zone”, to live a “flow”, would say Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

In theatre, these special moments, when “the bird of inspiration rests on the actor’s shoulder”, as described by Ariane Mnouchkine, become even more spectacular when the teacher/director intervenes in the actor’s act, without the latter’s interruption. There are two procedures of intervention/ “hot” guidance of the actor; they differ in their levels of proximity. **Sidecoaching** occurs through indications, impulses, loud observations made from a distance by the director and heard by the other actors. **Shadowing** involves the teacher’s/director’s presence on the stage; he flanks the actor while the latter executes his stage actions; the intervention takes place via a flow of whispered indications, at the pace and matching the tension of the developing dramatic event. Here, the teacher / director himself undergoes a transformation, because he has to place himself at the same level of energy, if not even higher, to be able to guide the act.²⁹

The actor’s internalization of the director’s/coach’s voice, with no break in the creative flow, is not a mere effect of divided attention; instead, it is one of the most eloquent examples of the Encounter (the Meeting) that theater is. Against the laws of physics, we could say that, in those moments, the actor is simply present in several places at the same time: in the character’s world, where he can see the “Target”; on the stage, where he can feel the unfolding of the energy in the performance and in the acting partners and where he can even anticipate the flow of events; at the same time, he is in the “small circle of attention” and, finally, in contact with the audience’s “temperature”, he is circumscribed by the latter’s feedback loop.

Which is the ontological stand of the actor who reaches, during acting, the state of *soft focus*? Are actors different from non-actors, from those who watch them from the audience? Do they leave in a dream world? Or, on the contrary, are they more soundly anchored in the Present, in the Reality? I tend to agree

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Director Tadeusz Kantor established this method at the performance level.

with Natalie Depraz who sheds light on the direct relationship between the quality of our attention and the level of humanity.³⁰ The inspired actor is closer to his human essence.

The current opinion is that actors are privileged because they are given the chance to “escape” the prosaic daily existence. The actor’s work opposes this preconception. Actors do not want to escape reality; on the contrary, by reconstructing it, they are able to grasp it more acutely. They pay more attention to the Present and help the spectators do the same. The actor does not “put on an act” and does not dream when he speaks to us from his pyre, he is real.

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³⁰ “Dimension intime de notre humanité, l’attention n’a cessé d’être cultivée à l’aide de « techniques » variées destinées à l’attirer, à la maintenir ou, à rebours, à la relâcher, comme si nous sentions confusément que notre humanité en dépendait.” (Natalie Depraz, *Attention et vigilance. A la croisée de la phénoménologie et des sciences cognitives*, Presses Universitaires de France, Coll. « Epiméthée » 2013, p. 3).

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