

*A 'link', I guess. This one between theatre and... ethics! This article has not previously been published, I wrote the first early version in about 2009, not long after I started going to meetings of that excellent set-up the Forum for European Philosophy (based at the LSE). Some of this article describes again some of the details of using a mask - but from a different aspect and with a different purpose.*

## **The Ethics Of Acting**

Acting, to act, is an interesting word. In one meaning it denotes taking action, doing something in the real world. In another meaning, it denotes pretending, taking a role in an imagined world.

In this article, I shall start with the latter, the acting that goes on as a performance, in a theatre or in a theatre-related medium. But I am undertaking this because I believe that acting in the theatre-of-the-stage sense can throw some light on acting in the theatre of reality.

Actors (and of course actresses - in the USA, they are called actors) have always occupied a special place in society. David Garrick, Sarah Bernhardt, and in our era Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, James Stewart, and in the present day perhaps George Clooney and Kate Winslet, are among many who aren't just celebrities but can be said to have achieved a kind of God-like status - thus comparable, I would claim, in their presence and their behaviour in the general consciousness to that of the panoply of Gods in Greek mythology. But that is a broader issue.

My starting point in this essay is to focus on the way in which the art and craft of acting has come, in our time, in our society - by which I mean the 'developed, Western, secular' world - to be seen as a kind of indication of an ethical position: a position in relation to a certain kind of truth. Good actors are recognised by the extent to which they are 'convincing', 'authentic', 'believable'. Good acting in some way has to be seen as truthful.

There are some actors, with quite exalted reputations and with acknowledged acting skills, who nevertheless when I watch them (and I don't believe I am alone) I always am aware: this is acting, this is so-and-so playing a part. There are other actors who somehow manage to allow the character they are playing to get under their skin to the extent that we forget they are acting. We still know they are actors, and admire them as such. But in part of our minds we suspend that knowledge, at least for long enough to be taken over, as if what is being enacted in front of us, for that time, were a part of real life.

I regard this kind of acting as an altered state, a trance-like state, a state of possession.

My view of acting in this respect comes originally from work I did with masks at the Royal Court Studio, mainly with Keith Johnstone. We worked with half-masks, that is, they leave the lower half of the face, below the nose, exposed. They are also called character masks. Their origin was the kind of mask that was used by the Commedia dell' Arte, in the troupes in Italy in the 16th Century. Some of the masks we used (many of which were made by Harriet Devine, the daughter of George Devine, founder and first Artistic Director of the English Stage Company) were derived from Commedia masks. Some were her own invention.

The method of using these masks was as follows. You take a mask, without any deliberate choice, without spending any time 'deciding', from a table where several are laid out, with a mirror at its side. You put on the mask, making sure it is comfortable, but not attempting any other kind of deliberate adjustment. You divest your mind of any preconceived idea, you make your mind 'blank', so far as this is possible. Then, and not before, you turn and look in the mirror.

What you see, of course, is part the mask, part you - but it looks like a new creature. And you allow the impact of this thing in the mirror to affect you, physically, so it may be that your mouth changes, your neck and shoulders take on a different posture, you stand differently. You don't 'think'. You allow your body to respond. Then you start to move, you discover how this creature moves, you turn to a table with bits of clothing, hats, a scarf, a bit of cloth, a box, a brush, a cardboard tube that was the centre of a roll of lining paper - and you explore what this new creature is interested in. With a new 'mask', by which I mean a new 'creature', one that you are inhabiting for the first time, this may be a slow process. You don't try to talk. Not yet. This creature doesn't know how to talk. You might make a sound. But talking has to be learned - it's a very sophisticated activity.

Now. Two things are very remarkable about this phenomenon.

First, it is very clear to us watching (in a studio, where it would be the other participants) whether it is 'working' or not. When it is working, what that means is, here is a new creature in front of us, convincing, authentic, believable. Whatever the mask does is somehow right. (I shall enlarge on the connection with the ethical aspect, how I started this essay, in due course). If it's not working, it is obviously and unambiguously contrived, embarrassing, rather silly. There is no half way about this. It is one or the other. And the person in the mask becomes aware of it too. When it's working, the wearer just does things, without thought or planning. When it's not working, now things are made to happen, there is internal deliberation, 'what shall I do now?'. 'Oh yes, that looks interesting, I must arrange my hair...'

The instruction I always give is ' - and stop when you don't want to do any more.' I don't say more than this, because it becomes clear both to watchers and to those doing it (and of course in a workshop watchers become doers and vice versa) what this criterion means. When it is no longer 'working', you take the mask off. Or, alternatively, once you've got the hang of it, once you've got the basic feel, you can go back to the mirror and 'recharge' - you may get back into the right state.

This is the early stage of working with a mask. Later, you learn how this mask does various things, you start relating to other creatures, you can learn to talk, perhaps you learn to dance, or play a musical instrument. Sometimes there remains a temptation to make things happen: and when the state weakens, a desire to prolong it. Eventually, you learn how to follow simple instructions, which may even take the form of a structure, a simple script, or purpose, a scenario. Within these instructions, the details are improvised. From what we can deduce, this is how the Commedia dell' Arte seem to have worked.

The second thing, the other thing that is remarkable, is that a particular mask has a similar effect on different people wearing it - and I mean, of course, on people who have never seen this mask being used before. It's as if the features of a mask have some quality (I am tempted to call it archetypal, but am

ambivalent about this term because it carries some baggage and I don't really want to spend time attempting a defining job on it) - the features of a mask seem to have some quality which, deep down, we recognise, and which evokes behaviour of a particular kind. Here the comparison for me is with the characters in a Voodoo ceremony: which is why I think of a mask state that is working, and also of good acting, as a state of possession.

I want to clarify right now why I think this is an altered state, comparable to a hypnotic trance.

First, there is a trigger, which is the putting on of a mask and the seeing of an image in the mirror. And connected with this trigger there is the set of rules, and the suggestion that you allow yourself to react to what you see in the mirror.

Next, certain specific instructions can be implanted beforehand. One that Keith was always keen on (and I followed him in this) was to implant beforehand the instruction 'if I say take it off, you take it off'. This is largely a safety measure, because sometimes a mask will do something that is dangerous, like go to hit someone with a stick. But also, sometimes, he, and I, use it to stop someone when obviously it isn't 'working' any more and the wearer is vainly trying to persist.

Third, there is a certain degree of control within this state, especially once the wearer has some experience of it and has developed the skill. This is also true of a hypnotic trance. One part of the mind seems to remain 'conscious', in the ordinary sense.

Fourth, there is the business of the thing being convincing or not. Whether someone is in a hypnotic trance, or is pretending, or 'faking' it as stage hypnotists will say, is obvious to see, and rather easy once you get the feel of it.

And finally, there is the phenomenon of anaesthesia. A mask in character does not feel pain from something that would normally be painful - until, quite often, afterwards when the mask-state is over.

So. How to relate all this to an ethical understanding, to an ethical system, to the value system of a particular society? This was my starting point, and this is my interest now in looking at this issue in acting.

In Claire Tomalin's wonderful biographical study of Nelly Ternan "The Invisible Woman", she devotes the first couple of chapters to describing the attitude with which the theatrical profession, and actresses in particular, were regarded by what one could call respectable society. Or, in other words, from a different perspective, the image that 'official', 'formal' society wants to have of itself, and uses to reinforce this.

The way acting, and actresses, are now regarded has changed rather radically since those days. And I think this change gives us some insights into the way our society has changed, and also into some values that can be articulated from a secular, humanist position.

What is especially interesting (to me) in Tomalin's account is how the life of the theatre, the people who worked in it, their attitudes, gives it the feel of an alternative society, a counterculture, different from those of the social world surrounding it. Women were much more independent, they could command pay

on an equal basis to men, they could take leading positions within the profession, their social horizons were not limited by their situation as 'a wife', the prevailing sexual rules were more openly flouted, separation and divorce were possible. And it does seem as if it regarded itself as a special section of society, with values of its own that were different and were seen as positive.

However, the reverse side of this was that the theatrical profession was regarded by respectable society as disreputable. Actors, and especially actresses, were considered skilled in the art of faking, of simulating, of deception and deceit, and of seducing in the direction of immorality. Much theatre itself was considered a form of prostitution.

If we look at our more contemporary times, there are perhaps some similarities, but certainly some very large differences. 'Contemporary' I have to define as going back some 100 years. Because we could describe as a pioneer in contemporary countercultural life the community based on a village near Ascona in Switzerland right back in the years around 1912. It called itself 'Mountain of Truth', actually 'Monte Verita' - because they believed they were following a truthful approach to life and to self-knowledge. Frieda Lawrence's lover Otto Gross was a member for a time - he was a well-known psychoanalyst who believed in sexual liberation. The dancer Mary Wigman, and Rudolf Laban, were long-standing members. Its inhabitants pretty much practised free love, and frequently danced, or just spent time, naked. They believed in organic cultivation and grew at least some of their own food. They believed in collective ownership, at least amongst the community - but of course many of them came from privileged families so it did not need a real-world 'economy'. Their relation to change in society was artistic and intellectual, rather than political or economic. Its story is chronicled in Martin Green's *Mountain Of Truth*.

The Ascona community effectively ended in 1914, soon after the outbreak of the First World War. But it foreshadowed the counter-culture communes which flourished from around some time in the 60s into the late 70s. A few survived longer. Perhaps the best known, Christiania, in Copenhagen, exists till this day (February 2012); and so does Frestonia, in Notting Hill, London. Another community, started by Marcel Barbu in 1941 and called Boimondeau, has been chronicled. There is also a kibbutz, in the Negev desert 60 km north of Eilat, Neot Sedama, founded in 1989, which successfully practices communal structures.

I myself lived in a communal squatted house in a squatted street, St Agnes Place, London for a couple of years (see article in *Performance Groups, Travels and Growth Movement*). What were, and are, the values of such communities? Their practices? Their structures of ownership and for decision-making?

I want to focus on their decision-making structures; and their ownership structures. They commonly use the 'general assembly' for making decisions: everyone is present and represents themselves. There might be working committees for particular tasks, but these are set up by the general assembly and are responsible to it. This is participatory democracy, or base democracy as the Germans called it (*basis*). It is definitely distinct from representative democracy. We can use the terms 'collective decision-making', 'collective responsibility' to characterise this kind of system.

How far such a system could go seems to me to depend on two things. How large is the social organism? And what is its ownership structure?

In a small collective, decision-making can have a very collective structure. In a large organism, such as a nation, it is hard to imagine how this could function. We would need a structure based on small local collectives but inevitably linked to a central 'parliament'.

*[ - added in year 2012) And there is the issue of consensus versus majority voting. A useful account of the consensus practice can be found on the website of Seeds for Change <<http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consensus>>. A very present-day organisation which claims to practice consensus is the Occupy movement. I say 'claims' not because I doubt that they actually and consistently and honestly attempt to use this practice but only because I see it as a somewhat Utopian way of achieving agreement, I doubt its ability to resolve real conflict. And I cannot believe it to be the most effective way that a collaborative social organism, especially a large one such as a nation, could in practice, given our evolved make-up, function. Not for long, anyway. I believe it would tend to return - or one might say degenerate - to a representative system. And it would certainly have to deal with the central issue of localisation. (I say 'central' because, in company with the Greens, I believe the issue of localisation to be one of the most crucial of all, to which just about everything can be related, in the disastrous economic and social situation that we find ourselves in our contemporary, globalised world.)*

*My main reason for believing this is that we have to consider ownership structures. Some of the communes I have known practice a common economy, to the extent that those working at an outside job bring their earnings in to share with the communal economy. What are the resources of a social organism - whether large or small? And who owns them? These are crucial questions. Without considering who owns the resources, talk of a Big Society is just bloated rhetoric.]*

If we consider the educational movements in the 1970s, how does this connect with them? I was on the staff of the Polytechnic of North London at the time. From working rather conventionally in a Management Studies Department, we changed the work and set up a new course. Some of the participants came from companies, but a substantial number were from the care professions; and people who wanted to work with groups and organisations. We set up what at the time were given the general name Self-Directed learning communities (which title, however, ignores the very important element of collective responsibility). They are described in detail in the section 'History and Design of Courses'.

And so back now to the ethical question as it relates to acting. It is very clear that there has been a fundamental change in how we regard acting, and theatre, since Victorian times. The name most directly associated with this change is that of Stanislavsky, and his approach, now widely practised, has come to be called the 'Method'.

The essence of Method acting is, as most people probably know, that in building a character, and working with a scene, an actor searches within for real feelings and experiences, and brings these to what is being enacted. Clearly this is very different from faking or simulation. It is bringing a definite kind of truth to the work. And it is what makes it 'convincing', and 'truthful'.

I believe that when a character is built in this way, an actor can become 'possessed'. And I believe that this aspect of acting does indeed have an ethical dimension, because it defines a certain kind of truth.

The question then that arises for me is, does this change in the workings of theatre and acting have any significance in relation to a fundamental change in our society? Are people in general more 'truthful'?

I believe it is legitimate to propose that they are. 'Transparency' and 'Accountability' have become valued concepts - used somewhat rhetorically at times, true, but they have entered the public consciousness. The thought that they are a genuine development in our European, secular culture gives me cause for optimism.

*( - also added in 2012. I am struck by the success of the Scandinavian TV dramas in the past two years. I believe this is partly due to their great realism - the characters in them feel 'real' in a way that characters in American and British dramas often don't. And it occurs to me that Henrik Ibsen, who in a way can be seen as the father of realistic, exposing drama, was Scandinavian. And that measures of equality and health and functionality are co-related and higher in these countries than in most - see Pickett and Wilkinson's The Spirit Level).*

And further, does this change, in the direction of what I have labelled 'truthful', connect with any change towards co-operation and collective responsibility?

All the evidence points to the fact that as human beings we have evolved the capacity for collaborative empathetic living as much as we have the capacity for competitiveness and territoriality. Have we evolved sufficiently the capacity to integrate these two energies? I hope so. Because if we haven't, then as a species, and as a planet, we may be doomed!