

Letters & Notes

(THE EDITOR:)

Dear Michael,

Your article on Acting (T53) begins with a misleading premise. To say, "Acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate," is to miss the most obvious, important meaning, the one which, in fact, harmonizes all the elements which you chose to separate in your diagrammatic discussion: acting is *doing*. This is as true for the task-oriented Happening actor (or the contemporary nontheatre people, such as John Perreault, making theatre pieces influenced by the Happenings of several years ago) as it is for the characterization-oriented play actor, and for all the gradations in between, including the modern group actors who are involved in investigating certain aspects of their inner selves through theatre.

This definition is important because it brings us to the very essence of the theatrical experience, as obvious to Aristotle as to Stanislavski: theatre is action (internal action as well as external). And the actor is the one who *does*. The acts which he performs, he does as a surrogate for all men. We go to a theatre event to see human beings making choices of actions and performing those actions. In this way is theatre exemplary for us all. In this way is it the most graphically existential medium.

From this principle, it follows that theatre events in which performers are not involved in choice and the performance of actions (I am not talking about activities, which have a function in the theatre only as external manifestations of choice and intention) cannot be considered theatre. And this is what we American "method"-trained people mean by "indication," rather than the curiously off-the-mark explanation in your article: an action to which you are not really committed,

an action not really performed, but merely sketched in, as if to show how it would be performed if one were to bother to commit oneself or had the technique or sense of truth to really *do* it. (Obviously, this does not mean that the actor playing Othello really has to kill his Desdemona. It does mean that he has to search out where murder exists in his own heart, and work from there.) Uncommitted pseudo-action activity with neither commitment nor intention, is not theatre, by this definition.

To commit oneself to a course of action means to involve oneself, to invest something of oneself in that course of action. Now, a series of activities can be performed without costing you anything except a little time and energy. In that case, the performer's only commitment is to the continuity of his actions, like the squirrel on the treadmill. It is precisely here that theatre people part from Happenings people, for nothing could interest theatre people less than mere activities devoid of that investment.

American "method"-trained people have oversimplified this element of involvement to mean the degree to which the actor gets emotionally worked up during his performance. But obviously a "cool" actor, such as Brecht's rational, critical actor, is not any the less *involved*. Perhaps *engagé*, with its Sartrian overtones, would be a more useful word.

A most useful discussion, therefore, would focus on a subject which "objective" academics seem to prefer to avoid: commitment in theatre. This would be more than a political discussion, as I've tried to suggest. For example, is it enough to perform an activity because Claes asked me to, or because it symbolizes growth (or decay or whatever)? Can't we expect more of a performer than that? Even putting

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Moscow is Burning (1930)

aside questions of technique, does the performer invest any part of himself in these tasks besides some degree of concentration? In what way does the activity fulfill him, free him, enrich him, redeem him, renew him as a person, as the more complex actions of the theatre actor can do?

Peter L. Feldman,
former Co-Director of
The Open Theatre.

MICHAEL KIRBY replies:

Peter Feldman's views are important not because they are correct but because they give us some insight into the goals of this theatre practitioner. If they do not tell us about *all* theatre, they do help us to understand *his* theatre.

Yes, acting is doing. But writing and many other things are doing, too. I am "doing" right now, yet I am not "acting" in the sense of that word that we are trying to define. Thus it is pointless to equate acting and doing, as Feldman does in his first paragraph. The concept of doing "harmonizes" not merely the acting/not-acting continuum but all of life. It is simplistic and does not distinguish actors from anyone else.

Yes, Aristotle and Stanislavski both used words that have been translated into English as "action." Yet from the context of their writing, it is clear that each was using the word in a different way. Basically, Aristotle was referring to the "action" represented by the play as a whole, while Stanislavski was concerned with the "actions," both physical and mental, of the individual actors. Again, it would be easy to find many examples of action in life as well as in theatre. To say "theatre is action" is as useful as saying "life is action."

Nor can "choice" be an acceptable objective criterion for theatre. Most rehearsals, it seems to me, are designed

to eliminate choice during performance. Of course, we see the results of the choices made in rehearsal, but we do not see the moment at which the choice is made nor do we know who has made it. In many plays, as in other types of presentation, a director (or choreographer or creator) has made the choices rather than the performer. Pure chance is the only method I know that eliminates choice at the "directorial" level, but choices must still be made in selecting the chance techniques and the materials to be employed in the presentation. Thus, although choice is necessary at some point in every performance, there seems to be no reason, other than personal taste, for making choice *during* a performance a defining necessity of theatre.

And even though Feldman's taste is for this type of performance, he can not use this argument against Happenings as a genre. It is well known that the Happenings to which he seems so opposed tended in most cases to maximize rather than minimize choice during a performance—thus giving them an unfounded reputation for being improvised—and this has had a significant influence on other forms of theatre.

Yes, "indication" means "merely sketched in." In my "curiously off-the-mark explanation," I described it as "an element of acting that exists in relative isolation and is not totally integrated." I don't sense any disagreement. When Feldman ascribes indication to a lack of technique, he is merely saying, as I did, that indication is a simple rather than a complex form of acting. Even the phrase "sense of truth" implies acting as I have defined it: One who is not pretending (a non-actor) does not need a sense of truth. He is true.

Where we do not agree is in our willingness to make value judgments—or to write about them. I say that in-