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Notes about Theatre

No 8. The Mirror of Mutual Reflection

There is an ancient myth in theatre that Personnages are living beings. This myth affects an actor's career and his artistic fate. The brilliant Luigi Pirandello wrote of this in his plays. This myth, however, is not true for all forms of theatre. In the traditions of the Russian school, the Personnage is created by the actor, the actor comes to the Personnage from himself. In the West, this is generally not the case – the actor dispenses with the Personnage and reinvents himself. Some have tried to create new combinations *à la* “actor-role” and others have made deliberate attempts to separate them, “alienating” one from the other. So what *is* the relationship between the Actor and the Personnage? What are the rules governing their existence? The different interpretations of the laws that bind them are, in my opinion, one of the problems of contemporary theatre, where performers try to act together but believe in different myths and use different theatre structures. That is why I think it useful to talk of the dialectical connections between the actor and the role, between the persona and the personage.

First and foremost, I think we must define the lexis we are using. That will explain a great deal. In everyday theatre practice, we often use the following categories: ACTOR, ARTIST, ROLE, MASK, PERSONALITY, CHARACTER, PERSONA and PERSONNAGE, but do we always really know what we are talking about and what we mean? Take for example the word *role*. This can be understood purely and simply as the French word *rôle*. Or as the Latin *rotulus*, the scroll containing an actor's cues. Or it could be an artistic image created by the dramatist and brought to life by the actor. A role can be taken to be a musician's sheet music, as a path of words, emotions and actions. It is the essence of a given idea represented in an artistic form. It is the growth and development of a specific energy. Or take the word *persona* from the Etruscan *phersu* – a person in a mask. In Latin, *Persona* denotes a mask, or a face, or a role or personality. All merged into one. Hence the confusion.

When I work on a play, I always find it important to know how an actor will approach his role – as a Persona or as a Personnage. It is the difference between these concepts that basically defines my approach as a director. I want the actors to understand a *persona* as a real

individual, with personality and character, with joys and woes. It is there at a certain point in the play and then it is gone. For example, when an actor utters the name “Hamlet”, who does he mean? If he means the Persona who actually existed, then the stage representation must reflect the life of that man. In this scenario, the relationships between him and his mother, his friends, his enemies, the girl he loves, his father and so on will be in the forefront. Some loved him, others hated him, he suffered from loneliness and the treachery of his friends; in short, he felt real human emotions.

But if an actor sees Hamlet not merely as a person, but as the dynamic embodiment of an idea, or a certain philosophy, a certain myth, then we must look from an entirely different standpoint. He will focus largely *not* on the myriad possible manifestations of human nature, but on analysing a specific philosophical and aesthetic standpoint, the issues of life’s unchanging values. This approach will endow an actor with the powerful energy of ideas and myths. The “self” of a Personnage free to do as he pleases and the “self” of an insignificant person. This contradiction between freedom of spirit and the limitations of physical energy results in dynamism of action which, by developing an Actor’s personality, will propel him towards his own ideal “self”.

I will tell an actor that “As a person, Hamlet is dead; as a Personnage, he is alive. So the question is, do you want to take the living or the dead?” The actor must decide what he will present to the audience – the suffering of one man or the suffering of the world. In researching a Personnage, an actor creates the kind of theatre where there are not mere “living” people, but also artistic images and other worlds. One might think that excluding “the person” from the role may result in a lack of emotional diversity, but this is not so. The artistic world can suffer, and love, and hate just as mankind can. The only difference being that these emotions are expressed differently, incomparably richer, more powerful and more varied.

A Personnage is a legend, a myth, a dynamic substance beyond the confines of time and space. Personnages live forever and their energy is with us, communicating to us. Not every character in a play, however, has sufficient dynamic potential to be a *Personnage*. Some characters have mere functional roles, or convey a specific subject. The higher the level of drama, the fewer memorable figures the play contains. Treplev and Shamraev in *The Seagull* are real people, but Chekhov created one as a Personnage and the other as a Persona. To take Shamraev as a Personnage means artificially “inflating” him, which, although possible in theory, the role will not stand for. To take Treplev simply as a Persona diminishes the role. An

author always imbues a Personnage's fate with the energy of a special idea or a special myth. It is important to define it, absorb it and embody it on stage.

It could be said that the relationship between a Persona and a Personnage somewhat resembles that between an *Actor*, meaning the mere profession or certain professional skills, and an *Artist*, meaning a unique artistic philosophy, a special artistic attitude or a unique theme in art. An Actor carries out another's instructions, whereas an Artist creates and analyses. The latter concept is more capacious, encompassing the ethics, the aesthetics and the philosophy of an artistic personality in addition to mere professional skills. The audience can always tell from the first glance whether it is an Actor or an Artist who comes on stage.

The stage can also be viewed from differing standpoints. It can be the place where people are born and where they live, or it can be the place where ideas are created and nurtured. Either theatre reflects day-to-day reality or it is a completely different world that requires other ways of thinking and talking, other emotions and other ideas, a world that merely corresponds with the world people live in.

Having defined the concepts of Persona and Character more clearly, we must turn our attentions to their differing relationships with the actor. First of all, we should ask what between them is constant and what varies? This question can be rephrased in the following way: does a person move and the mirror remain still, or does the mirror move and the person remain where he is? Clearly these are entirely different actions and have different outcomes. Let us analyse a few different versions.

The first is when an actor sees the role as a man, i.e. as a Persona. In this case, he will compare his own life experience and his own psychological abilities with the behaviour and emotions of the Persona. This comparison acts as a source of energy and material for the role. Such life comparisons provide little energy. Using the "Persona = self" formula, an actor is merely creating a mirror image. The actor moves away from the existent "person" of the role towards himself, towards a real person. The Persona of the role is unchanging (if we ignore the changes as the plot develops); it remains constant and the actor adapts to suit, just as Proteus would change his form. The acting profession is generally seen in such a primitive light.

The second version is when an actor views the role as a Personnage. The Personnage does not change as well, but here the actor is reflected by a special artistic system and philosophy. It could be said that this is a mirror image not just of a person, but of a system too. By reflecting the philosophy and aesthetics of the Personnage, the Actor feeds on the

energy of his ideas and philosophical views. This energy propels him towards the Character. The type and power of this energy depends on the level of the system and ideas of the Personnage, but also on the actor's skills and his ability to "reflect" complicated structures and adapt to them. To be able to create such a mirror image, the status of the actor must change from an individual to an artist. The "Personnage = self" formula represents a more rounded approach to a role in comparison with the first version.

There is a third version where the Actor and the Personnage are two constant, unchanging and equal subjects. When they come together, we see a combination of two equally important figures, somehow concordant and somehow close to one another, but at the same time occupying opposing positions. In a single system we may observe two independent figures influencing each other. Here the formula of "playing" theatre comes into play, the "self + the Personnage" formula. Both are constantly seeking an object in which they can be reflected, in order that they be revealed. The Personnage seeks its actor, or to be more precise, its Artist. But the Actor/Artist is also looking for his Personnage. Probably every actor dreams of playing the role of Treplev, but does Treplev want just any actor to play him? How is it possible to deliver Konstantin Treplev's phrase "This is my Theatre!" without having your own artistic image of Theatre, your own unique vision and artistic concept of what Theatre is? Even when there is no definite answer, it is important that the question is there, torturing both you and the Personnage who has come to you. Otherwise what could there be to talk about? Clearly this method requires above all else a well-trained actor who can meet the Personnage on an equal footing.

In its endless endeavour to be reflected, the "self + the Personnage" system will find its mirror image in the very mirror it has created – by acting. Both components of this system emit and reflect light at one and the same time. Both the Personnage and the Actor are objects of reflection and each acts as a mirror for the other. They exist as constant figures, but when they meet, deliberately adopting different positions, they are in a state of constant flux. They constantly change the angle and distance from which they view one another. If this does not happen, nothing will be reflected.

To be reflected, to see yourself, you always need distance. You understand the past, the present and the future better from a distance. You have to step outside yourself if you are to understand something of yourself. In the beginning, God used this method to set things apart. Light from darkness, the skies from the earth, dry land from the seas and so on. The sky has to be so high up in order to comprehend the earth. And only at this distance can we on

earth see the beauty of the sky. The soul becomes set apart from the body and at this moment we discover what is possibly life's greatest secret.

Similarly in theatre, everything is separate from everything else. The space is divided into the auditorium and the stage. Time is divided into the time in the play and actual time. And the people are divided into the artists and the audience. A Mask, a Personnage, a Puppet – all this is created by distance. It is not just the distance, however, but also the “angle” that is important and how the two figures face each other. Whereas in the first two versions the mirror and the subject face each other directly, here the system is open. They view each other sideways. This angle increases the capacity of the role and affords it an echo-like quality, ensuring an equilibrium while at the same time creating a new, third reflection of the performance. It is in this way that polar light is created, magical and almost unreal – the result of a complex reflection off several surfaces set at different angles to each other.

If we truly feel the actors to be alive, then I am convinced that the Personnages are alive. They inhabit their own world, with their own lives and their own fates. As actors, we inhabit a different world, with different lives and different fates. But they and we both love to play with mirrors. To become someone else, to change and see all this with your own eyes. And we do it for ourselves rather than for others. We need this, we need to change and turn into someone else. To become someone else and at the same time remain the same person, fundamental and constant – this paradox sums up the main energy of acting with mirrors. Becoming someone else in order to understand yourself! And there is only one way to do this – to be reflected. Both they and we are searching for something in which we will see ourselves reflected. But isn't the Personnage the best reflection of the actor playing the role? Doesn't an actor wish to play a specific Personnage precisely because that will provide the best mirror image of that actor? If the Personnage reflects the actor, that is acts as a mirror, then we must above all else demand absolute purity and depth from that Personnage. However, Personnages place the same demands on us as actors. Pirandello wrote of this in his play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. Actors prefer to perform roles that reflect *them*, and Personnages prefer *actors* who will show them in the best possible light. Through such reflections, both discover something new in themselves and, thanks to these discoveries, they change, becoming “different”.

This, however, raises a question: does becoming “different” mean moving from or coming to yourself? I consider that when an actor and a Personnage *enter* the stage in order to become “different”, they go from one state of consciousness to another. There is distance, a

journey to be made. Each *goes* towards himself. To say that they “come” would be incorrect. They “*go*” towards themselves. That is the acting’s destiny. Its eternal destiny.

In theatre you will often hear an actor saying “I performed as Hamlet tonight”, though it is unlikely you would hear him say “Hamlet performed as me tonight”.

We spend a long time learning how to act as Hamlet and are completely unprepared for Hamlet to act as us. But acting won’t work that way. Acting is always a two-way process. A person is reflected in the mirror and the mirror in the person. The question “Do I write with ink or with a pen?” doesn’t exist for me; “I write” and what is written “is written through me”. These two absolutely different actions are in fact united in one system. There are many such paradoxes in theatre – the unique nature of acting lies in precisely this paradox: the performer and the instrument exist together in one body. The performer plays the instrument and the instrument plays on the performer. The writer creates the image, but the image also creates the writer. The actor approaches the role and the role approaches the actor. The mask plays with the face and the face with the mask. The Artist performs alongside the Personnage.

An actor must bear all this in mind from his first day at theatre school to his final performance. As I see it, their co-existence on stage depends on the precise definition of the nature of the relationships between the ACTOR, the PERSONNAGE, the PERSONA, the MASK and the PUPPET.

(translation Michael Smith)