

Being Split, Being United: Theater as Inner Work

R. Hodges June 2021

Listen to the hollow reed cry out
from being separated:

“Since cut from my reedbed
I sing my pain.

Anyone apart from his lover
understands my song.

Anyone cut off from a source
longs to go back.”

Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, opening of the *Mathnawi*

Not to be separated,
not by the thinnest screen
shut from the measure of the stars

Innerness—what is it if not intenser sky
shot through with birds
and deep with the winds of homecoming

Rainer Maria Rilke, uncollected poems

Man—Being, split. Living in two currents. Essential self cut off from social person. Essence is not so hard to sense—it is the body, its sensations, impulses, feelings. But we constantly lose this inner contact in outer pulls: projects, people, ideas, duties, place, pride, things. Anyone who attempts inner work discovers this. It can become a burning question. If not, nothing will change.

“Theater”—in all its many forms—has long been a vehicle for exposing, for intensifying, this aporia¹. In theater, one begins as oneself, alone; *and* one plays a role. The actor’s creed: “Yes, *and*.” But the actor often gets lost in the acting, and/or in identification with his ego. How to make the actor and the acting one, and free? How to face the impossible demand (which is, really, the same demand as Life makes): to keep one’s place, in essence, *and* to act (one knows not how) for the benefit of others?

¹ aporia—an irresolvable conundrum

The spectator, too, is no mere bystander. The word “theater” comes from ancient Greek θεάομαι (*theaomai*) “to watch,” “to contemplate.” The play involves the watcher, draws him in, unbalances him, threatens his false security, puts him in front of his own split being. To fully receive the drama, the spectator needs to be actively passive, an unlisted *dramatis personae*.

If only we would let ourselves be bent
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names
From *The Man Watching*, Rainer Maria Rilke

Beyond the aim to entertain the spectator, and beyond the aim to open the spectator toward an encounter with himself, there is in theater work the inner work of the actor *for himself*. This is similar to Gurdjieff’s idea of *work for oneself* and *work for the other*. It is often not understood that there is an element of theater in Gurdjieff work.

Real work begins with a discovery in the moment that passes beyond what the actor previously knew about himself, or thought he knew. In this way the viewer may be opened to a similar discovery about himself. This is the aim of the truest theater, and the real aim of Gurdjieff work.

A confession of the actor’s revealed inner situation takes place. This is first, confession to the confessant himself, but the presence of the other as witness is crucial. It is the process Gurdjieff called “reciprocal feeding.” The witness eats the confession, and the confessant eats the witness. The deep, etymological, meaning of enter-tain-ment is at play here: “holding within.” The actor holds the spectator within himself. The two become part of each other. Communion. Oneness.

It is not always necessary that the spectator, or the actor, be conscious that revelation has taken place—a trace of the event is deposited in the unconscious and can have its effect later, possibly in an unknown way. Perhaps the person is not (yet) able to sustain conscious awareness of a profound opening.

It is necessary to intensify. How is this to be performed? To *intendify*, to work with conscious intent. To *indentify*², to sink one’s teeth into the work: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10, KJV).

The splitting of attention is key. Before being can be unified, it must first be intentionally separated from its present condition of unconscious mixture. Each of the parts of the body and other functions are studied and exercised independently, then brought harmoniously together. The practice of “listening” involves a simultaneous awareness of the meaning of what is heard, alongside its vibrational qualities—this gives insight for example into what is “behind” what people say. In music making there needs to be a separation between the listening and the mechanics of playing. And in learning to really play the piano, the hands must first become independent—able to sustain contrasting rhythms and dynamics in each hand. African music and dance achieve compositional sophistication by combining rhythms with different meter and

² *intendify* and *indentify*—invented words, from “intensify”: “intendify” by QWERTY keyboard finger slip, followed by metathesis to “indentify.” “Identify” also by epenthesis from “identify”.

different starting points in time. Many Gurdjieff movements exercises employ contrasting rhythms and sequences in separate parts of the body. Gurdjieff speaks of “separation of oneself from oneself”—a simultaneous awareness of the overseeing attention, the “I,” and of the attention of the automatic self.

A Judo teacher once put it like this: “we will have to take you apart before we can put you back together.” Many practitioners of martial arts, and actors, and walkers, know the importance of separating the lower body from the upper. Most people move from above, they lead from the chest or the head; but the dynamic center of movement is below, lower even than “Hara,” it is in the hips and loins. One Judo teacher of mine would shout the reminder “Oshi, Goshi” which means “hips, thighs.” The principle of contrapposto, an asymmetric twist in the torso which conveys dynamic rather than static balance, was employed by Renaissance painters and sculptors, something they learned from Greek sculpture. Some actors use contrapposto in standing and moving. A number of Gurdjieff movements involve flexion and torsion in the sacral spine, which demands special attention to separating the upper body from the lower.

An actor has to constantly be aware of his body and the energy and emotions it is expressing, and also must carry the imagined existential situation of the character he is playing. If you pause a video of a good actor you may see how they are never absent from the body, and never “out of character.” In Gurdjieff movements work a reminder is sometimes given to stay present *especially* in the movement between positions.

In some schools of theater training, the force of the unconscious is cultivated, for example personal memories which contain some emotion are evoked in the actor’s body while *simultaneously* acting the character who needs to express that emotion. Other methods employ the ability of a person to be “inhabited” by a character. In many cultures there are rituals of “possession” in which a divine personage or an ancestor is invited to inhabit the body and psyche of the celebrant; these rituals lie athwart the shadowy lines between theater, religion, and magic³. In yet other schools, the actor must maintain a strong self-presence and enact the required character behaviors from a well-studied knowledge of how different emotions and conditions manifest in different types of people—Alexandre de Salzmann tells in *Notes from the Theatre* how this approach is used in Oriental theater.

In yet another school, there is no method other than responding in the present moment to whatever comes up in a situation “on stage.” Peter Brook gives theater exercises in which this is the prime instruction. This is similar to the work of the legominists of theater portrayed in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* chapter XXX “Art.” It is also comparable to Pentland’s idea of “non-directive skill.”

All these methods cultivate an inner emptiness and relaxation, in intense simultaneous relationship to an awareness of the role that is to be played. Often there is the impression that these different inner states are not in harmony, not in equal balance—this is often obvious to the sensitive observer. The actor is only helped to develop to the extent he is able to observe himself,

³ Besides what are sometimes called “primitive religion” and cultic magic, in many Christian services the priest is possessed by and becomes a vehicle for the “Holy Spirit.”

to note this flaw in himself, and to work to correct it. This is also the key to development in the art of living, in playing a role in life.

We end with applause for an idea from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and for Shakespeare:

Emerson, "Art":

There is higher work for Art than the arts. They are abortive births of an imperfect or vitiated instinct. Art is the need to create; but in its essence, immense and universal, it is impatient of working with lame or tied hands, and of making cripples and monsters, such as all pictures and statues are. Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy. He may paint and carve only as long as he can do that. Art should exhilarate, and throw down the walls of circumstance on every side, awakening in the beholder the same sense of universal relation and power which the work evinced in the artist, and its highest effect is to make new artists.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Sources:

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