

THE ACTOR'S APPROACH

How does an actor approach a role? How do they prepare themselves to simulate a character, to embody a character? These questions have been answered in many ways and the answers are shrouded in subjectivity and controversy. Historically, the answers have generally gravitated toward one or the other of the two basic methods, called "external" or "technical" and "internal" or "truthful". As these terms are inexact, the historical importance and wide dissemination demand exploration.

The "external"- "internal" dichotomy refers to the basic paradox of the theatre itself, and to the fact that the actor both simulates and embodies the role. The "external" methods of approaching a role have concentrated on the acquisition of technique, the development of virtuoso abilities and on simulating emotions and behaviours without regard to personal feelings. Diderot, who first articulated the paradox, was an extremist in this position, contending that the best acting was done with cool dispassion, and that "the great actor watches appearances... he has rehearsed to himself every particle of his despair. He knows exactly when he must... shed tears; and you will see him weep at the word, at the syllable, he has chosen, not a second sooner or later." Believers in such an external approach treat the actor's performance as simulation of reality rather than a direct embodiment of it, a calculated 'presentation' of a character's life rather than its living representation on stage.

"Internal" methods focus on the personal assumption of character, the actor's "use of him/herself" in the portrayal of the role and the actual "experiencing" of the events of the play. These methods tend to expand the psychological dimensions of a performance. They aid the actor in assimilating the physiological reality of their character, down to the heartbeats, flushes, and hormonal activities the character would undergo if the dramatized situation was real. Internal methods profess to reach the actor's rationally uncontrollable states, and to awaken in them feelings and reflexes that are beyond sheer technical manipulation. Konstantin Stanislavski, the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre (1898), is the most closely associated with the "internal" method, so much so that his approach has become known as "The Method." Stanislavski's maxim was "You must live the life of your character on stage." To achieve this, he researched the subconscious, studied the intricacies of the lives of the characters he was to play, and demanded that his actors be "in character" not only during intermissions and while waiting for cues in the wings, but for the entire day to the performance.

The follower of the "internal" approach is likely to judge the "external" performance to be "hollow," "unbelievable," "shallow", "merely technical", "empty", "unfeeling", "cold". The "externalist's" criticisms of the "internal" performance uses words such as "unclear", "muddy", "self-indulgent", "over-emotional", "melodramatic", "sentimental", "confused".

The two traditional methods have had an extraordinary impact on the theatre of the present century. European acting has been responsive to many of the presentational techniques suggested by Diderot, whereas North American acting has been particularly influenced by Stanislavski's and his followers who studied at Lee Strasberg's celebrated Actor's Studio in the 1950s and 1960s.

Current theatre makes the division between the two approaches obsolete. Contemporary theatre has come to realize that acting involves BOTH simulation and embodiment, both impersonation and virtuosity, and that both external and internal processes are involved. Acting approaches now integrate the best of the traditional methods, and combine with new approaches suggested by recent discoveries in psychology and communications.