

Heuristic Expression: 'Self' as image in amagin-ation.

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In an individual who wishes to engage in Acting, self image is the most important single factor. Self esteem has eminence over all skills that might be acquired by professional training. An onstage performer must be comfortable with being diligently and critically looked at by strangers, through successes and failures. Indeed, self image is so important that onstage performers are obliged to cultivate it as near as possible to its mutant evil twin, ego. Ego, which, too often is disastrous to an Actor's general sociable personality.

In professional theatre, if a would-be performer is lacking in self esteem, that person is simply not hired. End of problem for the theatre. This drastic and immediately and permanently successful solution is not available in school classrooms. I refer here mainly to university classrooms, because that is where I do most of my work as an instructor of Acting. No Head of Department accepts as a legitimate reason for a teacher to require a student to drop the course because of the student's low self esteem.

These students are a real problem in Acting classes because conventional pedagogy does not provide

for their accommodation in a subject and process that assumes the pre-requisite of healthy self image in extroversion. The situation is worsened when low confidence is a consequence of ongoing personal private trauma about which the student has no need to talk, and which, anyway, the Acting teacher is usually not professionally qualified to address even if the cause is known.

It was to cope with such individuals in Acting classes that Heuristic Acting, Heuristic Expression, had its origins in South Africa some 40 years ago. At the 2 universities where I taught part-time in the 1960's, first year students had no options. Everybody had to take specified courses, whichever the degree. Acting was one of those course. And that was long before semesterization of the year.

For the first few years in Acting classes, we blundered along, neither teachers nor students quite knowing why we were trying what we were trying. And yet, serendipitously, in all of our frustrations through sincere bungling, a new genre gradually burgeoned.

Heuristic Acting, in the end, is one of the many kinds of drama therapy processes. In 2 significant ways it is unique among drama therapies. First, it evolved at a time and in a country in which any form of drama therapy was unknown, and so it had no prior or

concurrent modes from which to learn. Second, for a long time Heuristic Acting was the only form in which performers performed to heal themselves. Even as late as nowadays, the predominant mode involves well performers simulating unwell personalities, a mode being popularized and endorsed by the movie industry and television productions.

Since Heuristic Acting evolved out of and diverged from traditional onstage theatre acting, it is best understood through a comparison with the latter genre. From here on I select some of the usual areas of conventional onstage acting, and outline how they are modified in the heuristic approach.

Expression and Communication. In conventional theatre acting, expression and communication are equal components. For our purposes, expression is approached as 'meaning denoted by a performer for the performer only', and communication as 'meaning directed by a performer to listeners or, and, viewers beyond the performer'. In conventional Acting, the performer's need to communicate beyond self is, at least, as important as self expression for self fulfillment. The obligation to communicate to strangers is a very high stressor in all conventional approaches to acting.

Fear to communicate with strangers is the indication if not the cause itself of the personality impairment addressed by Heuristic Acting. Hence, in

Heuristic Acting, expression is much more important, minimum communication serving as only a necessary conduit out of excessively introverted expression.

Group work. It is the norm in conventional Acting classes to begin with group work. Part of the usual reason for this is that it 'breaks the ice'; that it creates a group spirit among students. In the early years of the Heuristic approach we were constrained to re-visit this group work approach because it was not working with individuals with an inveterate shyness, to begin with. They use the group to hide in, or their self-consciousness worsens. Some drop the class if they can, after the first group involvement.

For these students, work is one-on-one with only the instructor, nobody else in attendance. And the instructor is performer only; not teacher. This sole focus of attention would seem to not have a chance of success with these students, and yet it works every time from the very first class. It might be because the total involvement of the teacher as performer in the role eliminates completely, for the moment, the realness of self-presence. The student's need to match the instructor's intensity, quickly removes whatever barriers there are against freed self expression. This initial working with the teacher is the only time the student works with someone else. All

other work that follows is with monologues in solo performance.

The monologue for Heuristic purposes is defined as one person talking to another imaginary person. The soliloquy, talking to oneself, is avoided since it calls for expression that is mainly introverted.

Pretence. Pretence, or make-believe, is the modus operandi of all genres of conventional acting, because it is a popular and valid notion that through pretence a high level of entertainment is easier achievable.

This is a fact. But it is also a fact that pretence for spectacular entertainment always functions through a large measure of artifice, aesthetic and other.

Immediately patent artifice does not work with personalities struggling with low self-esteem.

Situations for Heuristic presentation have to be as close to reality as is healthily and practically possible. Students create from their own real

experiences. Scripts by other authors are not used.

Students are encouraged to use their own native languages and dialects.

Improvisation. Improvisation is an integral part of conventional onstage performance, verbal and non-verbal. In Heuristic Acting, non-verbal improvisation is not automatically part of the process, because it calls for a high degree of inclination to healthy extroversion. Individuals in need of Heuristic

discovery, have no such healthy predisposition. In conventional Acting, beginning classes always include pure pretence improvisational exercises such as "Imagine you're a tree." Not in Heuristic Acting. Improvisation during expression and communication happens naturally all the time, and so is present in Heuristic expression, but not as a teacher-invited component. Nor does the teacher draw the student's attention to it when it happens.

Coaching in delivery techniques. Detailed instruction in speech, voice, movement, posture, for performers is crucial in conventional acting, in order to provide audiators with the best possible entertainment through expression and communication. There being no obligation to an audience of strangers in Heuristic Acting, coaching for technical virtuosity is not attempted. Moreover since the drive for virtuosic excellence, as valuable as it is toward highest artistic achievement, brings with it stresses that exacerbate a personal state of inadequate self esteem.

Rehearsal and performance. In traditional acting, rehearsal is repetition toward the attainment of accurate representation for a culminating performance. In the Heuristic approach, rehearsal repetition provides opportunities for the individual to explore and experiment with different ways to express the same meaning. There is no culminating performance occasion.

The de-emphasis on accurate repetition of words and other components and patterns of expression, removes a stressor that, in all other approaches to acting, continually adulterates the salutary flow of meaning informed with healthy emotion.

Memorization. In Heuristic Acting, the only memory work required is that of general plot sequence.

Memorization for accurate representation of speech is a major source of onstage stress, that is absent in the Heuristic approach. Continual re-direction and modification of expression is a necessary option for an individual's discovery, exploration and development of healthy emotion. To this end, after the first scripting of an experience in order to provide general direction for expression, the performer is encouraged to spontaneously re-word thoughts during class sessions. And beginning at the beginning each time is always optional.

Performance area. The traditional stage-auditorium arrangement is avoided in the Heuristic approach since it heavily implies prescribed obligations for expression and communication. If a stage is the only facility available, both instructor and student work on it. The preferred area is a large general space indoors with a very small number of chairs and small tables. Quiet spaciousness is a most wholesome initial

setting for eliminating extremes of introversion.

Stage movement. Only the accountability to an audience necessitates the specialized genre of poetry known as stage movement, on the live stage. This obligation to audience being at the barest minimum at most, in Heuristic Acting, and quite irrelevant most of the time, the functional and aesthetic embellishment, flourish, extension, stylization, that constitute the nature and character of stage movement, are pointedly avoided. Absence of auditors is not the only valid reason for no functional and aesthetic onstage visual histrionics. The genuine poetry of stage movement has no bearing on the ontogeny of genetically sourced healthy emotion that has been long denied full expression. Along with stage movement, some other onstage poetics that are avoided because of their prerequisite of considerable extroverted expression. These are: costume for character, theatre make-up, dance, singing, mime.

Posture is addressed only insofar as it relates directly to healthy voice production.

Hand props. Functional hand props always improve a performance, onstage or Heuristic. When a functional hand prop includes functional movement, it quickens spontaneous affective development. In Heuristic Acting, only functional hand props are used

because of the unavoidable externalization of expression they invoke.

Theatrical hand props are avoided because the kind of extroversion they call for is more fictional than functional.

Characterization. Because of the high importance of communication to an audience in conventional acting, the onstage performer is trained to acquire the presence of mind to be two persons simultaneously, the fictive character and an environmentally alert performer. The former in the interests of entertainment through the audience's suspension of disbelief. The latter in order to attend to onstage logistics for safety and other practical exigencies.

In Heuristic Acting there is no need for this dichotomy. Portrayal of fictional character is left out because it requires an intensity of pretence that is counter productive for introverted personality. The issues of onstage safety and other logistics are virtually non-existent because of the irrelevancy of stage movement, group work, and dance.

Emotion. Emotion has been central to conventional Acting from the very beginning of the art form. Not so in Heuristic Acting. Healthy expression has been avoided if not repressed for so long, by the

individual, it has become uncomfortable, at best, and unsightly, at worst. The words "emotion" and "feeling" must be eliminated from the teacher's vocabulary when working with individuals in need of Heuristic attention.

This does not mean emotive expression does not happen. There are sentences common in everyday expression that are virtually generic forms of unavoidable spontaneous emotion. It is these sentences that the teacher accesses in the one-on-one brief exercises at the beginning. Some examples of such sentences: "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" "I don't have to stand here and take this from you!" "Out! Out! Out of my sight! Now!" There is no degree of repressed emotion in a student that will not respond emotionally to such sentences spoken passionately by an instructor.

Some changes in Acting classes over the years have helped, others have not. Semesterization of the year has not helped because a semester is too short to achieve more than occasional success with most individuals. In the days of full-year courses consistent success in the last few weeks was guaranteed. Nowadays, only a few students enroll in the following semester.

A change that has helped is the division of Acting students into General and Specialist. Each group

enrolls in different class times. In General Acting classes all the students easily and willingly embrace the Heuristic approach, even those who are not in need of it. Makes life easier for the instructor.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the ancient pedigree of Drama therapy. I do this partly to show the uniqueness of our Heuristic approach.

Throughout the Ancient Hellenic world archeologists have uncovered about 100 sanctuaries dedicated to Asklepios, the Greek god of medicine. Adjacent to every one of these structures for healing, is a theatre. These sites include the famous Epidaurus amphitheatre which, in its day, was, perhaps, more renowned as a healing centre than as a performing art place venue.

At present we have no information on just how the connection between the performance of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripedes, was played out between Dionysus and Asklepios. We do know that in all religions from the beginning to our present time, it is usual practice to offer religious service on behalf of the ill. It is quite possible that this was the basis of the connection between the Ancient Greek sanctuaries and their theatre spaces.

In all drama therapies at present, restoration of healthy self-image is at the heart of the process.

Linkage with the art of Acting in that the sufferer is coached to perform artistically, is either absent or merely adventitious. The facilitators or counselors are not required to have had training as onstage performers. In the Heuristic approach the Art of Acting is the source from which all basic principles of approach are derived.

Although at present we do not have enough information to determine if in fact there was a direct connection between medical healing and performing arts, notwithstanding the joining of buildings architecturally, there is evidence in Ancient Greek religion that the connection was deeper than the outwardly physical. Apollo was the Hellenic god of both medicine and poetry. Apollo was also the father of both Asklepios, the divine healer, and Orpheus, the divine musician.

