

Acting and Imagery

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Facts & News, No 18, NCPA, Theatre Development Centre, Mumbai, August 1990)

Who can be considered a good actor? What is good acting? A number of answers are given. In the final analysis all of them are likely to prove useful, because each one succeeds in shedding light on the Protean performing reality.

The performing reality has three basic components, namely, performer, performance and the audience. Description of good acting can emerge from each of the components. The descriptions collectively indicate the criteria used by the concerned culture, to pronounce aesthetic judgements. To watch the rise and fall of adjectives would indeed be a good strategy to get readings of the prevailing aesthetic barometer! For example good acting is often described today as real, natural, authentic or suggestive etc. Adjectives as coloured statements of an assessing mind can safely be treated as the spectators implied verdicts.

If one looks at the situation from the performer's angle an interesting correspondence is detected. There are items of method or technique in the actor's performing armoury which help him in eliciting the correlated adjectival responses from the audience. For example to get noticed for a 'real' acting may indicate actor's recourse to the formula 'true to life'. To act like a beggar would then mean to dress, move and speak like a real beggar one has seen round the corner for years. In brief, natural acting may connote concentration on the essence of the real and not on imitation - an attempt to ape it in all details. Thus to do a 'natural' beggar would be to present a beggar with a deliberate focussing on the helplessness, servility and the struggle for subsistence. Moving further, acting could be understood as that which creates overtones of a well-researched presentation. Such a venture spares no pains to delve into the period, locale, biographical or factual details of a character, event or a situation for the proposed recreation. To perform as a historical character, or to produce a play according to Bharata's tenets are good examples bidding for the honour the term authentic promises! Finally suggestive acting is frequently achieved through underplaying. This style of acting allows spectators' participation as they are coaxed into filling in the details left out deliberately by an actor. A construction of underplayed scenes, conception of an underplayed role are often favourably described as artistic,

aesthetic, modern or new etc. With the growing fascination for the cinematic way of interpreting the dramatic, as also the commonly found anxiety of actors to be 'telegenic' - the canon of suggestivity has assumed a new stature. One should devote some attention to the phenomenon of imagery for a better understanding of the concept (of suggestivity) and the techniques related to it.

In what manner can imagery contribute to suggestive acting? Acting, it is explained, should be able to create an image, a vivid picture of the complex situation any dramatic event is bound to be. What is an image? Some dictionary-meanings would help:

1. A reproduction of the form of someone or something, esp. a sculptured likeness.
2. An optically formed duplicate, counterpart, or other representative reproduction of an object by a mirror or lens.
3. A close or exact resemblance to another.

As a verb it means:

1. To make a likeness of
2. To reflect
3. To symbolize or typify
4. To picture mentally
5. To describe so vividly as to call up a mental picture of

Admittedly these meanings record some general perceptions. However, the common thrusts thus noted are not cancelled by the later, aesthetic, dramaturgical and literary specialized connotations.

From all accounts the concept of image and the related device of image-making acquired noticeable prestige among the literary thinkers of the eighteenth century with the mental faculty identified as imagination enjoying a clear rise in esteem. Imagination could be defined as 'that power of the human mind to form a mental image or concept of something unreal or not actually present at a particular moment, place or for a particular person'. The concept of image being an offshoot of the thinking based on literature, repeated reference was made to a poet's Power to visualize. Poets were therefore exhorted/expected to describe natural beauty or the awesome play of the natural forces, emotional responses to the life around, the feelings of individual human beings reduced to mere playthings of fate etc. so graphically as to create a mental picture before the mind's eye of the reader. In short, the goal was image-making and the

strategy employed was visualization. In this manner a particular aesthetic outcome, a theory of human mind and a particular literary criterion combined to form a package.

The implications of the act cannot be understood fully unless one more aspect is noted. It is obvious that no thing/process/mental state can emerge as an image unless items surrounding a thing, conditions leading to a process or emotions associated with the mental states are given their due place in the total picturization. The image was thus to carry out the task of 'visualizing' life with all its complexities. As a consequence, there had to be an all-sided extension. The creative attention ranged beyond the primary colours to note subtler shades. It turned to catch even the fleeting feelings than remaining content with the classifiable emotional states. Finally, more importance was attached to exploring the inner than the outer forms.

It is obvious that the gradual increase in the aesthetic aspirations called for a corresponding widening of the concept of image and the theory of imagination on which it was based. The process and the technique of visualization could no more be confined to exploring the visual modality alone. Vision as a sense and the eye as its organ could not be allowed to monopolize the excitement of image-making. All human senses were thus accepted as image-makers, as creators of imagery and not of images. The exclusive visuality of visualization ended! This was understandable and legitimate. Human experience is the final product of the total human response to every situation and hence the faculty of imagination certainly deserved to be liberated from (to borrow Coleridge's phrase) the tyranny of the eye'. All human senses and their own imagery thus earned a firm foothold in theorization and practice. The resultant schema can be noted as shown:

<i>Sense Organ</i>	<i>Sensory Experience</i>	<i>Imagery</i>
Eye	Seeing	Visual
Ear	Hearing	Auditory
Tongue	Taste	Gustatory
Nose	Smell	Olfactory
Skin	Touch	Tactile
Sensory nerve endings	Movement and Body effort	Kinaesthetic
Brain	Abstract	Intellectual

The psychological scheme, the conceptual framework and the criteria developed along with these have naturally undergone changes since their earlier formulation. Further, their application to performing arts has been less sure. Finally, it

is better understood today that universal validity to methodology is to be claimed with extreme caution because cultural orientation exists in many more areas than philosophers can dream of!

And yet there is an unmistakable ring of truth in the suggestion that creating rich imagery is the royal road to a richer acting. Equally pertinent and logical is the argument that the sensory world has many nuance-expressions in store for the actors if they can go beyond the narrow pale of the visual!
