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ON CHINESE ACTING

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In the following paper something will be said about the use of "alienation" in Chinese acting. The "alienation effect" has been used in Germany in plays of a non-Aristotelian kind, that is, in plays which are not based on empathy (*einfuehlung*). I refer to various attempts to act in such a manner that the spectator is prevented from feeling his way into the characters. Acceptance or rejection of the characters' words is thus placed in the conscious realm, not, as hitherto, in the spectator's subconscious.

The attempt to "alienate" the events being presented from the audience was made in a primitive way in the theatrical and pictoral displays of old fairs. We also find it in the circus clown's manner of speech and in the way in which so-called "panoramas"[1] are painted. The reproduction of the painting *The Flight of Charles the Bold After the Battle of Murten*, often to be found on German fairgrounds, was always inadequately painted. Yet the copyist achieved an alienation effect not to be found in the original; and one can scarcely blame this on his inadequacy. The fleeing general, his horse, his retinue, and the landscape are quite consciously painted to give the impression of an *extra*ordinary occasion, a forbidding catastrophe. Despite his inadequacy the painter admirably produces the effect of the unexpected; astonishment guides his brush. This *effect of estrangement* is also known to the Chinese actor, who uses it in a very subtle manner.

(Everyone knows that the Chinese theatre makes use of many symbols. A general wears little ribbons on his shoulders, as many, in fact, as the regiments he commands. Poverty is indicated by sewing irregular patches onto silk robes, the patches being also of silk, though of a different color. The personages of a play are characterized by a particular kind of make-up, that is, simply by paint. Certain gestures with both hands represent the forcible opening of a door, and so forth. The stage stays unchanged though articles of furniture are brought on during the play. All this has been known for a long time and can scarcely be taken over by us *in toto*. And one is accustomed to regard an artistic phenomenon *in toto*—as a whole. However, if you want to study one particular effect among many you have to break with this custom.)

In the Chinese theatre the alienation effect is achieved in the following way. The Chinese performer does not act as if, in addition to the three walls around him there were also a fourth wall. *He makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at.* Thus, one of the illusions of the European stage is set aside. The audience forfeits the illusion of being unseen spectators at an event which is really taking place. The European stage has worked out an elaborate technique by which the fact that scenes are so arranged as to be easily seen by the audience is con-

cealed. The Chinese approach renders this technique superfluous. As openly as acrobats the actors can choose those positions which show them off to best advantage.

Another expedient is this: *the actor looks at himself*. Presenting, let us say, a cloud, its unsuspected appearance, its gentle yet strong development, its speedy yet gradual transformation; from time to time he looks at the spectator as if to say: Isn't it just like that? But he also looks at his own arms and legs, guiding them, examining them, in the end, perhaps praising them. If he glances at the floor or measures the space available for his act, he sees nothing in this procedure that could disturb the illusion. In this way the performer separates mimicry[2] (presenting the act of observation) from gesture[3] (presenting the cloud) but the latter loses nothing thereby, for the attitude of the body reacts back upon the face, gives to the face, as it were, its own expression. An expression now of complete reservation, now of utter triumph. The performer has used his face as an empty sheet of paper that can be written on by bodily movement.

The performer wishes to appear alien to the spectator. Alien to the point of arousing surprise. This he manages by seeing himself and his performance as alien. In this way the things he does on the stage become astonishing. By this craft everyday things are removed from the realm of the self-evident.

A young woman, a fisherman's daughter, is shown on the stage, rowing a boat. She stands up and steers the (non-existent) boat with a little oar that hardly comes down to her knees. The current runs faster. Now it is harder for her to keep her balance. Now she is in a bay and rows more quietly. Well, that's the way to row a boat. But this voyage has an historic quality, as if it had been sung in many songs, a most unusual voyage, known to everyone. Each of this famous girl's movements has been preserved in pictures. Every bend in the river was an adventure that one knows about. The bend she is now approaching is well-known. This feeling in the spectator is called forth by the performer's attitude. It is she who confers fame on the voyage. (The scene reminds us of the march to Budweis in Piscator's production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Schweik's three day march under sun and moon to the front, which, curiously enough, he never reaches, was seen in a completely historical way, as something just as worth thinking about as Napoleon's journey to Russia in 1812.)

To look at himself is for the performer an artful and artistic act of self-estrangement. Any empathy on the spectator's part is thereby prevented from becoming total, that is, from being a complete self-surrender. An admirable distance from the events portrayed is achieved. This is not to say that the spectator experiences no empathy whatsoever. He feels his way into the actor as into an observer. In this manner an observing, watching attitude is cultivated.

In many ways the art of the Chinese actor seems to the western actor cold. Not that the Chinese theatre renounces the presentation of feelings! The actor presents events of considerable passionateness, but his delivery remains unimpassioned. At moments when the presented character is deeply excited, the performer takes a strand of hair between his lips and bites it. That is pretty much of a rite; there is nothing

eruptive about it. Clearly it is a matter of the repetition of an event by another man, a *rendering* (artistic, certainly). The performer shows that *this man is beside himself* and he indicates the outward signs of such a state of mind. This is the proper way to express being beside oneself. (It may be improper too, but not for the stage.) Anyway a few special symptoms are chosen out of many—obviously with great deliberation. Anger is naturally distinguished from fury, hate from dislike, love from sympathy, but the various movements of feeling are sparingly presented. The pervading coolness arises from the fact that the individual is not so much the center of interest as in western theatre. True, the cult of the star has gone further in Asia than perhaps anywhere else. The spectator's eyes positively hang on the star. The other roles give him the cue to the star, place obstacles in his way, show him off. Nevertheless, the star places himself at a distance from the role he plays in the manner just described. He guards against making the audience feel exactly what the character is feeling. Nobody will be raped by the individual he presents. This individual is not the spectator but his neighbor.

The western performer does all he can to bring the spectator as close as possible to the events and the character being presented. To this end he gets him to feel his way into him, the actor. He spends all his strength on transforming himself as completely as possible into another type of person, the type being presented. When this complete transformation is achieved, his art is pretty much exhausted. Once he *is* the bank clerk, the doctor, the general, he needs just as little art as the bank clerk, the doctor or the general need in real life. The act of completely transforming oneself takes a lot of trouble to accomplish. Stanislavski provides a whole list of devices, a whole *system* of devices, by means of which this "creative mood" can be produced afresh at each performance. Usually the actor does not succeed for long in really feeling like the other person. He soon begins, in his exhaustion, to copy certain external features of his carriage or tone of voice, and thereby the effect on the audience is appallingly weakened. Doubtless the reason is that the creation of the Other Man was an intuitive act taking place in the subconscious. The subconscious is very hard to regulate. It has, so to speak, a bad memory.

The Chinese performer knows nothing of these difficulties. He eschews complete transformation. He confines himself at the outset to merely *quoting* the character. But with how much art he does this! He requires only a minimum of illusion. What he shows is worth seeing even to those who are not out of their senses. What western actor, with the exception of a comedian or so, could do what the Chinese actor Mei-Lan-Fang does—show the elements of his craft clad in evening dress in a room with no special lights before an audience of professionals? The scene of Lear's division of his kingdom, let us say, or Othello and the handkerchief? He'd be like a conjurer at a fairground showing his magical tricks, which no one would want to see a second time. He would merely show how one *dissembles*. The hypnosis would pass and there would remain a couple of pounds of badly beaten-up mimicry, a commodity quickly thrown together for sale in the dark to customers who are in a hurry. Naturally, no western actor would

arrange such a performance. Isn't art sacrosanct? Isn't theatrical metamorphosis a mystical process? He lays store by the fact that what he does is unconscious; it has more value for him that way. A comparison with Asiatic acting shows how deeply parsonic our art still is.

Certainly it gets harder all the time for our actors to consummate the mystery of complete transformation. Their subconscious mind's memory is getting weaker all the time. And even when the actor is a genius it is hard to create truth out of the adulterated intuition of a member of a class society.

It is difficult for the actor to generate certain emotions and moods in himself every evening and comparatively easy to render the outward signs that accompany and denote these emotions. Certainly the transference of these emotions to the spectator, the emotional contagion, does not take place automatically. The "alienation effect" enters in at this point, not in the form of emotionlessness, but in the form of emotions which do not have to be identical with those of the presented character. The spectator can feel joy at the sight of sorrow, disgust at the sight of anger. We speak of rendering the outward signs of emotions as a way of effecting alienation. This procedure may, however, fail to do so. The actor can so render these signs and select these signs that, on the contrary, emotional contagion follows, because the actor *has,* while rendering the signs, generated in himself the emotions to be presented. The actor can easily stir up anger within himself by letting his voice swell and by holding his breath, also by drawing his throat muscles together so that the blood flows to his head. In this case, alienation is out of the question. On the other hand, alienation does occur when at a particular point and without transition the actor displays a deadly pale face which he has acquired artificially. (He held his face in his hands, and in his hands was some white grease paint.) If the actor exhibits at the same time an apparently undisturbed nature, his fright at this point in the play (occasioned by a piece of news or a discovery) will produce the alienation effect. To act in this manner is more healthy and, it seems to us, more worthy of a thinking being. It calls for a considerable knowledge of men, a considerable general intelligence, and a keen grasp of what is socially important. Obviously a creative process is going on here too. And one of a higher sort, since it belongs to the sphere of consciousness.

Obviously the alienation effect in no way presupposes an unnatural style of acting. One must at all costs not think of what is called Stylization. On the contrary the success of the alienation effect is dependent on the lightness and naturalness of the whole procedure. And when the actor comes to examine the truth of this performance—a necessary operation, which gives Stanislavski a lot of trouble—he is not merely thrown back on his natural sensibility. He can always be corrected by reference to reality. Does an angry man really speak like that? Does a guilty man sit like that? He can be corrected, that is, from without, by other people. His style is such that nearly every sentence could be *judged* by the audience. Nearly every gesture is submitted to the approval of the audience.

The Chinese actor is in no trance. He can be interrupted at any moment. There is no question of his "coming to." After an inter-

ruption he will take up his performance at the exact place where he was interrupted. We disturb him at no mystic moment of creation. He had finished "creating" before he came on the stage. If scene building is going on while he is acting, he doesn't mind. Stagehands hand him whatever he needs for his work quite openly. During a death scene played by Mei-Lan-Fang a spectator sitting near me let out a startled cry at one of the actor's gestures. Several spectators in front of us turned indignantly around and hissed: *Sh*! They conducted themselves as at the death of some real girl. Perhaps their behavior was right for a European production, but it was unspeakably ridiculous in a Chinese theatre. The alienation effect had misfired.

It is not altogether easy to regard the alienation effect of Chinese acting as something that can be shaken loose from the Chinese theatre and exported. The Chinese theatre seems to us uncommonly precious, its presentation of human passions merely schematic, its conception of society rigid and false. At first sight nothing in this great art seems useful in a realistic and revolutionary theatre. The motives and aims of the alienation effect are alien and suspect.

In the first place it is difficult, when watching the Chinese act, to rid ourselves of the feeling of strangeness that they arouse in us because we are Europeans. One must be able to imagine they achieve the alienation effect also in their Chinese spectators. But, and this is more difficult, we must not allow ourselves to be disturbed at the fact that the Chinese performer creates an impression of mystery for a quite different purpose from any that we can envisage. If one has learned to think dialectically one can find it possible that a technique which is taken from the realm of magic can be used to combat magic with. The Chinese performer may intend to use the alienation effect to make the events on stage mysterious, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable to the audience. And yet this effect can be used to make the events mundane, comprehensible, and controllable.

The attitude of the scientist, who at first views the object of his investigation with astonishment, may resemble the attitude of a magician. Yet these apparently identical attitudes have a precisely opposite function. Whoever finds the formula $2 \times 2 = 4$ obvious is no mathematician; neither is the man who doesn't know what the formula means. The man who viewed a lamp swinging on a rope with astonishment at first and found it not obvious but very remarkable that the lamp swung thus and not otherwise—such a man approached the understanding of the phenomenon and, with this, the mastery of the phenomenon. It won't do to exclaim that this attitude is appropriate to science alone and not to art. Why shouldn't art try (by its own means, of course) to contribute to the great social task of mastering life?

A technical feature like the alienation effect in Chinese acting can be studied with profit only by those who *need* such a feature for particular social purposes. As charm, novelty, finesse, and formalistic frivolity it could never become significant.

Moreover, in the experiments of the new German theatre, the alienation effect was developed quite independently. The influence of Asiatic acting was nil.

In the German epic theatre the alienation effect was employed not only through the actors but also through the music (choruses and

solos) and the décor (placards, film, etc.). The aim was the *historification* of the events presented. Under this head the following is meant.

The bourgeois theatre (this is everything that we think of when we speak of theatre in general) sifts out from its materials the timeless element. The presentation of the human being stops with the so-called Eternally Human. By a certain ordering of the plot or fable, general situations are created in which Man—the man of all periods and every color—can express himself. Events on stage are all one long cue, the cue for the Eternal Answer, the inevitable, usual, natural, human answer. Here is an example. The black man loves in the same way as the white man. But only when the plot extorts the same reaction from him as the white man gives (the formula presumably works in reverse too) is the result called Art. The peculiar and distinct elements may have a place in the cue; the answer is the same for both; and in the answer there is nothing peculiar and distinct.

Such a philosophy may acknowledge the existence of history but it is an unhistorical philosophy. Certain circumstances may be changed; milieus are transformed; but man does not change. History is valid for the milieu; but not for man. The milieu is so essentially unimportant, is understood just as the *occasion* for things. A variable quantity, and essentially inhuman, it really exists without man. It confronts him as a closed unity. And *he* is forever unchanged, a fixed quantity. To regard man as a variable which, moreover, controls the milieu, to conceive of the liquidation of the milieu in relationships between men—these notions spring from a new mode of thought, historical thought. An example will cut short this historical-philosophical excursion.

The following is to be presented on the stage. A girl leaves her family to take a job in a big city. (Dreiser's *American Tragedy,* which was adapted to the stage by Piscator.) For the bourgeois theatre the idea is a pretty limited one. It constitutes only the beginning of a story, the bit of information we must have if we are to understand or be excited by what follows. The actor's imagination can hardly be set in motion at all by this. In a way the event is general: girls do take jobs. And in this case one can be excited at the thought of what in particular will happen to her. The event is also peculiar: this girl leaves home; had she stayed, the following would not have occurred. The important thing is what kind of girl she is. What is her character? That her family lets her go is not a subject for investigation. It is credible. Motives are "credible."

For our history-making theatre it is otherwise. It seizes on the special, the particular, on what needs investigation in this everyday event. What? The family lets one of its members leave the paternal roof? To live quite independently and earn her living without assistance? Can she do it? Will what she has learned in the family help her to earn her living? Can families not keep their children any more? Are they a burden? Is this so in all families? Was it always so? Is this the way of the world and not to be affected? "When the fruit is ripe, it falls from the tree:" does the proverb apply? If children always and at all times make themselves independent, if this is something biological, does it always happen in the same way, for the same reason, with the same results?

These are the questions—or some of them—that the actors have to

answer if they want to present the event as a unique historical one, if they want to point to it as a custom which provides a key to the whole social structure of a particular, transitory period. How can such an event be presented so that its historical character comes out? How can the confusion of our unhappy age be made to stand out while a mother, amid warnings and moral demands, packs her daughter's bag, which is a very small bag? So many demands and so little underwear? Warnings for a lifetime and bread for five hours? How is this to be put on the stage? When she hands the small bag to her daughter the mother says: "Well, I think that'll be enough." How can the actress playing the role speak this sentence so that it will be understood as an historical expression? It can only be done if the alienation effect is brought off. The actress must not make of this sentence an affair of her own. She must hand it over for criticism. She must make it possible for the audience to understand the motives behind it. She must make protest possible.

In the Artef Players Collective in New York (1935), I saw a stage version of Samuel Ornitz' *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, which showed how an east-side boy rose to be a corrupt lawyer. The theatre could not play the piece. And yet scenes like this were in it. Sitting in the street in front of his house, the young lawyer gives legal advice at very low prices. A young woman comes with the complaint that her leg had been damaged in a traffic accident. But the case was bungled. Her claim for compensation has not yet been handed in. In despair she points at her leg and shouts: "It's healing already!" Working without the alienation effect, this theatre could not adequately display the horror of a bloody age in this extraordinary scene. Few people in the auditorium paid any attention to it. Few of them, even if they read these lines, would remember the woman's cry. The actress spoke it as something obvious. But precisely the fact that such a complaint seems obvious to the poor woman the actress should have reported to the audience as an outraged messenger returning from the lowest of hells. In this she would have needed to be helped by a special technique to underline the historical nature of a given social condition. Only the alienation effect makes this possible.

In bringing forward new artistic principles and in working out new methods of presentation we must proceed from the imperative demands of an age of transition. It seems possible and necessary to rebuild society. All events in the human realm are being examined. Everything must be seen from the social standpoint. Among other effects, a new theatre will find the alienation effect necessary for the criticism of society and for historical reporting on changes already accomplished.

Translated by ERIC BENTLEY

NOTES

[1] A "panorama" is a series of pictures used by a ballad singer as an accompaniment to his songs.

[2] *Mimik.*

[3] *Gestik.*