

Heidi Hovland

Not Real, but True

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I think that theatre should make people laugh at themselves and cry over others; it should reflect, enlarge, distort, confuse and transform life. It should not try to be like life, since this appears to me just a copy or a boring reproduction. What I look for in theatre is not real, but true.

This also applies to theatre characters: in order to create a character in whom both the actor and the audience can believe, and who, at the same time, can contribute to lifting the performance into a not-real reality. Everyday life is a great source of inspiration, but how can this be transformed into something that is interesting on stage?

People are inspiring in their particularity, when they deviate from the norm and lose control. For example, when they alter their usual way of walking and stumble (the reaction after the stumbling is particularly interesting). Or when a stewardess walks down the aisle of the aircraft with a smile, asking in a friendly voice "Tea or coffee?" and then turns to her colleague and snarls, "We're out of coffee".

Exaggerated, theatrical behaviour can also be inspiring. Take the case of a guide I met some weeks ago. After each gesture he made and each word he said, he took his time enjoying his own movements and savouring his carefully selected words.

Everything that surrounds me can be equally inspirational: animals, for example. Their anatomy, dynamism and reaction patterns offer many human characteristics. The clichés first: a cock expands its breast looking around with quick staccato movements - is he a big charmer on the beach or a controlling vice-president of a company? The penguin - is he an indecisive, but all too eager waiter? And the cat-family, from the sweetest little kitten to a growling lioness - they show elegant and explosive energy. The fly buzzes around in a seemingly random pattern, and then suddenly lands quietly to rub its forelegs together in a concentrated way. The cow ruminates monotonously; the bull scrapes its hoof aggressively; the horse neighs and tosses its neck: there are endless examples of animal characteristics that we can use for a human character. Animals' dynamism, their weight

and way of walking can be useful starting points to create a theatre character.

We can also let ourselves be inspired by the material world, for instance by the movement of olive oil being poured out of a bottle; or by jelly; a porcelain cup; an elastic band... Little by little we can discover the human aspects in these things and let the contours of a character come forth. Fundamental characteristics for creating character can also be found in the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Is the character solid and rooted, restless and flighty, powerful and troubled, smooth and liquid?

These observations and physical techniques do not constitute a schematic method. I have never created a character in this way. But I often use them as starting points to find a new character. During the process an echo of this kind of work remains to maintain a connection between the resulting figure and the source of inspiration in all its forms – animal movements, things, elements or people's gestures.

Jerzy Grotowski writes in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*: "Here we touch on a type of acting which, as an art, is closer to sculpture than to painting. Painting involves the addition of colours, whereas the sculptor takes away what is concealing the form which, as it were, already exists within the block of stone, thus revealing it instead of building it up." This text impressed me a lot when I first read it. The actor's work deals with craft, hard work, technique, and of course something else as well. No matter how inspirational the world around us is, and no matter how many techniques one learns to master, everything has to go through the actor. In some way we must use our own personality and physique as a catalyst. The actor must dare to reveal herself, to use all that she has, her own self! Without this the use of technique will just be a demonstration of skill.

For me this is about creating a basis for

an actor's continuous work that will support expression and presence and be able to fill the theatre space with something honest and open as a means of communication.

I am fond of an exercise called *L'Equilibre du plateau*. During this exercise all the participants are placed in a rectangle, thus creating a performance area in between them. One person enters the space, filling it as neutrally as possible. I have done this exercise myself many times, I have taught it, and I have seen others do it. It is as difficult as it is simple. I understood most clearly what it is about when three other actors and I were in Recife, in Brazil, giving a workshop at Pro Crianza, a youth centre for the city's *favelas*. The kids presented themselves behind layers of cool attitude, grimaces, hip ways of walking and stone faces. Suddenly it all disappeared. On stage a young person stood quietly, with an overwhelming presence, filling the whole room with openness and earnestness. The space almost shook with vitality - a starting point for an improvisation of which many professional actors could only dream.

For me, the process of creating a character involves two issues: the techniques to build a character such as I have described, and the ability to make a personal investment in the character. I must dare to be honest and meet the audience with a character that is not real, but true.

Translated from Norwegian by Geddy Aniksdal

HEIDI HOVLAND (Norway) is one of the founders of Scene: Bluss, a forum for young emerging artists to showcase their work. She has attended Lecoq's school in Paris and is currently working as an actress.