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Self-Experiencing in a Specific Form of Acting Improvisation

Martina Musilová

Abstract

The improvising actor may experience a range of feelings that may not relate to the content of their improvisation or the themes that emerge during the improvisation. Some of these feelings are even considered negative, yet they can be a positive and activating impetus for the development of play. Using the example of a specific variant of acting improvisation, which is practised from 'point zero', the article demonstrates the influence that these feelings have on inducing the *creative state* of the actor. For my analysis, I will make use of, among other sources, students' written reflections of the practice of the psychosomatic discipline of *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner*, which was founded by Czech actor, director, psychologist, and acting teacher Ivan Vyskočil. I will primarily focus on the feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, boredom, amazement, wonder, and joy in play.

Key words

Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner, acting, improvisation, embarrassment, boredom, wonder, joy in play

The emotions of the character an actor is representing may not be the only ones the actor experiences. Besides these, the feelings and emotions related to the actor's self-perception seem essential. One of the first to conceptualise and incorporate self-perception into acting was Konstantin Stanislavsky, who, as Sharon Carnicke argues, writes that '[the] "sense of self" combines two conscious perspectives: being on the stage and being within the role' (CARNICKE 2009: 232). In contrast to the actor's dual consciousness introduced by Denis Diderot (CARNICKE 2009: 231), we could speak of a *double perception* of emotions and feelings. This study focuses on four feelings that can significantly influence the creative process and may not relate to creating a dramatic character. The first two feelings: amazement and joy in play, can be significant in developing and deepening the creative process. The second two – awkwardness (or embarrassment) and boredom, can be significant in the initiation phase, when beginners are introduced to the creative process. The second pair of feelings is generally evaluated as negative, unpleasant, but these feelings do have the potential of being an activating force in the exposed situation of being on stage.

My research is based on long-lasting experience with the psychosomatic discipline of *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner* (henceforth DA) as both a practitioner (30 years) and educator (25 years). I will start by briefly introducing this psychosomatic discipline and the historical-cultural context in which it was developed. For an understanding of this context, it is necessary to introduce its founder, the Czech actor, psychologist, writer, and acting teacher Prof. Ivan Vyskočil (1929–2023), who was a key figure of Czech post-war neo-avant-garde theatre. Then, in four subsections, I will discuss the feelings I have already mentioned. These are experienced to varying degrees by students of DA. Evidence of this is to be found in all practitioners' written reflections, which are an integral part of the study of this discipline, and I will thus use them as a source for my research. I will work with these feelings in the context of current research in the cognitive sciences: philosophy, medicine, and psychology. Research in these fields has investigated the feelings of amazement, wonder, awkwardness, embarrassment, boredom, and joy in play, and studied their influence on human creative processes. The findings of much of this research support the argument that these feelings are an essential and integral part of creative processes in acting. Experienced actors and performers perceive this fact, in their embodied experience. Of course, this may not be fully conscious. For this reason, too, one of the ambitions of this study is to contribute to a finer differentiation of creative processes.

The psychosomatic discipline of *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner*

Ivan Vyskočil founded the discipline of *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner* (DA)[1] at the end of the 1960s, when he was a key figure of the new theatre movement of so-called 'small' theatres that began to form in the late 1950s (BURIAN 1971: 229). Characteristic of these neo-avant-garde theatres was conceiving of *theatre as play*. American theatre scholar Jarka M. Burian mentions the transformation of the relationship between stage and audience: 'At the very least, important to both artists and spectators was the creation of more informal, open communication between stage and audience, a shift from one way proclamation to dialogue, to a form of mutual participation in the act of theatre, to a sharing of experience' (BURIAN 1971: 232). There is a noticeable shift from traditional theatre, which separates the actors on stage from the audience in the auditorium, to theatre as an *encounter*. Czech theatre scholar Jan Roubal has defined several characteristics that place Vyskočil's theatre group Nedivadlo (Non-theatre) in the stream of alternative and experimental theatres of the 1960s. Roubal writes that it represented 'a platform for maximally independent, freely motivated creativity defying the rules of regularly run theatre' and 'radical attempts to open up the theatre workshop to the public' (ROUBAL 2011: 130). Vyskočil gradually, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, began to explore 'general and basic principles of acting', concerned mainly with 'the search for sources of spontaneous creativity and playfulness' (ROUBAL 2011: 148).

The discipline of DA can be understood as a specific form of acting improvisation which starts from 'point zero', despite the fact that in purely terms of terminology, Vyskočil avoided the term 'improvisation' in the last years of his pedagogical career. DA shares many features with similar approaches, such as the improvisation of Viola Spolin or Keith Johnston.[2] However, it differs fundamentally in that the pedagogue does not offer students a positively defined set of instructions or way of practice. Vyskočil's conception of improvisation and spontaneity stems from his education in psychology and was also inspired by Jacob Levy Moreno's psychodrama.[3] Vyskočil, like Moreno, does not limit spontaneity to the realm of acting or art. He always stresses that the situations in which the practitioners of DA find themselves are basically already familiar from their interactions in ordinary life, even if they do not happen every day. It is crucial that the practitioners do not have an external partner in the space. They are alone in the space, and they play out their inner partners (their internal attitudes). This intrapersonal dialogue is made public in a situation of *play*. The inner partners are embodied by the practitioner. Unlike Moreno, Vyskočil did not end up working with different enactment or acting-out variants for therapeutic ends.

1 See https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/ivan-vyskočil?lang=en or (MACHKOVÁ and RAIS 2024).

2 See (CHARLES 2003).

3 See (MUSILOVÁ 2024).

Instead, he chose theatre and created his own distinctive concept of authorial acting and *open dramatic play*.

As mentioned, the practitioner receives no external instructions in DA, beginning their improvised play at 'point zero'. Everyone has to search for their own way to deal with the exposed situation of being in the space, with the 'simple' challenge or task being to express oneself in some way, and then to react to it. This challenge is a part of the creative process.

The uniqueness of DA lies in the fact that it encourages the research and study of the basic principles and phenomena of acting, play, and drama. The student can, for example, experience and explore the double existence of a human in play, in the sense of not only producing and creating play but also perceiving it. Another specificity is the exploration of bodily, vocal, and speech expressivity. The latter is related to the actor's somatopsychotype, which is also something the student can discover and explore. Exploring the intensity of stage expression is essential. This goes beyond ordinary, everyday expression. According to Vyskočil, the heightened intensity of expression and bodily tension in the space can become a stimulus, a challenge, or a provocation for a response to one's actions. The students can also develop their sensitivity to perceiving the impulses for play – the emerging fragments: shards of characters, situations, and relationships, as we know from other forms of improvisation. By placing the practitioners in a situation of play with themselves alone, the challenge for perceiving oneself, and for perceiving one's expression, becomes much more pressing. Vyskočil writes of his students:

> They then gradually begin to concentrate, loosen up, and start to perceive and express themselves in the 'here and now.' They begin reacting, interacting, relating, and articulating more differently. They start understanding and observing contrasts, polarity, and oscillation; true opposites and complementarity; reciprocity; and the interplay of opposites. (VYSKOČIL 2020)[4]

This process of exploration is usually longer than with other approaches to improvisation (about 2 years of regular practice). Vyskočil is convinced that teaching the student self-perception is impossible, but it is possible to be a guide in its exploration. DA is for actors and non-actors, if we may borrow these terms from Augusto Boal (see BOAL 2005). However, for Vyskočil, 'non-actors' are meant to be students of all disciplines (humanities and exact sciences), teachers of all types of schools, psychologists, and possibly even clergymen, in short, those who make public appearances in their professions and whose public appearances should achieve a certain communicative quality and quality of expression.[5]

This discipline's intrapersonal character requires the student to reflect on their experience during the semester. Written reflections (usually one per semester or after

4 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Czech are by Jakob Keller.

5 Vyskočil, in the early 1990s, offered this discipline to politicians and TV presenters as well.

10 encounters) can be the subject of further research. Students rehearse in an empty space without any proposed goal of action, or props. Neither are any circumstances given, such as a topic, a story, characters, or a situation. There are no external acting partners in the improvisation; the student acts only with themselves. The experiment usually lasts 3 minutes; 3 attempts per lesson are optimal. The play in DA arises from spontaneous, improvisational, and self-presentational acting. The self-presentational acting leads the students to the opening and exploring of their personal themes and topics.

> [It] implies a plurality of human existence and dialectical unity of complementary and contrasting opposites. We can understand it in terms of the archetypal opposites: small one – big one, child – parent, Sancho Panza – Don Quijote; a psychological opposite: extrovert – introvert; or we can understand it in the sense of any player's situation: restless pupil – encouraging teacher, daydreamer – pragmatist, lover – prude or sulker. (MUSILOVÁ 2018: 80).

The basic information about the discipline presented here cannot really capture its essence. One of the reasons for this is the basic premise of DA – a return to one's own experience. This experience is so individual, unique, and in permanent change in the process of practice that makes it impossible for those who practise it to generalise, categorise, or rationalise it in any way. Also, for this reason, written reflections that capture this personal experience are an essential part of the study process of this discipline.

To sum up this brief introduction to the discipline of DA, the relationship of DA to the philosophical phenomenological tradition should be noted. This is apparent in the emphasis placed in DA on personal experience, and in how this is preferred over imitation, and over various techniques and methods of actor training. Ivan Vyskočil was a lifelong friend of Jan Patočka,[6] the Czech philosopher who introduced phenomenological and existential philosophy into modern Czech culture in the post-war period. Patočka studied with Edmund Husserl in the 1930s and later became friends with Husserl's assistant Eugen Fink, who was engaged in work on the phenomenon of play.[7] The influence of phenomenology, albeit in Patočka's interpretation, was crucial for Czech theatre culture and its orientation during the second theatre reform.

In the following sections, I will first deal with amazement and wonder, and joy in play – feelings whose positive impact on improvisation is easy to imagine. Then,

6 'Jan Patočka (1907–1977) was a Czech philosopher with a strong lean towards Classical Studies. He converted to phenomenology by listening to Husserl lecturing in Paris in 1929, studied with Husserl and Heidegger (initially as a Humboldt-stipends in 1932/3), and in Heidegger's footsteps he devoted a considerable part of his work to the study of Greek thought and culture and their influence on the subsequent Europe and world. His professional career was severely impeded by the historical circumstances: habilitated in 1937, he faced the closure of Czech universities in 1939–45, expulsion from the university job in 1950 and, after a brief and heavily influential episode of teaching again in 1968–70, the final ban on any public activity from 1972 on' (MOURAL 2013: 123).

7 See (FINK 2012).

I will focus on two feelings that are usually evaluated negatively and whose positive relationship to the creative process may not be immediately apparent: awkwardness/embarrassment, and boredom.

Amazement and wonder

> 'Improvisation,' says Jan Werich, 'is when the ear is amazed at what the mouth is saying.'
>
> (VYSKOČIL 2021: 1)

Amazement and wonder are generally understandable feelings. Everybody has experienced the shock of something new, and everybody has considered life from a distance, from another perspective. I will work with these feelings together, considering them related. To put these in the context of acting and the discipline of DA, it will be necessary to open this section with a small excursion into the history of Czech modern comedy acting. The quotation given in the epigraph above comes from Vyskočil's professorial lecture 'On the Study of Acting' from 1992. In it, Vyskočil refers to the acting of two Czech avant-garde actors, the comedy duo Jan Werich and Jiří Voskovec, who became the inspiration for a whole plethora of Czech actors in the generations that followed.

Voskovec and Werich were strongly influenced by Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Czech avant-garde movement of Poetism. They were inspired by the circus and the acting of the American silent slapstick film. Like so many avant-garde artists of the 1920s, they wanted to succeed in film, making a total of four films in the interwar period. Eventually, however, their comic talents underwent rich development in original revue-type productions at the Liberated Theatre.[8] They played the central roles here, usually these characters were social outsiders modelled on those of their film idols Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and others. In the end, their talent and original humour was best expressed in verbal comedy. Roman Jakobson, who lived in Czechoslovakia between the world wars, wrote about the humour of these verbal clowns in 'An Open Letter from Roman Jakobson to Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich on the Epistemology and Semantics of Fun', which was published in 1937 in a collection on the tenth anniversary of the Liberated Theatre. The verbal clowning of the pair of actors Voskovec and Werich, their witty, dadaistic improvised word play, became the prototype of modern Czech comedy acting. This is why Jan Werich refers to 'mouth' and 'ear' when defining improvisation in the quotation above.

Ivan Vyskočil introduces his professorial lecture by quoting Werich, but further develops the quotation in the sense of his own distinctive conception:

8 The Liberated Theatre was founded in 1925 as the theatre section of the association of Czech avant-garde artists Devětsil (see e.g., BURIAN 1977).

> Undoubtedly, the ear and the mouth we are dealing with belong to one and the same person. But at the same time, judging from what is being said, the amazed ear is so baffled by what it has heard, that it has somehow detached itself, gained some kind of independence. The mouth, being the one who started it and basically caused the whole thing, finds itself in a similar situation of course. Did the afflicted person really not know, we ask ourselves, what his mouth will say? Did he really not already know it before his mouth said it, and before it got to his ear? It seems he did not. His mouth probably got carried away. He only gets to know this when it, the sound, carries to the ear, that is: together with the ear. Perhaps he even discovers it a tad later than the ear. He only discovers it from the ear, which is already amazed. But since this has already happened, it probably won't stay this way. The amazed ear will most probably show its amazement. It'll reply to the mouth. And it'll do that with its own mouth, which it has grown all of a sudden (from the surprise, that is). The mouth that started it all probably hears the reply. It hears the reply with its ear, which it has similarly grown. And it goes on like this, back and forth. The person in question is deep in it now, up to his ears. (VYSKOČIL 2021: 1)

The 'ear' and 'mouth' mentioned in the opening epigraph of this section can be understood metaphorically. It does not only have to be verbal expression *per se*, but also gestural, bodily, vocal, and physical expression. From the late 1960s, after personal encounters with Moshe Feldenkreis and Franz Wurm, among others, Vyskočil increasingly turned his attention to the body and to bodily expression. His pedagogy thus has a strong interest in corporeality, bodily expression, bodily impulses, bodily tension and bodily memory.[9]

Shklovsky's defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*)

Czech avant-gardists were strongly influenced by the Moscow Linguistic Circle and Russian formalism, including Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*). Shklovsky defines *ostranenie* in his 1917 essay 'Art as Technique'. Spiegel summarises this definition 'as the breaking up of established habits of reception. In daily life, we often perceive things only superficially – i.e., we do not really see them the way they are. To *truly see* things again we must overcome our "blind" perception, and this is only possible when they are made strange again' (SPIEGEL 2008: 369). Werich's (or Vyskočil's) 'amazed ear' is analogous to the amazement, the heightened awareness, and sharpened perception evoked by that novelty, by that defamiliarisation (VAN DEN OEVER and GUNNING 2020: 21).

9 Vyskočil follows the Czech interwar avant-garde. Jindřich Honzl, a Czech avant-garde director and theorist, writes about 'muscle memory' and 'muscle inspiration' in his theoretical texts. Honzl himself is inspired by Meyerhold. See (MUSILOVÁ 2014).

Brecht's amazed actor

Aside from the Czech interwar avant-garde, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre was also an important influence on Vyskočil's conception of acting. In the case of Brecht, one must also refer back to Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*. Vyskočil became acquainted with Brecht's concept of the amazed actor, as defined in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, at the end of the 1950s. A Czech translation of this text was published in 1958.

Bertolt Brecht brings a more philosophical perspective to his conception of the amazed actor. This Brechtian impulse brings Vyskočil to balance the amazement and wonder of the 'mere' joy of free, uncommitted spontaneous play, and the emergence of associations and meanings from somewhere in the subconscious, with a more philosophical attitude. Although Brecht's aim is tied to a particular ideology, we cannot deny that he brought a crucial impetus for avant-garde theatre: one can learn about the world, about human coexistence and, not least, about oneself, even through joyful play (MUSILOVÁ 2010). What Vyskočil adopts from Brecht is precisely this philosophising attitude, an attitude often characterised (in the cases of both Brecht and Vyskočil) as Socratic questioning. Brecht's actor should do his best to let himself 'be amazed by the inconsistencies in [the character's. – M.M.] various attitudes, knowing that he will in turn have to make them amaze the audience' (BRECHT 1988: 200).

The amazement of Brecht's actor does not come naturally. The actor is supposed to create it, evoke it, discover it. It is a certain principle of the creative process, and it should be added that it is more of an authorial and dramaturgical process than an acting process:

> To transform himself from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry he would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was amazed by this pendulum motion, as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come on the rules by which it was governed. (BRECHT 1988: 192)

Amazement and wonder as part of the creative process

The British philosopher Howel Martyn Evans explores the sense of wonder from a clinical, medical perspective in his study 'Wonder and the Clinical Encounter'. His definition of wonder does not differ in principle from that derived from Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*:

> The attitude of wonder is thus one of altered, compellingly intensified attention to something that we immediately acknowledge as somehow important – something that might be unexpected, that we certainly do not yet understand in its fullest sense, and towards which we will likely want to turn our faculty of understanding; something whose initial appearance to us engages our imagination before our understanding [...]. (EVANS 2012: 127)

Evans points out that wonder is not confined 'to static gazing but has its own dynamic leading-on to the desire to understand' (EVANS 2012: 127), whereby wonder can become involved in the actor's creative process as an activating principle. From Evans's study, I select those characteristics of wonder and amazement that are relevant to actor improvisation: a strong emotional experience containing elements of ideation and disposition to act; an experience of oneself that is not yet an attitude but that gropes towards an attitude; detaching us from our ordinary world. This is an interruption that is embodied and physical; a 'hinge' which turns the door to 'other worlds' (EVANS 2012: 127–128).

In the humanities, wonder is most often examined in relation to philosophy, respectively as a primary presupposition of the philosophical and scientific stance. Less attention has been paid to wonder in relation to creativity itself. Wonder in relation to creativity has been the focus of psychologist Vlad Petre Glăveanu in the last decade. Glăveanu follows an earlier study, 'A Philosophy of Wonder', by Howard L. Parsons, who pointed out that wondering is 'emotionally and curiously cognitive' (PARSONS 1969: 86). In particular, he is inspired by Parsons' claim that wonder 'retains an element of detachment or ideation, a minimal curiosity, a control of emotion that gives psychic distance to the event and permits at least in some small degree the play of imagination' (PARSONS 1969: 87).

Glăveanu, in his 2019 study 'Creativity and Wonder', presents a conceptual model according to which to wonder means 'to decenter or destabilize unitary and singular perspectives and open up to difference and multiplicity' (GLĂVEANU 2019: 174). In his conceptual model, he defines a metaposition as the capacity 'not only to entertain more than one perspective on reality but also, mainly, to view that *multiple perspectives are indeed possible*' (GLĂVEANU 2019: 173). In holding a metaposition, 'multiple ways of relating to one's reality become possible' (GLĂVEANU 2022: 31). In the conclusion of his study, Glăveanu compares Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow (1990). Unlike the flow state in which the performer is fully immersed in their task, the experience of wonder is characterised by distance (GLĂVEANU 2019: 176).

Wonder and amazement allow us to take a new perspective on events, to open ourselves up to otherness, to see events, situations, expressions from a different, complementary position, from the position of an inner partner, one who perceives, listens, and accepts. Wonder (and curiosity) does not only allow us to enter a dialogically experienced human existence, to step out of a monologic life and out of objectification (in the sense of a loss of a relationship to oneself), it also allows an actor to take up an authorial attitude in their performance.

The joy of play

> That moment of a kind of inner relaxation and pleasure when he noticed and realised what was happening. It was the awareness of what was at play that turned into the pleasure of play, of the otherness of being. – A joyfulness, a cathartic aliveness.
>
> (MUSILOVÁ 2019)

In this section I will discuss how the feeling of joy in play appears in improvisation from 'point zero'. I will be working with my own experience as both a practitioner and teacher of DA. Joy in play is something we can also read about in Konstantin Stanislavsky's book *An Actor's Work*, especially in Chapter 8: 'Belief and the Sense of Truth'.

Joy in play is a moving experience

We can experience joy in play in moments when the performing actor becomes aware of their situation as a situation of play. When the situation is illuminated by the consciousness of play and the pleasure of it. These moments are accompanied by a certain lucid consciousness, and, at the same time, by bodily relaxation. The actor's body is tuned to the optimum (conductive) tension, which has to do with bodily attunement, and the sense of rhythm. The performing actor, or rather the playing actor, is like a player rhythmically attuned to the teammate's pass (in the sense of an offer) as George Herbert Mead writes about it in *Mind, Self and Society* when defining the term *game*: 'If one has the attitude of the person throwing the ball he can also have the response of catching the ball. The two are related so that they further the purpose of the game itself' (MEAD 1972: 159).[10] This has to do with the self-awareness of the player in the situation of play. In DA, it can be a matter of noticing and accepting any (offer of a) spontaneous impulse, no matter how banal. However, it can also be the adoption of an animated vocal or bodily gesture as in the case of this actor:

> X. Y. made a movement that he thought was stupid, embarrassing, clownish, silly. This movement was beyond the normal movements of a corpulent man in his fifties. The pleasure of the awkwardness led him to further clowning around, and to play. The movement was simple – a partial crouch and a jerked upright hand on the diagonal. (MUSILOVÁ 2019)

10 'I have illustrated this by the ball game, in which the attitudes of a set of individuals are involved in a co-operative response in which the different roles involve each other. In so far as a man takes the attitude of one individual in the group, he must take it in its relationship to the action of the other members of the group; and if he is fully to adjust himself, he would have to take the attitudes of all involved in the process' (MEAD 1972: 256).

I know from my own experience of DA practice as well as from my teaching, that moments of lucid awareness of play are followed by a release of associations and imagery. These can then be an incentive to develop play in an improvisational way – by repeating the action, by variations of it or, on the contrary, by sudden unpredictable turns.

> In my attempt, I provoked myself, baiting myself into something. And suddenly I noticed the classroom window open. This image stuck in my mind and forced itself on me like a vague memory of a pre-present moment. I tried to take this image into play, to somehow incorporate it into what was already happening. It was the essential moment of this round of dialogical acting, when I tried to reveal a sensation or impulse in an articulate way. To give it expression – bodily or speech – so that I could somehow incorporate it into the slowly emerging structure of my action. In this case, for some reason, I followed the image of an open window with the image of a closed window. Opening and closing. Open and close. Open myself and close myself. In this (self-)transformation, something happened to me. I was born different from what I had felt and experienced – in the play of opening to the world, in gesture, with my whole body, even with my voice. And then again in the play of closing myself off from the world. It surprised me. (MUSILOVÁ 2019)

In sessions of DA, both in the role of the practising participant as well as in the role of the educator, I often observe that the person who has recognised that they are in a play situation has lit up internally. There is a noticeable, if only fleeting, amusement at what has just happened. Something warms you up inside and energises you. It is a tiny wave of energy, a tiny surge of human joy, accompanied by a desire to continue. The player is exalted and carried away by their play. The joyful movement of play moves the human spirit at that moment. Or does play itself move the human spirit?

It warms the heart

The heartwarming phenomenon of joy in play does not only have to be a phenomenon of free improvised acting from 'point zero'. It is already to be seen in the work of Konstantin Stanislavsky, in his pedagogical novel. In the book's eighth chapter, entitled 'Belief and the Sense of Truth', Stanislavsky describes the three stages of rehearsing the etude with given circumstances, specifically, for example, the etude of 'burning money'. Stanislavsky's character Tortsov instructs Kostya to foster a sense of belief and truth in his actions by playing the 'burning money' scene repeatedly. In the first phase, Kostya learns to work with an imaginary prop when counting banknotes. Tortsov guides his pupil to perform partial physical actions logically, in sequence and only based on imagination (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 169). In the next phase of rehearsing this etude, the students, with Tortsov's guidance, discover 'the logic and sequence of feelings through the logic and sequence of physical actions' (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 189–190), so that the tragic outcome, or rather the given circumstances of the etude,

are organically fulfilled. Kostya, with the help of his imagination, develops in himself images, situations, relationships and ideas that evoke inner dynamism, the impulse to external action (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 189).

In the moments when Kostya can act truthfully in the given circumstances of a fictional situation, it causes him to believe in this action and causes him to enjoy the play. This pleasure provokes in him further spontaneous action and opens up the ability to freely develop play and improvise.

> They are not the same things at all – waving one's fingers meaninglessly and counting the dirty, used rouble notes which, in my mind, I was looking at.
> As soon as I felt the truth of physical action I felt home on the stage.
> And at the same time, spontaneously, impromptu actions occurred. I meticulously untied the string and put it on the table beside me. This tiny action encouraged my sense of truth, and produced a whole series of fresh impromptu actions after it. For example, before counting the packets I tapped them on the table for a long time to make sure the edges were even, to make them tidy. Vanya, who was beside me while I was doing this, understood my action and laughed.
> 'What is it?' I asked him.
> 'That came off very well,' he explained. (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 169)

When playing the 'burning money' etude again after a certain time delay, Kostya fails to lead his play with small physical actions. However, with the help of Tortsov, who represents the actor's consciousness in the given pedagogical situation and thus strengthens Kostya's consciousness-raising process, the actor eventually achieves a sense of truth and belief in his own actions, which again triggers a wave of enthusiasm in him. Kostya describes his feelings: 'Once I had felt the truth of the physical actions and believed they were genuine, I was on fire: things became easier, my imagination was working' (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 192).

Stanislavsky also points out that evoking a sense of truth and belief in an action is as essential for the actor as it is for his co-actor (stage partner) or for the spectator (partner in the audience): 'Vanya entered into the spirit of what I was doing and reacted well to it. His enthusiasm spurred me on to invent new things. A whole, different scene was created: cosy, living, warm, happy. It drew a response from the auditorium at every moment. That also spurred me on' (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 193).

The words Stanislavsky uses to capture the joy of play point to the specific qualities of this phenomenon. They are words full of energy ('on fire', 'warm', 'living'), relaxation ('easier'), a feeling of security ('cosy', to 'feel home') and at the same time they capture a state of inspiration and actors' awakened vitality ('enthusiasm', 'happy').

Illuminated being

In his structural analysis of play in the text *Oasis of Happiness*, philosopher Eugen Fink repeatedly points out that play is 'pleasurably attuned, joyfully moved within itself – it is animated' (FINK 2012: 11). The pleasure of play 'is taking delight in a "sphere," delight in an imaginary dimension; it is not merely taking pleasure in play, but rather pleasure at play' (FINK 2012: 12). Fink returns repeatedly to this illuminating attuning of the human being in play in his study.

This illumination in play, creation and human life is met with the phenomena of inspiration, excitement, and enthusiasm, which are usually conceived and defined as exceptional, liminal human experiences. Philosopher Henri Bergson also characterises extreme joy as a liminal experience in 'Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness': 'Finally, in cases of extreme joy, our perceptions and memories become tinged with an indefinable quality, as with a kind of heat or light, so novel that now and then, as we stare at our oneself, we wonder how it can really exist' (BERGSON 2001: 10). I believe that this 'wonder how it can really exist' is one of the most important reasons why we have been fascinated by acting improvisation since the birth of Dada, which brought accident and the aesthetic pleasure of accident into modern art.

Embarrassment and awkwardness

To clearly understand how the feeling of embarrassment affects the actor's self-experience, I will make use of the example of another etude of Stanislavsky. In the beginning of Chapter 3: 'Action, "if", "Given Circumstances"' in *An Actor's Work,* Tortsov asks a female student Marya to go on stage with a banal, almost bland assignment – to sit on stage (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 39). Marya does not know what to do with her hands, head, and eyes... Kostya also wants to try this etude. He does not feel comfortable on stage either and later describes his experience:

> The stage by its very nature put me on display, while the human feelings I was looking for needed solitude. There was one person inside me who wanted me to entertain the audience, and another who told me to pay no attention to them. And though my legs, hands, head, and torso obeyed me, at the same time, despite myself, they added a certain something of their own, over and above what was needed. A simple movement of the hand or foot turned into something mannered. The result was a kind of photographic pose. (STANISLAVSKI 2017: 40)

The situation of acting without given circumstances and without a predetermined theme for play, as depicted by Stanislavsky, can be seen as a starting point for the following considerations.

Embarrassment is taken to be a self-conscious emotion. I find the strongest analogy to the actor's situation is *social awkwardness*, in which we perceive ourselves in the

perspective of others. We are doubling our self-consciousness. As with Kostya, the feeling of awkwardness leads to increased activity, activity that we cannot easily regulate. It fuels our need to change the situation, it requires some immediate action (CLEGG 2012: 268).

The American psychologist Joshua W. Clegg, who has investigated socially awkward encounters, reports respondents' experiences from his research: 'You know, usually I wouldn't even think about how I'm walking or how I look from someone else's perspective. [...] I was just imagining myself and how I must look to them and their perspective and opinions of me [...]" (CLEGG 2012: 268). During such awkward moments, the participants experienced a sense of magnification (often through a sense of slowed time), tension, or discomfort and sometimes anxiety or embarrassment (CLEGG 2012: 272).

In short, awkwardness pushes actors into a higher bodily tension that is, or can be, very productive in an exposed situation of play on stage. It allows them to be more perceptive, to notice something that we do not notice in ordinary life because of stereotyping and automatism.

The existential experience of 'being seen'

The feelings of awkwardness when practising DA are mentioned by many students in their written reflections. Here I give some examples of how students reflect on their feelings[11]:

> 'It's a naked place [...] where I just have to be my own awkward self. And there's always someone looking at me. At how naked I am.' (Helena: reflection, autumn 2023)

> 'I began to worry about the fact that others saw more into me, that I didn't want to be awkward and boring [...].' (Katherine: reflection, autumn 2023)

> 'I didn't find anything funny, interesting, or revelatory, there was a feeling that "it's been done before", "you've done it before [...], it's embarrassing [...]". I guess it's like trying to choose from the plethora of movies on Netflix and nothing is ever interesting enough. I wanted to be entertained.' (Ilona: reflection, autumn 2023)

Sondra Fraleigh opens her study 'A Phenomenology of Being Seen' with a basic statement: 'Being seen is an essential phenomenon of performance.' She continues: 'I discover that being seen is a perception of myself through the eyes of others [...]' (FRALEIGH 2019: 87). Our students' reflections demonstrate how the situation of 'being seen' can cause us considerable embarrassment. Thus understood, the embarrassment of being seen corresponds to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of 'being-seen-by

11 Students' names have been changed for privacy.

Other' presented in his *Being and Nothingness*. Through the gaze of the other, which is focused on me, I can see myself as a subject:

> The explanation here is that we in fact attribute to the body-for-the-Other as much reality as to the body-for-us. Better yet, the body-for-the-Other is the body-for-us, but inapprehensible and alienated. It appears to us then that the Other accomplishes for us a function of which we are incapable, and which nevertheless is incumbent on us: to see ourselves as we are. (SARTRE 1953: 353–354)

In a 2007 interview, Ivan Vyskočil recalls the early inspirations of Sartre's existentialism when he says of embarrassment:

> [...] from the point of view of existentialism, 'being seen' is taken as an embarrassment. One is caught, existing, not knowing how, not knowing the answer. [...] When we become the target of attention, we are separated from the background. We don't know what to do about it, and because the attention is on us, we think we should know [...]. (VYSKOČIL 2007: 208)

And while Fraleigh emphasises the importance of the situation of being seen for somatic experiencing, Vyskočil recognises, in addition to psychosomatic qualities, that being seen and being heard also means that there is a witness (spectator) to the themes that may emerge spontaneously during improvisation. The spectator's witnessing can thus help the performer to become aware of their own personal and authorial themes that emerge randomly.

Embarrassment as an aesthetic category

According to Ivan Vyskočil, awkwardness must be 'anticipated and taken into play as a certain basic existential and aesthetic category' (VYSKOČIL 1993: 61). This concept of embarrassment was characteristic of his work from its beginnings in the Reduta Club in the centre of Prague in the late 1950s. Vyskočil explains it further,

> Embarrassment experienced reciprocally is very dominant, ambivalent, and either blocks, ends and makes common play impossible, or opens, establishes and elucidates it. Depending on whether one panics from it and flees from it, or whether one works from it and with it in an acknowledged, organic way. From the first moment of performing at the Reduta Club, I have been aware of and acknowledged embarrassment and learned to treat it as a positive, inspiring given, and as a possibility. (VYSKOČIL 1993: 61)

But in this case, unlike the social awkwardness we can experience in everyday situations, awkwardness is magnified by the perception of the spectators who are in the position of witnesses and co-players.[12]

12 On the interplay and co-play between actors and spectators, see (LAZAROWICZ 1997).

The Czech theatre scholar Zdeněk Hořínek has devoted a whole study to this topic: 'Trapno jako estetická kategorie' [Embarrassment as an Aesthetic Category] (1968). He focuses, among other things, on the meanings of the Czech word *trapnost*, such as feelings of insecurity, shame, embarrassment:

> Embarrassing feelings and situations are many people's strongest and most enduring experiences and as such tend to be deeply stored in the memory. I see the reason for their intrusiveness in the fact that embarrassment, more than any other experience, threatens a person's self-esteem and dignity, the qualities that are indispensable in a healthy measure. Embarrassment diminishes us, not only in front of others, but also in front of ourselves. Above all in front of ourselves. Embarrassment degrades us within. (HOŘÍNEK 1968: 62)

In his study, Hořínek refers to the 1964 production of Ivan Vyskočil's Non-theatre production *Meziřeči* [In-between-speeches], in which the audience was provoked to participate in the same way as in Peter Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* [Offending the Audience and Self-Accusation] (1966). And while Handke writes his antiplay to do 'something onstage against the stage, using the theatre to protest against the theatre of the moment' (HANDKE 1970: 58), Vyskočil emphasises the cathartic function of this invective on the audience: 'And we believe, for more than one experience has led us to believe this, that embarrassment induced by play, accepted and clarified in play, is a wondrous way to de-embarrassment, to catharsis' (Vyskočil quoted in HOŘÍNEK 1968: 62).

Boredom

In written DA reflections, students often mention that they find their actions boring and that they believe that they bore those who watch them. We all know the feeling of being bored, of looking for any impulse to engage us and dispel our boredom. In everyday life, we use various means to stave off boredom – we turn on the TV, browse social networks, call friends, etc. Somehow, we try to fill the time that irritates us and constricts us with its emptiness. The more creative individuals among us will come up with going for a walk, a hike, or a lively gathering with friends.

The actor is in a similar situation. When they feel the fear that the audience has become bored, they can use the interplay with colleagues to 'kick things up a notch', the actor can start improvising outside the framework of the dramatic text, etc. They may complain about the tediousness of the text, the incompetence of the director's conception, or about their untalented or unprepared co-actors. The reasons for the feeling of boredom thus dissolve in external circumstances.

In DA, when the actor is alone on stage, in conditions of *public solitude* (MACHKOVÁ and RAIS 2024), and when they develop play with their inner partner, or respective partners, they have no such crutches. They may experience their own play as interesting and inspiring or, which is more often the case, as boring, even after many

years of practising the discipline. And this boredom, especially in the first year of practicing, can be paralysing. Gradually, through practice, they become aware of the (un)provocativeness of their own offers, and if they work up the courage, they begin to modify their acting. The uniqueness of this approach can be seen in the fact that the actor does this for themselves, without any external prompting or instruction from the pedagogues. The teachers limit their input to supportive comments only and to calls for full expression, through not silencing the expression of the body, voice and gesture. The actor can thus discover their own, original topic and the unique quality of expression of their own acting. It may also happen that they discover something that interests, inspires and entertains them. In his pedagogy and concept of authorial acting, Vyskočil has always emphasised personal responsibility, not only for the theme of the play, but also for the expression through which this theme is communicated. But how can boredom become the impetus for an actor's creativity?

A positive function of boredom?

Boredom is 'an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity' (CARRERA 2023: 11). When a person is bored, they think that the situation they are in lacks meaning or purpose, or that what they are doing does not correspond to what they want. When a person is bored, they have a desire to engage in a different and more satisfying activity. They also have difficulty maintaining and focusing their attention (ELPIDOROU 2014: 2).

The American philosopher Andreas Elpidorou, who has long studied the nature of boredom, conceives this emotion as functional:

> As such, boredom is a cognitive-affective experience, captured well by the suggestion that boredom is a 'feeling of thinking'. By conceiving of boredom as a regulatory mechanism that maintains cognitive engagement, our model explains and highlights boredom's ability to function as a call to action. (DANCKERT and ELPIDOROU 2023: 495)

Elpidorou likens boredom to an emotional trap which 'due to its own character fortunately "pushes" us to escape from it' (ELPIDOROU 2014: 2).

Boredom is usually conceived of as entirely negative. But recent research points to its positive aspects. Boredom motivates the pursuit of a new goal when the current one loses meaning: 'In the absence of boredom, one would remain trapped in unfulfilling situations, and miss out on many emotionally, cognitively, and socially rewarding experiences' (ELPIDOROU 2014: 2). Boredom can activate brain activity, restore perception, facilitate the promotion of alternative goals, revive and boost creativity. Elpidorou further argues: '[F]inding that there is anticorrelated activity in the anterior insular cortex during the state of boredom is a further indication that during boredom one is looking for stimulation, even though one is not currently meaningfully

stimulated' (ELPIDOROU 2018: 22). Psychologists Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman (2014) conceive of boredom in the same functional way. According to them, the benefit of boredom is that it can stimulate the imagination and awaken creativity (MANN and CADMAN 2014: 166).

Boring time

The feeling that the actor's actions are boring and uninteresting, and that there is therefore no point in continuing the action, is only one possible reaction. In DA, we can also encounter an opposite reaction. The fear that one's attempt will be boring is often responded to with increased activity, an endless series of offers and suggestions for play, to which the rehearsing student does not respond, however. In fact, the student does not respond because their efforts are entirely occupied with producing.

The feeling of boredom is usually accompanied by the subjective experience of dragging time. In her book *Boredom*, Elena Carrera mentions the research of Michael Spaeth, who defines boredom as 'the subjective core impression that there is nothing meaningful to do and that the time is passing slowly, accompanied by feelings of dissatisfaction, despondency, annoyance, stress, and a sense of entrapment' (Spaeth quoted in CARRERA 2023: 10). The specific experience of time is also mentioned by Elpidorou: 'The weariness that we experience while bored, compounded with the perception of a slower passage of time, makes the character of boredom all the more aversive (Sackett et al. 2010)' (ELPIDOROU 2014: 2).

An actor may try to fill the dragging time with some action. In the initial phase of practising DA, time is often filled with various stimuli and impulses, which the actor is unable to perceive and accept because of their speed and haste. In the words of Gertrude Stein, an actor is not able to 'to talk and listen, to listen while talking, and talk while listening' (STEIN 1998: 353). Or in Stanislavsky's words, he is unable to simultaneously engage in 'emanation (or radiation) and imanation (or the taking of radiation)' (CARNICKE 2009: 210).

Vyskočil's conception and modification of public solitude accentuates the conscious focus of attention on one's own expression, however banal this expression may seem to the actor.[13] Students are therefore encouraged not to worry about the audience, instead to worry about themselves and their play. If your acting entertains you or your inner partner (and the inner spectator), it will also entertain the spectator in the audience.

13 As inspiration for productive banality, Vyskočil often recalled Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and repetitively played out banalities like those in this play (a pebble in a shoe, eating a carrot, etc.).

Transformation of unpleasant feelings

Some examples from students' written reflections prove that the transformation of negative feelings through play is possible and very stimulating. Indeed, it can lead to the discovery of personal and authorial topics that emerge quite spontaneously:

> I am thrown out into the light of ten pairs of eyes, and suddenly I notice that the space has shrunk inwards, and my head is occupied more than anything else by the increased pulse, the beating of my heart, the trembling of my hands... I pay attention to it and wait for the calming... and for what is to come... The calming doesn't come completely, but something has to come... and what comes is my MOTHER. My mother, who begins to admonish me. How to behave, how to adjust myself, how to... And I'm having a lot of fun on stage. (Ilona: reflection, autumn 2023)

They can also help to boost self-esteem, as in the case of this dramatic acting student:

> However, I must thank you as your course has made me move forward in many ways that have long troubled me. Primarily, it is about awkward situations or situations on stage like: 'I have forgotten my lines, what am I going to do now? Panic.' After this semester, I enjoy awkward situations more than ever. It is comforting to know that thanks to you I could experience that there is a way out of every situation and that the situation is not embarrassing if I don't determine it myself. In general, it makes me feel much better and calmer on stage. (Andrea: reflection, autumn 2022)

These feelings are linked to a different experience of time, as this student confirms:

> I have noticed, I remember it well, that boredom and dislike or exhaustion can be very beneficial. It brings me detachment and slowing down, feeling and intensity, but in a calm way. It brings such a specific clearness and stimulation. (Peter: reflection, spring 2022)

The feeling of awkwardness in the situation of 'being seen' especially, helps students to become self-aware:

> The special space, the absence of any aids and the gaze of others makes me perceive my own body more strongly, like space and time, becoming the only tangible point in the infinite space around me. No matter where I move, I am the centre. Not only the centre of attention, but also the centre of the world I am creating. At the same time, I am also the timeline, because it is my four minutes, my time, designated to me. (Melissa: reflection, spring 2013)

Conclusion

As we have seen, the four observed feelings are engaged in the creative processes and have the potential to activate the actors in improvising from 'point zero'. In the case of amazement, it is the taking up of a metaposition, which, as Glăveanu argues, allows for a multiplication of perspectives from which the improvising actor views their actions, expression, and associated images. The concept of the metaposition differs from Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, which is often attributed to improvisation. At the same time, the metaposition, as Glăveanu describes it, reinforces the authorial position of the improvising actor. The sense of joy in play is accompanied by the physical relaxation and rhythmic attunement of the actor's body. With this attunement, the actor's imagination is awakened to a greater extent. Embarrassment and awkwardness, the third feeling explored, has been examined in terms of social interaction – the situation of 'being seen by the other'. The latter appears to be constitutive of acting itself. In terms of creativity, then, it is significant that the feeling of awkwardness increases the actor's receptivity and, as Clegg argues, stimulates the actor's need to change the situation and therefore to act. This is particularly significant in the case of improvisation, whose topic is not given in advance and emerges during the acting. The last of the feelings explored, boredom, is certainly the most common of the feelings experienced by the actor, or the fear of it, in moments of lack of inspiration, blockage of the body and bodily impulses. In DA, the actor is at one with themselves and the experience of boredom necessarily turns their attention to their own actions. Elpidorou considers boredom as a regulatory mechanism and argues that the unsatisfactoriness of boredom can function as a challenge to action and the search for an alternative goal. Of course, the feelings explored here are not the only stimuli for the initiation of creative processes in acting. I have focused on them because they are often overlooked or underappreciated, despite their dominance in the written reflections of DA students, a discipline that allows us to explore the basic principles of acting.

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