

## Chapter Three

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES: THE PROGRESSION OF THE TRAINING



The training is not a step by step progress along one line of development; rather than being a single line, it is like a rope with several strands all separate but all somehow entwined to make one.

GEORGE DEVINE

I ONCE ATTEMPTED TO outline what would to me be an ideal school of theatre: it would offer a course of studies as detailed and as rigorous as any other professional training, be it law, medicine, music or architecture; a training so demanding that only study entirely devoted to it over several years could form the kind of accomplished actor needed for today's theatre.

Such training is different from most other professional training in that the instrument of the training is the human being itself—the body and soul of the actor—and that the work is done from the inside out rather than from the outside in. An actor has to be trained in a variety of disciplines, each vital in itself and intimately related to all the others.

Although a school offering such training should have a certain flexibility, the school's *basis* should be a unified programme of training. Too much teaching by trial and error is a great waste of effort for both teachers and students, and in addition to being disconcerting, especially in the early part of the training, it can prevent the laying of a solid base for the young actor.

Therefore, a more or less systematic basic plan, with some flexibility in the way of proceeding, is absolutely necessary.

This may sound contradictory, but I hope to explain why it is not. It is important to understand that what follows is not a method or a system, but a *way to work*.

### *The Kind of Actor We Want to Train*

It is essential to make clear from the outset what kind of actor we want to develop and what sort of theatre we want to train him for.

Nowadays society and the theatre are changing so fast we cannot be sure of anything; all the more reason for the training to have a comprehensive basis in all disciplines so that a complete freedom of technique, a freedom of expression and a flow of imagination can be achieved.

The question, however, is, how are we going to train the young acting student so as to prepare him to be discriminating when confronted with a multitude of outside influences and tendencies? Are we going to defend him against them or prepare him to face them?

Our conviction is that whatever experiments may be attempted, through fresh forms of writing, or on new stages—in the round, octagonal or thrust, on stages with the latest, the most advanced, technical devices, or just on bare, exposed boards — everything ultimately depends on the human being, the *actor*.

We have, therefore, to form an actor equipped with all possible means of dramatic expression, one capable of facing up to any challenge and meeting the demands of today's and tomorrow's ever-changing theatre, an actor who is capable of participating in these changes and who is himself inventive enough to contribute to them.

### *The Training*

I have a tremendous suspicion of *any* "method," whether old or new, which stops questions or discourages change. We search for truth—but truth is always changing as our lives change.

I have planned in my time five schools, each of them aimed at establishing a complete theatrical organization, with, at its centre, a permanent, professional repertory company.

To me, such a school would combat all sorts of academic rigidity. It would dedicate itself to a renewal of acting techniques and gradually invent new ways of working, while along the way training its own teachers. Regularly—in fact at the end of every school year—it would re-examine its ways of working.

In each of the schools it was hoped that the students would develop a unified way of acting which would then become that of its repertory company.

As we consider these goals and ways of working, several factors emerge: it is of prime importance to establish from the beginning the idea of ensemble acting because what, in fact, creates life on the stage is the actor's awareness of his relationships — spiritual, imaginative, perceptive, physical — with other actors.

However, the training of the actor has to be, in its details, adapted to each individual. This is of vital importance.

The quality and standards of the school can only be ensured by continuity in the faculty and teaching. In order to arrive at a unified way of acting it is necessary to establish a unity of training, with the different branches coordinated and growing organically.

Each entering group of acting students should gradually be formed into a kind of company, which should be maintained during the entire four years of the training, if possible.

Finally, in contrast to the detailed individual exercises practiced in other branches of the training, the interpretive work should always be done by studying a whole play, or, at least, one act of a play; we must avoid the customary practice of working on isolated scenes. By continually rehearsing scenes detached from their contexts, the student takes the risk of placing too much importance on his own work instead of maintaining the necessary balance of relationships with the other characters in a play.

When I use the word actor, I actually have two sorts in mind: the kind who works with a text and the kind who works without one. When his work is based on a text, I think of him as the actor/interpreter; when he acts without a text, I call him the ac-

tor/improviser. Naturally, at the highest levels of our art these two breeds of actor tend to merge; however, for now the above distinctions will be helpful.

In most companies the actor will be placed, more often than not, in the position of interpreter: as such he finds himself confronted with a text. Having penetrated to the heart of the play, he must interpret its meaning. To do this it is necessary, above all, to submit himself to the play and this demands an objective attitude.

The truthfulness of a given text cannot be found unless an objective consideration of the nature of the text takes place at the precise moment when the actor's subjective, inner truth starts to emerge.

The connection between the subjective and the objective, the absolute necessity of constant exchanges between these two attitudes, conditions the entire progression of the work. It is through the experience of this connection, this exchange, that the interpreter, having started from his instinctive way of working, gives himself the chance to go beyond himself. Through this he can raise his imagination to the level of the most demanding texts instead of remaining miserably dependent on his own subjective identity, however profound it may be.

Yet, ultimately, in order to bring life to a part, the actor will have to move from his objective attitude to a concentration on himself. It is only from within himself, and through physical actions inspired by or drawn from his own inner resources, that the character can be realized, can finally be born. This requires a subjective attitude. From the conflict and reconciliation of these two attitudes, one can gradually obtain an interpretation which will be both faithful to the text and vitally alive.

The actor who works without receiving his initial impulse from an author, without the support of a text and without the subsequent restrictions of his obligations to it, is not an interpreter. He has been called many things at different times and in different countries: a farceur, a clown, a music-hall or vaudeville entertainer. This kind of actor is his own author, but it is rare that he actually sits down to write. He invents his text in action, as it were, on his feet—he is an improviser. In fact, he usually has no

ambition to devise a work of art, he merely makes a plan which he calls a scenario or a sketch. He is directly creative.

If we accept this distinction between the actor/interpreter and the actor/improviser, should we not stimulate the initiative and invention of the future interpreter by making him pass through the experiences of the actor/creator?

### *Improvisation*

A recognition of the value of this way of working leads us to improvisation, in all its forms, as an essential basis for the training of the actor, regardless of the kind of theatre for which he is destined. Improvisation is the way to liberate and stimulate invention; it is a fundamental way of working that opens up new and unexpected horizons for the student.

We have, of course, to define in what way we are going to use this improvisation so that it can lead to the interpretation of all styles without exception, regardless of their origin and period. We want to give interpretation a *reality* which is meaningful for our own time. I realise that here one is confronted with a very complex problem: not to confuse *reality* with *realism*. But how, and by what means, are we to help young actors—who are plunged daily into the realism of films and television, not to mention the theatre—to understand, to develop a feeling for and to invest with equal reality a character from the drama of ancient Greece, of the Spanish Golden Age or of Shakespeare? Our training should, to a certain degree, encourage in our student a passion for what is called truth. But how can we discourage the misconception that a conflict exists between this contemporary demand for truth and those lyrical, heroic, eloquent masterpieces of the past which reveal the ways of feeling and the modes of living of classical times?

To give life to a style of the past demands that the interpreter find a balance between contemporary subjective truth and the objective qualities which the text brings to him. The inner truth of the actor must unite with a truthfulness of expression: if either remains separate from the other, there is falseness and deceit.

The challenge is two-fold: how to bring the actor's need for truth gradually up to the level of the finest classical texts, and how to prevent this need for truth from clashing with the remoteness and the unfamiliarity of the *form* of these texts.

There is, of course, a preliminary problem which is unavoidable: the difficulty of understanding different cultures. Acting of our sort needs nourishment. This will be found, in part, in an appreciation of the arts and in an imaginative study of the history, religion and the social life of the historical periods which are related to the great dramatic styles. An intimate knowledge of poetry and a regular practice with various sorts of texts is also necessary. Familiarity with them is a fundamental and indispensable aid to interpretation, and can only be obtained by continuous practice.

In order to be free, the actor needs to feel himself rich, rich in resources. Abundant means of expression, derived from a study of many techniques, can produce in our actors a flexibility which will not be contradictory to their need-for-truth, but will develop the range of their creative freedom. We want these techniques to be the servants of the imagination, invisible in their execution, but very solidly established by the training.

Acting which is too set, too obvious in intention, too heavy in execution, kills truth and pleasure. The teacher/director should not force anything on the student/actor. But he must induce the student to use varied means of expression and keep his imagination always well oriented and open. Under these conditions freedom can thrive. In order to arrive at *la vie scenique*, the total life of a play on the stage, achievement of this freedom is of first importance.

There are certain elements which make this freedom possible:

- The development, at the very heart of the school and of the company, of a human and artistic milieu, which, because of its invisible pull on everyone, quite naturally breeds a climate where the quality of the professional training, the adherence to the guiding principles, the multiplicity of critical and theoretical exchanges, will spread a sense of individual responsibility, which will ultimately merge with the school's sense of ensemble. I believe that this milieu, this climate, if it is authentic and gen-

erous, could impress students and actors more profoundly than the study of even the most advanced techniques.

- The encouraging of all the artists working within such a school to advance their own views while, at the same time, directing their efforts towards a common goal—the achievement of vital work in a contemporary spirit.
- The provision of an open stage, one without the “fourth wall” and, therefore, without a proscenium. Such a stage presents a large acting area served by many different entrances. This sort of acting area makes the audience aware of the three dimensions of space and invites the actor to play *physically*; its proximity to the audience enables the actor to act truthfully without having to force his voice or enlarge his gestures.

These then are the guiding principles upon which the training is founded. In the chapters that follow each discipline is examined in detail. The emphasis throughout is on helping each student to discover the potential of his instrument—his body and his voice—and to liberate his imagination.

It seems to me vital to train, simultaneously, from the beginning, the mind, the technique and the spirit of the actor to serve the imagination.

It is also important to encourage first the dramatic instinct in the actor and through it develop invention and spontaneity. This *must* precede the work on interpretation, which is, of course, the culmination of all our effort.

A constant interrelationship of the three disciplines — movement, voice and speech — must be established very early on in the training. The student will discover how each serves the other and how the integration of all these elements makes for a strong overall impact.

If the student is not absolutely free in body and voice, that is, if he is not relaxed in the right way, he will soon discover that it will have an adverse effect on his speech and on the control of his breathing and will also disturb the rhythm and the scansion of the text.

In the first year great emphasis should be placed on the non-verbal aspects of the voice and speech training. When the student has learned, through various ways, to focus on expression with-

out using a text, then he will be able to begin to *act* with a text.

To the student who tries to express something too early without having yet the means to do so clearly, I often say: "Do not put on a cloak and then try to dress underneath it."

Once during a lecture I was asked: "What is the most vital aspect of your training?" There is no *most* vital aspect. There is, rather, a balance between the technique on which the actor bases his activity and what is generally called the "inspiration of the actor."

Students often feel that technique hampers spontaneity, that it kills creativity. But if one has learned and absorbed technique, it becomes second nature. One is not conscious of it, but it is there—the Third Eye, the actor's ever-present unconscious control.

### *The Training Schedule*

The training, consisting of twelve terms, three terms to a year, lasts four years. Each year of the training has been given a name which defines our principle aim for that year.

#### I. THE DISCOVERY YEAR

In this first year the student discovers what talents—physical, vocal and imaginative—nature has given him. He finds out what he has to do to develop them and to acquire technique and skills. He begins to be aware of potentialities and possibilities.

#### II. THE TRANSFORMATION YEAR

In his second year the student begins to learn how to use these possibilities as he acquires some knowledge of physical, vocal, and imaginative expression. As he develops these faculties, he is transformed and learns *how* to transform—that is to say, he learns how not always to be himself.

This second year has always been known as a difficult year. This is partly due to the fact that, beginning to be aware of "technique," the student feels that technique is disturbing the flow of

his imaginative powers. But it is also due to the fact that we demand of the student his complete imaginative involvement. This is absolutely vital for the kind of training we propose.

#### III. THE INTERPRETATION YEAR

In this year the student, having discovered the natural equipment at his disposal and having enlarged it to some degree, acquires a certain confidence that he can now apply to the interpretation of plays in many different styles—classical and modern—and he begins to be able to project and to communicate with an audience.

#### IV. THE PERFORMING YEAR

The main activity in the fourth year is rehearsing and performing many different plays on stages as varied as possible before many kinds of audiences.

The twelfth term—at the end of the student's four years of training—should be crowned by a two-week repertory season in the school's theatre, where the student can be seen by audiences and agents. Three plays should be presented—a tragedy, a comedy and a realist play—plus an experimental piece specially devised for the group. The last could be either a musical show or an entertainment with masks, tumbling, fighting, singing and dancing, which would show the versatility of the student.