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OBJECTIVE ATMOSPHERE AND INDIVIDUAL FEELINGS

OBJECTIVE ATMOSPHERE

Actors have differing conceptions about theatrical space. Some performers regard the stage as an empty space, occasionally crowded with sets, properties, and people, only to become vacant at other times of the day. For them, everything in the theatre must be visible and audible. Other actors know that this is not so. The stage is always filled with Atmospheres, the source of ineffable moods and waves of feeling that emanate from one's surroundings. The theatre, the concert hall, the circus, each has a specific and forceful Atmosphere that is peculiar to it. And often it is one of these special Atmospheres alone, independent of content or human talent,

that attracts spectators to the entertainment.

Read the biographies of great actors and you will see that, for them, even the severely limited size of the stage was a whole world, enveloped with magical Atmospheres, from which they could not clearly separate themselves. After a performance, some actors spent the night in their dressing rooms or in the wings of the stage, absorbing the intoxicating Atmosphere. These gifted performers were impelled to reexperience the interplay of Atmospheres that embraced them when they acted. The Atmospheres brought about a sense of exhilaration that strengthened their acting.

Actors who outgrow the phlegmatic conception of the stage as an empty space know that Atmosphere is one of their strongest means of expression, as well as an unbreakable link between them and their audiences. These artists always look instinctively for the Atmospheres around them in their everyday surroundings, and they find them everywhere. Each landscape, town, street, building, room, library hall, hospital, cathedral nave, crowded restaurant, hotel lobby with its bright confusion, small house, tension-filled operating room, secluded lighthouse, corridor in a locked museum, engine room of an ocean liner, deserted farm—each of these contains its own particular Atmosphere. The seasons of the year, the hours of the day, and the fluctuation of the weather speak to us of different Atmospheres. But we must open ourselves up to experience them.

The life through which we move is rich with this interplay of Atmospheres. The actor must apprehend all those Atmospheres with which he has come in contact. Atmospheres for the artist are comparable to the different keys in music. They are a concrete means of expression. The performer must listen to them just as he listens to music.

ATMOSPHERE AND CONTENT

Atmospheres enable the actor to create the element of the play and the part that cannot be expressed otherwise. For example, imagine Romeo speaking his words of love to Juliet without the Atmosphere of love. Although the spectator may understand the sublime text and enjoy the beauty of Shakespeare's verse, he or she will still miss something of the content. And what is this content? It is love itself. All feelings require a specific Atmosphere to be conveyed to the audience. Without these proper Atmospheres radiating from the actor, Shakespeare's words of love, hate, despair, and hope reverberate meaninglessly in empty psychological space. Atmosphere reveals the content of the performance.

THE BOND BETWEEN ACTOR AND AUDIENCE

Think of how many difficulties actors experience in establishing communication with their audience. Consider how many shallow means they employ in an effort to "trick" the audience's attention. The performance is in reality a mutual creation of actors and audience, and the Atmosphere is an irresistible bond between actor and audience, a medium with which the audience can inspire the actors by sending them waves of confidence, understanding, and love. They will respond thus if they are not compelled to look into empty psychological space.

ATMOSPHERE INSPIRES THE ACTOR

The actor will also receive the necessary inspiration for his acting from the Atmosphere directly. Just as in everyday life one speaks, moves, and acts differently when surrounded by different Atmospheres, so on the stage the actor will realize that the Atmosphere urges him to new nuances in his speech, movements, actions, and feelings. Undoubtedly he will enjoy

the unbreakable series of improvised and unconscious details in his acting. He will not need to resort to clichés, nor will he fix his acting in a rigid way.

The space, the air around the actor, will always be filled with life, and this life—which is the Atmosphere—will also keep him alive as long as he maintains contact with it. Even a simple imaginary experiment will convince us of all this.

EXERCISE 15.

Let us say that you are reading the scene from *Hamlet* in which Horatio, the soldiers, and Hamlet himself are waiting on the terrace of Elsinore castle for the appearance of the Ghost of the dead king. Now imagine this scene, or a section of it, with the Atmosphere of tense foreboding expectation of an ominous appearance, apprehension, and gloom. Follow each gesture, each intonation of the voices, each movement of the characters. Be sure that they really are in harmony with the chosen Atmosphere. Do it several times until you are satisfied with your little imaginary “performance.” Then change the Atmosphere a little—for instance, to tense expectation, foreboding of an ominous appearance, but now active, fiery, vigorous. Act the same scene again in your imagination and see what changes will occur before your mind’s eye, in the voices, movements, actions, *mise-en-scène*, and other means of expression for the characters. Do it several times.

Compare the second scene with your first “performance” and then make another change in the Atmosphere. For instance, fill it with admiration for the unknown Ghost, see it as stately, solemn, quiet, reserved. Observe the characters again in their imaginary acting, compare this with the two previous “performances,” make another change in the same Atmo-

sphere, and so on. In doing so, try not to hurry with the results. Let the characters develop their own reactions to the subtle nuances that you make in the Atmosphere. This will “inspire” your imaginary characters. Suddenly you will realize that these images truly have an independent life.

The same kind of work that we have just done in our imagination can be done by the actor in reality while preparing a part. This is another means of rehearsing through which the actor will always discover new content, new meaning, new values in his part, new significant facets of the character, and new means of expression. It will bring his character into full harmony with the rest of the play and with other characters.

The director can organize the rehearsal period of a production so that different Atmospheres within a play will be investigated, decided upon, and rehearsed as exactly as the dialogue or *mise-en-scène*. The script can be marked with a succession of Atmospheres. The division of the play into scenes and acts need have no connection with the division of Atmospheres. These can be freely distributed to cover several speeches or an entire scene, or only a part of it, according to the interpretation of the play. As a result, the actor, instead of waiting for the inspiration of an Atmosphere to “accidentally come to him,” will have before him a score of Atmospheres that he can consciously assimilate, rehearse, and perform.

The true function of the Atmosphere starts even before rehearsals have begun. The actor whose training has given him a sharp sensitivity toward Atmospheres will undoubtedly notice that his first and general acquaintance with the part fills him with a certain definite, all-embracing Atmosphere. This experience anticipates his future creation.

Actors, like other artists, experience an overwhelming sense of joy that precedes the beginning of new work. Frequently when a writer starts a project he may not have any

definite plot or details, but simply a desire to create out of a certain Atmosphere: tragic, humorous, dramatic, melodramatic, mystical, and so forth. This general Atmosphere, this "musical key," inspires him during the initial stage of his work. Characters, details, situations, and often, as we have said, the plot itself gradually occur before his mind's eye while he lives in this Atmosphere. But although we know about this process, rarely do we pay enough attention to it. When we fail to use Atmospheres consciously, an initial and important grip on our part is lost. Atmospheres at the beginning of an artistic endeavor are like a seed that contains the potential of the whole mature plant.

ATMOSPHERE STIRS PERSONAL FEELINGS

The Atmosphere, like the well-developed imagination, stirs and awakens Feelings within us that are the essence of our art. One cannot live in the Atmosphere of the scene or the whole play without immediately reacting to it with one's Feelings. The Feelings, in this case, arise organically of themselves, without being forced or squeezed out of our soul.

Although the Atmosphere is akin to our personal Feelings and individual moods, it nevertheless differs from them greatly. Imagine, for instance, a group of people, each with his own mood, entering an old castle where every stone, cornice, staircase, doorway, every room and tower breathes the Atmosphere of unspeakable charm and the mystery of a lost age. It is there objectively in the air, created by no one, dependent on no one, yet strong enough to fight even the personal mood of the person who enters into its influence.

Let us take another example: a catastrophe on a crowded street. How many different personal moods are there? One person is afraid, another full of compassion, the third burns with a desire to help, a fourth is indifferent, but the objective Atmosphere of the horror of the catastrophe prevails over all the people concerned, regardless of their personal moods.

An important characteristic distinguishes the Atmosphere from individual Feelings. This is its objective existence outside of the individual. If we usually speak of personal Feelings as coming from within the individual and radiating themselves into his surroundings, so in speaking of an Atmosphere we have to imagine this process reversed; the objective feelings of an Atmosphere are coming from outside and are radiating themselves into the individual realm of Feelings.

Although both individual and objective Feelings may be different (and even belong to different realms—one comes from within, the other from without), often both are present at the same time and in the same “space.” That is what our experience shows us in innumerable instances in life as well as on the stage. For instance, you may enter a room in which a gay, festive Atmosphere will envelop you, but your personal mood may be gloomy and depressed.

Now let us go on to some exercises for acquiring the technique of mastering the objective Atmosphere.

EXERCISE 16.

Imagine the air around you, or a theatre space, filled with the Atmosphere that you have chosen. It is no more difficult than imagining the air filled with light, dust, fragrance, smoke, mist, and so on. You must not ask yourself, “How can the air be filled with fear or joy, tenderness or horror?” You must try it practically. Your first effort will show immediately how simple it is. What you have to learn is how to sustain the imaginary Atmosphere that now envelops you. Your main aid will be a developed Concentration (as discussed in Chapter 1). In this exercise you do not need to imagine any special circumstances or events to justify the Atmosphere. It will only distract your attention and make the exercise unnecessarily complicated. Do it as simply as described above.

After a certain period of time, when you feel sure of being able to imagine and sustain the Atmosphere around you, proceed to the next step. Try to relate the reaction inside you to that of the imaginary Atmosphere outside. Do not force yourself to feel anything, simply realize the reaction, which will appear of itself if the first part of this exercise has been carefully and patiently done. The whole value of this exercise will be lost if you impatiently impose the reaction upon yourself, instead of letting it grow freely. In the beginning this exercise may take time, but very soon you will see that the process of creating the Atmosphere and reacting to it is almost instantaneous. Gradually the Atmosphere will penetrate deeper and deeper into the realm of your emotions.

EXERCISE 17.

Now move and speak within the Atmosphere. Start with simple movements and a few words, trying to establish full harmony between them and the Atmosphere. Frequently, we are able to maintain a strong Atmosphere if we are silent and motionless, but as soon as we speak or make a movement we are inclined to destroy it. The Atmosphere must remain around you and your movements and words must be born out of it. The harmony will be achieved more easily and organically if you avoid any pretension, any attempts to "perform" such harmony as if someone were looking at you. Strive for the harmony sincerely and honestly, for the sake of the harmony itself, but not in order to "show off." Movements and words may gradually become more complicated. Finally you may choose short moments from actual plays and use them for your exercises.

Soon you will reach the point where your speech

and movements will intensify rather than diminish the Atmosphere. You can strengthen this result by making the effort to radiate the inner life that has been awakened in you through the objective Atmosphere.

To summarize:

1. Imagine the air around you filled with a certain Atmosphere.
2. Become aware of the reaction within you.
3. Move and speak in harmony with the Atmosphere.
4. Radiate it back into the space around you.

INNER DYNAMIC

The more an actor advances in acquiring the technique described above, the more he becomes aware of a certain peculiarity about Atmosphere. He begins to realize that it is never static, but dynamic, that it is a process rather than a state. It lives and moves constantly, although this movement is a purely inward, invisible, psychological one. If, for instance, the actor lives in a “depressing” Atmosphere, he definitely feels the pressure as an act, a process, or a movement that goes on unceasingly as long as the Atmosphere lasts. If the actor, through exercises, has really acquired a sense of inner dynamic, it will become for him an urging power, an impulse, an inspiration for his imagination and acting.

In Atmospheres such as catastrophe, panic, haste, excitement, gay festivity, etc., the inner movement, the urging power, is obvious. But what of Atmospheres such as the tranquillity of a forgotten cemetery, the comfort of a warm room, the peace of a summer evening? Here the inner dy-

dynamic is not so apparent. Yet for a sensitive actor, it exists in these apparently passive Atmospheres even as in those more energetic ones. The experienced performer knows and loves the catalytic power of the Atmosphere, which awakens his activity. He needs it on the stage if the theatre is to represent an expanded life for him and not merely a feeble reproduction of his usual surroundings.

The layman, the nonactor, surrounded by the Atmosphere of a moonlit summer evening, will remain impassive, while the actor, inspired by it, will start to act, at first perhaps in his imagination and then perhaps outwardly, too. Images born out of the inner dynamic of the Atmosphere will surround him. He will absorb this hidden dynamic and will transform it into events, characters, words, and movements.

MISSION OF ATMOSPHERE

Deprived of Atmosphere, a performance becomes greatly mechanized. It can be intellectually understood, its technical skill can be appreciated, and yet it will remain cold and heartless. This obvious fact is often obscured by the individual feelings of actors flashing here and there during the performance. But separate actors are only parts of the whole, and have to be united with each other and with the audience to create a performance that is an organic whole. How can they do this if they are not enveloped in one Atmosphere? The best way to create a chaotic performance is to cast a play exclusively with stars, and to let them display their brilliant abilities freely.

As we know, art itself lives primarily in the realm of feelings. The Atmosphere, which also belongs to this realm, is the heartbeat of every piece of art, and is also the lifeblood of each performance. In a materialistic era such as ours, people are ashamed of their feelings. They suppress and hide them. Are they not thus in danger of losing them altogether? The great mission of the contemporary actor is to save the

objective Atmosphere in the theatre and with it to rescue the human facet of his profession.

INDIVIDUAL FEELINGS

Now let us consider the individual Feelings of the actor and ways to awaken them. It is possible for the imaginative actor to “see” the Feelings of his characters and the Atmospheres of the play. This enables him to become free of his conventional and personal responses, making his Feelings flexible and engulfing him in an infinite sea of surprising and varied nuances. Now the actor can receive the impulses for individual Feelings from outside.

But this does not exhaust the actor’s possibilities of arousing and kindling his individual Feelings—the source of which lies within himself and is therefore most obscure. How often the actor tries to force his Feelings, to order himself to become sorrowful, gay, or happy, to hate, to love. It seems that such forcing is rarely successful. In most cases, the actor’s Feelings, the most valuable element in his profession, remain dormant in spite of all his efforts. This is why he so often seeks refuge in his old theatrical habits and worn-out clichés. But since the actor’s Feelings cannot be commanded, are there any other means of governing them at will? There are.

ACTION WITH QUALITIES

Let us try to describe a special technique for reviving the actor’s Feelings. The secret lies in arousing the Feelings without forcing them immediately. If we want to lift and lower our arm, we are able to do it without difficulty. We can also do the same movement, let us say, cautiously. Of course, this will not seem any more difficult to us than our previous movement, but a certain psychological tint will come into our movement, namely, caution. How did this happen? It slipped into our movement, unnoticed by us as a Quality of caution.

But what is this Quality from the point of view of acting? It is nothing other than a feeling. Did we force it? No, it slipped into our movement just because we did not force ourselves to feel caution. We fulfilled our simple movement, our “business,” and that we can always do. Our doing, our action, is always in our will, but not our Feelings. Here lies the key: the feeling was called forth, provoked, attracted indirectly by our “business,” doing, action. If we had not acted but only waited for the appearance of the Feelings, perhaps they would not appear. On the other hand, if we only moved and acted, without coloring our action with Qualities, the Feelings might have remained passive.

We can go on doing different movements, choosing more complicated “business” with more complicated Qualities. We can, for instance, caress a child, speaking this or that word to it and giving our movements and voice the Qualities of warmth, tenderness, and compassion. Surely we will be able to do it just as easily as the previous simple tasks we set ourselves, but the difference in this case will undoubtedly be greater. The Feelings will take part in our acting to a great extent. We can combine a number of Qualities in our action, and in every case we will get the same result. We will have at our disposal Feelings—real Feelings—that will follow our movements, our actions, slipping into them easily and with sufficient strength.

Therefore, we can say that action with Qualities is the easiest way to the living Feelings. Once we have found the way to stir our Feelings without forcing them, we can be sure that they will flow of themselves more often and more easily. But this cannot happen without sufficient training.

EXERCISE 18.

Make simple movements and “business”—move your hands and arms in different directions, then get up or sit down, cross the room, take up different

things, move them, and so forth. Make the same movement several times with different Qualities—calmly, fiercely, thoughtfully, angrily, hastily, staccato, legato, painfully, decidedly, slyly, wilfully, rigidly, softly, soothingly.

Go on doing this simple exercise until the Feelings begin to respond to the chosen Qualities. Then combine your movement and “business” with one or several words. The chosen Qualities must color equally both business and speech. If you are working with partners, proceed to simple improvisations. Later on even short sketches can be used.

The realm of Qualities is unlimited. You can take almost any noun or abstract idea, any image in your mind, and turn it into a Quality for your action. Try it practically and you will see how greedily the actor’s nature turns everything into feelings if you approach the problem through the right channels.

ACTION IS “WHAT”; QUALITY IS “HOW”

Until now we have been speaking about Qualities that awaken Feelings when combined with Actions. But what about Action itself? Since the Quality is connected with the Feelings, so the Action comes from the realm of the Will. The Action, the movement, the gesture—what do they express? What do they speak about? They tell us what one’s Will is aiming at.

Just like us in our everyday life, the characters on the stage always desire something. That means that the Will is always directed toward a certain goal, a certain aim. Out of this stirred Will, all Action, all “business,” every gesture emerges on the stage, just as in life. The sharp, clear, definite aim of the Will expresses itself in well-formed, plasticly molded Actions and Gestures. While observing such Actions and Ges-

tures we can penetrate into the Will of the character and follow its impulses and aims.

Now if we ask ourselves what the difference is between Action and Qualities, what each is assigned when combined together, we may say: the Action (and Will) expresses "what" happens, whereas the Quality (and Feelings) shows "how" it happens.

Each gesture, each Action, one makes, springs from a certain Will-impulse. The opposite is also true: the Gesture the actor makes can stir his Will. We have said that the more definite the Will-impulse, the more expressive the Gesture. Now we can add that the better the Gesture is formed, the stronger and clearer it is, the surer it will reach the Will and stir, stimulate, and arouse it. A strong Gesture of affirmation or denial, expansion or contraction, repulsion or attraction, will inevitably agitate the Will, calling forth in it a corresponding desire, aim, wish. In other words, the Will echoes the Gesture, reacts on it.

We must emphatically point out, however, that only Gestures that are properly done can arouse the actor's Will. He has to learn and practice making such Gestures in order to be able to apply them later on to the professional work. Therefore, let us first describe some exercises that lead to the correct technique for producing these Gestures.

EXERCISE 19.

Start with simple observations. Look at, or imagine, forms of different plants and flowers. Ask yourself, "What Gestures do these forms conjure before me?" Combine them also with Qualities. For instance, a cypress streams upward (Gesture), and has a quiet, positive, concentrated character (Quality); whereas, the old, many-branched oak, rising upward and sideways (Gesture), will speak to us of a violent, uncontrolled, broad character (Quality). The violet peeps

out of its surrounding leaves (Gesture), tenderly, confidently, questioningly (Quality); whereas, the tiger lily thrusts out of the earth (Gesture), aggressively, persistently, passionately, almost shouting at us (Quality). Each leaf, stone, rock, remote mountain range, cloud, brook, wave, will speak to us about Gestures and Qualities that are contained in them.

Through such observations alone, you will awaken in yourself a living feeling also for each element of stage construction. You will, for instance, see different Gestures, the interplay of powers, and Qualities in staircases (steep or sloping), in doors, in windows (narrow, low, high, broad, or square), in pillars, walls, corners, etc.

It is amazing to see how Leonardo da Vinci experienced architectural form. "An arch," he says, "is nothing other than a strength caused by two weaknesses; for the arch . . . is made up in two segments of a circle and each of these segments, being in itself very weak, desires to fall, and as the one withstands the downfall of the other, the two weaknesses are converted into a single strength."

Would it not be true to say that Leonardo da Vinci "acts" the arch because in his imagination he is "inside" it? While exercising, you must try to do the same "acting," being inside the forms you are observing. Then try to make with your hands and arms the gesture that will express for you what you have experienced as Gestures and Qualities in different forms. Make this Gesture several times until you come to the point where your Will and Feelings will echo your Gesture.

Here, as in all exercises, you must make a real effort, but the final results should not be forced. These will come of themselves, if you are patient and persistent in your work.

EXERCISE 20.

Train yourself to make certain Gestures with the utmost expressiveness, as fully and completely as you can. These gestures might express, for instance: drawing, pulling, pressing, lifting, throwing, crumpling, coaxing, separating, tearing, penetrating, touching, brushing away, opening, closing, breaking, taking, giving, supporting, holding back, scratching. You can produce each of these gestures with different qualities: violently, quietly, surely, carefully, staccato, legato, tenderly, lovingly, coldly, angrily, cowardly, superficially, painfully, joyfully, thoughtfully, energetically.

The suggested movements must not become a kind of acting. You must avoid pretending, for instance, that you are pulling something with difficulty, and you are becoming tired. Try to adjust yourself to handle the imaginary heavy object more skillfully. Your movements of pulling, pressing, tearing, and others, must maintain a pure, ideal, archetypal form. Unnecessary complications and acting additions will weaken the results of this exercise.

Each movement must be as broad as possible, so that your whole body and the space around you will be used to the fullest degree. The tempo in which you produce your movements must be moderate, and after each movement come to the repetition of it without haste. Finally, the exercise must be done with full, inner activity, and yet you must not strain your muscles and body as you produce properly wide, broad but beautifully executed movements.

Through these exercises you will revive your body so that, later on, while producing smaller Gestures you will always feel as though your whole body—your whole being—takes part in

them, although your whole body need not necessarily move. This is the point of the exercises. Your Will will not react to the movements if they do not occupy and electrify your body.

Another benefit of this exercise is the development of the ability to manage your body more freely than before. You will also more easily invent various Gestures and movements that you will need while applying “Action with Qualities” in your professional work.

EXERCISE 21.

Perform the Gestures with their Qualities again—the ones you found while working on the forms of different plants, flowers, and so forth. Perhaps you will improve them now, making them simpler but stronger and more expressive. Do each of them as many times as necessary to call forth the reaction of your Will and Feelings. Then go on doing them, but only in your imagination, remaining outwardly immobile. See that your Will and Feelings react upon the imaginary Gesture as they reacted upon the real one. If the result is not yet satisfactory, return to the previous stage and make your movements visible again, alternating them with invisible ones, and wait patiently for the result. If you do these exercises every day with the same energy, the result will show itself very soon.

Until now we have tried to describe how, by means of Gestures and Qualities, the actor can stir and awaken his Will and Feelings. Now as we continue we will see how he can apply these means to his professional work.