

On Acting and Not-Acting

Author(s): Michael Kirby

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# On Acting and Not-Acting

*By Michael Kirby*

Acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate. As Happenings demonstrated, not all performing is acting. Although acting was sometimes used, the performers in Happenings generally tended to “be” nobody or nothing other than themselves; nor did they represent, or pretend to be in, a time or place different than that of the spectator. They walked, ran, said words, sang, washed dishes, swept, operated machines and stage devices, and so forth, but they did not feign or impersonate.

In most cases, acting and not-acting are relatively easy to recognize and identify. In a performance, we usually know when a person is acting and when he is not. But there is a scale or continuum of behavior involved, and the differences between acting and not-acting may be quite small. In such cases categorization may not be easy. Perhaps some would say it is unimportant, but, in fact, it is precisely these borderline cases that can provide insights into acting theory and into the nature of the art.

Let us examine acting by tracing the acting/not-acting continuum from one extreme to the other. We will begin at the not-acting end of the scale, where the performer does nothing to feign, simulate, impersonate and so forth, and move to the opposite position, where behavior of the type that defines acting appears in abundance. Of course, when we speak of “acting” we are referring not to any one style but to all styles. We are not concerned, for example, with the degree of “reality” but with what we can call, for now, the *amount* of acting.

## NOT-ACTING

## ACTING

There are numerous performances that do not use acting. Many, but by no means all, dance pieces would fit into this category. Several Far Eastern theatres make use of stage attendants such as the *Kurombo* and *Kōken* of Kabuki. These attendants move props into position and remove them, help with on-stage costume changes and even serve tea to the actors. Their dress distinguishes them from the actors, and they are not included in the informational structure of the narrative. Even if the spectator ignores them as people, however, they are not invisible. They do not act, and yet they are part of the visual presentation.

As we will see when we get to that point on the continuum, “acting” is active—

it refers to feigning, simulation and so forth that is **done** by a performer. But representation, simulation and other of the qualities that define acting may also be applied **to** the performer. The way in which a costume creates a "character" is one example of this.

Let us forsake performance for a moment and consider how the "costume continuum" functions in daily life. If a person wears cowboy boots on the street, as many people do, we do not identify him as a cowboy. If he also wears a wide tooled-leather belt and even a Western hat, we do not see this as a costume—even in a northern city. It is merely a choice of clothing. As more and more items of Western clothing—a bandana, chaps, spurs and so forth—are added, however, we reach the point where we either see a cowboy or a person dressed as (impersonating) a cowboy. The exact point on the continuum at which this kind of specific identification occurs depends upon several factors, the most important of which is place or physical context, and it undoubtedly varies quite a bit from person to person.

The effect of clothing on stage functions in exactly the same way, but it is more pronounced. A performer wearing only black leotards and Western boots might easily be identified as a "cowboy." This, of course, indicates the symbolic power of costume in performance. It is important, however, to notice the degree to which the external symbolization is supported and reinforced (or contradicted) by the performer's behavior. If the performer moves (acts) like a cowboy, the identification is made much more readily. If he is merely himself, the identification might not be made at all.

At this stage on our acting/not-acting continuum we are concerned with those performers who do **not do** anything to reinforce the information or identification. When the performer, like the stage attendants of Kabuki and Noh, is merely himself and is not imbedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time, I refer to him as being "non-matrixed." As we move toward acting from this extreme not-acting position on our continuum, we come to that condition in which the performer does not act and yet his costume represents something or someone. We could call this state "non-matrixed representation" or "non-matrixed symbolization."

## NOT-ACTING

Non-Matrixed  
Performing

Non-Matrixed  
Representation

## ACTING

In *Oedipus, a New Work* (see T-51) by John Perreault, the "main performer," as Perreault refers to him rather than calling him an actor, limps. If we are aware of the title of the piece and of the story of Oedipus, we might assume that this performer represents Oedipus. He does not pretend to limp, however. A stick has been tied "to his right leg underneath his pants in such a way that he will be forced to limp." When the "main performer" operates a tape recorder, as he does frequently during the presentation, we do not think that this is a representation of Oedipus running a machine. It is a non-matrixed performer doing something. The

lighting of incense and the casting of a reading from the *I Ching* can be seen as a reference to the Delphic Oracle; the three lines of tape that the “main performer” places on the floor so that they converge in the center of the area can be seen as representing the place where, at the intersection of three roads, Oedipus killed his father, and the limp (and the sunglasses that the “main performer” wears throughout the piece) can be considered to stand for aspects of Oedipus. The performer, however, never behaves as if he were anyone other than himself. He never represents elements of character. He merely carries out certain actions.

In “non-matrixed representation” the referential elements are applied *to* the performer and are not acted *by* him. And just as Western boots do not necessarily establish “a cowboy,” a limp may convey information without establishing a performer as “Oedipus.” When, as in *Oedipus, a New Work*, the character and place matrices are weak, intermittent or non-existent, we see a person, not an actor. As “received” references increase, however, it is difficult to say that the performer is not acting even though he is *doing* nothing that we could define as acting. In a New York luncheonette before Christmas we might see “a man in a Santa Claus suit” drinking coffee; if exactly the same action were carried out on stage in a setting representing a rustic interior, we might see “Santa Claus drinking coffee in his home at the North Pole.” When the matrices are strong, persistent and reinforce each other, we see an actor, no matter how ordinary the behavior. This condition, the next step closer to true acting on our continuum, we may refer to as “received acting.”

## NOT-ACTING

**Non-Matrixed  
Performing**

**Non-Matrixed  
Representation**

**“Received”  
Acting**

## ACTING

Extras, who do nothing but walk and stand in costume, are seen as “actors.” Anyone merely walking across a stage containing a realistic setting might come to represent a person in that place—and, perhaps, time—without doing anything we could distinguish as acting. There is the story of the critic who headed backstage to congratulate a friend and could be seen by the audience as he passed outside the windows of the on-stage house; it was an opportune moment in the story, however, and he was accepted as part of the play.

Nor does the behavior in “received acting” necessarily need to be simple. Some time ago, I remember reading about a play in which John Garfield—I’m fairly sure it was he, although I no longer know the title of the play—was an extra. During each performance he played cards and gambled with several friends on stage. They really played, and the article emphasized how much money someone had won (or lost). At any rate, since my memory is incomplete, let us imagine a setting representing a bar. In one of the upstage booths, several men play cards throughout the act. Let us say that none of them has lines in the play; they do not react in any way to the characters in the story we are observing. These men do not act. They merely play cards. And yet we also see them as characters, however minor, in the story, and we say that they, too, are acting. We do not distinguish them from the other actors.

If, as I would like to do, we define acting as something that is done by a performer rather than something that is done for or to him, we have not yet arrived at true acting on our scale. "Received actor" is only an honorary title, so to speak. Although the performer seems to be acting, he actually is not. Non-matrixed performing, non-matrixed representation and "received" acting are stages on the continuum that move from not-acting to acting. The amount of simulation, representation, impersonation and so forth has increased as we have moved along the scale, but, so far, none of this was created by the performer in a special way we could designate as "acting."

While acting in its most complete form offers no problem of definition, our task in constructing a continuum is to designate those transitional areas in which acting "begins." What are the simplest characteristics that define acting?

| NOT-ACTING                 |                                | ACTING               |                  |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Non-Matrixed<br>Performing | Non-Matrixed<br>Representation | "Received"<br>Acting | Simple<br>Acting |

They may be either physical or emotional. If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate and so forth, he is acting. It does not matter what style he uses or whether the action is part of a complete characterization or informational presentation. No emotion needs to be involved. The definition can depend solely on the character of what is done. (Value judgments, of course, are not involved. Acting is acting whether or not it is done "well" or accurately.) Thus a person who, as in the game of charades, pretends to put on a jacket that does not exist or feigns being ill is acting. Acting can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense.

Acting also exists in emotional rather than strictly physical terms, however. Let us say, for example, that we are at a presentation by the Living Theatre of *Paradise Now*. It is that well-known section in which the performers, working individually, walk through the auditorium speaking directly to the spectators. "I'm not allowed to travel without a passport," they say. "I'm not allowed to smoke marijuana!" "I'm not allowed to take my clothes off!" They seem sincere, disturbed and angry. Are they acting?

The performers are themselves; they are not portraying characters. They are in the theatre, not in some imaginary or represented place. What they say is certainly true. They are not allowed to travel—at least between certain countries—without a passport; the possession of marijuana is against the law. And I think we will all grant that the performers really believe what they are saying—that they really feel these rules and regulations are unjust. Acting exists only in their emotional presentation.

At times in "real life" we meet a person that we feel is acting. This does not mean that he is lying, dishonest, living in an unreal world, or that he is necessarily giving a false impression of his character and personality. It means that he seems to be aware of an audience—to be "on stage"—and that he reacts to this situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions and elements of his personality for the

sake of the audience. That is what the performers in *Paradise Now* were doing. They were acting their own emotions and beliefs.

Let us phrase this problem in a slightly different way. Public speaking, whether it is extemporaneous or makes use of a script, may involve emotion, but it does not necessarily involve acting. Yet some speakers, while retaining their own characters and remaining sincere, seem to be acting. At what point does acting appear? At the point at which the emotions are "pushed" for the sake of the spectators. This does not mean that the speaker is false or does not believe what he is saying. It merely means that he is selecting and projecting an element of character—i.e., emotion—to the audience.

In other words, it does not matter whether an emotion is created to fit an acting situation or whether it is simply amplified. One principle of "method" acting—at least as it is taught in this country—is the *use* of whatever real feelings and emotions the actor has while playing the role. (Indeed, this became quite a joke: No matter what unusual or uncomfortable physical urges or psychological needs or problems the actor had, he was advised to "use" them.) It may be merely the "use" and projection of emotion that distinguishes acting from not-acting.

I think that this is an important point. It indicates that acting involves a basic psychic or emotional component; although this component exists in all forms of acting to some degree (except, of course, "received acting"), it, in itself, is enough to distinguish acting from not-acting. Since this element of acting is mental, a performer may act without moving. I do not mean that, as has been mentioned previously, the motionless person "acts" in a passive and "received" way by having a character, a relationship, a place and so on imposed on him by the information provided in the presentation. The motionless performer may convey certain attitudes and emotions that are acting even though no physical action is involved.

Further examples of rudimentary acting—as well as examples of not-acting—may be seen in the well-known "mirror" exercise in which two people stand facing each other while one copies or "reflects," as if he were a mirror, the movements of the other. Although this is an exercise used in training actors, acting itself is not necessarily involved. The movements of the first person, and therefore those of the second, might not represent or pretend. Each might merely raise and lower his arms or turn his head. The movements could be completely abstract.

It is here, however, that the perceived relationship between the performer and what he is creating can be seen to be crucial in the definition of acting. Even "abstract" movements may be personified and made into a character of sorts through the performer's attitude. If he seems to indicate "I am this thing" rather than merely "I am doing these movements," we accept him as the "thing": He is acting. On the other hand, we do not accept the "mirror" as acting, even though he is a "representation" of the first person. He lacks the psychic energy that would turn the abstraction into a personification. If an attitude of "I'm imitating you" is projected, however—if purposeful distortion or "editorializing" appears rather than the neutral attitude of exact copying—the mirror becomes an actor even though the original movements were abstract.

The same exercise may easily involve acting in a more obvious way. The first person, for example, may pretend to shave. The mirror, in copying these feigned actions, becomes an actor now in spite of his neutral attitude. (We could call him a "received actor" because, like character and place in our earlier examples, the representation has been "put upon" him without that inner creative attitude and

energy necessary for true acting. His acting, like that of a marionette, is controlled from the outside.) If the originator in the "mirror" exercise put on his jacket, he would not necessarily be acting; if he or the "mirror," not having a jacket, pretended to put one on, it would be acting, and so on.

As we have moved along the continuum from not-acting to acting, the amount of representation, personification and so forth has increased. Now that we have arrived at true acting, we might say that it, too, varies in amount. Small "amounts" of acting—like those in the examples that have been given—would occupy that part of the scale closest to "received acting," and we could move along the continuum to a hypothetical "maximum amount" of acting. Indeed, the only alternative would seem to be an "on-off" or "all-or-nothing" view in which all acting is theoretically (if not qualitatively) equal and undifferentiated.

"Amount" is a difficult word to use in this case, however. Since, especially for Americans, it is easy to assume that "more-is-better," any reference to amount might be taken to indicate relative value or worth. It would be better to speak of "simple" and "complex" acting with the hope that these terms can be accepted as objective and descriptive rather than evaluative. After all, "simple" and "complex" are terms that may be ascribed quite easily and without implied value judgment to other performance arts such as music and dance. A ballad is relatively simple compared to a symphony; the ordinary fox trot is much less complex than the filmed dances of Fred Astaire. Let us apply the same kind of analysis to acting, remembering that "simple" acting, such as we saw in the "mirror" exercise, may be very "good," while complex acting is not necessarily "good" and may, indeed, be quite "bad."

"Complex" acting, then, would be the final condition on our acting/not-acting continuum. What do we mean by "complex" acting? In what ways can acting be "simple" or "complex?"

| NOT-ACTING                 |                                |                      |                  | ACTING            |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Non-Matrixed<br>Performing | Non-Matrixed<br>Representation | "Received"<br>Acting | Simple<br>Acting | Complex<br>Acting |

The simplest acting is that in which only one element or dimension of acting is used. Emotion, as we have seen, may be the only area in which pretense takes place. Or, as in the "mirror" exercise, only an action such as putting on a jacket may be simulated. Other acting exercises attempt to isolate various aspects of acting, and they are proof that behavior, which is complex, can be broken down into simple units.

The simple/complex scale also applies to each individual aspect of acting. Emotion may be generalized and unchanging, or it may be specific, modulating and changing frequently within a given period of time. An action may be performed in a simple or a complex way. In the game of charades, for example, we may only indicate that we are putting on a jacket. As long as our team understands what we are doing, the acting is successful. The same action becomes more complex as

details such as the resistance of the material, the degree of fit, the weight of the jacket and so on are acted.

(The word "indicate" that was just used in connection with charades has negative connotations in the technical vocabulary of the American "method." Practitioners of the "method" cannot accept an element of acting that exists in relative isolation and is not totally integrated by being "justified" and related to other elements. In other styles, however, isolated acting elements are perfectly acceptable and are used, among other things, to focus attention.)

Acting becomes complex as more and more elements are incorporated into the pretense. Let us say that the performer putting on a jacket is part of a scene: he may choose to act emotion (fear, let us say), physical characteristics (the person portrayed is old), place (there is a bright sun) and many other elements. Each of these could be performed in isolation, but when they are presented simultaneously or in close proximity to each other the acting becomes complex. In a like manner, it is obvious that when speech is added to mime the resultant acting is more complex than the mime alone; the acting involved in a staged reading will, in all likelihood, be less complex than the acting in a fully staged production of the same script; and so forth.

In part, complexity is related to skill and technical ability. Some styles make use of a highly specialized vocabulary that is quite complex. This does not contradict our earlier statement that the acting/not-acting continuum is independent of value judgments. It is not a question of whether a performer can do certain complex acting well but whether he can do it at all. Anyone can act; not everyone can act in a complex way.

Yet the analysis of acting according to simple/complex does not necessarily distinguish one style from another, although it could be used to compare styles of acting. Each style has a certain range when measured on a simple/complex scale, and in almost all performances the degree of complexity varies somewhat from moment to moment. It would be impossible to say, for example, that the realistic style of acting is necessarily more complex than the "Grotowski style" of expressionism. Realism, in its most complete and detailed form, would certainly be considered relatively complex. Yet there are many approaches to realism; some—such as those used in many films—ask very little of the actor and would be considered relatively simple. The film actor may do very little, while the camera and the physical/informational context do the "acting" for him. On the other hand, a non-realistic style such as that developed by Grotowski can also be extremely complex. When I saw *The Constant Prince*, I felt that I had never seen performers act so *much*: The impression was not one of over-acting but of many things taking place simultaneously in the work of a single actor. During the Prince's long monologs, the other performers did not decrease the complexity of their acting; their bodies were frequently involved in numerous, detailed, small-scale movements. In part, at least, this complexity may be explained by Grotowski's exercises that are designed to develop the ability of the actor to express different, and even contradictory, things with different parts of his body at the same time. However, other companies that use what may be recognized as "Grotowski style" act very simply.

Thus, we have arrived at a scale that measures the amount or degree of representation, simulation, impersonation and so forth in performance behavior. Although the polar states are "acting" and "not-acting," we can follow a continuous



increase in the degree of representation from non-matrixed performing through non-matrixed representation, "received acting" and simple acting to complex acting.

\* \* \*

Belief may exist in either the spectator or the performer, but it does not effect objective classification according to our acting/not-acting scale. Whether an actor feels what he is doing to be "real," or a spectator really "believes" what he sees, does not change the classification of the performance; it merely suggests another area or parameter.

Various types and styles of acting are, indeed, seen as more or less realistic, but, except as an indication of style, the word "reality" has little usefulness when applied to acting. From one point of view, all acting is, by definition, "unreal" because pretense, impersonation and so forth are involved. From another point of view, all acting is real. Philosophically, a Noh play is as real (if not as realistic) as a Chekhov production. Pretense and impersonation, even in those rare cases when they are not recognized as such, are as real as anything else.

Most plays, of course, even the most naturalistic ones, do not attempt to fool the observer into thinking that they are "real"—that they do not involve acting. Illusionary stagecraft and realistic acting do not intend or expect to be taken for real life any more than an illusionistic painting is intended to be mistaken for what it represents. In almost all performances, we see the "real" person and also that which he is representing or pretending. The actor is visible within the character.

To say that no performance *can* deceive a spectator would not be true, however. True and complete illusion is possible in theatre; acting may actually "lie," be believed, and be seen as not being acting at all. This happened in Norman Taffel's *Little Trips* (T-51). The entire performance was designed to move from the context of "art" to that of "life." Many people actually believed it; indeed, some never discovered that what they thought was a real argument that "destroyed" the performance had actually been acted.

(During *Little Trips* the two performers changed from a rather simple form of acting that could be more-or-less copied by participating members of the audience to a conversational style, the realism of which was, perhaps, heightened by the contrast. In terms of our previous discussion of acting, however, it is important to note that the effect of reality did not depend entirely on the acting. It is not only the behavior of the performers, but the total performance experience that determines the spectator's response. What creates an illusion in one context will not necessarily do so in another, and in other frames of reference the same acting would have remained "acting.")

There is another type of performance in which the spectator does not recognize the acting for what it really is. I remember meeting an Argentine architect who told of her experiences at an all-night religious ceremony of some sort on the Northern coast of Brazil. At one point, costumed performers appeared who were thought to be dead ancestors. This caused panic among the believers because the doors were locked, and they thought if these ghost-beings touched them they, too, would die. Although belief of this kind obviously effects the quality of the experience, it does not mean that pretense, impersonation and so forth were not involved in the performance. The appearance of the "dead" ancestors was acted.

Even if the performers believed themselves to be dead, acting would have been involved. Belief would not change the objective fact that something or someone

was being represented. This is not to say that belief cannot be an important aspect of acting in certain styles. A principle of the "method" that achieved the stature of a cliché was the attempt by the actor to "really believe" what the character was doing. If he was successful, the audience would "really believe," too. There is no question that this approach has frequently been successful. The **attempt** to believe undoubtedly attains or approaches with some certainty and predictability the goals that are sought, and it well may be the best approach to these particular problems. At the same time, it is just as clear that belief is not an acceptable criterion for an actor. Many times the actor, when faced with a certain lack of "belief" by his audience, protests that he "really believed." The important point, however, is that when belief is present or is attained by a performer, acting itself does not disappear. The acting/not-acting scale measures pretense, impersonation, feigning and so forth; it is independent of either the spectator's or the performer's belief.

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During the last ten or twelve years, theatre in the United States has undergone a more complete and radical change than in any other equivalent period in its history. At least this is true of the theatre considered as an art rather than as a craft, business or entertainment. Since, in the past, almost all of American theatre has been craft, business or entertainment, this may not be a very startling fact, but the changes have been striking and extensive. Every aspect of performance has been affected, including acting. As recently as the Fall and Winter of 1964, **The Drama Review** could devote two complete issues to Stanislavski; now the "method" no longer has the absolute dominance it once did in this country, and certain alternative approaches are attracting great interest. Everyone now seems to realize that "acting" does not mean just one thing—the attempt to imitate life in a realistic and detailed fashion.

Thus eclecticism or diversity in the approaches to acting is one aspect of the recent change in American theatre. In terms of our theoretical acting/not-acting continuum, however, we can be more specific: There has, within the last ten years, been a shift toward the not-acting end of the scale. This means not only that more non-matrixed performing has been used but that, in a number of ways, acting has grown less complex. A brief review of recent developments will allow us to examine how this has come about while also providing additional examples of the various areas on the acting/not-acting scale.

The most important single factor in the recent changes in performance has been the so-called "Happening." Happenings, of course, are now a part of history. The term is best used in a completely historical and sociological way to refer to those works created as part of the international Happenings movement of the early and mid '60's. (The first piece called a Happening was done in 1959, but other generically similar works preceded it, and the term is important only as a reference and as a popular catch-phrase.) The necessary thing to notice, however, is that works which, on completely formal grounds, could be called "Happenings" continue to be done and that almost all of the many innovations produced by Happenings have been applied to narrative, informational, acted theatre. Although I have no wish to perpetuate the name, those who think that Happenings were unimportant, or that the theatre form characterized by Happenings is no longer alive merely because the word is no longer used, are literary and don't understand the nature of the form. At any rate, the Happening can help to explain much about current developments in acting.

Under the direct influence of Happenings, every aspect of theatre in this country has changed: scripts have lost their importance and performances are created collectively, the physical relationship of audience and performance has been altered in many different ways and has been made an inherent part of the piece, audience participation has been investigated, "found" spaces rather than theatres have been used for performance and several different places employed sequentially for the same performance, there has been an increased emphasis on movement and on visual imagery (not to mention a soon-commercialized use of nudity), and so forth. It would be difficult to find any avant-garde performance in this country that did not show the influence of Happenings in one way or another. But Happenings made little use of acting. How, then, could they have anything to do with the recent changes in acting? One way to see this is to examine the historical relationship between Happenings and the more prominent United States theatre groups. The history is not very old, but things are forgotten very quickly.

The last play that the Living Theatre produced before going into their period of self-imposed "exile" in Europe was *The Brig*. It was a realistic play with supposed documentary aspects, and it emphasized the "fourth wall"—a high wire-mesh fence closed off the proscenium opening, separating the spectators and the performers. When *Le Living* opened their next production in Paris in October 1964, their style and form, if not the socio-political nature of their content, had changed completely. *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (T-32) was a Happening. (They would later do another piece, *Paradise Now*, that could also have been called a "Happening.")

Of course, *Mysteries* was not called a "Happening" by the Living Theatre, and few, especially in Europe, recognized it as such. (Claes Oldenburg, who was the first one I knew to see it, identified it, but this might be expected. He had seen quite a few Happenings.) At any rate, the performance was without plot, story or narrative. It was divided into sequential scenes or compartments—one emphasized movement, another sound, another the smell of incense and so forth. Some even involved acting. The performance was apparently put together on rather short notice and was the work of the group rather than any one writer. (Almost all of the major Happenings were the product of one artist's imagination, but Happenings often were created by a group, each of whom contributed his specialty—music, design, poetry and so forth—and, among other things, the form gained the reputation of being group creations, thus inspiring those who were dissatisfied with working from an author's previously written script.) Certain images in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* came from *The Brig*, but much of it was taken from outside the group and was identical or similar to various Event and Happening images.

In one of the later sections of *Mysteries*, all of the members of the cast died. That is, they pretended to die. Death can be symbolized, but they chose to act it. No acting of this sort was taking place in the Happenings; the Living chose to use elements of acting within the Happening structure. But the acting did not involve character, place or situation—other than, perhaps, the conditions of the Artaudian plague that was the cause of death. The actors were only themselves "dying" in the aisles and on the stage of the theatre.

This simplification of acting is typical of much of the work in the new theatre. Indeed, the movement toward the non-matrixed or "reality" end of our acting, not-acting continuum made some wonder when death itself would become real rather than "merely" acted in performance. In Happening-like presentations, Ralph Ortiz—and others before him—had decapitated live chickens. Peter Brook

included the burning of a butterfly in *US*. (Live butterflies were seen flying out of a box, but there is some doubt whether the burned butterfly was indeed real. Cutting the head off a chicken makes death obvious; a butterfly can be “faked.” “We cannot tell,” reads the script of *US*, “if it is real or false.”)

One of the scenes in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* was a sound-and-movement exercise taken from the Open Theatre. Two lines of performers face each other. A performer from one line moves toward the other line making a particular sound-and-movement combination. A person from the second line “takes” the movement and sound, changing them before passing them on to someone in the first line, and so forth. Like the “mirror” exercise that was discussed earlier, this use of an acting exercise as an actual performance is one way to simplify acting by concentrating on one or a limited number of elements. Exercises, often more integrated into the action than was this example, are frequently used in the new theatre for their performance qualities and expressiveness rather than for their training values.

I believe that it was this same exercise that opened the first public performances of the Open Theatre. These presentations, which began in December, 1963, and continued into 1965, combined various exercises and short plays on the same bill. It would be foolish to claim a kinship with Happenings for these “variety” programs, but one wonders whether the similarity between the exercises and certain “game” and task-oriented work by, among others, the Judson Dance Theatre did not suggest the possibility of presenting the exercises, which were designed to be done privately, to the public.

Yet another company that showed exercises and made them part of a longer piece is The Performance Group. In their first public presentation, on a 1968 benefit program with other groups, they performed an “Opening Ceremony” composed of exercises adapted from Jerzy Grotowski with certain vocal additions. This “Ceremony”—dropped, as I recall, after Grotowski saw the production—was in *Dionysus in 69* when it opened. Grotowski himself would never show exercises as performance. This merely emphasizes the complexity of his work and the difference between it and even the people in this country who were most influenced by it.

The effect of Happenings on Richard Schechner’s work predated The Performance Group, however. The New Orleans Group, which he organized in late 1965, produced a large and spectacular Happening in 1966 and then adapted the various technical means and the audience/performance relationship of the Happening to an “environmental” production of Ionesco’s *Victims of Duty* in 1967. The use of real names, personal anecdotal material and so forth in *Dionysus in 69* can be seen as an attempt to move away from complex acting toward the non-matrixed performing of Happenings.

Happenings somehow gained the reputation for exhibitionism; some certainly had “camp” aspects. It was probably their use of the untrained performer—the “found” person/actor, so to speak—that had the most influence on the Theatre of the Ridiculous. John Vacarro, who performed in at least one of Robert Whitman’s Happenings, has explained how important the experience was to him. The unabashedly home-made quality of many Happenings was also an inspiration to many people who did not have an inclination toward slickness, craft and technique.

I do not mean to suggest that the general movement toward simplification of acting is entirely due to the direct influence of Happenings. There have been many factors, all interdependent to some extent: Viola Spolin’s improvisations; Grotowski’s emphasis on confrontation, disarming and the *via negativa*; an interest in

developing ensembles; the early desire of the Open Theatre to find techniques that were applicable to the Theatre of the Absurd. (In regard to the last, it should be noted that, with *Terminal*, the Open Theatre moved into a form quite similar to some Happenings in both structure and use of imagery.)

Yet influence can also be indirect. Happenings have contributed their share to the creation of a state of mind that values the concrete as opposed to the pretended or simulated and that does not require plots or stories. The most original playwright of recent years, Peter Handke, has worked in this area. Although his plays are quite different from most of the new theatre in this country, much of it illustrates the same concern with simplification of acting.

*Offending the Audience* and *Self-Accusation* by Handke are rather unusual plays, if they can be called plays at all. Handke refers to them as "speak-ins" (Sprechstücke). They do not employ any matrices of place or character. They take place on plain, bare stages; the actors do not relate to or refer to imaginary locales. The performers are themselves; they are not dressed in any unusual way, nor do they portray characters. In fact Handke has written dialog for performers who do not necessarily have to act. The scripts require no pretense or emotion.

The performers speak. They have memorized what Handke has written, and they have rehearsed. But this does not, in itself, make a person an actor. People recite poems and speeches without acting. Musicians rehearse, are concerned with timing, respond to cues. None of these factors defines acting.

What the performers say are, almost entirely, direct statements that would be true no matter who was speaking them. In *Offending the Audience* they speak about the performance situation: "You are sitting in rows . . . You are looking at us when we speak to you . . . This is no mirage . . . The possibilities of the theatre are not exploited here." In *Self-Accusation* the two "speakers," as Handke calls them rather than "actors," talk about themselves: "I came into the world . . . I saw . . . I said my name." There is no need to act in order to perform this material.

If *Self-Accusation* were played by a blind "speaker," however, the statement "I saw" would be untrue. Or, to take a somewhat less facetious example from the later passages that are no longer so universally applicable, certain people could not say, as if they believed it, the line "I came into the world afflicted with original sin" without feigning. But even a blind person could use the word "saw" metaphorically, and Handke does not suggest that each of the lines has to be given as if the speaker believed it. There are interpretations that would avoid any kind of acting during the performance.

On the other hand, these observations are based only on the script, and there is no script, including Handke's "speak-ins," that can *prevent* acting. Let us say that a performer creates an emotion. In *Offending the Audience*, for example, he pretends to be angry at the spectators when, actually, he is glad that they are there. An element of acting has been added to the performance. The presentation would then be using what we have called "simple" acting. Under a certain director, each of the actors might even create a "well-rounded" characterization; the acting could become complex. Knowing the eagerness of actors to act, I doubt whether there has ever been a production of these scripts that did, in fact, avoid the use of acting.

Handke's *My Foot, My Tutor* (T-49) makes use of simple acting by reducing the performers' means: the two characters do not talk, they wear neutral half-masks and, for the most part, they perform ordinary movements (that sometimes seem extraordinary because they contradict expectancies and do not "fit" the con-

text). The play does involve characters—a Warden and a Ward—but much of the action provokes the question “What is acted, and what is real?” There is a cat in the play. A cat cannot be trained and does not act: In the performance, “The cat does what it does.” Timing depends on the will of the actor, but the length of one scene depends on the length of time it actually takes water to boil in a tea kettle. The Ward eats an apple just as he would if he were not acting: “. . . as if no one were watching.” Yet he fails, for no reason, to slice a beet with a large and powerful beet-cutting machine: Obviously he is only pretending.

These scripts by Peter Handke show, among other things, that the playwright, too, may use an awareness of the acting/not-acting continuum. Although his control—exerted only through the written word—over the complexity of acting is limited, he may still deal with the nature and degree of acting itself as an element in the script. And Handke’s early work is another illustration of a general, but not universal, shift among contemporary theatre artists toward simple acting and the not-acting end of the scale.

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It must be emphasized that the acting/not-acting scale is not intended to establish or suggest values of any kind. Objectively, all points on the scale are equally good. It is only personal taste that prefers complex acting to simple acting or non-matrixed performing to acting. The various degrees of representation and personification are “colors,” so to speak, in the spectrum of human performance; the artist may use whichever colors he prefers.

In spite of Handke’s example, one importance of attempting a formulation such as the acting/not-acting scale lies in the fact that it is a practical theatre tool as opposed to a literary one. The qualities and characteristics of acting can be determined only in performance. We have a great heritage in the analysis of dramatic literature, but it is vitally necessary to develop techniques and methods for the analysis of performance.

Such analysis need not be purely philosophical and academic. Just as literary analysis contributed much to playwriting, performance analysis should contribute directly to all of the arts of the stage. It should be relevant, pragmatic, eminently useful and stimulating.