

THE ACTOR

By Stark Young

AS all actors who ever get anywhere know in their hearts, the actor is the liveliest part of the theatre. Of all theatre elements acting is closest to the audience. Of all theatre languages acting gets the readiest ear. Actors are the vehicle of expression on which most depends in the theatre, and they know that their first business is to get themselves and their matter over the footlights to the audience, to turn everything into theatre. They sense the fact that nothing counts except in relation to this theatricality. Probability in character, time, or action; likeness, naturalness, or truth, concern them only with regard to the theatre, to projecting what they create, and getting a response to it.

Actors sense the difference between acting talent and a mere serious intention, and they sense what a part sheer vitality and magnetism play in the actor's achievement. They know how audiences like spirit in an actor, well adjusted egotism, engaging exhibitions, power, assurance, the impression of success — know how wise are the Spanish in their proverb that everyone likes the victor — *siempre es simpático el que vince*. And they know that while the production of the play is being presented to the audience, they themselves are, of all the agents at work in this complex art, the chief, they are the protagonists. More than the designer who created the décor, or the dramatist who gave the play and the central theme, or the director who controlled and shaped the whole of the theatre work, the actors engage the au-

dience; their mystery and power are felt most; they are the singers in the song. By instinct, intuition, and talent actors that are functioning in their art know these things, have them all straight. Whether they can explain them or not, they exemplify the principles of their art. And audiences by the same intuition follow them freely.

We should not hold it against them then that actors should show how human they are by being frailty and innocence itself when they come to analysis and theory. Every one of us philosophizes over life to some extent at least, every actor in the midst of his art does a little theory on his own. Then begins a confusion indeed, an æsthetic Babel, the ballad of the babes in the wood.

Sometimes the actor's theory is a prattle of mere made up explanations, like that of a man in the midst of a love affair trying to talk the psychology of sex. He will tell you, for example, that he has got to be natural, to be like life, when all the while what he is trying to do on the stage is not to represent a natural person or action but to present naturalness itself, to project to the audience what he thinks is natural. He may tell you that he must keep to the truth, when there is in fact no truth of time, place, or anything else that holds him except in relation to the effect he aims at; for he goes as fast or as slowly as he likes, jumps his scenes over the earth, in the house one minute, the next on the sea, now speaking plain words, now bursting in-

to song. Actors, he concludes perhaps, should be themselves. Acting is being natural. Or artifice is out of date and false. An actor should be the part he plays. Be sincere. There are a hundred theories, sometimes held by people who can only think, not act; sometimes talked by good actors who do the right thing and are only confused when they try abstractions and principles, who act like monarchs but talk like poor Poll. Some of them think straight, most of them if they carried out the theories they announce would break their necks and the theatre's neck, or at least be far worse players than they are now. But this, as Cicero said of the early orators before him, is a horrid way of speaking, *asperum et horridum genus dicendi* —

There is no reason, however, why actors should be artists in words or artists in æsthetic doctrine. No doubt such a state of things is most desirable, but we have no more right to demand that of actors than we have to ask Lessing to dance a ballet, or Shakespeare to mold a statue of Lucrece, so long, that is, as the actor has something to say in his own language, which is acting.

Acting is an art in which the actor uses himself, his body and voice, as a medium. The actor takes from a drama a character and the dramatist's comment on that character; he brings his inspiration and technique to the dramatist's imagination. This creation of the dramatist's he restates in terms of acting, bringing into existence a new creation that was not before. This creation of the actor's has in its turn, then, to be restated in relation to the whole play, the theme and the characters; it must be given its right mask. Thereby it becomes a part of another body, of the whole theatre work that is to be created.

Technical training and skill in his art develop and perfect the actor as a medium of theatrical expression, that is obvious. But there is an element about him that we may speak of as pure acting medium, which he has largely by birth, to some extent by cultivation, and at his best by both. It is possible to be a finer artist on the stage than you are an actor; some players, Duse for example, illumine the nature of all art rather than perfect their technical range in one phase. It is possible, on the contrary, to be a noteworthy actor without being a significant artist at all, David Warfield for example. In each case we are concerned with this matter of the actor's equipment, his possession of those elements that are specially related to his particular art, as a voice is to a singer or suppleness of body to a trapeze performer. We are concerned with what he has that is pure acting medium.

We may speak of five aspects of this medium.

There is first — and most baffling of all so far as explanation goes — the theatrical person, the player who goes vividly over the footlights. Some players click as they appear on the stage, we watch them because they in themselves seem to exist in theatre terms, as contrasted with good actors whose presence is interesting only by virtue of skill in their art, or beauty, or pleasing personal quality. This theatricality is not to be confused with the popular *sex appeal* — an actor may not be conspicuously appealing in this way and yet may be theatrical, may project readily into theatre terms, just as some voices, good or bad, engage your ear at once. Indeed this theatricality in the actor corresponds to what a real singing voice — a voice whose life is at once contagious for the hearer — is to the singer, who may, how-

ever, or may not be a good singer when he has it.

Second, there are the natural assets that the actor has for his business. These may be an effective body, in shape and flexibility, and a good theatre mask, all of such blessings, down to a skin that takes the makeup well, a minor advantage in which actors greatly vary.

A good theatre mask implies contours and conformations that can project themselves over the footlights into the theatre; eyes that can be seen; cheekbones that will not crowd them; teeth whose glitter carries a smile to the farthest row in the theatre; and so on. What one actor, though a profound artist, may succeed in creating only in the course of a long scene, another who is more or less a fool may establish the first minute he is on the stage merely because his brow has a noble outline, a splendid serenity upon it, or because the bone structure of his eye sockets, by throwing stage shadows over them or allowing room for black-leading, conveys the effect of tragic romance. A voice may express to its hearers a score of things that the speaker neither intends nor could understand. Such endowments as these are unescapable elements in the actor as a medium. They have not necessarily anything to do with soul, training, or artistic intelligence; they are to the actor what the violin, good, bad, or indifferent, is to the violinist.

Third, there is the time sense. One of the most expressive languages in the theatre is that of the time intervals. Actors with a sense of rhythm and an instinct for pause, cues, and general tempo, can sometimes easily achieve what players who are much better artists reach only with great elaboration. Glenn Hunter, for example, who is a player without much imaginative

scope, can often hit at once by means of his time values what Morgan Farley, who has far more genuine artistic understanding but less acting gift, can approach only indirectly and laboriously.

Like the time sense, but in the region of the eye, is the actor's sense of movement and line, his visual music. Here he transfers the time sense into visual motion, whose rhythm, pattern, and intervals become in themselves expressive as the rhythm in a ballad or a scherzo is expressive, as Michelangelo's design in line and mass is expressive in his Campidoglio, or as a spiral says one thing as distinguished from what an oval says. The flow of Charlie Chaplin's gesture and movement is unbroken and complete; Chaliapin in "Boris" exhibits a visual rhythm that is superb and superbly related to his own particular body and stature and wholly calculated in terms of them. It is through this visual music that the actor is related to one of the theatre's chief and most elusive elements, its movement. It is through this that he draws from us a response akin to that we give to music and dancing, and as powerful, distinct, and hard to describe or exactly remember. Under this head falls the capacity for wearing costumes, which, in fact, come alive on the stage only through the wearer's sense of moving line. This sense for the pure visual medium must not be confused with the gift of mimicry. Mimicry works through the medium of gesture of course, but it turns on resemblance. It is the fifth of these acting parts.

A mimetic gift in the actor corresponds to a good ear in the musician. It is a great advantage, but will not of itself make him an artist. Many good actors have little talent for mimicry. Mimicry is to acting what memory can

be to culture and education, and like memory it must not be too easily despised. The imitation of others is an instinct born deep in us, and is the source of the actor's art. Acting is essentially based on men's actions as we see them in our daily experience; and an aptitude for imitating these actions may be taken as the first ready test of a man's born gift for this particular art. In the theatre there is always to be found a sort of person, often intelligent enough, who can think, theorize, and describe acting till we might mistake him for a player of some skill. The way to show such persons up at once is to let them imitate the simplest action of men and women and to see how certain they are to miss it flat. This gift of mimicry in the actor resembles a gift for likeness in a painter. Such a knack will not make his drawing fine, but it will give him a kind of solid reality with which he can begin and which he can alter and force to his own ends. Corot takes the landscape as material for the expression of his idea; it is plain that he can express his idea more adequately if he knows the exact appearance that he works in, and that by knowing just what he has done to this material we understand better what he has expressed. In order to translate a gesture into elegance or extravagance or drunkenness, an actor may best begin by being able to reproduce the actual, literal gesture that he sees. To that literal and basic gesture the shortest cut lies in the power of mimicry, which amounts to saying that it is from this actual, literal gesture and the knowledge of what it would be in any given case, that all style evolves. The reason most of our extremely stylized productions seem so poor and misled is because the actors lack the needed style, and they often miss this style

because they do not command the simple, straight acting from which this style departs.

These five parts—theatricality, physical assets, time and linesense, and mimicry—compose what we may call the pure acting medium as distinguished from that portion of acting that we may call its art, which shares in the principles of other arts and partakes of the nature of all art.

To these basic endowments and faculties in the actor we must add—as we should do not only with the actor but with any artist—the rest of him, all that spiritual and mental and personal and peculiar sum that for want of a better word we should call himself. The sum of all, of himself with his special acting gifts, is what the actor brings to his art, and is what qualifies him as the medium of acting. He remains himself as pigment remains pigment in painting, and in sculpture marble remains marble.

It follows therefore that the actor, being the medium that he works in as an artist, is never the character that he plays, or we should have no art. Even a Mr. Tom Jones acting himself on the stage would have to project on the stage his own notion of himself and his relation to the rest of the play. Even in such a case the actor cannot play from nature. He plays from an idea, which he sets up and which if you like he may have drawn from nature. He is Mr. Jones, but the Mr. Jones projected into his acting is another matter. To say that another actor playing this part does not act Mr. Jones, he is Mr. Jones, is such nonsense that it defeats itself. If it were not a matter of conception and presentation, we should not be going around in a circle admiring the actor for being Mr. Jones without being him. The actor is always himself, in every rôle he is himself.

But he is himself only as a medium for his idea. He uses himself, his body, his voice, and the elusive personal quality that goes with these, exactly as Titian uses paint or Haydn sound, to create a form for his idea.

To create in this medium of himself, the actor needs technique. Acting is a language in the theatre that must be learned. Without technique the actor cannot know the resources of rhythm, what tempo is, what the voice means to such ends as his, or how, when he does get effects, to recognize them, to retain from them what is most expressive and to repeat it when he wills. Through the avenue of technique the actor approaches all wit, elevation, variety, and depth of style. Through his technique he establishes that firm outline that divides his creation from reality or heightens it into art. Without technique, however wonderful his own quality may be, he has no language to speak. Through technique he learns the use of his medium. And through technical labor he gets an intellectual discipline that helps to clarify his ideas, which in their turn are developed by this search for their right technical form.

If cultivation in his technique helps the actor's use of his medium, cultivation in general, a culture in thought, arts, and living, will help his idea. Culture in other arts will nourish and promote the conceptions that he brings to his own. The technical qualities in one art can be transferred to another. You can take rhythm or emphasis, for example, and apply their expression in architecture to music or acting; the structure of Milton's style in "Samson Agonistes" is not unlike Michelangelo's in its formalism, pedantry, nobility, and controlled but intense emotionalism. The rich texture of Veronese, once felt and understood,

affords an approach to the texture of Shakespeare's writing. The phrasing in good music can throw light on the thought phrase and on word phrasing. I should think that Debussy would be the best guide to many a drama of Maeterlinck, since the quality of their mood is so totally suggested in some of his music; and that nothing could teach us more about acting Sheridan than the furniture of the period. Emotional or spiritual culture and exercise in one art enriches the substance that we bring to another. The dilation of his mental horizon by knowledge and ideas furthers the actor's opinion into sane judgment and his choice into distinction; it furthers too his understanding of the play and of his rôle in all its meanings and parts. The range, intensity, and glamour of his own living cannot be divorced from the nature of his conceptions. The actor needs always to make of himself a material beautiful in quality and diverse in range for his art's sake; even the finest building is more beautiful for its marble's beauty.

Through the creation of his idea into acting form, the actor achieves a work of art, complete in itself and free of its material. If he has power behind the idea and the expression of it he can, if he chooses, do a beggar, not in whining rags, but in the most exalted declamation and elegance. It will be an extreme case of unlikeness, and he will have to contend with the disappointment or resentment that we feel when we see what is a familiar fact so contradicted or distorted; he will have to convince us of the particular truth that he is expressing. Or he might take the reverse direction and do his beggar in dust and shreds. On the other hand, he could do a king in robes and heroic speech, as in Æschylus, or in homely cotton and the simplest realism, as in

certain beautiful and moving folk dramas and rituals. The principle remains the same — the freedom and completeness of a work of art. The actor is as free of his material as any other artist. But the fact remains, nevertheless, that in acting this freedom is more dangerous, since acting of all arts rests most on imitation and arouses therefore more than any other art a strong demand for likeness. It happens too that this lively instinct that is in us for imitation has us doing the stage characters inside ourselves before we know it; before we know it we are acting them, and so are doubly critical over resemblances and doubly jealous of the facts of appearance and similarity.

But whether he works close to the surface of his material or remote from

it, the actor must have one chief concern. Having made of himself an expressive medium, he must be concerned with his idea or conception. It is by this means that he persuades toward himself the stream of life in others and becomes, like the loved man in Bianor's poem, "lord of another's soul". The poet when he speaks himself, Aristotle says, creates no image — the actor merely being himself is not an artist. Homer, he says, admirable as he is in every other respect, is especially so in this, that he knows the part to be played by the poet himself in the poem. Only by his idea does the actor share in the whole work of theatre art that he serves; the rest of him is merely used by the director and the dramatist; it is mere medium like the paints, canvas, and lighting.

EPITAPH

By Lynn Riggs

WHEN there must be accounting
I'll not be there to see
The sad mound, the graven slab's
Phrasing over me,

Nor able to direct
The inescapable
Chisel into epitaph
Gay and beautiful.

For this, a certain yearning
Better to define
The brief intoxication
Of beauty has been mine.

Lest the last word be,
Sealing my blood and bones:
"His laughter
Was rimmed with granite stones."