

The Pursuit of Truth... Korina Chrysaidou and Giorgos Haratzas talk to
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By Achilleas Kourias

In their words, someone could easily distinguish hearty love and profound knowledge about theatre, characteristics that they do not keep undisclosed for their own selves, but they choose to share with, mainly young colleagues, in order to make them communicants of the truth that they have already discovered in the art of acting. Korina Chrysaidou and Giorgos Haratzas talk about the “Practical Aesthetics” and the workshop that has already been taking place in Michael Cacoyannis Foundation.

1. How the technique of “Practical Aesthetics” can be distinguished among other acting art models?

G.Haratzas: Practical Aesthetics is based on the last period of the work of Stanislavski (who talked about ‘physical actions’), the teachings of Aristotle, the Stoic philosophers and the American teacher of acting Sanford Meisner. Practical Aesthetics focuses on the notion of ‘physical action’, e.g. what we do on stage, here and now, in our effort to fulfill a goal, an objective. Although the notion of Action is common to all schools of acting, many other schools focus on the ‘emotion’ as a main tool, or the ‘body’ or the ‘imagination’. In this way they deflect the awareness of the actors from the fact that in the final analysis they are called on stage to play ‘actions’ and through the actions to tell a story to the audience (something that was first defined by Aristotle). Practical Aesthetics also focuses on how the actor will remain totally connected on stage with his fellow actors and interact with them moment to moment without anticipating his or their responses.

2. Would you characterize it as a complete and exclusive method for a role approach, or could it work, perhaps, even as auxiliary to other techniques? In other words, is it demanded someone to disown other techniques and enter Mamet’s world without having prepared forms and solutions?

K. Chrysaidou: Practical Aesthetics is a complete method of acting but exclusivity is not perceivable today in any system of acting. All the modern western systems rely on Stanislavski and are, therefore, communicating vessels. We believe that Practical Aesthetics can collaborate perfectly with other acting approaches, especially those which train and cultivate the expressive means of the body. Nevertheless, in order to train in Practical Aesthetics one has to approach it with a clear mind, free from other models and conceptions, so that it is given a fair chance to work for him or her.

3. “Practical Aesthetics” seems to promise an integrated encounter with the soul-searching, the doubts or hesitations as well as the fears that usually actors feel. In which way can this be accomplished?

G.H.: When someone reads the handbook of Practical Aesthetics called A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK FOR THE ACTOR, which is written by six of D.Mamet’s students, he realizes that for the first time an acting approach analyses fully the process of the actor, pinpoints all its crucial issues and suggests solutions that are specific and practically applicable. We think that it is liberating for the actor - as is true for the painter or the musician or even the carpenter - to know exactly what the tools of his craft are and how to use them. To know how to work when he takes for the first time a text in his hands, apart from the guidance of a teacher or a director. For the first time a technique codifies so clearly the work of the actor and this is why A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK FOR THE ACTOR is considered today one of the best books on acting.

4. In an article of yours, you highlight that David Mamet’s method transcends the limitation of a technique and obtains spherical dimensions, as if it were a philosophical approach to acting. Is it possible for “Practical Aesthetics” to unveil a different and more essential dimension of Theatre? If so, could that happen just for the actor, or could it reach the audience as well?

K.C.: In a creative group process the actor recognizes that, sometimes without noticing it, his ego feels threatened, starts being defensive and reacts negatively to the processes he doesn’t identify with. The Stoic philosophers said that ‘People are disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of things’. This hinders the creative process because it interrupts the fertile exchange of ideas and the flow of energy. Practical Aesthetics, on the other hand, teaches the professional actor to behave with humility, generosity, consideration and tact. The actor learns to consciously observe the events within a group, not to take them personally, and to digest them in a way so that he can offer creative feedback. Thus, the actor of Practical Aesthetics learns how to retain his personal integrity while at the same time retaining high availability, an element that is absolutely necessary in any collective artistic process. Consequently, when a performance is the result of a group process with these creative and collaborative elements then the audience, being sensitive, will perceive behind the actual events of the performance a message of faith and positive energy.

5. For those who are not familiar with acting, the “pursuit of truth” in the “art of acting” sounds as a controversial pattern. Could “acting” involve “specks of truth”, and if so, how could these be defined in the relationship that is being developed by the actor with his/her part as well as the audience?

G.H.: With ‘acting’ we don’t mean to lie, to pretend, to deceive. This is a common misunderstanding between those who haven’t delved in the art of acting. On the contrary, acting is about being truthful with oneself; it is about taking the elements of one’s expressive means from one’s own self and transforming them into ‘actions’. An

actor is asked to build his roles by digging deep into the infinite realm of his personal world, something that makes him 'believable' and 'truthful' on stage. When this happens constantly, in every moment of a performance the audience gets fascinated and leaves the theatre relieved and reinvigorated – which is the ultimate goal of any performance.

6. David Mamet seems to attempt, to bare actor's status away from transcendental, or someone could say "divine", characteristics that are usually being attributed, and finally restore it to the realistic dimension of a profession. Do you really see a twisted reality in the theater sector? Could "Practical Aesthetics" keep an actor grounded, avert him from becoming a big-headed "star", and make him a truly "theatre-servant"?

K.C.: It is our belief that the Greek theatrical reality is disproportionate. While on the one hand there is a horizontal development of the theatrical art with the formation of innumerable new companies which produce all kinds of theatre (devised, physical, popular, street theatre, etc.), on the other hand there is a lack of a vertical development, one which explores its deeper elements and can create a current strong enough to become a school of acting. The theatrical world is broken down into many little pockets, the companies don't have a long-lasting life and most importantly there is a lack of a common language about what is theatre, what is acting. Young actors aim to become recognizable knowing that that will help them survive in a very difficult and harsh professional world. Thus, many of them find refuge in the Greek television which, in its turn, strangles and devours them artistically. The Practical Aesthetics actor who knows exactly what his job is doesn't resort to creating a false image of himself, thinking that it will allow him to survive in his profession. Simultaneously, as we explained earlier, Practical Aesthetics helps every actor to keep himself grounded and humble and his artistic integrity intact, which is a matter of a very demanding personal struggle.

7. Which audience does the workshop for David Mamet's acting technique invite? Obviously it is appealing to a young actor, however, could it be suitable for an already successful professional, or even for an amateur?

G.H.: David Mamet's technique is for any person would like to delve seriously into acting. We say 'seriously' because it demands consistency and continuity, discipline and the complete commitment of the studying actor. Our acting workshop regards mainly young actors who have previously conquered the basic elements of acting at their drama schools or through a serious engagement with theatre and would like to move ahead. It is for actors that would like to acquire a specific, crystal-clear and practical technique that is able to give them the means to work efficiently under any professional circumstances. For this reason we will ask them, for the time being, to put aside any preconceptions and ideas they have formed about acting from other teachers and allow themselves to approach this workshop tabula rasa (like a 'white board'). Therefore our workshop is also suitable for the successful professional given that he will also be available to follow this procedure.

8. Could you mention some elements from your personal relationship with Mamet's technique, either as actors or as tutors as well as the benefits that you might have derived personally?

K.C.: We now have a clear idea what to do when we take a text in our hands for the first time. How to work on it. How to learn the words of the text (there is a specific way to memorize the words which helps when we are playing). We know how to build a role, a character and how to handle our emotions when they arise on stage. We know where to put our attention on stage, what liberates and energizes us and what stresses us up and blocks us. We are fully aware of the tools of our craft. We also know how to behave in a creative group and how to relate to our fellow actors. We can adapt in any professional circumstance. Because Practical Aesthetics is so clear and transparent, as tutors and directors we know exactly what we are teaching and what terms to use, which language we need to use to guide our actors so that they can fully comprehend their objectives and ultimately their job.

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