

The Casting or the Two-Headed Spectator – a give and take process¹ –

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Abstract: This paper analyses the process of casting in theatre, by focusing on the actor-director information exchanges. The author starts from the premise that a casting session is, essentially, a *theatrical situation* with two players who alternate their roles.

Keywords: casting, director, actor, limit encounter, emotion, non-verbal language, blocking, attention, observation, neurosciences

To observe a casting session is a privilege. Perhaps many people would like to get in a casting room, drawn by the opportunity to surprise the actors at their most “vulnerable”, while wavering between the “civil” being and the character, committed to the complex relationship with the director and with the latter’s indications. The turbid or glowing waters in which the actors swim, the moment of inspiration, the hazard or, on the contrary and at the same time, the anxiety, the stumbled lines, the altered voice, the failure, the indecision relate to the backstage area that has always been provoking for the spectator. The tests to which the actors are submitted during casting are reminiscent of the rehearsals, because the making of the cast is also a search, a *work-in-progress*, a process with an unpredictable ending, able to draw like a magnet.

As an outsider, one might believe that, in an audition, the director plays the part of a cold, calculated individual, whose intentions are impenetrable, and who is present only to pick the few most “gifted” from the many.

¹ The phrase *give and take*, borrowed from the terminology of the work with the actor, seen at Viola Spolin and at other practitioners, defines the way and the essential rule according to which an improvisation occurs: when a partner takes the initiative (*take*), the other one will temporarily “hand over” (*give*) the lead of the game. The partners take and give the initiative alternatively and spontaneously.

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However, since I have had several times the opportunity to observe closely the casting process, I believe the audition means instead, as put by George Banu, a **mutual** “close” supervision (Banu, 2007, 153) between the actor and the director; in a relatively short time, a series of focus shifts occurs, each of them being both the observed and the observer, both the spectator and the performer. In a limited time, the two exchange information intensely, verbally and non-verbally, so that the Other evolves from an anonymous individual in a partner, defined as an artist and a human being.

In fact, the *casting relationship* is the *meeting* of two people, of whom the director usually keeps a low profile. Although the director’s status and role mean a static, physically passive presence, he/she is fully involved. Of course, the director has an apparent superiority, a position which, however, does not influence the balance of the relationship with the actor. On the contrary, it is natural as long as the director’s objective is to pick, in the meeting with the actor, the maximum amount of specific information and then to select and interpret it. The actor – the director’s relational double, “in the limelight” (unlike the latter), hence, the only one who is “visible” – is required to apply full (physical and psychological) immersion in the brief span of their meeting; because, unlike the rehearsals, the casting room conditions are not protecting the actor, whereas the director’s sympathy reflects his/her interest in erecting a construction in optimal conditions. In casting, the time limit, the goal of the meeting, and fatigue are experienced differently.

Thus, we may consider a *limit-encounter*. For a researcher, it can be an extraordinary opportunity to study the complex exchange of verbal and especially non-verbal messages, the existing types of emotions, in other words, considerable information approachable with the tools of the neurosciences, of psychology or of anthropology.

As found by modern bio-psycho-physiology research, how we live and how we show ourselves forth are aspects defined by the “chemical processes in our body, by the biological interaction among organs, by the tiny electrical currents jumping between the synapses of the brain, and by the organization of information that culture imposes on our mind” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007, 13). This paper is meant to monitor and interpret the specific *effects* in the sphere of emotions developed in the exchanges of significations and in the negotiations between the two casting subjects, the actor and the director. The hypothesis of my research is that the emotional load of this *limit-encounter* triggers a series of states and phenomena likely to generate subtle transformations at both of the “actors”² of the situation.

² Obviously, here, the word “actor” has the sociological meaning of participant.

Before we map the emotional universe of the casting process, we should consider several preliminary ideas on the process as such: the casting is when the director's gaze makes the first contact with reality. The character, envisaged according to the director's reading of the text, become actual possibilities, *avatars* – the dictionary definition – i.e. “unforeseen (and tormenting) transformations that occur in the evolution of a being”. The director's behaviour during the *perception* of the other (the actor) is directly linked with his/her expectations generated by the initial view on the performance. Therefore, in a first phase, the actor is classified and assessed depending on the director's interests, purposes and needs. If the actor, in aspect or reactions (e.g. is strikingly tall or has a noisy laughter), does not catch his/her eye, or if the director is constrained (e.g. he/she has a migraine which prevents the examination), the process that leads to the shaping of the impression will be interrupted and the assessment will rely mainly on information specific to the (human or professional) category in which the examined individual is included from the start. If specific factors stimulate the director to assess also personal traits of the actor, the resulting impression will be toned. Once the image is formed, there is a tendency that the subsequent information on that individual be processed toward the consolidation of the already shaped impression. On the other hand, the actor may initiate actions or adopt behaviours meant to influence the director. This is how the future performer is not necessarily in the position of the one whose fate is decided. As noted by Erving Goffman, the actor may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them. (Goffman, 2007, 32)

Therefore, his interest is in the control of the others' attitude and, especially, behaviour by which they react to his presence. The “reading” of the reactions triggered by his performance will act as a guideline for the actor to adjust his own actions; it is an indispensable feedback. The actor wants to reach his purpose (get the part), but, since the audition installs a living, condensed, dramatic relationship, everything projected by the actor before the casting can change depending on the director's reactions and indications.

I have attended recently a casting session led by a ludic, careful and kind director. At a certain point, a young actor, whom I knew was talented, rational, and educated, appeared in front of the director. “Their discovery of each other will be wonderful”, I thought. Unfortunately, the meeting was a modest one: the young actor seemed dispirited; he read unconvincingly, his interpretation was amorphous at the director's patient indications. Obviously,

the role was cast to someone else. Intrigued by this episode, I had a subsequent talk with the actor. He confessed his emotions got in the way. When he assisted the auditions of actors before him, he heard the director say to another actor to moderate his interpretations. Therefore, he became obsessed with the idea that he would also have to make economy of movements and of changes of attitude. Emotions are paradoxical. On the one hand, as stated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, they are

...in some respect the most subjective elements of consciousness, since only the person him/herself can tell whether he or she truly experiences [...]. Yet an emotion is also the most objective content of the mind, because the 'gut feeling' we experience when we are in love, or ashamed, or scared, or happy, is generally more real to us than what we observe in the world outside, or whatever we learn from science or logic. (Csikszentmihalyi, 30)

Emotions can be controlled or led in a direction to stimulate the actor's performance, for example by techniques that involve attention. *Attention calibrates emotions*, finds psychologist and scientific journalist Daniel Goleman. Starting from this assertion, we can imagine the following scenario: we are at the beginning of the casting session. The actor is in the audition room, the first eye contact has been made, and the first impression has been shaped on both sides. Now, the actor's emotions are very strong, he hasn't heard his voice yet and the following actions are still undefined. If he took Goleman's advice, the highly excited actor would direct his attention to something concrete, different from his own "limit-situation". On the other hand, the director, who can see the actor's intense emotions and who, obviously, wants them cleared, to allow him to see beyond them, should give the actor a concrete indication that could gather the actor's full attention to a specific point. This trick is in fact the activation of the mechanisms of *selective attention*, to "calm down" the anxious amygdala³. As long as his attention is caught by something else, the emotion of the "supervised" individual disappears. But if this attention drops, than "the emotional distress, if still kept by the amygdala neural networks, comes roaring back." (Goleman, 2013, 87) For example, if the director opens the conversation and asks the actor to pick, from a table, an object to be used in a first improvisation, his attention will be fully focussed on the fulfilment of the received task. Back again in front of the commission, if he does not receive immediately the following indicator, the actor will begin to wonder whether he

³ *Amygdala*, a primitive area of the brain that controls gut reactions to events we experience; it is responsible, among other things, with the production of instinct behaviour.

chose the right object. Perhaps he should have picked something bigger or something that could be held more easily with one hand. Such questions will continue to arise and the state of distress will be reinstalled.

Let us imagine another hypothetical situation. If there is an object in the casting room, for example a fur coat down by the director's chair, this may give to an actress who fears dogs the feeling there's a dog there - and this idea may stir moods or reactions that reason cannot control. It is what Joseph LeDoux, cited by Daniel Goleman, calls *precognitive emotion*, hence a reaction based on "fragments of sensory information that were not stored completely and were not integrated in a recognisable object". (Goleman, 2008, 53) The amygdala is the one that senses this *sensory pattern of import* (Goleman) and it draws a conclusion that triggers reactions even before the fact is confirmed. The phenomenon is called by Goleman *the dark side of our raging emotions*, emotions with which actors work frequently.

If an actor exits the casting room discontent and furious, the one following him is burdened with strong emotions that will vanish only if he is welcomed in a calm, natural environment.⁴ Essentially, feelings are indispensable to rational decision-making, believes neurologist Antonio Damasio, professor at the Iowa University, introducing the concept of "emotional brain". *The rational brain*, claims Damasio, has a leading role at the level of emotions, with the exception of the times when emotions cannot be controlled and the *emotional brain* goes haywire. (Goleman, 58) Although emotions dominate the actor's state when he enters the casting room, the information he obtains by the quick analysis of the environment can appease him immediately. Ana Tkacenko, an actress in Chisinau, tells the story of such a change of state she experienced at an audition organized by the Bucharest National Theatre: "My legs were shaking just before my turn came... When I least expected it, I had to go in and the change as such began..." (Andronescu, 2013, 327-328). For her, the emotions were appeased when she looked at the director and felt he was a "normal and kind" man. The physiological explanation of emotions shows that, in a distressing, intensely emotional situation (such as the casting), a nerve that starts from the brain and reaches the adrenal glands triggers a discharge of hormones, i.e. epinephrine and norepinephrine which flow through the body and give the signal a "limit state" is at stake. Owing to a long series of chemical processes in

⁴ "When the amygdala works by preparing a distressed reaction, another part of the emotional brain enables a more adequate and more correct reaction. The brain bumper goes from the amygdala, which seemed to have lied, to the other end of the major circuit, i.e. the neocortex, the frontal lobes, (...) mastering the feeling for a more efficient reaction". *Ibid.* p 54

the actor's body, the actor will keep the memory of an important moment in an extremely energetic form⁵. As an example, I will evoke an episode in the biography of actor Florian Pitiș, recounted by the actor himself in an interview. Twenty years and more after this debut at the Bulandra Theatre, he remembered in detail how he received his first role while he was working as an electrician at the theatre:

On 24 February 1962, the actor of a small part in *As You Like It* was not available. Petre Gheorghiu told the director, "I know someone who knows the play by heart" (because I had seen it 232 times!). They summoned me from home and, in the cabin, before the performance, Liviu Ciulei worked with me on that small part for 20 minutes. (Dragnea, Băleanu, 1984, 178)

As to the director's emotion, it is conditioned by the actor and his actions. When something surprising happens - for example if an actor, in aspect and in act, exceeds his expectations – it is very likely that the director, too, experiences emotions. Since the casting is an endurance test (director Tompa Gabor, for example, recounts a casting with 310 actors in 8 days at the Lliure theatre in Barcelona), the overwhelming amount of data blends emotion with fatigue. A casting process may result in a troubling finding at the last moment, or it may lead to an overload of useless information and less fortunate choices. The decision (or the awareness that the circumstances overwhelm you) appears, say neuroscience studies (Goleman, 162), in the prefrontal region of the brain, the one that operates the executive functions, such as organisation, planning, forecasting or self-monitoring.⁶ When a threshold is reached, this part of the cortex no longer resists, and the decisions and choices get out of hand as anxiety and fatigue increase. To avoid getting there, the director should apply selective attention, follow a number of sources he can manage and ignore the rest.

Intense emotional states, experienced in childhood, act directly on us, make us more flexible or, on the contrary, more unstable in relation with the people we meet or the events we witness. Emotions are urges that prompt us

⁵ The following mentions are taken from Daniel Goleman, *Inteligența emoțională*. The amygdala is the main place in the brain where these signals go; they activate the neurons in the amygdala nucleus, which send signals to other regions of the brain in a way that will improve the memory of what is happening. This awakening of the amygdala nucleus seems to print on the memory most of the intensely emotional moments, with additional strength. p. 49.

⁶ The four functions of the brain are taken from <http://www.psihiatrietimisoara.ro/material/cortexul.pdf>

to act, each emotion⁷ readying the body for reaction. People in general (actors, too) fall either under the spontaneous-intuitive type or under the rational-intellectual one; they approach situations differently in order to meet their objectives. At those who rely on reason, the *downward* neural steering is primary, according to Goleman, where *spontaneous attention, will and intended choice* are activated. Those who rely on intuition use first of all their instinct and then *reflexive attention, routine habit and impulse (urge)* are intensified, corresponding to an *upward* neural activation. Selective attention is also different, depending on one's typology. For the intuitive person, whose attention system starts from instinct and goes to reason, information comes from the closer or more remote outer environment, sometimes not yet in the area of interest of total focus; the mind analyses what is in the field of perception before knowing what it will select as important. Let us imagine the following situation: if from the building adjacent to the room where the casting process is in progress bouncy music can be heard, it is possible that an "intuitive" actor borrows, even unaware, the perceived rhythm in his improvisation. The rational actor's mind accesses more easily the selective attention which starts from reason and goes to instinct, but it requires more time to decide what piece of information it can choose from the surrounding sounds, to identify each piece of information and to make decisions once they are analysed in full. For the same example, the rational actor could retain a specific instrument from the music heard in the distance, and then he could use the image or the name of the instrument in his improvisation. Thus, in the reason – emotion relationship, the conclusion is easily conceivable: the more intense a feeling is, the more the mind will be dominated by emotion and more inefficient rationally speaking. For instance, if during a casting session the director decides to test the candidate's coordination skills in an "opposite vectors" exercise⁸, and the latter makes several successive

⁷ To understand better the power of emotions on thought, we have taken several pieces of information from Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, on how the brain has evolved. "The most primitive part of the brain is the brainstem surrounding the top of the spinal cord. This root brain regulates basic life functions like breathing and the metabolism of the body's other organs, as well as controlling stereotypes reactions and movements. From the most primitive root, the brainstem, emerged the emotional centres. Millions of years later in evolution, from these emotional areas evolved the thinking brain or "neocortex". The thinking brain grew from the emotional, there was an emotional brain long before there was an emotional one. (...) The neocortex is the seat of thought, allows for the subtlety and complexity of emotional life, such as the ability to have feeling *about* our feelings", pp. 38-39.

⁸ "Opposite vectors" is a special category of exercises that explore the possibility to make simultaneous movements (opposed in direction, pace etc.) with different parts of the body. Known as "opposite vectors technique", these exercises require focus and the division of the actor's attention.

mistakes, it is possible the actors no longer manages, later, to fulfil any simple task. Balance between the emotional life and the rational one is given by the fact that, usually, "emotions feed and inform the operations of the rational mind, and the rational mind refines and sometimes vetoes the inputs of the emotions."(Goleman, 35-36) Reason cannot, however, oppose strong passions that cause an imbalance, when emotions takes control and stifles it.

During a casting process, actors improvise. By improvising, the actor creates stories, fictions, illusions with images and sounds. The actor's mind is like a machine that absorbs real images and sounds which it then mixes and restores them transformed, mysterious or humorous, more dilated or more compressed, but definitely more energetic. When the actor comes to a "halt" (blocking), it will generate a state of panic, the information travels fast an emergency route, from the eyes and the ears to the thalamus and then to the amygdala nucleus. According to traditional scientific theories, the eye, the ear and the other sensitive organs (skin, tongue etc.) transmit information to the thalamus and from there to the neocortex, *the thinking brain*. Pioneering research by professor Joseph LeDoux led to the finding of a small group of neurons that carry the information from the thalamus straight to the amygdala nucleus, the one that signals the emergency state and concentrates the remaining parts of the brain on this situation, before the neocortex has any opportunity to analyse completely what is happening and to decide how to act. Thus, time is saved in situations that require an immediate reaction. From this, the thalamus-amygdala circuit sends only a small part of the sensory message; its largest part goes to the neocortex. The neural outcome of this special situation is that, once the corresponding moment expires, those who experienced it are like "possessed", they cannot tell what happened to them(Goleman, 42). Such a moment is recounted by stage director and instructor David Zinder in an interview:

I've been teaching for nearly thirty years and in this time my memory has retained four or five experiences with my students. Many years ago, one of my students in Tel Aviv performed an amazing, bright exercise with a rope. For almost half an hour she worked with the image of the rope. We were all out of breath, watching her: no "mistake", if we could speak about mistakes in an improvisation! After each creative decision she made, I would find myself think, yes, that's ok, that absolutely ok! The solution was correct but not only she was doing what matched a series of prescribed rules, but because she could surprise me, everything was integrated organically with what she was proposing, there was continuity. Moreover, it was obvious she was feeling very well [...]. At the end, I asked her what she remembered. She told me she remembered nothing

with the exception of a feeling of infallibility. She had felt like me that she couldn't do wrong. She didn't remember a thing. (Zinder, 2011, 115-125)

Once they exit an emotionally challenging environment, such as a casting process or a competition, actors often state that they cannot remember anything, they cannot say how they made this or that decision, why they began all of a sudden, without thinking, to cry, to laugh, to scream etc. It seems the amygdala nucleus is responsible for strong emotional reactions that emerge without the participation of the conscious; it acts like "an emotional sentinel able to hijack the brain when the impulsive reaction overwhelms the logical one", states LeDoux (Goleman, 46). Borrowing the information on the *amygdala* from LeDoux's studies, Goleman also approaches "this smaller and shorter pathway that allows the amygdala to receive some direct inputs from the senses and start a response *before* they are fully registered by the neocortex". (Goleman, 184) Therefore, feelings, sensations that take the path of the amygdala and trigger a quick, irrational reaction are usually the most primitive and most powerful ones. Often, the force of the emotion experienced by an actor during casting overwhelms the rational because of the great thing at stake.

To enable the manifestation of his creativity, the actor needs to exceed the *emotional hijack* caused by the fear of making a mistake or by discouragement, in case of negative feedback. Indeed, if the messages received from the director are negative, cervical level neural areas are activated, and this generates anxiety, contradiction and sadness, states which lead to a defensive attitude or to inhibition (Goleman, 184). From my own directing experience and from the observation of other directors, I have found the importance, in casting, of voice inflections and tones, when a suggestion/conclusion is offered. Research in this direction has shown that the "acoustics of our skull case render our voice as it sounds to us very different from what others hear. But our tone of voice matters immensely to the impact of what we say." (Goleman, 81) If feedback is negative but the tone of the director's voice is pleasant, warm, the actor will experience the criticism constructively. However, if the director talks about the good things he saw, but involves a cold and distant tone of voice, the actors will experience the feedback negatively. If the actor is told that what he acted was not alright, the bad state that may appear pushes him to a restricted sphere of thoughts. On the contrary, if his state is good, he extends the span of his attention and his perception changes. According to Richard Davidson, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the Wisconsin-Madison University, the actor's state of wellbeing "activates the nerve centres at the left prefrontal part of the brain, a sphere that includes the nervous branches that remind us the pleasant feeling we have when we manage to do what we are set to do." (Goleman, 182)

“Attention works, in general, like a muscle – if it is not used, it start to atrophy” states Daniel Goleman. (Goleman, 14) In most actors, the training of attention is permanent. However, the distraction of attention may occur both at an emotional level (for instance, when the fear of failure emerges) and at a sensory one (if a physical discomfort or pain appears). To maximise his odds and to avoid fatigue and inefficiency due to the effort during an audition, the actor needs to learn how to discipline his attention. In its usual state, mental information is somewhat disordered; thoughts appear and disappear. If the actor’s attention is not trained, errors, confusion, and irritation may appear and lead to the decrease of the power to focus and, therefore, the casting purpose can be missed, and the directors may make inappropriate choices. Daniel Wegner, professor of psychology at Harvard, studied errors and how they alternate depending on how careless, stressed or tense we are. According to Wegner, in limit-situations, “a cognitive control system that ordinarily monitors errors we might make can inadvertently act as a mental prime, increasing the likelihood of that very mistake.” (Wegner, 48-50) For example, if the actor is set not to mention he interpreted, in another directing effort, the role for which he is at the casting, perhaps he will do just that. Edgar Allan Poe called the mental tendency to reveal a sensitive topic one does not want to bring up “the imp of the perverse”.

In casting, focusing in the required direction is the director’s fundamental task. Sometimes, essential information may be found in a movement of the hand, in a specific way of delivering sounds or in a specific movement of shoulder, for example. The director’s talent is also expressed in his capacity to steer the attention toward the right direction, at the right time, while guessing some defining traits of some actors. If the actor lacks focus, his capacity to comprehend is also compromised. The solution, offered by Goleman, is *meta-awareness*, attention to oneself, similar to the capacity of *observing that you are not observing* and redirecting attention to what you were set to. When the actor is focused, attention on himself may diminish, and the mind is freed from the thoughts that concern the self, which enables the activation of the circuits that support his intentions.

The casting is a communicational process made from a complex network of information exchanges organised at multiple levels. Valuable information can be obtained both by the director and by the actor from the postures of the body, which validates the examination of the other during the interaction. In the actor’s communication with the director, any of them may convey some *other* type of (energetic or cognitive) information than the information put in words. Since they are involved in a permanent communication at two levels

(verbal and nonverbal) the actor and especially the director need to be careful about reciprocity and harmony. The director, primarily an *observer*, needs, therefore, to extract and to select information both from the actor's behaviour *in the role* (professional skills) and from the behaviour of the individual in front of him (traits, feelings, states). Lev Dodin, the well-known Russian director, would note that, paradoxically,

in fact, many actors are shy or even closeted, and most of the people mistake freedom on stage for freedom in real life. I have seen that, the more detached you are in your everyday life, the more inhibited you become on the stage, perhaps because energy is wasted at the outside and it is not carried within on the stage. (Dodin, 2008, 18)

The most revealing sources of the nonverbal behavioural keys for the actor who is not in the role are: body language, eye contact (the sight) and voice. Many other pieces of information can be obtained from an analysis of gestures, of the gait, of posture, of pace and of the flow of various movements. On the other hand, the director is never corporeally passive; instead he runs a "secondary" performance in front of the actor. When he likes it, he relaxes, he smiles, and even replies. When he does not like it, he may twitch, he is fidgeting, he is coughing; he is obviously at a loss. There are cases where the director gives the line to the actor, which commits him, unwillingly, to the interaction; the two are interdependent, involved, and energetic, some other times quiet, a two-headed spectator.

Various studies have shown that actors and observer-directors do not hold the same information; actors have more pieces of information on their own behaviour and on the justification of their act and they are used to shaping their nonverbal language based on their purpose. Therefore, the actor and his observer evaluate a situation from different points of view: the observer is interested in the action to unravel, while the actor focuses on the specificity of the situations in which he is involved. One of the many of the director's purposes in casting relates to the actor's image on himself, to his attitude toward his own skills. In the end, the actor is his future partner in an inscrutable journey. If he does not know the actor, the director may obtain clarifications from the attitude and appearance of the one he observes, which, at an intimate level, makes him update his previous experience with more or less similar individuals or apply unverified stereotypes. The actor may represses his immediate actual feelings, by sending a perspective on the situation of which he thinks the other will find acceptable, at least for a

while. This superficial agreement is enabled by the fact that each participant is able to conceal their own intents behind value-based statements followed by everyone in attendance.

The director's action, however, concerns frequently the actor's *person*, the one in the extra-professional environment, the environment of his private existence. To this end, more often than not, the director will have a skewed, evasive approach rather than a direct, frontal one. The director's tricky behaviour tries to grasp the actor's real human essence, but the director may allow himself, deliberately, to be contaminated and seduced by the actor's vital strength. In front of the actor's performance, the observer-director is in a paradoxical situation resulting from his dichotomous condition: detached observer and at the same time committed participant. He needs to be simultaneously *within* and *without* the event, to allow himself to be "stolen" by the "object" of his observation (the interpretation, the acting), as well as not to misplace the "plan", the "chart" of the upcoming performance; the director needs to obtain information and to trust the reality of the things that may surface when self-control wanes. The casting process can be the first meeting place of a director and his future "fetish actor", a first revealing intersection, a fulfilment of an expectation, a state similar to falling in love, a fateful encounter.

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