

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Teaching Acting at Uew - An Experiential Observation

Ebenezer H. Brew-Riverson

Lecturer, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba (UEW), South Ghana

Abstract:

It is an undeniable fact that Acting is at the core if not the fulcrum on which everything theatre swings. Though it is an art that eludes statutory tied-down definitions, it predates even the age old held notion that the Greeks gave it birth. This paper dares to assert that though commendable that high academia admits this age-old art into its curriculum, there is still the evident struggle, even in our times, as to the most accurate value to place on this eternally fascinating art that possesses the dual proclivity to prop up society for the better or spearhead the expiration of that very society's core values. In the author's nine-year experience of teaching Acting at the University of Education, Winneba the observation is that the student-actor's mental or psychological antenna picks up this obtrusive though covertly expressed suspicion of both his place and that of his art in high academia initiating intermittent dithering of his self-confidence. Albeit, for more than half a decade of the setting up of the Department of Theatre Arts here at UEW, it has been an exhilarating process of discovery for both facilitators and student-actors or student theatre-practitioners that no apology is owed for asserting their creative intellectual identity in a world where they still do exert a crucial influence as into which direction that defined world is headed. Drawing attention to the fact that the student-actor embodies language in action this paper is a reflective presentation of a typical Acting class orientation that positions student-actors/performers as the creative intellectuals that they are.

1. Introduction

The vocation of acting is rapidly generating a great deal of interest in Ghana. Across Ghana, higher academia admits this age-old art into its curriculum on various campuses since Ghana's premier university, the University of Ghana, Legon's 'firstborn' School of Performing Arts a little over fifty years ago. Among these would be the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology in Kumasi, the University of Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale, the University of Cape Coast in Cape Coast and the Methodist University College at Dansoman in Accra. Lately the National Film & Television Institute (NAFTI) at Cantonments in Accra has the teaching of Acting as a course of study on its timetable. NAFTI largely prepares its students for 'behind the scenes' multimedia work, including directing screen actors. The intent for putting Acting on their timetable is to orient their students to better understand one of the major 'raw materials' they will invariably contend with.

In September 2007, under the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Jophus Anamuah-Mensah's administration, the Department of Theatre Arts, was set up here at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). One of the Department's key functions has been to prepare actors or student-performers for the stage and for life as key communication and change agents via the medium or capsule of edutainment.

2. The Challenge

Theatre students, acting majors not excepted, are still, to some measure, at the receiving end of the 'dondology' cynicism. The word dondology is coined from the Nigerian hour-glass type drum and used to derogatively allude to students who were studying Drama and Dance at the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, Legon. How does one position actors (and all student performers) to combat this misreading of his chosen programme or course of study? The dual tendency of the Arts (especially the performing arts in all its various and varying manifestations) to either tilt our core values as Ghanaian-Africans up (as in positively) or down (as in negatively) is one element that should understandably capture the attention from academia.

The contention that Drama training is a waste of time is a popular misconceptions held still by many. Swift (1979) sounds amused that some hold the myopic view that acting simply is something you can or cannot do. Such contend that acting comes naturally so it need not be taught. After all is it not sheer natural innate talent that powers the profession of acting? Miller (2000) offers an answer: "I strongly believe that acting can and should be taught as a craft consisting of a finite number of concepts and tools that can be mastered with practice and time." (p. 35). This mastering process has been a propelling incentive for faculty and the student-performer here at the Department of Theatre Arts, UEW. There is also the issue of our inherited or is it, adopted national lingua franca, English and how (a) the actor learns to use this and (b) how his use of it affects the actor's faith in himself and his ability to execute his craft, his productivity and ultimately his confidence.

3. The Experience

Alfreds (2011) draws attention to the fact that the role of the actor in the theatre cannot be underplayed when he puts forth that:

- Theatre is predominantly the domain of actors... no one brings the theatre to life – or, to be more accurate, brings life to the theatre – but actors. Before actors come on stage, everything about theatre is abstract, theoretical, potential. Actors are the ones who make theatre happen, who turn ideas into experience. They are the artists through whom all other elements of theatre are mediated: they embody the playwright's words and the director's intentions; a good set is incomplete until actors inhabit it; it is actors who make contact with the audience. Actors are the sine qua non of theatre. (Alfreds, 2011, p. 12).

In my close to nine-year experience of teaching acting at UEW, part of the quest has been to psyche up the student-actor to realize that they owe no one an apology for affirming their creative intellectual individual-ness in a world where they still have an immense and critical say. They need to recognize that their craft directs and re-defines individual and general opinion in molding, re-molding and shaping thinking and behaviours. Though extremely challenging, the process of discovery continues to be an exhilarating one. An anonymous quote that has been an impetus to this experiential journey reads thus “*Tis needless, nay lethal even, to dismiss cynics and skeptics for aye we need same; they propel one to soar!*” Student-actors learn early and quickly to let the doubts about the (future) potential and prospects of pursuing this line of academia be a propelling forward force rather than a drawback. The class is quickly oriented to harness the actor's most basic yet indispensable tools; these are, a well-defined technique routine, ‘taking apart, putting back together’ (an illustrative expression for Play (or Script) Analysis & Interpretation, an essential component course that aids understanding of scripts/scenarios) and ultimately be able to communicate and translate intentions into performance for a targeted audience (The ‘L’ or language/communication factor).

The re-packaging of the student-actor's mental attitude has been prime, followed by a language accessibility that translates to actions that ‘speak’ in performance, performances of merit that audiences connect with and relate to. To achieve this, acting classes have taken cognizance of the different and differing backgrounds of each individual in class and have used these to commendable effect in getting students to ‘act’ from the gut or the intuitive. The discovery is that the indigenous languages they express themselves in serve as an amazing trigger to their understanding and grasp of their nation's lingua franca, English, in which most of the scripts/plays they enact are written. It is important that they come to appreciate that language is a culture, a way of life and as Stanislavski intimates:

- We need a broad point of view to act the plays of our times and of many peoples; to reach the pinnacle, an actor has to have more than his artistic talents; he must be capable of reaching the high points of his epoch, of grasping the value of culture in the life of his people, of reflecting the spiritual cravings of his contemporaries. (Stanislavski, 1990, p. 11)

Language is probably the most essential component of one's culture and constitutes a vital aspect of one's spirituality or transcendence. Ghana being a former British colony we are “heirs of a culture complicated by the accretion and conglomeration of various factors and elements which we can no longer safely ignore” (Dei Annang 1961, p. 41). One of those various factors is of course, language which should not be a barrier but a resource base. Undeniably, the various languages of the world share a common ideal; that of transmitting an idea, a thought, or a message; so, the language of the script. Student-actors are oriented to glean the thought beneath the typeface. The print is but the key to hidden treasures. Consequently, the students realize that our lingua franca is as much an asset as the indigenous and they come to appreciate that nobody is the poorer for being bilingual (for actors, this does not refer to the spoken word only). Indeed, the well-oriented actor is ‘multilingual’ in speech (including pauses and even silence) and movement (gestures, other mannerisms, nuances, and also sitting/standing still). This has to do with mastering the use of voiceless extensions that ‘shout’ or possess their own voice as in all movement – standing or sitting still included! A remarkable discipline that manifests revealing results as in believable acting.

What then is the actor's responsibility to one of his major communication instruments; the script or text? Actors must not only become dialogue highlighters, highlighting their given character's lines or dialogue, often with bright yellow or green highlighter markers ere they have read the play through even once. I would often quiz my students: “without a grasp of the story in its entirety (all the information is not in) how do you judge?” Language must evoke strong visual images in the actor's mind (the facts file technique or personalizing-the-character-technique; creating an imagined history as a springboard for your characterization to leap forward). One finds that over a period of student-actor's learning to create this imaginary, albeit, credible historical backdrop for characters they play, they actually begin to ‘see’ that defined character and then it is easier to respond to what one sees (as in perception). Furthermore, this technique or approach coerces research and has the penchant for developing in the student a personalized preparation routine. Only then can the actor transpose the third-person “Who is this character? Where is he from? Where is he headed?” etc., to “Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I going?” The end result always is an improvement in fluid, seemingly effortless, ‘natural’ acting.

Also the reality, the acknowledging and applying the fact that language is music, has a telling impact on the student-actor's craft. After all, *rhythm, tempo, pitch, volume* etc., are terminology reminiscent of music. Appreciating the music of language frees the predisposition, the impulse, to perform. We then connect with “our physicality our spontaneity, our instinct, our imagination – channels that tap those unconscious parts of ourselves where true creativity lies dormant, waiting to be woken up” (Alfreds, 2011, p. xxi).

A thought-provoking, ever relevant question as posed by Kennedy (1968): “How must the actor in Ghana develop and perfect himself as a medium of theatrical experience? And how important is his use of language in this development, in respect to technical training and skill in his art?” (Kennedy, 1968, p. 107). Dei Annang (1961) had pre-empted an answer I can relate to: He insists we each have “an alienable right to humanity” and cautions against “purists in language, traditionalists in music and art and the conservatists in dress” (Dei Annang 1961, p. 41) who assume an intransigent stance against universal cultural fluidity. He recommends that we blend “Africa with all her best - and all her worst” and “the fertile laws of Faraday” (p. 41) in our own unique approach to the putting on of

theatre. Jones-Quartey (1968) would seem to concur and offers that our lingua franca English should not be used so as to create “culture conflict, confusion or distress” (Jones-Quartey, 1968, p. 101). Rather he advocates for culture “selection and synthesis” (p. 101). Kennedy (1968) shares a thought that works for me and my students. He advances that:

- Language is an expression of life, and theatre mirrors life. The language of the theatre involves both verbal and non-verbal communication. It involves the use of symbols as well as the use of actions. Consequently, proper voice and speech production are essential to the actor because the language of drama is speech, not pure literature. The language of drama is that which is spoken and heard, that which speaks both of sound and sense, of rhythm and rhyme, of words and music, and action. It is that which shows the behaviour of a player, communicated through his actions, thoughts and feelings to an audience. The actor deals in theatrical terms and must therefore communicate this language of life to his audience. (Kennedy, 1968, 106).

Kennedy continues and offers a prescription that I have found most useful in preparing Ghanaian student actors from different ethnic backgrounds. He suggests that:

- Let them learn to dig deeply into the indigenous experience of their first language, where with ‘know symbols’ expressing the experience beneath the idea, they can, ‘in comfort’, reach back to the roots of their own existence and society, and communicate through the dramatic experience of their fellow Ghanaian. On the other hand, in English, let them begin to translate these same Ghanaian experiences in universal terms to the world outside Ghana. (Kennedy, 1968, p. 109).

For example, my typical acting class would have students who are Ga, Akan, Ewe, etc. who come from largely dissimilar backgrounds. Often, in rehearsing English texts they appear to have challenges with cadences or inflections. When encouraged to rephrase the thought in vernacular and then revert to English, there always is a marked, noticeable alteration. On occasion, students would study texts or improvisations in English; then they present in class first in English after which they would re-enact given scenarios in indigenous or local language most convenient for student. Finally, they would re-present in English. The result is consistently revealing of the actors’ enhanced comprehension of the given text or texts and therefore of the characters and the situations they live in. Above all, they are encouraged to learn to savour words as they would rich ingredients in a delicacy which remarkably I find enriches their assertive natures or inclinations.

4. Conclusion

It is significant that over an eight-year period - 2007 to date – the effort has been to lead student-actors to the realization that the expression ‘creative acting’ is not intended as a play on words nor is it simply reiterative. They learn that creative acting is to act with such distinction that they improve in the ways they handle the varied and varying roles they are encouraged to play. They learn to respond to all that surrounds them (including the stimulus or impetus of language) and evolve a way to respond to those stimuli. Over time they start to work at honing natural ability into workable skills; skills that they apply in performance and can in turn share or pass on to others.

Theatre, and extensions thereof such as film and television, shapes society in most dynamic ways and it is apt that academia has key say in which direction theatre leads us as a people with a vibrant and rich heritage in today’s global village world. As long as the impulse to perform is universal, and the theatre and simulations of it as in Hollywood, *Ghallywood¹, **Bollywood², ***Nollywood³, etc., thrive, acting thrives. Talent that feeds this industry is only raw material; it requires processing, formal or informal. Otherwise, growth is stunted. Intellectual understanding is born of doing and experiencing in order to “pinpoint the nuances of motives, feelings and impulses” (Alfreds, 2011, p. xxi). These nuances – including our use of language - flavour or colour acting. Most significantly, the student-actor or performers, including our dance students, are gaining recognition as creative intellectuals on campus. The Department of Theatre Arts’ contribution to statutory University programmes and occasions is noteworthy indeed.

Acting is, and will continue to constitute, a most potent avenue for students to build vocabulary and increase their word power and in consequence their power of oratory in almost an informal fashion. Furthermore, it enhances their ability to be assertive and expressive, dispenses with inhibitions and bolsters their sense of self-worth. And it shouldn’t matter if after school they branch into fields unrelated directly to theatre; they still would be applying principles and tenets contributed by their theatre and student-acting background and experience.

5. References

- Alfreds, M. (2011), *Different Every Night; Freeing the Actor*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Dei-Annang, M. F. (1961). *A Writer’s Outlook*. Okyeame, 1 (1).
- Jones-Quartey, K. A. B. (1968). *The Problems of Language in the Development of the African Theatre*. Okyeame 4 (1).
- Kennedy, Scott (1968). *Language & Communication Problems in the Ghanaian Theatre*, Okyeame 1 (1).
- Miller, B. J. (2000). *The Actor as Storyteller; An Introduction to Acting*. California, Mayfield Publishing.
- Stanislavski, C. (1990). *An Actor’s Handbook*. E.R. Hapgood, (Ed.). London, Methuen Drama.
- Swift, C. (1979). *The Job of Acting*. London: Harrap.

¹ Ghana’s ‘Hollywood’

² India’s ‘Hollywood’

³ Nigeria’s ‘Hollywood’