

# AGAINST THE WRITER'S PERFORMANCE

## (AN INTERIOR REALISM)

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For writers to be able to read well their own work in front of an audience it is nowadays more than ever an essential part of their practice. Writers are expected to perform and read meaningfully their work. They have to be out there. It is not surprising that such "performance" has become a highly visible - one might almost say emblematic - art form in the contemporary world, a world that is self-conscious, reflexive, obsessed with simulations and theatricalization in every aspect of its social awareness.

The writer's performance for a reading, in most cases forces the writer to fight against his own nature and become an artist of a different kind (a performer/actor). Most writers are always facing the "performance" problem when they need to read their work in front of an audience, the stage devours and torments them, but this jump is everything they have. Needless to say, that this transformation is nerve wrecking and brings many anxieties, but above all more often than not it results in "dubious" performances.

I find the idea of the writer/performer very puzzling to say the least. In the past few years I have attended various readings and seen writers get up on stage to read their work trying to acquire an attitude and put a confident front for the audience in order to appear in control of the situation and show that they can "perform". The impression I get is that these writers are so concerned with their "act" that it all results in performances that appear far too calculated. They include: hammy gestures, over rehearsed pauses, bizarre put on accents, overtly confident postures and weird facial expressions. In essence they try too hard to please their audience. This tends to misfire rather than fulfil their expectations (and that of the audience) and unfortunately the result is generally quite cringeworthy.

Let's be clear, writing and performing are two completely different set of skills and attitudes towards life. More often than not a writer is a person who construct his imaginary world alone in his head, who is often introverted and feels that he makes the best out of his art when is alone at his desk. Writing is an intense personal thing and, for some a chance to express things that could not be spoken. The performer on the contrary is someone who desires to be looked at, who feels at ease when he is at the centre of attention and who has an appetite for the spotlight, likes to engage with an audience and above all has the confidence and energy to perform. It is only natural that a writer is not always capable of mastering the expertise of the performer.

Of course, there are exceptions, some people can both write and perform their work very well but these are far and few between.

It seems to me that audience and writers (in their vest of being performers) forget how interesting vulnerabilities are in one person, how weaknesses become charming and how these qualities are truthful, real and captivating. We mustn't forget that the audience and people in general are always more inclined to understand rather than reject a vulnerable character. The natural reading of a piece of work (and by natural, I mean a dignitous no frills

reading of a text or a poem), also has the potential to illuminate, to touch and inspire, and is enhanced, not diminished by its ever-present uncertainty.

The British theatre critic Charles Morgan (1894-1958) says: "the greatest impact of a performance is neither a persuasion of the intellect nor a beguiling of the senses...it is the enveloping movement of the whole drama of the soul of a human being. We surrender and we are changed". (Morality and Power in a Chinese Village, p. 9)

Jerzy Grotowski (1933 – 1999) was a Polish theatre director who had strong views on performance training. He says: "the performance should be like a 'scalpel' for opening up the person. It is really about using the stage as a way of revealing the person not the person identifying with the character". (An Acrobat of the Heart: A Physical Approach to Acting inspired by the work of Jerzy Grotowski, p. 121)

Grotowski used to gather his performers in a retreat before preparing a show and get them to forget every single thing that they had learned about acting. These performers would spend days training by means of stripping away their techniques and their acquired acting skills so that they were able to portray their true self on stage.

FM Alexander (1896 – 1955) was an Australian actor, who went through a process of discovery as he was working to overcome his own vocal challenges. Alexander thought that in order to learn one must be willing to unlearn. He stated: "As soon as people come with the idea of unlearning instead of learning, you have them in the frame of mind you want" (Articles and Lectures, p. 198).

Of course, these examples are of professional theatre practitioners and perhaps these approaches to an unconfident writer going on stage to read his work might sound a bit too extreme. However, the point is that it is only by longing the bare and essential action that he can unburden the emotional demand upon himself. The attempt to recreate the emotions of a story or of a poem and convey them to the audience should be of no interest, what should be adopted instead is almost a detached attitude towards the text and a major involvement with letting go of the idea that there is not "right" way to perform.

Every creative act involves a leap into the void. The leap has to occur at the right moment and yet the time for the leap is never prescribed. In the midst of a leap there are no guarantees. To leap can often cause acute embarrassment. Embarrassment is a partner of the creative act, a key collaborator and would go as far as saying that, if your work does not sufficiently embarrass you, then very likely no one will be touched by it.

Usually we think of embarrassment as self-consciousness, shame or awkwardness, but the etymology of the word suggests other useful possibilities. It derives from the French *embarrasser*, which means to entangle, obstruct or trouble; to encumber; impede, to make difficult or intricate; to complicate. The uneasiness keeps the lines tight. If you try to avoid being embarrassed by what you do, nothing will happen because the territory remains safe and unexposed. Embarrassment engenders a glow and a presence and a dissolving of habit. If one is not 'touched' by the brashness of what is expressed through you, then, as Gertrude Stein remarked about Oakland, California, 'there is no there there.'

The essential problem is to give the writer the possibility of working "in safety". The reading of a writer is a danger, it is continuously supervised, observed and judged. The writer must

create for himself an internal atmosphere, a working system, in which he feels that he can do anything, and that nothing he does can be mocked and that everything will be understood...by understanding this the writer will reveal himself.

Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki once remarked: 'There is no such thing as good or bad performing, only degrees of profundity of the performer's reason for being on stage.' This reason is manifest in one's body and in one's energy. First, we have to have a reason to perform and then, in order to articulate clearly, we must be courageous in that act. The quality of any moment on the stage is determined by the vulnerability and modesty one feels in relation to that courageous, articulate, necessary act. (Seven Essays on Art and Theatre, p. 119.)

We need to define the efficacy of performance, if not exclusively, then very inclusively, in terms of getting rid of our learned skills in order to find new ones - that is, a mode of activity where we allow ourselves to go off balance in order to allow for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed.

The meaning and the essence of a writer work is to be found on the book and not on the stage. For the audience reading the work on the pages is the reason why the work was created in the first place, but if we ask the question how can an unconfident writer deal with performing his work, "laying bare" is perhaps the most concise and accurate response to this question. This is the first step to learning something new. A process that requires self-observation, patience, and a great deal of generosity - towards oneself.

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