

# A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Actor's Active Listening

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**Abstract:** We know that a sound becomes a meaning carrier only when it is actively listened to. As M. Scott Peck observes, listening is essential, for there is no real communication in the absence of real listening. During rehearsals, the actor/actress immerses him/herself in a state of listening in order not only to develop his/her concentration, observing ego, distributed attention, capacity of identifying with/distancing from a character, but also to establish relationships with his/her self, with the other actors and with the spectators. To briefly analyze the actor's process of active listening, the present paper makes reference to methods and techniques used in different fields of research such as psychoanalysis, psychology, psychodrama, theatre, paratheatre, storytelling, emphasizing the idea that emotional identification, alienation, self-revelation, reaching physical tiredness play a major role in self-growth. Undeniably, the actor's explorations and experiments aim at improving his capacity of creating sequences of physical and vocal actions in order to tell every spectator a different story to which he/she reacts according to his/her background, personality and personal experiences. Taking into consideration the phenomenon of neural coupling, we advance the idea that both theatre performance and storytelling might be of significant interest in cognitive science.

**Keywords:** active listening, story, identification, alienation, actor

## Introduction

The art of listening presupposes both for the psychoanalyst and for the theatre actor/director who, to some extent, in turn, also deals with different methods and techniques used in psychoanalysis, *an extraordinary capacity for empathy, closeness, and immediacy of one's relationship to others* (Funk 2009: 7).

Psychoanalysis, according to Fromm, can be defined as “a process of understanding man’s mind, particularly that part which is not conscious” (Fromm 2009: 192) and which is considered by him an *art* like the *understanding of poetry* (*ibid.*) is used, in the theatre, both by the director and the actor. Fromm distinguishes six rules of psychoanalysis as the art of listening that can be found in the art of the actor: *concentration, freeing one’s mind of residual thoughts, freely-working imagination, capacity for empathy, capacity for love and understanding* (Fromm 2009: 192-193).

### **Methodology**

The present paper makes reference to methods and techniques used in different fields of research such as psychoanalysis, psychology, psychodrama, theatre, paratheatre, storytelling, aiming at examining the active listening of the actor from three major theatrical perspectives: that of the actor’s identification with the character, that of the actor’s distancing from the character, and that of revealing the actor’s self through the character. In this regard, we refer to the *emotional identification*, a technique through which the spectator or the participant in a (para)theatrical event experiences *catharsis, purification of passions* (Aristotle 1819: 74), to the *alienation technique* (Brecht 1977) through which the spectator distances him/herself from the fictional world created on stage, and for which the actor has to develop his capacity of attention, observation and self-observation, as well as the *self-revelation technique*, which deals with “a question of the very essence of the actor’s calling, of a reaction on his part allowing him to reveal one after the other the different layers of his personality, from the biological-instinctive source via the channel of consciousness and thought, to that summit which is so difficult to define and in which all becomes unity” (Grotowski 2002: 130-131). We note

here that both psychoanalytical and theatre studies emphasize the necessity of reaching the unity between the intellect and the instinct, the physical and the psychical, the reason and the emotion, the body and the voice. In this regard, Aldous Huxley remarks: “The only philosophy of life which has any prospect of being permanently valuable is a philosophy which takes in all the facts – the facts of mind *and* the facts of matter, of instinct *and* intellect, of individualism *and* of sociableness” (Huxley 1931: 222). Theatre researchers treat the actor first of all as a human being capable of identifying with/distancing from him/herself and the other/others and of revealing his hidden self. With every performance in front of the spectators the actor performs a ceremonial through which he unveils truths about himself and the human condition.

In the process of developing his capacity of listening, the actor makes use also of improvisation seen as a main source of creativity, works on the rhythm and the musicality of his body movement, goes beyond rules, conventions, stereotypes. Through the technique of improvisation, more often than not, the actor expands the horizon of his imagination experimenting different emotions and sensations. While exploring symbolic actions and archetypal situations, he aims at revealing the universal contained in the particular. Thus, improvisation, a fundamental and constant element in the actor’s work, and quite frequently “closely related to physical theatre” (Innes 2013: 218), is a unique form of manifestation of the actor’s creative freedom (Brook 1999). As the improvisations and exercises linked to the development of the ability to listen are also ways of self-knowledge, they often take place in natural environments; it is here that the human being/actor enters into a relationship with the natural elements, far from the predictability and comfort of urban areas, aiming at tearing off the social mask, fighting the social ego, exploring the

state of being a child (Grotowski 1997: 215-225), developing the empathetic capacity.

## **Results**

For the performance *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter, together with Adrian Matic and Eugen Titu, guided by the director Radu Teampău, we did preparatory laboratory work in which the active listening was treated as “the most important element” (Lindh 2010: 95) of the creative process. We made use of “double listening, with the ear turned inwards as well as outwards, in an almost sublime attempt to harmonize the sounds, words and breaths” (Teampău 2015: 93). The training had as major objective the scenic embodiment of the concept of *body-house*, respectively the creation of the human and objectual universes as one entity. The objects in the house were endowed with human data, and the characters were endowed with objectual data. The exercises were aimed at discovering similarities and differences between the characters seen as different aspects of human personality. Furthermore, the study had envisaged both the identification of the characters’ archetypal nature and the creation of a scenic space imbued with sacredness, to give the actors’ interpretation unsuspected depths. Part of our research consisted in deciphering the author’s intentions, following the inner logic of the characters, of the scenic situations, and of the narrative chaining, in short, in listening to the playwright’s voice. Pinter’s narrative, highly ambiguous, revealed the co-existence of opposites perceived as a dimension of the human being’s existential manifestation. To more clearly highlight the situations created at opposite poles, we worked with the monologues and dialogues so that they enhanced the states experienced by the characters, the borderline experiences, and increased the conflicts between them. At the same time, we poured Pinter’s text, which

made us think of Virginia Woolf's writing, in the detective pattern, making use of suspense and mystery. The *silence on stage* (Flaszen 2010: 174) was exploited to the fullest: the significant pause between one action and another, between one word and another; pauses meant to further increase the tension between the characters. The silence reminded us both of the characters' *conflict* in the Greek tragedy and of the sense of the tragicality of the *minor consciousnesses*. Increased attention was paid to the nonverbal language, to the body reactions that were addressed not only to the characters and the spectators, but also to the objectual universe. The cohesion of the group was achieved from the moment we succeeded in truly listening to each other, in establishing relationships based on attention and empathy.

### **Discussion**

Listening, "initiated as an act of intentional allocation of attention to a series of acoustic events which has an intelligible structure, such as speech or music" (Imhof 2010: 99), is what leads to the real *meeting* with one's self, with the other(s)/partner(s) or spectators. Beyond doubt, to listen to the other involves not to get bored, to keep one's mind awake, to overcome prejudices, to be determined, eager for knowledge, to wish to change one's life. According to Peck, "True listening, total concentration on the other, is always a manifestation of love. An essential part of true listening is the discipline of bracketing, the temporary giving up or setting aside of one's own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speaker's world from the inside, stepping inside his or her shoes. This unification of speaker and listener is actually an extension and enlargement of ourselves, and new knowledge is always gained from this" (Peck 1978: 127-128). Only by actively

listening to the other, paying attention to other's actions and reactions, can one hope that, in turn, he/she will be listened to.

Due to the nature of his work, the actor becomes capable of establishing three relevant types of relationships, respectively a relationship with himself, with his partner/partners and with the spectator(s), respectively (Brook 1995). The relationship between the actor and himself is based, to a significant extent, on listening as in the process of self-knowledge and self-becoming. The actor enters into an *active dialogue* which is *not necessarily just with his body but also with him as a whole* (Richards 2008: 64). The *active dialogue* between the actor and himself involves a certain concentration, an immersion in his inner world, a journey through his brain. In addition to listening to his *mind-body*, the actor, during rehearsals and performances, listens to his partners and spectators, thus building several bridges of communication at the same time. In the work on his self, the actor enters *via negativa* (Grotowski 2002), that is a process of eliminating his complexes, inhibitions, blockages, aiming at discovering himself, materializing his potentials, releasing his creative energies, establishing certain connections between his imagination and his vocal-body expression and, in this regard, creating forms which are carriers of multiple meanings. We note that the active listening is necessary during the creative process, as it contributes significantly to guiding the actor on the path of both self-discovery and discovery of his character.

So, the actor aims at visualising the character's voice, intonations, intensities, timbres, colours, nuances, volumes, as well as body movements, actions, gestures, postures. In other words, the actor goes through a process of revelations that can be perceived as a *duration* in which, through empathy, lets himself be inhabited by the thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, sensations, experiences of the character. According to Grotowski,

“a character is an instrument for the actor to work on himself or herself. This very instrumentality consists in the character having a certain content against which actors can measure themselves” (McCaw 2016: 230). It is a duration in which the actor cleans himself as “cleansing implies a proper respect for the self, and is an active way of preparing the mind and body for disciplined work” (Oida 1997: 4), renounces his discursive mind, eliminates his diurnal thoughts and residual emotions, which are not only unrelated to his explorations, experiments, searches, but may even be barriers in his working process, reminding us of one of the rules of the art of listening mentioned by Fromm, namely *nothing of importance must be on listener’s mind* (Fromm 2009: 192). This rule has its correspondence, in the theatre, in the *technique of reaching physical tiredness* (Campo 2010). What is essential in these explorations and experiments is that the mind ceases to control the actions and reactions of the body; having reached *physical tiredness*, the body moves freely and only at this moment the actor becomes capable of surpassing his mental, psychic and physical limits. We might say that *the technique of reaching physical tiredness might possibly be seen as a specific way of working with it as a way for liberating the impulses* (*idem*: 11). “Like a shaman, trying to make the impossible possible” [19] (*idem*: 2) or trying “to accomplish the possible in order to touch the impossible” (Weil 2002: 123), during his work, the actor quests Life capitalized: “Everybody finds the Life in the self. The Life is something connected with everyone’s life, his memories, or even his dreams” (Campo 2010: 4-5). In the dialogues with Giuliano Campo, Zygmunt Molik briefly analyzes a few crucial elements present in the working process, such as the *voice* as a vehicle, as *an instrument for connecting body and psyche* (Campo 2010), “the Voice that isn’t just a sound consisting of different tones and vibrations, but a carrier of energy and of quality – that

is, a manifestation of a particular individual's personality" (Molik 2015: 122); *the different levels and qualities of energy*; and the *rhythm* which, in the training, usually works as follows: "You can work in different rhythms, and normally, if the rhythm produces a certain effect of lightness, we work very lightly but energetically. It means that the body must be very light but the action must be full, that it is precisely done but very light, the rhythm must then be rather quick. But if you slow down, the energy deals with a different kind of weight and everything must be done in a slowed-down rhythm" (Campo 2010; 14). In his work, the actor performs countless mental, vocal, physical exercises that require the qualities necessary for the active listening, that is concentration, attention, imagination, empathy. In this respect, we notice a similarity between *the 'total act' of the actor which happens when he/she gives him/herself absolutely into something (idem: 112)* and the act of active listening as "To listen actively means to listen fully, with an active body and mind, in response to a speaker's message" (Leonardo 2020: 7). In order for the actor to perform a *total act*, in the first stage of his research, Grotowski *put into effect a radical reform of the exercises based on: the individualisation of the exercises starting out from a defect that cannot be eliminated, from errors that can be eliminated and from the capabilities belonging to a particular person, so everyone becomes their own instructor and the introduction into all the exercises of the imaginative factor (stimulation of the subconscious)*. These exercises are part of his extraordinary research consisting in *self-exploration, psychic anatomy, psycho-analysis of the 'non-private'* (Grotowski 1999: 122). As his research progresses, Grotowski notes that "the exercises from one domain should be executed contemporaneously with those from a different domain (for example, the physical and vocal ones together), in order then to develop into an acted sequence on a

theme – scene or sketch – making use of the physical, plastic or vocal elements that one wants to exercise” (*idem*: 124), emphasizing the necessity for “the release of creative energy, and the search for the unity and connection between the body and the voice” (Molik 2015: 120). Thus, the exercises aim at eliminating stereotypical means of communication and experiencing a rich range of physical and vocal actions for achieving the *total act* of the actor.

Undeniably, an actor has to be a fine psychologist, a keen observer of the changes that occur in his *mind-body* during his training, rehearsals and performances, as well as in his daily life. At the same time, he has to develop his capacity of studying man’s behavior manifest in various social contexts: “Above all other arts / You, the actor, must conquer / The art of observation” (Brecht 1961: 15). As regards the double nature of the human being, individual and social, Huxley remarks: “Men cannot live apart from society and without organization. But, equally, they cannot live without a certain modicum of privacy and personal liberty” (Huxley 1931: 217). By investigating the nature of family and social relationships which directly influence the way of being of the individual, who is simultaneously a solitary animal and a social animal, and which, consequently, determines his way of thinking and behaving, the actor succeeds in embodying different existential hypostases. Only an actor who rigorously analyses the individual’s behavior manifest both in his personal and social life becomes capable of incarnating him scenically. So, the careful study of man and society contributes to the creation of truthful characters the spectator can easily identify with and at the same time distance from. Brecht’s theatre, engaged in social reality, aims to make the spectator not *hear*, but *listen* to the story of the actor/performance, engage him/her actively in the process of listening that “involves processing information from various

internal and external sources, as the verbal information may be complemented and modified by prior knowledge, context information, situational variables, body language, and nonverbal paralinguistic messages” (Imhof 2010: 98). Also, in this respect, Rogers and Farson note that “truly sensitive listening requires that we become aware of several kinds of communication besides verbal. The way in which a speaker hesitates in his speech can tell us much about his feelings. So too can the inflection of his voice. He may stress certain points loudly and clearly, and he may mumble others. We should also note such things as the person’s facial expressions, body posture, hand movements, eye movements, and breathing” (Rogers 2021: 14-15). Brecht’s *Verfremdung* [4] requires a process of building the character that is carried out in two steps, respectively, a first stage consisting in identifying with the character, in an active listening to his *inner voice*, and a second stage consisting in distancing himself from the character through reflection and analysis, a lucid and critical interpretation that makes use of the devices belonging to the parody. It is obvious that Brecht does not eliminate the scenic pathos, feelings and emotions, but only the *superfluous emotion* or what in the theatre is called *excessive pathos*. In fact, Brecht seeks to create a *tragedy of the human condition*, and here we refer to *Mother Courage and Her Children* (Brecht 1991), which highlights the qualities necessary for a tragic act such as the essential, symbolic gesture, the utterance of the text in a detached, restrained, dignified tone, characteristics that have an overwhelming effect on the spectator. His play speaks about the ability of the individual to stand firm in the face of the vicissitudes of life, to cope with the horrors of wars and cruel violence. This way of thinking theatre is aimed at awakening the consciousness of the spectator.

During the time of the performance, which is also a time of listening to a story, which sometimes can be made up of several stories, the spectator overcomes his inertia, observes attentively what is happening on stage. Distancing from the scenic event simultaneously involves distancing himself from his social life in order to take action in the social reality, as the actor takes action in the fictional reality. The technique of alienation is widely used by Augusto Boal (2008) in *the theatre of the oppressed*. Beyond any doubt, Brecht's theatre is not primarily addressed to the senses, but rather to the mind/consciousness of the spectator. Thus, for the spectator, the theatrical performance represents a form of education, emancipation, a means that sensitizes him about the need to pay full attention to the actions that are performed on stage, in order to understand his own social life and (re)act accordingly. In this regard, like the storytelling, the theatre performance "is a dynamic dialogue – one in which the teller listens to what the audience needs, the audience listens to the story and the teller, and the story moves back and forth between them" (Harvey 2013: 15). About the relationship between teller/actor and listener/spectator, Lindsay notes that "in 2010 a group of neuroscientists at Princeton University hooked both storytellers and their listeners to an fMRI machine as a story was told. They were amazed to discover that when a person tells a story to another person, both their brains show nearly identical activity across most areas. Their brains effectively 'sync up' with one another in a phenomenon known as neural coupling" (Lindsay 2015: 12). Taking into consideration that *human brains are wired for stories* (*idem*: 10), that "research shows that our brains are not hardwired to understand logic or retain facts for very long. Our brains are wired to understand and retain stories" (*idem*: 11), it becomes noticeable that both theatre performance and storytelling might play a significant role in cognitive science. The actor tells

the spectator the story of the performance, and the spectator is the one who listens and at the same time influences the way the actor tells the story: “Once the listener receives and interprets the message through his/her cognitive psychological process, he/she then responds to the message. This response, the listener’s feedback, takes listening beyond the internal, self-controlled cognitive processing and back into the communication relationship. [...] However, the listener’s feedback is an essential part of the communication function of the interaction” (Wolvin 2010: 14-15). Only if the spectator truly listens to the story told by the actors and the director, he/she may experience a *change of state* (Barba 2010). When the performance is based on a pre-existing dramatic text or on a text written on stage during rehearsals, more often than not, we deal with a predominantly verbal communication, in which the meanings of the words greatly contribute to the telling of the story; from this perspective, similarities can be noticed with certain characteristics specific to storytelling, in which the text told by the actor-storyteller plays a major role in communication. Moreover, “When you’re told a story, your whole brain wakes up. In addition to the language parts, the parts responsible for sensation and emotion also spring to life – and you experience the story’s events almost as if you were living them” (Lindsay 2015: 12). Indubitably, the story simultaneously addresses the thoughts, emotions and sensations of the spectator.

How does the actor make the spectator listen to the story of the performance? How does he create the *captatio benevolentiae*? How does he succeed in stirring the spectator’s curiosity and attention? The focus is, indisputably, not on *what* exactly is transmitted, but on *how* it is transmitted. And, in this respect, from Eugenio Barba’s perspective, the creation of an organic series of actions is essential: “if there are precise stimuli

there are also precise reactions. Then a sonorous logic will become apparent, revealing itself through the rhythm, i.e. variations in tone, pauses, intensities, changes in volume, stress on particular parts of the sentences, micro-pauses before certain words and before breathing in, which instead of causing gaps in our speech, sharpen its sense and nerve. This rhythm, this physical and vocal pulsation is a sign that the whole body is alive. It is this pulsation which vibrates the fabric of sounds and meaning which is our body, present in and projected into space” ” (Barba 1999: 76). From Brecht’s perspective, it is essential to put into use several devices such as the shattering of the scenic illusion by breaking the fourth wall and addressing directly to the spectators, the presence on stage of the actor in double hypostasis, actor and character, or the one who shows and the one shown, an uninterrupted flow of identifications with/alienations from the character. We are proposed a fictional universe in which the songs, the scenic space, the placards reminiscent of Shakespeare’s performances, the sound and lighting effects, the film projections, the alphabet of gestures, the *aparté*, the *dedublations*, contribute to the establishment of direct relationships with the spectators. All these theatrical means have the role of maintaining the active listening of the spectator, he/she organically taking over the role of an active participant in the performance as such.

In addition to some defining characteristics of *poor listening*, namely *condemning a speaker’s subject/actor’s performance as uninteresting; criticizing the speaker’s/actor’s delivery rather than focusing on the message/context; preparing an answer/reaction to a point/scene before comprehending it; listening only for facts/realistic dialogues; tolerating or creating distractions; faking attention; permitting personal prejudices to interfere; avoiding difficult material* (Wolvin 2010: 9), we note that, from Brecht’s perspective, as regards the *spectator-listener*,

*poor listening* may be also due to the spectator's fall into the trap of illusion, a state of being that does not allow him to react at the intellectual level as well. The human being/spectator as active listener "has a very definite responsibility. He does not passively absorb the words which are spoken to him. He actively tries to grasp the facts and the feelings in what he hears, and he tries, by his listening, to help the speaker work out his own problems" (Rogers 2021: 2). It follows that the active listening to the story of a performance occurs only on the basis of a rapid alternation of identification and alienation, which is a characteristic of the actor's play. As the actor, during the performance, has to be *fire and ice at the same time* (Brook 1990), so the spectator must enter and come out of the scenic illusion in an instant, confirming the idea that active listening is always a "growth experience" (Rogers 2021: 5).

From a dramaturgical and performance-oriented perspective, we notice that the spectators become active listeners not only when the scenic events stir the interest of each *spectator-listener* according to his/her "background, experience, roles, and mental and physical states" (Wolvin 2010: 12), but also when the performance addresses the spectator as human being, beyond temporal, spatial, linguistic boundaries. In this respect, Brecht's characters, like Shakespeare's characters, have a contradictory nature, which reveals a coexistence of extremes, such as sacredness and blasphemy, spiritual exaltation and triviality, greatness of the mind and stupidity, reason and emotion, emphasizing the idea that the human being throughout his/her existence is with his/her head in the clouds, "but with both feet firmly on the ground" (Brook 1990: 71), reminding us of Claude Lévi-Strauss's remark on Nicolas Poussin's painting *Eliezer et Rebecca*: "the work plays on the opposition between stability and instability, motion and stillness" (Lévi-Strauss 1997: 21). Thus,

Brecht's theatre finds itself at the intersection of identification and alienation, causing the spectator to be both involved and distanced, to experience both catharsis and alienation, accentuating the fact that "A person's listening ability is limited by his ability to listen to himself" (Rogers 2021: 25) or that "In order to be a great listener, it's important to listen to yourself first" (Leonardo 2020: 26) and thus revealing the idea that the art of listening is, after all, an *art of living*.

If, in Brecht's time, the actor was attentive to the changes produced by the scientific discoveries of the first half of the twentieth century, today the actor is attentive to the mutations produced by the cutting-edge technologies on the level of both individual and social existence, being preoccupied with the life generated by the digital fictional worlds or the new illusions created by these worlds and the creation of a theatre of the digital age. We consider that nowadays' spectator, too, totally immersed in the illusions created by the virtual worlds, lives an experience that involves a series of identifications and alienations, and, on the other hand, a series of actions/reactions based on attention and active listening.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, we consider that, in order for a story to be actively listened to, it has to engage both the speaker's/actor's and the listener's/spectator's whole organism in action. Between the speaker and the listener, a symbiotic relationship is established and the impulses transmitted from one to the other equally contribute to the telling of the story.

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