

# Interplay of Sound and Image as a Means of Conveying the 'Subtly-Physical' Dimension of a Living Theatrical Performance

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The topic at the basis of this issue, allows us to discuss the fascinating subject of recording, or archiving a living, breathing work of theatrical art. The problem of creating a record, a certain notation of a theatrical performance, occupied theatre directors for decades. In Russia, for example, both Meyerhold and Tairov experimented with developing systems of 'scoring' a live performance. With the invention of film, television, video, and digital media, the question of recording has been seemingly solved, especially as some of these techniques are now easily available. Modern directors, such as Peter Brook or Anatoly Afros, participated in creating film or television versions of their live productions. In the meantime, people of theatre agree that no recording of a live performance can convey the 'experience' of a spectator, as it stands in live theatre.

Instead of following an obvious route of denying that a recording (digital or otherwise) can possibly convey a live performance, I would like to offer some arguments both for and against such recordings. Let us start with the obvious negative argument. It relates to a certain psychological, if not spiritual 'dimension' created by the actors of the so-called school of 'experiencing' (a term by Konstantin Stanislavsky), and an obvious impossibility of fixating it by the use of mechanical devices. To better explain why this particular school of theatre defies fixation the most, I offer an opinion by one of the most experienced and consistent master-teachers and directors belonging to this school – Stanislavsky's closest associate for over 30 years, Nikolai Demi-

dov (1884-1953). In his book, *The Artist's Creative Process Onstage*, Demidov (2007: 36) states:

Theatre is seemingly a combination of two kinds of different arts: that for the ear and that for the eye. Meanwhile, sound in theatre is registered not only by the ear, but also by the eye, while its movements are not merely seen, but also heard. One thing transforms into the other; one thing evokes the other; it supplements the other, while all together they constitute the tapestry of theatrical art.

Demidov (*Ibidem*: 35) also offers the following aside that significantly widens the picture, and that is especially important for our discussion on documenting a live performance:

By the way, I do not think that theatrical art is exhausted by this duality alone. Audience's perception of the actors goes beyond two of the simplest tracks – those of seeing and hearing. In live theatre, as in life, there are most likely other, finer means of perception also at work. These means can be compared with electromagnetic, or other energies yet to be detected.

It is these subtle energies that film, and certainly digital media seem to be unable to record. As a trained scientist, Demidov insisted these subtle energies, nevertheless, have a physical nature. He even came up with a term that would indicate this. Unlike those 'roughly-physical' objects and energies that can be touched, seen, heard, and registered by conventional detectors and recording devices, Demidov called these other objects, forces and energies (those seemingly belonging to human imagination) – 'subtly-physical'. In the meantime, these energies are responsible, at large, for a theatregoer's experience, when it comes to a performance – especially that of the 'school of experiencing'. It is not a secret that time, space and physical objects (including an actor's 'body'), undergo transformation, when entering the creative space of a live performance. Both audiences and performers no longer experience time 'accurately'. The actors and their audiences, both, can experience a single minute as one half-hour; or five minutes – as

an hour; fifteen minutes – as two hours; a half hour – as three, etc. The opposite is also true. Time in theatre does not always stretch; it also compresses, and a three-hour performance might feel like it lasted an hour at the most. When it comes to theatrical space, many theatre practitioners (most notably, Michael Chekhov) noted a special atmosphere that belongs to it, and to all objects inside it. Chekhov also noted certain new qualities acquired by an actor's body onstage, identifying them as qualities of ease, form, beauty and entirety (the latter being related to the feeling of form). These observations are based on the fact that an actor's body clearly undergoes a transformation that goes beyond the phenomenon known as characterization (or transformation into a given character). To summarize, an actor, when truly living onstage, enters a different, creative dimension, where time, space and body live a different kind of life. They become, so to speak, more incorporeal, or 'subtly-physical'. Deprived of their rough, physical characteristics, they begin to radiate a deeper, sacred essence, and therefore undergo what can be called a transfiguration, rather than transformation. To follow is a more 'technical' explanation of this phenomenon, from the perspective of internal acting technique. First, it must be said that the so-called astronomical or atomic time, as well as physical objects and space, in live theatre only change under the influence of certain processes that happen in people – both actors and spectators. Actors, who belong to the school of experiencing, rely on the so-called internal technique – in their training, in preparation for a performance, and during the performance itself. This technique allows them to subject merely physical aspects of their being to deeper psychological, if not spiritual forces.

In everyday life, our psychological processes (our emotions) and especially their intensification, are accompanied by proportionate contraction of muscles. The more intensely one experiences in life, the tighter his or her muscles contract, trying to 'lessen' the emotion. (This process is also accompanied by certain changes in breathing, also aimed at lessening the intensity of internal life). This mechanism developed in humans throughout the history of mankind, and its function is obvious: to assist a person in getting through life 'in one piece'.

Since most of the world's dramatic repertoire features heightened situations and calls for elevated emotions, actors belonging to the 'school of experiencing' resort to specific psycho-physical training that triggers mechanisms quite counterintuitive, as far as everyday life is concerned. Both in training, and in preparation for a performance, these actors achieve deepest relaxation (a term by Stanislavsky), or physical release. Demidov, in his own techniques, developed meditative yoga-inspired practices that go

beyond relaxation, or even release. In them, an actor enters a state described by Demidov as 'the great sleep of the body'. As the play's circumstances cause for an actor's emotion to progressively rise, Demidov trains an actor to match its level with increasing release – contrary to what the body tends to do in everyday life. Subsequently, in such moments an actor also continues to breathe fully and boldly – also contrary to what happens in life. Demidov called this 'psychological breathing' that belongs to 'creative living' – as opposed to mundane, everyday living. The Demidov technique subjects the physical aspects of the actors' being (body, muscles) to his or her spiritual being (emotion, psychology, spirit). It therefore allows an actor, through deep relaxation, psychological breathing and other means, to become more sensitive, and receptive towards finer and loftier images and sensations, and to resonate with them from the deeper layers of his or her psyche. Therefore, it allows actors to also radiate these deeper layers of their psyche. When radiated, they cause the actors to transcend their physical body, thus also transforming (transfiguring) 'physical' time and space, as well objects in it. In the meantime, the audience tends to mimic actors onstage, physiologically. Unconsciously, they match the actor's muscular release, and they synchronize their breathing with that of the actors. Subsequently, they too become more perceptive, and expose the deepest layers of their psyche. This allows them to receive what comes from an actor (from their own experience and imagination, or perhaps from other unknown sources) on a deep, subconscious level, and to resonate in unison with the actors' deepest inner vibrations.

This mechanism explains the process of genuine, organic creative life, as present in a live performance of the school of experiencing. It's necessary prerequisites and attributes are 'intuition' and 'inspiration'. When entering the specific psychophysical state and creative dimension, as described above, both actors and audiences begin to 'intuit' one other – perceiving 'subtler' and 'loftier' things in each other, and resonating with them. Thousands, or millions of invisible ties connect them, causing them to affect each other



in a co-creative act. They also become 'inspired' – which means that their breathing also transforms, in comparison with everyday life. It becomes 'psychological', thus allowing for heightened perception and expression. (The correlation between the words 'inspiration' and 'inhalation' is obvious). The actors (and subsequently audiences) acquire an ability to 'inhale' these subtler and/or more heightened impressions and sensations into deeper layers of their psyche, and to exhale them out. This results in an actor's voice that is soulful, emotionally musical, and is filled with deeper inner content. Audiences unwittingly mimic such a voice (sometimes even audibly), and it restructures them inwardly.

In the meantime, contemporary recording technology, especially digital technology, being mechanical in its essence, is incapable of fully registering and conveying these subtle radiations, perceived and emitted by the deepest layers of an actor's psyche, and multiplied by a similar receiver and sounding board within the audience. A mechanical recording of a performance being unable to recreate the 'experience of actual physical presence' at a live performance, it is also unable to bring the viewer into the psycho-physical state required to fully enter this transfigured creative dimension. Film, by the nature of its specific mechanism, may be superior to digital media in its ability to convey some of the subtler aspects of radiation, emitted during a live performance. In digital photography, a silicon receiver is made up of a grid of photosites (or pixels) that are sensitive to light. The visual information they collected is transmitted to a computer. Unlike digital media, film is designed to 'record light' through a process of 'an actual, direct exposure' to light of a sensitive silver halide emulsion, applied to film. A greater directness of this process, and its reliance on an organic chemical process, is arguably responsible for a lesser level of distortion, when it comes to transmitting subtler energies. Black-and-white film technology is even more concentrated on the depiction of light, and its interplay, and therefore it probably 'photographs' and conveys the subtly-physical energies with an even greater accuracy – although it is still inferior to the physical directness of a

live performance.

This discussion seems to point to the inability to convey a live, organic performance through 'mechanical' recording means. And yet, one can think of important exceptions, connected with imperfect architecture of theatrical spaces, and with imperfections of the modern actors' internal technique.


To fully comprehend this thought, let's go back to Demidov's quotation, from the top of the article:

Theatre is seemingly a combination of two kinds of different arts: that for the ear and that for the eye. Meanwhile, sound in theatre is registered not only by the ear, but also by the eye, while its movements are not merely seen, but also heard. One thing transforms into the other; one thing evokes the other; it supplements the other, while all together they constitute the tapestry of theatrical art.

This thought is much deeper than it may appear on the surface. To illustrate it, I will share a story, from my own theatrical practice, that might help comprehending the true meaning of Demidov's thought.

In the winter of 2011, I staged a production of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, for the Florida State University's Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training in Sarasota. The production was so successful, it made me want to preserve it by creating a more thorough recording of the piece, as opposed to a typical one-camera archival record. This idea was supported by a colleague, Brad Battersby, who is the Head of the Digital Filmmaking Department at the Ringling College of Art and Design, also in Sarasota. Brad assembled a film crew, consisting of his faculty and students. With three cameras located in various parts of the house, they recorded the production during a live performance. In addition to that, a special filming session was organized onstage, but without the audience. Over a period of one day, we shot the show in sections, stopping for breaks between the scenes. This made it possible to bring cameras onto the stage, allowing for different angles, and for close-ups. Since we were only given one day for this second recording, we could not afford multiple takes. The show was performed in front of three cameras once (with short breaks between the scenes). Only two or three key close-ups were filmed separately, at the end of the shooting.

When footage was transferred onto the computer, Brad and I came together to watch it. Three problems immediately became obvious to us in the first viewing. First, it was almost impossible to combine, or slice together, our two 'takes' – the one obtained during the performance with the live audience, and the other filmed without the audience. In the staging of *The Lady from the Sea*, I utilized the organic inner technique of living onstage, which calls for actors



to improvise their 'blockings' anew at each performance. The two 'takes' revealed how fully the actors embraced this technique. They were rarely found in the same place at the same time during each of the filmed performances. The second issue related to the footage obtained during the special filming session, when cameras had greater freedom of location and movement. While overall superior to the footage recorded during the live performance, it nevertheless had plenty of technical issues. With only one day to complete that recording, we could not afford multiple takes. That resulted in frequent problems with angles, light, camera movement, occasional sound boom popping into a frame, etc. The third, final issue was also due to our inability to allow for multiple takes. In certain scenes, the acting was not as strong as it could have been – perhaps because some actors were still adjusting to new conditions, or simply because they grew tired during a full day of filming. Having seen these three complications, Brad Battersby, an experienced filmmaker, concluded that he could not achieve, with this footage, what he initially intended. With that, he passed the project onto me and his student assistant, Andrew Burhoe. Together with Andrew, I spent about two months editing the footage.

At some point in the work, I concluded that we should abandon the project. So many of the scenes had technical issues; they failed to convey the beauty of the performance, and of the actor's work. Some scenes appeared to be too dark, and the actor's mimicry was not as pronounced, as we would have liked it to be. Other moments required tighter shots, or close-ups, but we could not use them, because of some other technical issues, such as cameramen accidentally jerking the camera, trying to get the right shot, etc. This would force us to go to a wide shot at a moment that required a tighter one. Having run into these types of problems again and again, I said to Andrew: «We should just quit. This is not going anywhere». Andrew thought a while, and then said: «Wait a minute, we are editing the footage, while listening to the sound recorded from the built-in camera mics. We are not hearing the sound recorded through booms and lavaliers, onto our high-quality Deva sound recorder. Let me pop that sound in». Then Andrew took some time loading the high-quality sound into the editing software, and synchronizing it with the video footage. Then, he called me in, to watch the results.

What I heard (and saw) exceeded my expectations. The actors' voices became rich with the kind of depth, overtone, and nuance that was not apparent before. That I could have predicted. What I could not anticipate, however, was that the picture 'itself had changed'. Now, even in those shots that were too dark, or too wide to register important details, the nuances of sound drew the viewer's attention to an actor's

subtlest facial expression, mimicry, and movements, but also, in some cases – to the subtlest radiation of the eyes, and of the body. Even those moments where acting itself seemed lacking, because it was too 'inward' – they also came to life, as superior sound allowed us to notice the subtlest nuances of an actor's thought, mood or movement. Both Andrew and I were so impressed by what we experienced, we decided to go on to finish the project. As for me, this helped me to truly understand Demidov's thought:

Theatre is seemingly a combination of two kinds of different arts: that for the ear and that for the eye. Meanwhile, sound in theatre is registered not only by the ear, but also by the eye, while its movements are not merely seen, but also heard. One thing transforms into the other; one thing evokes the other; it supplements the other, while all together they constitute the tapestry of theatrical art.

Now, one may be wondering: how does this prove that a digital recording of a live performance can convey the experience of being actually present in the audience? Surely, what an audience member hears (and subsequently sees in an actor) is still much more powerful in direct listening, and watching. Not entirely so, at least not always. This depends on the size of a theatre, an audience member's location, and – most importantly – on the 'acoustics'. Based on these factors, and on their combination, a digital recording may be able to rival live performance, in certain aspects.

Often, a house is simply too large for a given play, and many locations in it – deadly, as far as one's ability to hear and see is concerned. Also, contemporary actors do not necessarily possess powerful internal technique that would allow them to overcome these architectural imperfections. They don't know how to preserve nuances and overtones in their speech, while aiming to be heard in a larger theatre. So, they blast the audience with volume that washes any subtleties away from their voices. I still remember experiencing a 'live-theatre close-up' in the mid-1980s, when an older, experienced actress, suddenly 'took me into her hands', and caused me to see her face up-close, even though I was in a balcony of the theatre that could seat over 1,000 people. Seldom do we find actors who possess that kind of power to manipu-

late an audiences' attention.

Many theatrical institutions seem to be economizing on acoustics, while 'film' keeps investing in the quality of sound recording and reproduction. The nuances of acting that cannot be heard (and therefore seen) in a house with poor acoustics, can be picked up by ultra-sensitive microphones and reproduced by high-quality speakers. The same is true of a film's capacity to 'magnify' an actor's face, thus concentrating a viewer on the subtlest nuances of the actor's life onstage, and even to pick up certain levels of emotional radiation. It is not by chance that one of Russia's most significant twentieth century theatre directors, Anatoly Efros, resorted almost exclusively to close-ups, when filming his own theatre productions for television.

When projecting into the future of theatre from the mid-twentieth century, Nikolai Demidov (2007: 26-27) suggested that a direct correlation exists between the state of an actor's psycho-technique and the development (or rather lack of such) of the theatrical technology:

The outer and inner psychological acting technique does not develop, largely because of the technical conditions of theatrical performance, which are still in the early phase of their development.

Let us imagine that our acoustic engineers arrived at the ways of making each whisper, rustle, murmur or sigh (let alone regular human voice) be heard equally well in every corner of the theatre. This would call for an actor's voice to acquire musicality, expressivity, and richness of content – instead of mere loudness.

Let us imagine that these acoustic engineers managed to bring the faintest sound, like a whisper, so close to us that it appeared to almost touch your ear.

Let us imagine that optical engineers perfected their technology to allow, when necessary, for a close-up view of a live actor – as it is practiced in film.

Imagine that you can see a live human face (not a mere photographic projection of it), as large as a proscenium arch, with every eyelash, every facial feature, every thought in the eye fully seen and exposed.

Would this not call for a completely new and different set of requirements to acting? And would it

not annihilate old, antiquated requirements?

Additionally, let us imagine that some smart acoustic engineer invented a special filter that can transform an imperfect, unmusical actor's voice, eliminating all its unpleasant qualities, while also adding to it some new overtones, breathtakingly beautiful... Would that not, yet again, change an actor's technique?

Just imagine some inflexible, crude, monotonous voice, when processed through yet another type of a transformer, beginning to vibrate, tremble and sing, thus causing your own heart to follow suit.

One can notice that Demidov's foresight, while still not applicable to live theatre, is nevertheless quite accurate regarding technical developments and innovations in film, as well as analog and digital recording. For as long as live theatre is housed in spaces (old or new) that do not feature technology for 'live' acoustics or optics, as described by Demidov, a high-quality recording of a live performance may have certain advantages over its original. Amplification of an actor's voice through speakers, and projection of an actor's 'close-up' onto screens – these devices are used in live theatre today. However, these devices do not compare with the potential power of a 'live' close-up, as well as amplification and transformation of an actor's voice, where sound and picture are 'delivered' to the audience 'live', bypassing speakers and screens. It is difficult to project what kind of technical revolution awaits us in the future. Nevertheless, one would be hard pressed to imagine future recording techniques, digital or analog, being able to depict the subtlest waves of human radiation. Most importantly, they won't be able to 'connect' live audiences with live actors via thousands, if not millions of invisible and subconscious ties. These imperceptible 'subtly-physical' connections allowing spectators and actors to affect and guide each other's creative life, moment to moment – most likely will not be 'recorded' any time soon. No occasional inserted visual interjection of audience's reactions, nor recorded sounds of the audience, can substitute the immediate inner dialogue between the spectator and the actor, as it takes place in a performance rooted in the school of experiencing. Therefore, digital and other recordings of live performance, in the foreseeable future, will continue to serve as mere archival records, and, perhaps, as imperfect 'manuals' for the study of acting.

## Bibliography

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