CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

A

Aalberg, Ida (b. Janakkala, Finland, 4 December 1857; d. St Petersburg, 17 January 1915). Finnish actress. Ida Aalberg was pivotal in creating the first expressive style of the Finnish-speaking theatre. She joined the Finnish Theatre in 1874 and was a leading actress before she was thirty, playing Nora (1880), Ophelia (1884), Homsantuu in *Työmiehen vaimo* (The Worker's Wife) (1884), and Margarete in *Faust* (1885). Her dignified interpretation of the title role in *The Maid of Orleans* by Schiller (1887) helped elevate her to a national icon, reinforced by her marriage to nationalist politician Lauri Kivekäs in 1887. She worked permanently with the Finnish Theatre until 1889 and then guest-starred regularly and continued in leading roles. She was the first actress to play Hedda Gabler to critical acclaim (1891) and as Cyprienne in *Let's Get a Divorce* she displayed her comic prowess. Aalberg was always ambitious for an international career. In 1885–94, she was seen in Stockholm, Christiania, Bergen, Berlin, and St Petersburg, and, in 1907, in Hungary. She had a contract with the Dagmar Theatre Company in Copenhagen (1885–7) and toured with Harald Molander's company in 1894. The Finnish National Theatre invited Aalberg to join its Board and to direct (1908), but her contract was terminated after two years for artistic reasons. There were plans for her return to the National Theatre, but she died in 1915.

Aalberg's acting combined analytic thinking with emotional intensity. Her declamatory style was applied to the neurotic expression required by realistic drama, such as Ibsen's. Aalberg's international roles were praised, but her language skills were insufficient for success overseas. In Finland, Aalberg was a pioneer. In 1918, her second husband, Alexander Uexkull-Gyllenband, founded the Ida Aalberg Theatre Company to commemorate his wife's work.

PIRKKO KOSKI

R. Heikkilä, *Ida Aalberg. Näyttelijä jumalan armosta* (Porvoo, Helsinki, and Juva, 1998)
I. Räsänen, *Ida Aalberg* (Porvoo, 1925)

Abba, Marta (b. Milan, 25 June 1900; d. Milan, 24 June 1988). Italian actress. Luigi Pirandello's muse from 1925 until his death in 1936, Abba made her debut in Virgilio Talli's production of *Seagull* in 1924 and by the following year was principal actress at the Odescalchi Theatre in Rome, where Pirandello's Compagnia del Teatro d'Arte was based. For her, Pirandello wrote *Diana e la Tuda* (1926), *L'amica delle moglie* (The Wives' Friend) (1926), *Come tu mi vuoi* (As You Desire Me) (1930), and *Trovarsi* (To Find Oneself) (1932). She toured Italy and internationally, founded her own company in 1928 and was directed by the likes of Max Reinhardt and Guido Salvini. Admired by critics for her passionate portrayals of Pirandellian characters, Abba married an American entrepreneur and moved to Cleveland in 1938. After that she only rarely appeared on stage, even after she divorced in 1952.

MARGHERITA LAERA

D. Bini, *Pirandello and his Muse: the Plays for Marta Abba* (Gainesville, 1998)

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

Abbey Theatre. The Abbey Theatre is Ireland's National Theatre and it was the first Irish theatre ever to receive an annual government subvention (1925). It houses the oldest producing management in continuous operation in the Anglophone world. The precursors to the Abbey were the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) and WILLIAM GEORGE FAY's Irish National Dramatic Company (1902). Both companies were committed to showing, in W. B. YEATS' words, 'that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism'. To do this, the Abbey had to create a distinctive poetical style of acting that was diametrically opposed to the broad, comedic acting style of melodrama that BOUCICAULT did much to popularize. In 1902, William and FRANCIS FAY began to train and rehearse amateur actors in what became known as the Abbey style of acting. Their acting style required the careful orchestration of stage kinesics and proxemics as well as acute vocal ability.

In 1903 the Irish National Theatre Society was founded. The founding members included Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and John Millington Synge, in addition to some of Ireland's most memorable actors: MÁIRE NIC SHIUBHLAIGH, SARA ALLGOOD, GEORGE ROBERTS, and the Fay brothers. Yeats secured financial assistance (£1,300) from an English tea heiress, Annie Horniman, which allowed architect Joseph Holloway to renovate the Mechanics Theatre as the Abbey Theatre, which opened on 27 December 1904. But Horniman had her conditions: the theatre was not to be used for political ends and ticket prices were to be kept high in order to attract middle-class spectators. In short, the Abbey in its early years was committed to theatre as high art. A clause in the contract stipulated Willie Fay as casting director. However, when the Society turned professional in 1905 the clause was removed, which meant that the Fays no longer had control over the careful training of the amateur actor. The actor-as-celebrity could now be seen on the Abbey stage with London actress Florence Darragh appearing in Yeats' *Deirdre* in 1906. The Fays left the company in 1908.

In order to solve a problem of actors' complacency, which was fast spiralling into crisis, Yeats hired Nugent Monck in 1911 to train a large company of actors in the Abbey Theatre School of Acting. Remaining true to the Abbey style of acting, Monck effectively trained two companies, one resident in Dublin, the other on tour. Horniman withdrew her annual subsidy in 1910, so the Abbey's financial security was dependent on the box office. In 1916 the Abbey actors revolted against their manager, St John Greer Ervine, because they refused to rehearse twice in one day. Some actors left the company, as did Ervine, but the Abbey adapted by nurturing young talent from wide-ranging backgrounds, such as BARRY FITZGERALD in the 1920s, CYRIL CUSACK in the 1930s, and MARIE KEAN in the 1940s. The Abbey style of acting became hybridized as actors began to play their actions for the audience, thereby compromising the stability of the fourth wall by overtly acknowledging the presence of the spectator; the *Irish Times* was apposite when it suggested in 1925 that the Abbey actors 'knew how much they owed to the audience. They were encouraged by the spontaneous laugh and grateful for the moment of silence in tragedy.'

In 1926 the company opened the small Peacock Theatre, adjacent to the main stage for new writing and experimental work and in 1936 Ria Mooney revived the Abbey Theatre School there. In 1951 the Abbey burned down and the company moved to the Queen's Theatre Royal until 1966, when the new Abbey was opened. In 1967 the Abbey Theatre School was revitalized by Frank Dermody, but the introduction of ACTORS' EQUITY meant that the days of the Abbey actor as amateur and apprentice were obsolete; the School closed in 1970. By then the Abbey was synonymous with some of Ireland's most prodigious actors. It remains so today.

CHRISTOPHER COLLINS

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

C. Fitzsimon, *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre, The First Hundred Years* (London, 2003)
A. Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York, 1965)
L. Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre, 1899–1951: a History* (London, 1951)
R. Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford, 1999)

Abraham, F. Murray (b. Pittsburgh, 24 October 1939). US actor. A quintessential character actor, Abraham has made a career by submerging himself in challenging, idiosyncratic roles, from Shylock to Cyrano to Pozzo in a landmark 1988 revival of *Waiting for Godot* that also featured Steve Martin and Robin Williams as Vladimir and Estragon. After dropping out of the drama programme at the University of Texas-El Paso and struggling to break into film in Los Angeles, Abraham moved to New York City in 1965 and studied under UTA HAGEN at the Herbert Berghof Studio. Beginning in the late 1960s, he worked steadily off-Broadway, with occasional Broadway appearances, winning an Obie Award for his 1983 performance as Chekhov's Vanya. Despite his stage success, he was considered a surprise choice for the role of Salieri in the 1984 film *Amadeus*, for which he would win an Oscar for Best Actor. Despite his new-found status as a film star and frustrated by the one-dimensionality of many of the film roles he was offered, Abraham has remained committed to stage work, continuing to tackle complex, difficult roles, such as Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* (1994), Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* (2007), and Galileo in *Life of Galileo* (2012).

HENRY BIAL

Abu Salem, François (François Gaspar) (b. Bethlehem, 1951; d. Ramallah, 4 October 2011). Palestinian actor and director. Unquestionably one of the most talented Palestinian theatre actors to date, Abu Salem (*nom de guerre*) brought Western theatre practice to Palestine and international attention to Palestinian theatre. Son of poet and surgeon Lorand Gaspar and sculptor Francine Gaspar, Abu Salem studied in Beirut and later in Paris with ARIANE MNOUCHKINE's Théâtre du Soleil. He returned to Palestine in 1970 and with a group of friends formed the Balalin (Balloons) theatre troupe to respond to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the annexation of Jerusalem. In 1984 Abu Salem bought the burnt Al-Nuzha Cinema in Jerusalem, converted it into a theatre, and established Al-Hakawati (the Storyteller) Theatre, now known as the Palestinian National Theatre, the first physical space of Palestinian theatre under Israeli occupation. With the continuous harassment from censorship and closures, the company was unable to reach its audience, so Al-Hakawati Theatre closed its doors and Abu Salem left for Europe. As director he was influenced by the landscape and by the political and social events that swept Palestine. Abu Salem drew from many resources so as to mobilize Palestinian society and actively engage them in resisting Israeli occupation, to tackle taboos in Palestinian society, and to advocate for human and women's rights. Al-Hakawati engaged in group discussions and IMPROVISATION, and drew from oral tradition. Abu Salem's prolific productions included *Jalili ya 'Ali* ('Ali the Galilean) (1983) and *Bi-ism al-Ab wal-Umm wal-Ibn* (In the Name of the Father, Mother, and Son) (1978). He returned to Palestine in the 1990s and was awarded the Palestine Prize for Theatre in 1998. In his last ten years he became ambivalent about his adopted country. He failed to regain his previous status although he continued to create theatre, but without belonging to any theatre in Palestine. His Palestinian identity was often called into question; only after his death was he consistently identified as Palestinian, a reflection of the complex hybridity of the Palestinian theatre itself. Abu Salem exited the Palestinian stage by committing suicide in 2011.

DINA KHAMIS

Abyad, George (b. Beirut, Lebanon, 1880; d. Cairo, Egypt, 1959). Egyptian actor. George Elias Abyad immigrated to Egypt when he was eighteen and joined Arab and French acting troupes in Alexandria. In 1904, Khedive 'Abbas' watched him in a play entitled *Burg al-Nil*

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

(Nile Tower) and, recognizing his talent, sent him on a scholarship to study acting in Paris. There Abyad joined the CONSERVATOIRE and learnt acting, directing, and music. After he returned to Egypt in 1910 as the head of a French acting troupe, he played a prominent role on the Egyptian and Arab stage. Together with his troupe, he staged prominent French plays such as *Tartuffe* and Delavigne's *Louis XI*. He established ten theatrical associations, which formed the foundation of a solid theatre. In 1912, Abyad assembled an Arab troupe which staged more than a hundred and thirty classical plays in Arabic, such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, *Salah al-Din and the Queen of Jerusalem*, and *Noah's Ark*. In 1935, he formed the National Egyptian Acting Troupe in which he and his wife, Dawlat Abyad, were the stars, and in 1932, he was the star of the first Arabic-speaking musical movie, *Heart's Melody*. In 1943, he was elected as the first head of the Syndicate of Actors.

NOHA MOHAMAD M. IBRAHEEM

S. Abyad, *George Abyad: Days upon which Curtains will Never Fall* (1991)

Accademia Silvio D'Amico. Italy's most prominent school of dramatic art and the only one receiving state subsidy. It was founded in 1936 by the theatre historian and critic Silvio D'Amico following the closure of a previous institution named after ELEONORA DUSE, founded in 1921. It currently offers three-year courses in Acting and Directing at BA level, and MA programmes in Theatre Criticism and Directing Opera. Four generations of classical Italian actors were formed here by the likes of ORAZIO COSTA (Acting) and Tatiana Pavlova (Directing). Notable students include VITTORIO GASSMAN, Luigi Squarzina, Rossella Falk, Nino Manfredi, Monica Vitti, Luca Ronconi, and GLAUCO MAURI. The Accademia has recently established an international network of dramatic arts schools, including London's Guildhall School, Barcelona's INSTITUT DE TEATRE, and Moscow's GITIS.

MARGHERITA LAERA

Achurch, Janet (b. Manchester, England, 17 January 1863; d. Ventnor, Isle of Wight, England, 11 September 1916). English actress. Achurch played Nora in the first London performance of *A Doll's House* (1889) in a production mounted with her second husband, Charles Charrington, using a translation by WILLIAM ARCHER, who also contributed to the direction and staging of the play. Appearing with FRANK BENSON's company in 1885, for whom she played Lady Macbeth, she subsequently played in a number of Ibsen's dramas, including Rita in *Little Eyolf* (1896). She also played Candida and Lady Cicely Waynflete in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (both first performed in London in 1900) for Shaw, who greatly admired her acting, although he found her Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1897) sometimes dropped from 'Egyptian warrior queen into a naughty English *petite bourgeoise*'; he also referred to the 'lacerated discord of her wailings'. Archer praised her 'beauty and mobility of face, dignity of carriage ... sincerity and intensity of emotion', but was not always able to judge whether her tones were convincingly natural and true, or false, artificial, and mannered. He also felt that she was not always very attentive to punctuation or phrasing. Shaw considered that there were two Achurches, the one who played Nora and the one who played emotional intensity with the vulgarity of a BERNHARDT. He praised her vocal compass as Rita, for 'one clearly saw the superfluity of power and the vehemence of intelligence that made her often so reckless as to the beauty of her methods of expression. She looked at one moment like a young, well-dressed, very pretty woman: at another like she was a desperate creature just fished dripping out of the river by the Thames police.' Shaw considered that for all her cleverness as a realistic actress, Achurch should be classed technically as a heroic actress. She last appeared on the London stage in 1913.

JIM DAVIS

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

Ackermann, Konrad Ernst (b. Schwerin, 1 February 1712; d. Hamburg, 13 November 1771). German actor. This progenitor of an eighteenth-century acting dynasty promoted the shift in German drama and performance towards greater realism. An actor whose strengths lay in comedy and bourgeois drama, Ackermann performed with SCHÖNEMANN (1740–1) but left to establish his own company with Sophie Charlotte Schröder, a talented leading actress in Schönemann's troupe. They married after the death of her husband in 1749 and toured with their company throughout the Baltics, the northern German states, and Russia. In 1755 Ackermann constructed a theatre in Königsberg; the 800-seat structure was the first privately managed theatre in Germany, but the advent of the Seven Years War forced the troupe to resume touring. In 1764 KONRAD EKHOF joined the Ackermann Company, and the following year Ackermann built a new theatre in Hamburg. In 1767 the theatre was leased, becoming the Hamburg National Theatre; although not under Ackermann's control, the new company retained him and most of his actors. After its collapse in 1769, Ackermann resumed touring. Shortly before his death, management of his company passed to his stepson, FRIEDRICH LUDWIG SCHRÖDER. Ackermann's daughters were also popular performers. Dorothea played major roles, including Sara Sampson, the Countess Orsina in *Emilia Galotti*, and Ophelia, before leaving the stage in 1778. Her sister, Charlotte, played roles such as Franciska in *Minna von Barnhelm* and Emilia Galotti, receiving much acclaim before her early death. The Ackermann Company had a significant impact on the eighteenth-century German theatre, increasing the exposure of German audiences to the new bourgeois drama (they premiered Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* in 1755) and working to better the social standing of actors and of the theatre in general.

NATALYA BALDYGA

H. Eichhorn, *Konrad Ernst Ackermann: Ein deutscher Theaterprinzipal* (Emsdetten, 1965)

acting/actors. Acting is the representation of human behaviour before an audience in circumstances where both actors and audience are aware that this representation is a performance. Acting, which involves the mimesis or imitation of other human beings, is one of the most basic and pleasurable of human activities, for both those who practise it and those who witness it. For much of recorded history, the dividing line between behaviour in everyday life and acting has mainly been apparent, first through the actors' presence on a stage, which separates them from their audience, and secondly, through their engagement in the predetermined representation of a story or action.

However, human beings' mimetic impulses probably did not first find expression in formal theatrical performances. For much of the twentieth century, theories on the origins of acting have been influenced by the Cambridge anthropologists, who claimed that acting originated in the dances and RITUALS of hunter-gatherer societies. Recently, however, theatre historians, in searching for the human activities from which acting emerged, have placed greater emphasis on a wide variety of other activities such as oratory, dance, jesting, political protest, singing, musical performances, folk plays, acrobatics, tumbling, court rituals, poetry recitation, legal proceedings, and athletics in societies such as ancient Greece, Tang dynasty China, or early medieval Europe. At various points in the historical continuum, social, economic, and artistic conditions arose that allowed quasi-theatrical activities to become continuous and so create institutions that enabled the art and profession of acting to be formed and practised over an extended period of time.

In some instances, as in Europe during ancient and medieval times, the inciting circumstance for the rise and continuous existence of a theatrical profession was the custom of performing dramatic works as part of a larger religious or civic ceremony. As such performances mainly occurred during festivities, they were not continuously staged throughout the year and actors faced difficulties in making a living when they were not

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

employed. However, in ancient Greece, there is evidence that actors became progressively the centre of the audience's attention in Athens in the course of the fifth century BCE during performances at the Festival of DIONYSUS among others. Opportunities for performance were not, however, limited to Athens, and actors, either in groups or individually, as members of a 'Guild' of Dionysus, would travel from one theatrical site to another and, through the display of their mimetic talents, establish the idea of the actor as a skilled professional. Furthermore, in Athens and other cities where the successful practice of oratory was a crucial political skill, actors were employed not only as performers but as teachers and speech coaches. In Europe from the sixteenth century on, the practice of RHETORIC was regarded as an essential component of a classical education, and the performance of classical plays and, on the continent, of elaborately staged religious dramas sometimes became an integral part of the school curriculum.

However, while rhetoric and, at times, mimesis were valued skills, actors themselves found it hard to win social acceptance. In medieval Europe, relations between the Catholic priesthood and professional and amateur performers who acted in a wide variety of religiously sponsored dramas were always uneasy, sometimes mutually hostile; consequently the acting profession could only achieve social recognition with the rise of its own institution, a secular theatre that was dedicated to the production of plays and other entertainments on a regular, year-round basis. It was therefore not until the late sixteenth century in England and Spain, the early seventeenth century in France, and the late eighteenth century in Germany, Scandinavia, and much of Central and Eastern Europe that actors were able to find permanent employment in the theatres that opened in the larger cities and the wealthier royal courts, and in the process form a profession that became publicly recognized.

Even when professionally established, actors have had to fight hard for social respect and recognition. In part this may be due to the profession having originated, at least in the minds of the public, in the least privileged sectors of society; for centuries the theatre was considered to be a haven of last resort for those who could find employment nowhere else. To this day, when the study and practice of theatre is still regarded by many educational authorities to be the lowest priority in the institutions they manage, those among their students who are inclined to choose acting for their profession are regularly urged to think again. Now, of course, actors are regularly decorated by their countries and treated as celebrities, but stigma still attaches to the profession. In earlier centuries, for every MOLIÈRE, DAVID GARRICK, or KONRAD EKHOF, who deliberately passed up other professions in order to act, there were hundreds who became actors by default. The disreputable reputation of the profession may also have arisen from its peripatetic nature; even today, only those relatively few actors who have a permanent appointment at a regional or national theatre, or a flourishing career in a city with a large network of commercial and subsidized theatres, are able to live permanently within a community. Actors have limited opportunities to 'settle down', normally regarded as a sign of maturity within societies in which residence within a single place is considered to be a value.

Historically, existential objections to the very act of acting have been raised. Over the centuries, for those of a religious cast of mind, acting has been seen as an essentially blasphemous activity, because actors take upon themselves identities different from those given them by God; accordingly, they violate the very foundation of what it is to be human. Consequently, actors acquired the reputation of being morally lax, as if the personalities that they assume on stage erode both their own sense of personal identity and any powers of restraint they may possess. In seeking to account for their desire to perform, it is common to find actors' efforts being dismissed as exhibitionism, motivated primarily by a desire to reap applause.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

But despite the opprobrium heaped upon actors over the centuries, there never has been, and probably never will be, any lack of individuals prepared to devote their entire lives to stage acting, even though the material rewards are, for the majority of them, minimal at best. Performance on stage not only brings deep personal satisfaction, it can create between actor and audience an energy that is unusual in the arts because it is instant and immediate. This is not now a circumstance that arises by chance. Most professional actors in contemporary times have received quite rigorous training. For centuries, training for the theatre, in European countries at least, was an uncertain affair. Most actors would acquire their skills by experience or through an informal apprentice system, by which actors passed down the way in which roles should be performed, as if successful performance in the theatre was a process of meeting the expectations of tradition and the audience. Since the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, training has increasingly become a prerequisite for a successful career in the theatre. In Asia, where highly codified modes of acting define major genres of theatre such as KATHAKALI dance drama from southern India, KUNQU and JINGJU in China, and KABUKI and NOH in Japan, training for a career in performance necessarily requires several years of the most painstaking training, often beginning in childhood.

Acting is far more than conducting oneself on stage as one does in everyday life, even though, particularly in the drama of modern realism, that might not seem to be the case. While acting may seem to consist primarily in the representation of character, vastly more than characterization is involved in a successful performance. For a start, acting often takes place in a large public space. In the Greek amphitheatre or the Japanese *kabuki* theatre, actors had to project the character they represented to a body of spectators often numbering in the thousands. Not only does this require the voice to be trained to a level of volume and a degree of clarity and durability that lies way beyond the capacity of most people, it also means that through their movements actors have to command the space that surrounds them. There are good grounds for arguing that it is in the use of space and in the endowing of space with meaning that the main difference lies between acting on stage and in film. While film actors attend primarily to the development of a rounded, finely nuanced character, actors on stage attend to the space around them, similar to the way an orator does. Stage acting involves not only inner work on the character, but the manipulation of that character with the deliberate intention of moving the audience. For this reason, acting has often been thought of either as a mode of rhetoric – actors in Elizabethan England and later conceived of acting as such – or as the acquisition and practice of a complex set of poses, gestures, movements, and vocal techniques, which possess specific meaning and can only be fully understood when they are practised by a master and witnessed by a knowledgeable audience. Several Asian theatre practices, as already observed, are centred on these encoded acting practices, but they were also practised in the theatre of the ancient Greeks and Romans and traces can still be discerned in the popular MELODRAMA of the nineteenth century. The theatre in which such acting is practised prizes above all virtuosity in its actors and encourages the organization of the repertoire and the company around the presence of star actors.

The star actor is still a major presence in the theatre today, but modern Euro-American theatre in particular has been marked by a tendency to resist the dominance of the star in preference to the development of ENSEMBLE acting in which no single individual prevails. It is customary to see the origins of this change in the work of ANDRÉ ANTOINE at the Théâtre Libre in Paris (1887–93) and KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY at the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) (1898 on). In fact, the ideal of ensemble is already apparent in the work of Molière in Paris (1657–73), David Garrick at Drury Lane in London (1747–76), JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE at the Court Theatre in Weimar (1798–1817), and HEINRICH LAUBE at the Vienna BURGTHEATER (1849–67). This approach to performance was based on the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

understanding that theatre works most effectively when the focus of the performance, and of the audience's attention to that performance, is on the relationship between the characters represented by the actors rather than on the accomplishments of the individual star actor. Ensemble playing was not, however, completely possible while the auditorium stayed lighted and the actors and audience occupied the same space; under such circumstances, the rhetorical aspect of acting by which the actor addressed the audience directly was still a major component in the performance. It was only when electric light made the stage into its own space, conceptually separated from that of the darkened auditorium, that ensemble acting and the realistic style of performance associated with it was systematically developed. This was when the director, as the co-ordinator and, frequently, trainer of the ensemble became a key figure. Most notable among these was Stanislavsky whose widely adapted methods for eliciting from actors performances in which the unconscious elements of their characters were felt, within the context of the ensemble, to be prime movers of the action, have made him into the most influential figure in modern acting practice today.

Realism is not, however, the sole style of acting to be associated with Stanislavsky. SYMBOLIST plays frequently appeared in the repertoire of the MAT; in these the actor realized those aspects of character that connect humans to a numinous world and create a quasi-religious aura on stage, as if their acting was recalling earlier origins in ritual. Stanislavsky was, however, less sympathetic to those aspects of modern theatre that were overtly theatrical, harsh in impact and lacking in stylistic unity, as was shown by the distance that grew between him and MEYERHOLD, whose embrace of biomechanics heralded a theatre less organic than Stanislavsky's in which the actor embodied the affinities between the human body and the machine, in both individual and ensemble acting. Indeed, in the twentieth century, acting that was dedicated to articulating the experience of the alienation of the individual from society and self, such as EXPRESSIONISM, was marked by the employment of grotesquerie and caricature, in which the actor was driven to arcane extremes. Meanwhile acting in Brechtian EPIC THEATRE, which is conceptually not too distant from the rhetoric of the pre-realist theatre, requires the actor to work from a realistic basis, but to shape the character so that salient issues relating to society and the economy become apparent in performance. Ultimately, in Epic theatre, the actor, by highlighting the themes of the drama and making the purpose of the performance the delineation of the choices facing the character(s) represented on stage, recalls the oratorical actor of earlier periods of theatre.

From the above it is clear that to survive in the modern theatre, the actor has to become a virtuoso in a wide range of different styles. In contemporary theatre, the very value, even the ethos of representation through mimesis, or the assumption of a character different from one's own, has come under question. The growth of PERFORMANCE ART out of the HAPPENINGS of the 1960s has drawn attention to the performer as an artist within his or her self. Indeed, the rejection of character as a basis for acting on stage is one of the salient features of Postdramatic Theatre, which comprises much of the avant-garde work being done in theatres throughout the world. Companies such as RIMINI PROTOKOLL in Germany and LA CUBANA in Catalonia and directors such as the Japanese HIRATA ORIZA attempt in different ways to fuse performance and everyday life, with their actors either re-creating the actual conditions of everyday life or participating in it while they are still performing. Then there are directors such as the Hungarian PÉTER HALÁSZ or present-day companies like FORCED ENTERTAINMENT who dispense with the myth that the prime function of actors is to create characters different from their own; as a result they take the stage literally as themselves, which may well be realism taken to its furthest limit, or, perhaps, a foreshadowing of the dissolution of acting as an art.

SIMON WILLIAMS

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

acting in medieval Europe. Many types of performance existed during the Middle Ages (500–1500). Some performers of the early Middle Ages such as MIMES and *joculatores* (jesters) may have been related to similar performers of late antiquity. The earliest examples of dramatic performance are in Latin and portray religious and biblical events. Medieval Latin drama often incorporated music and existed in a wide variety of formats, including LITURGICAL DRAMA and extra-liturgical drama, which could be performed outside the divine office. The earliest extant example of Latin drama may be an extra-liturgical fifty-five-line representation of the Harrowing of Hell from the Book of Cerne, which pre-dates the best-known liturgical dramas including the *Visitatio sepulchri*, or Visit to Christ's Tomb, which portrays the women who visited Christ's tomb on Easter morning, only to find it empty and guarded by an angel. One of the earliest descriptions of the *Visitatio sepulchri* is contained in the tenth-century Winchester *Regularis concordia*. Priests served as actors, and costumes consisted of the clerical garb suited to the occasion. Nonetheless, the *Regularis concordia* makes it clear that the priests are representing the women and the angel and encourages them to imitate the appropriate behaviour. The concept that priests should imitate the holy events described by the liturgy existed as early as the eighth century, when Amalarius of Metz wrote that when consecrating the bread and wine at the altar, the priest should be like Christ on the cross. Around the turn of the twelfth century, Honorius Augustodunensis provided an elaborate description comparing a priest performing a Mass to a tragic actor of the classical period or late antiquity.

Platonic and Aristotelian ideas about representation co-existed throughout the Middle Ages even in the absence of the texts upon which these ideas were based. Consequently, actors and acting were considered to be morally harmful or efficacious depending upon the context. Despite being pagan, the Roman playwright Terence influenced early non-liturgical Latin drama in the Middle Ages. In the late tenth century, Hrotswitha, who lived in the Benedictine community at Gandersheim, wrote that her plays were influenced by Terence's style, which she melded with Christian themes. Although there are no performance records for Hrotswitha's plays, convent performances and even dramas were not exclusive to her. Convent dramas could include male performers, usually monks from a nearby community who served as confessors to the nuns. The cast of St Hildegard of Bingen's early Latin music drama the *Ordo virtutum*, or Play of the Virtues, may well have included the monk Volmar. The earliest signs of vernacular theatre are found in early Latin dramas that include verse, such as the twelfth-century *Ludus de passione* from the Carmina Burana manuscript, although the plays were performed by clerics familiar with Latin. Several of the earliest extant vernacular plays encompass a variety of religious and secular themes, including a musical *Play of Robin and Marion* written *c.*1285 by Adam de la Halle. He and Jean Bodel were members of the confraternity of *jongleurs* of Arras, the Carité de Notre Dame des Ardents.

While most lay actors could be considered AMATEURS by modern standards of professionalism, performers like Adam de la Halle certainly attained as high a level of skill as later professional actors. Vernacular performances that were produced by cities rather than confraternities probably varied more widely in actors' degrees of proficiency. Productions of Passion and cycle plays usually had enormous casts that required large numbers of lay actors; nonetheless many of the main actors were highly skilled. By 1476, the English city of York required that its four best actors examine all prospective cast members of the Corpus Christi plays before casting the pageants. Although most female roles were performed by men or boys throughout Western Europe, laywomen did sometimes play female roles in public plays on the continent. In Metz, a 1468 production of a play about St Catherine of Siena starred a young laywoman as the saint, although a 1485 production of a play about St Barbara cast a young layman in the main role. The young man, a barber's apprentice, portrayed the main role in a play about St Catherine of

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76954-9 - The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting
Edited by Simon Williams
Excerpt
More information

Mount Sinai (Alexandria) the following year, but the production was not successful in part because the apprentice's voice was starting to break. In England, there is no evidence that laywomen publicly performed in plays, although some women – including noblewomen – performed in private household performances, a custom that was also followed on the continent.

Although there is no extant medieval treatise on acting, a text known as *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* provides detailed descriptions of audience behaviour. This polemical text describes the arguments for and against performing miracles. Evidence for medieval acting and costumes may be found in diverse documents, from directors' notebooks to guild records, as well as in the rubrics of liturgical and other Latin dramas. The stage directions for vernacular plays such as the twelfth-century Norman-French *Play of Adam* suggest that actors in such plays likely incorporated a gestural vocabulary similar to that described by the rubrics of Latin and liturgical dramas. It was not uncommon for these gestures to be related to the study of RHETORIC, but the variety of medieval theatrical forms enabled a great diversity of performance styles.

JESSE NJUS

action. One of the most frequently used terms in theatre and film (where 'Action!' signals that the camera is rolling and the filming is in process), action is essentially that which happens in a scene. First introduced by ARISTOTLE in reference to the series of events comprising a play's plot or narrative, action found prominence in the actor's arsenal with STANISLAVSKY, who devoted a chapter of his key text *An Actor Prepares* (1936) to 'Action'.

There are three kinds of actions by which actors manifest their characters in a script: physical actions (what they do); verbal actions (what they say); and inner actions (the intentions underpinning their words, deeds, or silences). Physical actions are simple: 'I switch on the light. I open the fridge. I take out a beer. I flip off the lid.' Verbal actions consist of commands ('Come here!'), instructions ('Okay, let's begin'), questions ('Do you love me?'), etc. Inner actions may be complex and nuanced, and their quality can often reveal a character's subtext. For example, 'Why are you looking at me like that?' might on the surface suggest a direct, verbal action of 'I question you.' However, the way in which the words are spoken could reveal a variety of inner actions: e.g. 'I encourage you', 'I challenge you', 'I entice you', 'I goad you', depending on the interpretation within the given circumstances of the scene.

Action is the single most important part of an actor's work, applicable in every media, genre, and style. If the given circumstances of a scene elucidate the situation (Where are we? What's going on?), and the objectives clarify what each character wants or needs in that situation, the actions are the means by which they attempt to achieve that goal. Stanislavsky devised two rehearsal processes stemming directly from the value of actions: the method of physical actions and active analysis. The former foregrounded the construction of a score of physical actions, serving as a road map for the actors in a scene. The latter placed the actors directly on the rehearsal room floor to discover through their bodies, their partners, and the space what they needed to do (i.e. their actions) to achieve what they wanted (i.e. their objectives) in the circumstances of the dramatic situation.

It is worth noting that a physical activity is different from an action: there might be a sustained activity underpinning a scene, while the various physical, verbal, and inner actions generate the scene's flow. The lotto game in act 4 of *Seagull* (1897) or the King's signing of papers at various points throughout *The Madness of George III* (1992) or the 'dismal birthday supper' of Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* (1949) are all examples of physical activities used to juxtapose or heighten the action of a scene.

BELLA MERLIN

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org