

STAGE SPEECH AS A THEORETICAL DISCIPLINE: FROM DECLAMATION TO VERBAL ACTION

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Abstract

The article traces the formation of the theory of stage speech and examines its present state as a field of knowledge that unites phonetics, the physiology of the voice and the psychology of acting. The evolution of views on the actor's word is analysed from the declamatory tradition through K.S. Stanislavski's reform, which defined speech as action, to the methodological works of M.O. Knebel, T.I. Zaporozhets and I.P. Kozlyaninova and the voice-training systems of C. Berry and K. Linklater. It is shown that the modern theory rests on three principles – the freedom of the voice, the logic of thought and the purposefulness of the word – which form a hierarchy and determine the order of training. A four-stage model of a stage speech course for theatre institutes is proposed.

Keywords: Stage speech, theory of stage speech, declamation, verbal action, voice training, logic of speech, inner monologue, Stanislavski, Knebel, Linklater, actor training.

Introduction

Every epoch of the theatre has had its own idea of how an actor should speak. The oratorical declamation of the classical stage, the “natural” speech of the realistic theatre and the intimate, almost conversational word of modern cinema reflect not only changes in taste but also different answers to the question of what the word is on stage – an ornament, a means of communication or an action. The theory of stage speech arose as an attempt to answer this question systematically

and to base the training of the actor's voice and speech on knowledge rather than on imitation of a teacher.

Today the theory of stage speech lies at the junction of several fields. It draws on phonetics and orthoepy, on the physiology of breathing and voice production, on the logic and syntax of the literary text and, finally, on the psychology of acting, which explains how a word is born from the actor's inner life. Because of this interdisciplinary character the theory is difficult to present as a single whole: textbooks usually describe its sections one after another, while the connections between them remain implicit.

It is precisely these connections that this article addresses. Why do some actors with well-trained voices remain unconvincing, while others with modest vocal gifts hold the attention of the hall? The answer lies not in a single component of speech but in the way the components are subordinated to one another. The purpose of the study is therefore threefold: to trace how the theory of stage speech developed from declamation to the concept of verbal action, to identify the principles on which it rests today, and to derive from them a sequence of training for future actors.

Literature review

The decisive turn in the theory of stage speech is connected with K.S. Stanislavski. Criticising the conventional "theatrical" manner of reading, in which the actor displays the beauty of his voice instead of conveying a thought, he formulated the principle that speaking on stage is acting [6]. In the volume of his collected works devoted to embodiment he treats diction, the laws of speech, tempo-rhythm and the perspective of the role as instruments that serve this principle [6].

M.O. Knebel carried Stanislavski's ideas into the everyday practice of rehearsal and teaching. Her book on the word in the actor's creative work analyses how visions are accumulated, how the inner monologue is built and how the actor makes the author's text his own. The methodology of the discipline was elaborated in the following decades: T.I. Zaporozhets formulated the rules of the logic of speech for the analysis of a literary text, I.P. Kozlyaninova described the technical basis of pronunciation and diction, and the GITIS textbook edited by I.P. Kozlyaninova and I.Yu. Promptova summarised the experience of the Russian school in the form of a complete course.

A different line of development is represented by British and American voice teachers. C. Berry, working with actors on classical verse, insisted that voice exercises are meaningful only when they bring the actor closer to the text and its imagery. K. Linklater built a method whose starting point is the removal of habitual tensions: in her view, the natural voice is already present in every person and has to be freed rather than “made”.

The author has earlier written on Stanislavski’s system and its significance for contemporary acting [8], on its use in the variety genre [9] and on character and characterisation in actor training [7]; together with L. Urazmbetova she has examined the basic concepts of acting psychotechnics [10]. Another article considered the theatre as an art in which word and action cannot be separated [1]. A series of joint works with L. Urazmbetova is devoted to the national tradition of the sounding word – Karakalpak folk aytis songs [2] – and to the creative portraits of the masters of the Karakalpak stage A. Shamuratova [3], M. Xalmuratova [4] and X. Ayimbetov [5]. However, the history of the theory of stage speech as a movement from declamation to verbal action, and the consequences of this movement for the structure of training, have so far received little attention; the present article seeks to fill this gap.

Methods

The research is theoretical and historical. The historical-genetic method was used to reconstruct the stages in the development of views on stage speech. Comparative analysis made it possible to juxtapose the Russian and Anglo-American approaches. Conceptual analysis was applied to the key terms of the field – speech tact, logical stress, vision, subtext, inner monologue and the freeing of the voice. Finally, modelling was used to construct a sequence of training based on the results. The author’s long experience of teaching acting in Nukus served as a source of observations; no experimental data were collected.

Results

The first stage in the development of views on the actor’s word can be called declamatory. In the theatre of classicism, and for a long time afterwards, the main requirements for an actor’s speech were beauty and power of sound, measured delivery of verse and an elevated, “singing” intonation. The word was valued as a sound ornament, and training consisted largely in imitating the manner of a

celebrated performer. This tradition gave the actor a strong voice and a sense of rhythm, but it separated the sound of speech from thought and from the living situation of the character.

The second stage is Stanislavski's reform. For him the word on stage had to arise from the given circumstances and be directed at the partner. He demanded that the actor first see what he is talking about – the so-called visions – and then make the partner see it as well [6]. At the same time Stanislavski did not reject technique: he regarded diction, the logical division of the text and the command of intonation as necessary conditions for the word to carry thought. In his system technique thus ceased to be an end in itself and became a means of action.

The third stage is the transformation of stage speech into a full academic discipline. Knebel showed that the line of thought continues in the actor's mind even while he is silent and introduced the inner monologue as a working tool. Zaporozhets turned the logic of speech into a set of teachable rules: the division of the text into speech tacts, the choice of logical stresses, the use of pauses and the intonation of punctuation marks. Kozlyaninova and her colleagues created a graded system of exercises for breathing, voice and diction and linked it with the norms of orthoepy. As a result, stage speech acquired its own sequence of sections and its own methods of assessment.

A fourth line, which developed in parallel, is associated with the Anglo-American voice schools. Whereas the Russian tradition stressed the logic and purpose of the word, Berry and Linklater drew attention to the state of the instrument itself. Berry connected work on the voice with the physical experience of the text, so that the actor would feel the weight and energy of every word. Linklater regarded habitual muscular and emotional tension as the main obstacle and offered a progression of exercises – from relaxation and breath through resonance to articulation – aimed at freeing the natural voice.

A comparison of these stages makes it possible to formulate three principles on which the modern theory of stage speech rests:

- 1) the principle of freedom – the voice must be free from unnecessary tension and connected with the actor's breathing and inner impulses;
- 2) the principle of logic – speech must convey the structure of the author's thought by means of speech tacts, logical stresses, pauses and intonation;
- 3) the principle of action – the word must be addressed to the partner and serve a purpose, supported by visions, subtext and the inner monologue [6].

The principle of freedom rests on the observation that the voice reflects the whole state of the person. Tension in the jaw, the root of the tongue, the neck or the shoulders narrows the resonating spaces and makes the sound flat, forced or hoarse; shallow, high breathing deprives speech of support. Berry pointed out that a speaker's habitual vocal patterns are tied to his personality and life experience, so that work on the voice is also work on the actor's self-perception. Linklater went further and treated the freed voice as a direct channel between emotional impulse and sound. In both approaches freedom is not relaxation for its own sake but readiness of the instrument to respond to thought and feeling.

The principle of logic organises speech in time. The text is divided into speech tacts, each of which carries one thought; within the tact the word that is most important for the meaning is singled out, and pauses mark the boundaries and relationships between thoughts. Over a longer stretch of text logic manifests itself as perspective: the actor must lead a phrase, a paragraph or a whole monologue towards its main point without losing the thread and without emphasising everything equally [6]. A speech without perspective breaks up into separate phrases; a speech with perspective is perceived by the listener as a single developing thought.

The principle of action gives speech its direction. The same words – for example, “Come here” – can be an order, a request, a warning or a reconciliation, depending on what the speaker wants to achieve. The actor therefore needs not only to understand the text but also to know what he seeks from the partner, to see the pictures behind the words and to keep the line of thought alive between the lines of the text [6]. It is this principle that distinguishes stage speech from correct reading aloud.

These principles are not of equal rank; they form a hierarchy. Action is the goal, logic is the means of making the action intelligible, and the freedom of the voice is the condition without which neither logic nor action can be realised. Typical mistakes in training arise when this hierarchy is reversed – for instance, when a student places logical stresses correctly but does not know why he is speaking, or when voice work turns into vocal gymnastics detached from meaning.

The hierarchy suggests a sequence of training. In the author's view, a course of stage speech at a theatre institute can be built in four stages:

- 1) freeing the voice and the breath – removal of tensions, development of support and resonance, combined with simple texts that do not require “performance”;

- 2) technique and norm – diction, orthoepy and the range of the voice, practised on tongue twisters, short poems and prose;
- 3) the logic of the text – analysis of speech tacts, logical stresses and pauses on prose and verse of increasing complexity;
- 4) verbal action – work on monologues, dialogues and roles, in which visions, subtext and the inner monologue become the main tasks.

Each stage requires its own criteria of assessment. At the first stage the teacher evaluates the absence of visible tension, the depth and calmness of the breath and the fullness of the sound. At the second stage the criteria are clarity of articulation, compliance with the norms of literary pronunciation and the range and flexibility of the voice. At the third stage the student is assessed on the correctness of the logical division of the text and on the ability to sustain perspective. At the fourth stage the main criterion is the effectiveness of the word: whether the partner and the audience perceive what the actor wants to achieve.

Special attention should be given to verse. Poetic speech is the most difficult test of the hierarchy of principles, because the rhythm of the line, the caesura and the rhyme tempt the actor to return to declamation. Berry's work with actors on Shakespeare shows that verse becomes alive when its form is not ignored but experienced physically as part of the meaning; the Russian school likewise treats work on verse as a separate section of the course, in which the logic of thought and the rhythm of the line must be reconciled. Verse should therefore appear at each stage of training, from simple poems in voice exercises to dramatic verse in the final roles.

Each stage does not replace the previous one but absorbs it. Exercises for the freedom of the voice remain part of every lesson, and from the very first year even the simplest text should be given a purpose. In this way the hierarchy of principles is reflected in the very organisation of the course.

Discussion

The results show that the history of the theory of stage speech is not a simple succession in which each new school abolishes the previous one. Each stage has left an element that is preserved in the modern theory: declamation – the feeling for sound and rhythm; Stanislavski – the idea of action; the Russian methodologists – the teachable rules of logic and technique; Berry and Linklater – the concept of the free voice.

The proposed hierarchy also clarifies the relationship between stage speech and the other acting disciplines. If the word is an action, work on speech cannot be separated from work on the role: the manner in which a character speaks is one of the principal means of characterisation, and the inner monologue belongs at the same time to stage speech and to acting psychotechnics [10]. Stage speech therefore occupies a central rather than an auxiliary place in actor training, in full accordance with Stanislavski's view of inner experience and outer embodiment as a single process. The teacher of stage speech, accordingly, must be not only a specialist in the voice but also a partner of the acting teacher.

The hierarchy of principles also has consequences for the individual work of the teacher. Students enter theatre institutes with very different vocal habits: some speak too quietly and hold their breath, others force the sound, others have regional features of pronunciation. A uniform set of exercises cannot meet these needs. The teacher must first diagnose which link of the hierarchy is weak in a particular student – freedom, technique, logic or action – and then direct the work accordingly. Audio and video recordings of classes are a useful aid here, since they allow the student to hear and see his own speech from outside and to compare it over time. No less important is the living example of the masters: the memoirs of former students show how much the attitude to the stage word is shaped by the personality of the teacher and by the experienced actors with whom the young performer works.

The same principles retain their force outside the dramatic theatre. In the variety genre, where the performer often addresses the audience directly, the purposefulness of the word becomes even more important, because the audience itself becomes the partner of the action. In the musical theatre the actor constantly passes from speech to song, so that the freedom of the voice and the purposefulness of the word must be preserved in both; the art of A. Shamuratova, who combined the spoken word and singing, is a vivid example of this unity [3]. In screen acting, where the microphone removes the need for a loud voice, the principles of freedom and logic remain decisive, while the requirements for volume and projection change.

Special questions arise when the theory is applied to national theatres whose languages differ in structure from Russian, on the material of which it was largely created. In the agglutinative Turkic languages, for example, grammatical meanings are concentrated at the end of the word and the predicate usually closes

the sentence, which changes the distribution of logical stresses and the weight of the final part of the phrase. The three principles remain valid, but the rules of logic and orthoepy have to be adapted to each language, and this task calls for separate linguistic and pedagogical research. The history of national groups at theatre institutes, in which actors for the Karakalpak theatre were trained, shows that such adaptation has long been carried out in practice by teachers and students themselves; the national tradition of improvised oral performance, such as the *aytis*, is a further resource for it.

The limitations of the study follow from its theoretical character. The proposed sequence of training is based on an analysis of the literature and on teaching experience; it should be tested empirically, for example by comparing the progress of student groups trained according to different sequences.

Conclusion

The theory of stage speech has developed from the declamatory tradition, in which the word was valued as a beautiful sound, to the concept of verbal action, in which the word is a means of influencing the partner. On this path it has absorbed the rules of the logic of speech, the methodology of diction and orthoepy and the idea of the free voice.

The modern theory rests on three principles – the freedom of the voice, the logic of thought and the purposefulness of the word – which form a hierarchy with action at its top. This hierarchy determines the sequence of training: from freeing the voice through technique and the logic of the text to verbal action. Understood in this way, stage speech is not a separate technical subject but one of the central disciplines of actor training, in which the actor's voice, thought and purpose are educated together.

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