

Role Distance: On Stage and On the Merry-Go-Round

Robert Cohen

No issue in acting theory has been more discussed over the past twenty-five centuries than whether an actor should simply manifest his or her part through some sort of technical virtuosity, or experience the role through a process of emotional self-transportation. It is a dialectic Joseph Roach considers “the historic, continuing, and apparently inexhaustible combat between technique and inspiration in performance theory,”¹ and its roots are indeed ancient. Plato, around 395 BC, provides us with a dialogue between Socrates and one Ion of Ephesus, a reciter of rhapsodic poetry, in which the philosopher asks Ion if, while publicly reciting his works, the performer is in his “right mind,” or if his “soul” is rather transported, “in ecstasy . . . among the persons or the places of which you are speaking?” Ion answers that he is indeed in a transported state, but then adds that he also looks down from the stage at his spectators so as to “behold the various emotions . . . stamped upon their countenances when I am speaking.”² Swedish theorist Teddy Brunius calls this “Ion’s hook,”³ suggesting that the rhapsodist employed a double-consciousness, being ecstatic and rational—and one might even say entrepreneurial—at the same time. Martin Puchner locates this hook historically, at the tipping point when the rhapsode “switches from the third person to the first” and “rhapsodic diegesis [narration, reportage] turns into the mimesis [imitation, embodiment] performed by an actor.”⁴

Beyond these Attic sources, Ion’s hook is easy to trace through oft-cited authors across the millennia—Horace and Quintilian in the classical world, Denis Diderot’s “actor’s paradox” in the Enlightenment,⁵ and virtually all present day acting theorists. By the twentieth century, Ion’s hook had re-emerged in the slightly altered form of the seemingly-polarized theories put forward by the two towering director-theorists of the age: Konstantin Stanislavsky in Russia and Bertolt Brecht in Germany, with Stanislavsky famously promoting *perezhivanie* (experiencing,

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or living the part) and Brecht counter-proposing *verfremdung* (standing artfully distanced, estranged or alienated from it). In the theatre world today, two full generations after each man has died, actors and directors continue to posit Ion's dialectic as between modernist "Stanislavskian" and "Brechtian" approaches.⁶

This dialectic, however, should not be limited merely to a consideration of theatrical styles, for the distinction between experiencing and estranging one's "role" is a factor in ordinary life-behavior as well as the theatre. Erving Goffman's notion of "role distance," described in his 1961 essay under that title,⁷ defines a relationship between real-life role experiencing and role estranging that has important implications for acting. Goffman was not writing about theatre in this essay, of course; he was employing a theatrical metaphor to describe psychosocial behavior, just as he did in later books such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. But we can usefully turn Goffman's metaphor back upon its dramaturgical source.

Role distance is Goffman's term for "actions which effectively convey some *disdainful detachment* of the [real life] performer from a role he is performing."⁸ And the author's subsequent discussion of this subject throws light upon the signifier (theatre) as well as the signified (life). Goffman develops his idea after observing children of various ages riding a merry-go-round. Two year-olds, he discovers, cannot maintain sufficient "role poise" to maintain physical, and hence emotional, security under the multi-directional movement vectors the machine creates; they therefore "find the prospect too much for them." Three- and four-year-olds, however, undertake the task rapturously. "The task of riding a wooden horse is still a challenge, but apparently a manageable one, inflating the rider to his full extent with demonstrations of capacity." At three and four, "the rider throws himself into the role in a serious way, playing it with verve and an admitted engagement of all his faculties." Goffman concludes that for this age group "*doing is being*, and what was designed as a 'playing at' is stamped with serious realization."⁹ This merger of doing and being Goffman terms an "embrace" of the performer's "role."

But at age five, everything changes again. "To be a merry-go-round horse rider is now apparently not enough, and this fact must be demonstrated out of *dutiful regard for one's own character*." By five, "irreverence begins, and the child "leans back, stands on the saddle, holds on to the horse's wooden ear, and says by his actions: 'Whatever I am, I'm not just someone who can barely manage to stay on a wooden horse.'" The rider is hence "apologizing," not for "some minor untoward event that has cropped up during the interaction, but the whole role."¹⁰ "Whether this skittish behavior is intentional or unintentional, sincere or affected, correctly appreciated by others present or not, it constitutes a wedge between the individual and his role, between doing and being," Goffman concludes.¹¹ This wedge is role distance.

Role distance expands from age five forward. By seven and eight, Goffman finds, the child “not only disassociates himself self-consciously from the kind of horseman a merry-go-round allows him to be but also finds that many of the devices that younger people use for this are now beneath him. He rides no-hands, gleefully chooses a tiger or a frog for a steed, clasps hands with a mounted friend across the aisle. He tests limits.”¹² By eleven and twelve the ride has become solely “a lark, a situation for mockery.” Adult riders carry role distance even further: “Riding close by their threatened two-and-a-half year-old, [they] wear a face that carefully demonstrates that they do not perceive the ride as an event in itself, their only present interest being their child.” As does the adult who runs the machine: “Not only does he show the ride itself is not—as a ride—an event to him, but he also gets off and on and around the moving platform with a grace and ease that can only be displayed by safely taking what for children and even adults would be chances.”¹³

Goffman extends his notion beyond children and the merry-go-round, describing role distance in adult performance, both professional and social. The operating room surgeon sings obscene ditties while wielding the scalpel so as to assure co-physicians and staff that beneath his professional role rests an emotionally stable human being. The Manhattan waitress smirks to show that beneath her apron is “really” a yet-unsung poet or stage performer. “Know that I am *not* who I appear to be” is the message such “distancy” (as Goffman sometimes calls it) telegraphs. Role distance may also be employed to preempt criticism. The mayor tossing out the first ball of the season does so in a deliberately cockeyed fashion, hoping to sidetrack the crowd’s realization that his fast ball isn’t what it used to be. The diffident suitor seeking to impress his date at a French restaurant swirls the sommelier’s wine sample with a mockingly supercilious air, feigning disdain for a tasting ritual that makes him uncomfortable. Such behaviors demonstrate the prevalence of role distance in everyday lives: We do not wish to be seen either as locked into—or as failing to live up to—our put-on adult roles.

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of Goffman’s findings to the theorization, pedagogy, and evaluation of acting. If, as it is colloquially said, actors are basically children,¹⁴ Goffman proves the point—at least for those in the Stanislavskian model—going so far as to locate the precise age of such juvenility: it is three to four years old, when a child fully embraces “play” and melds “doing and being.” Goffman elaborates the three year-old’s role embracement in terms that describe the Stanislavskian dramatic ideal: “To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one’s acceptance of it. To embrace a role is to be embraced by it.”¹⁵ Goffman’s three-year old merry-go-round rider thus provides not only a perfect illustration of the Russian’s *perezhivanie*, but of the of

the celebrated American acting teacher Sanford Meisner's fundamental goal for the actor: "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances."¹⁶

Conversely, the role distance that Goffman discovers in the five year-old succinctly describes the very *verfremdung* or estrangement that Brecht sought in his epic theatre performances. If the three year-old lives the role, the five year-old coolly presents and critiques it. Such demonstrations of distancy, Goffman asserts, "allow one to show that *something of oneself lies outside the constraints of the moment and outside the role.*"¹⁷ Brecht applied this notion deliberately, asking his actors to "demonstrate" and "critique" their roles rather than to incarnate or inflesh them. The "Brechtian actor," as Brecht describes, expresses a "socially critical" view of his or her own performance, which "emphasizes that it is his (actor's) own account" of the character performed.¹⁸

Goffman's findings make clear that the difference between *perezhivanie* and *verfremdung* is not merely a theatrical dialectic but a direct parallel of a totally normal process in human maturation: role distance and role embracement being equally real-world behaviors of which Stanislavskian and Brechtian performance models are their respective stage-world equivalents. Neither acting model can then be absolutely prioritized as more "real" or "authentic" than the other: The ideal Brechtian actor, no less than her Stanislavskian counterpart, performs a role *authentically* (i.e., in a true to life manner) even when showing that, as Goffman asserts, "something of [her actual] self lies outside . . . the moment and outside the role." A Brechtian actor is therefore "authentic," under proper circumstances, because *estrangement itself is authentic*, and being "outside . . . the moment" can be as true to life as being "in the moment."

Understanding the real-life aspects of these terms can both clarify and demystify several important issues encountered in acting theory, acting pedagogy, and—most vexingly—in the rehearsal room. These are often simply described in overripe moral terms, such as breaches of an actor's "honesty" or "sincerity." This, however, obscures the important psychosociological—as well as aesthetic—distinctions between embracement and estrangement in both role and actor. In realistic plays, for example, role-distanced performance is usually what acting teachers and directors call, simply, "bad acting."¹⁹ It certainly *is* bad acting in these circumstances, of course, because outside of a theatre of deliberate *verfremdung* such estrangement reveals an actor's inability (or refusal) to engage fully in "play"—particularly the sort of play comparable to the "child's play" that lies at the heart of the "adult play" of acting (in plays). But it is bad acting of a very special case. We see it routinely in the high school rehearsal room, for example, when teenagers erupt in giggles when asked to perform as characters they see as noticeably unlike themselves—as, for example, more sophisticated, brutal, or sentimental as they would wish to appear to their classmates, or as having a different gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation than their own. Being asked to "put on" what they consider affected postures,

accents, mannerisms, or costumes may throw them into awkwardly-suppressed embarrassment, which they seek to cover by covertly critiquing the very behaviors they are asked to embrace, thus showing off “cool” behaviors distinct from the “hotter” ones they have been asked to play. But even experienced actors may, for various reasons, find themselves unable to fully participate in such dramatic play and become physically stiff and vocally monotonic when asked to do so, thus undermining their own performances. Such persons are not best described as simply “dishonest” or “insincere.” Rather, they are holding on to Goffman’s “dutiful regard for [their] own [real-life] character” and are, as it were, unconsciously signaling that they are not *really* foppish or female or brutal or sentimental or upper-class—or indeed anything other than their everyday selves. Role embracement, after all, may carry with it the perceived threat of identity effacement, as well as of accusations of deceit and hypocrisy (a word derived from the Greek *hypocrites*—or “actor”).²⁰ Addressing this in the rehearsal hall becomes problematical when treated simply as a moral failure—an actor’s lack of honesty or sincerity—or as an ontological breakdown, described as the actor’s inability to “be real” (the popular actors’ term in the 1950s), or to “commit to the role” (60s), to “get in the here and now” (70s), to “be in the moment” (80s), to “authentically experience the part” (90s), or to “own the role” (00s). Such critiques of performance portraying “the real” against—by implication—“the false” both misstate the technical distinction and overstate the moral or ontological one. What is necessary, in such cases, is not for the actor to progress into a generic and ill-defined world of “reality” but to regress into the role embracement of the three year-old. This is neither moral or ontological. It is rather a matter of rediscovering the art of play within the art of playing.

Since it is “real,” role distance exists even in the realistic theatre when a dramatic character exhibits it—as does, for example, Reverend Tooker as described by Tennessee Williams in this stage direction in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: “*Tooker appears in the gallery doors, his head slightly, playfully, fatuously cocked, with a practiced clergyman’s smile, sincere as a birdcall blown on a hunter’s whistle.*”²¹ An actor playing Tooker in a production of this play—whose central theme is ‘mendacity’—is thereby asked to act Reverend Tooker’s self-mocking distance from the shows of piety his professional role demands.²² Similarly, an actor playing the prince in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* might be expected to play his opening scene in a state of role distance—distinguishing his being from his doing—as he sarcastically mocks his official court-appointed role. “Sullenness, muttering, irony, joking, and sarcasm may all allow one to show that something of oneself lies outside the constraints of the moment and outside the role within whose jurisdiction the moment occurs,” Goffman observes,²³ in words that clearly may be applied to the Shakespeare’s Danish Prince as well as Salinger’s Holden Caulfield and disaffected teenage sons or daughters everywhere.

But it is with Brecht's notion of *verfremdungseffekt* that role distance takes, as it were, center stage, providing an encompassing frame for the epic stage productions in which the theorist/playwright/director asked the actor to distance herself from her role in service to an "historicizing theatre," where "an actress must not make the sentence her own affair, she must hand it over for criticism, she must help us to understand its causes and protest."²⁴ This places role distance directly in the actor's hands as actor, not as character, and not even as actor-on-behalf-of character. In Brecht, the actor places his *own* person into the staged proceedings in order to present "his own (actor's) account, view, version" of the play's incidents and actions.²⁵

Indeed, to Brecht, it was the *audience* that was to be the child. And, as Brecht surprisingly posits, a child on a merry-go-round!

For the spectator wants to be in possession of quite definite sensations, just as a child does when it climbs on to one of the horses on a roundabout: the sensation of pride that it can ride, and has a horse; the pleasure of being carried, and whirled past other children; the adventurous daydreams in which it pursues others or is pursued, etc. In leading the child to experience all this the degree to which its wooden seat resembles a horse counts little, nor does it matter that the ride is confined to a small circle. The one important point for the spectators in these houses is that they should be able to swap a contradictory world for a consistent one, one that they scarcely know for one of which they can dream.²⁶

Brecht, therefore, not only reverses the "ontological age" of the Stanislavskian actor from child to adult, he also reverses the audience's ontological age from adult to child. It's a double-reversal.

But if Brecht's audience is composed of children, they are "children of the scientific age" and must be addressed empirically, by "actor-scientists," skilled at "self-observation" and the "artistic act of self-alienation." The estranged acting that Brecht desires is not simply "bad acting." The *Verfremdungseffekt*, Brecht asserts, "can only be got by long training."²⁷ What can propel such training to a good start is the understanding that estranged performance is not simply a variant acting technique, but an outgrowth of the normal human phenomenon we have been discussing. This requires relearning how to act as a teenager and how to present a role while also maintaining Goffman's "dutiful regard for one's own character."²⁸ The helpful aspect of Goffman's teaching is that we already know how to do this—we have been doing it since we were five. The only trick is remembering *how* we did it, and why, and how it felt.

It is also helpful, in this regard, to recognize that Goffman did not limit himself to placing role embracement and role distance simply as absolutely bipolar performative behaviors but rather as disparate points on a continuum of real-world self-identification, on which we can find discrete gradations of role distance appearing at age five, eight, eleven, and adult years. Brechtian on-stage estrangement can likewise be incrementalized across a continuum ranging from “short” to “long” distance. The stage utterances of Shen Te in Brecht’s *Good Person of Szechuan*, for example, range from conversational-like prose dialogue, to singing, to poetic recitation, to audience interaction, to direct address. Indeed, an actor playing Shen Te will probably wish to differentiate points on the role distance continuum even within one-on-one dialogue scenes with other characters: In the direction of role embracement in scenes with Yang Sun, her lover, and towards role estrangement in her more political dialogues with the capitalist Shu Fu, in which the actor playing Shen Te, in Brechtian fashion, would retain that “something of oneself” that Goffman sees as crucial to real-world distance and Brecht sees as a need to “protest” her role and “hand it over for criticism” (per above), thus conveying Brecht’s—and the actor’s—own political commentary and perspective.

Brecht did not invent role estrangement, of course. Nor did Ion. We can see it throughout Aristophanes, the world’s first postmodern playwright, whose characters frequently (if not always) stand aside from their pretended real-life counterparts to create a theatricalized reality that doubles the phenomenological one—through exaggerated masks and phaloi, asides and pratfalls, and particularly in the mocking, metatheatrical *parabasis* (author’s address, though probably played by an actor) with its audience-enchancing self-ridicule. Role distancing—specifically by mocking one’s theatrical and hence fictive identity—is also implicit when dramatic characters self-reference their “actoriality” in any theatrical era, as they do, for example, in Shakespeare (“If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction,” says Fabian in *Twelfth Night*), Shaw (“Sooner than that, I would stoop to the lowest depths of my profession . . . and be an actress,” says Lina in *Misalliance*) and Beckett (“I’m warming up for my last soliloquy,” says Hamm in *Endgame*).²⁹ So, for an actor seeking work in the Western dramatic repertory, mastering role distance is as essential as mastering role embracement.³⁰

Taking control of what is essentially a natural process, however, is no simple task; one doesn’t easily reverse (or accelerate) one’s lifelong psychobiological process of maturation. Developing the acting skills needed to move freely along the role embracement/distance continuum requires, at minimum, an understanding of the conditions of its emergence in everyday life, where it is not merely a theatrical technique but a survival tool. For the five year-old, role distance establishes (and signals) independence and maturity, distinguishing today’s child from yesterday’s infant and offering the emerging youngster acceptance in his or her simultaneously emerging peer society. Goffman’s findings confirm the obvious: The five year-old

seeks to leave childish innocence—and more importantly the *impression* of childish innocence—behind. Children therefore adore birthdays and similar rites of passage that mark seemingly irreversible advances in power, dignity, and prestige. A drive to maturity makes pre-teens want to smoke, drink, curse, and dress/undress sexily, all in efforts to distance themselves from the babies they once were, and compete in the group they wish to join. “You’re so immature!” is an insult of the highest order in a pre-teen society. Role distancing surfaces as a disdain for one’s infancy, and testifies to an advancing social position, and an adult (or neo-adult) authority. No wonder it is psychologically problematical for actors to reverse this maturation process when asked to embrace roles in a childlike “play” environment, when they have been struggling so hard to *live* such roles in an adult, existential world. The process of human maturation is virtually an etiology of “bad acting” disease, at least as viewed in its Stanislavskian model, and curing this disease is a tall order.

How does the actor give up this socially desirable estrangement in order to fully embrace, in the Stanislavskian sense, a purely fictive stage role? And, conversely, how does a Brechtian actor present that “something of oneself” while simultaneously engaging in simulations of human conversation that even in Brecht’s plays must be at least credible enough, on a human level, to generate dramatic engagement and momentum to climax? A pedagogy of childlike role embracement has been integrated into actor training since at least the 1950s with the employment of actual children’s games (e.g., “Come Over Red Rover”) into the beginning acting curriculum and rehearsal hall; this movement, once ridiculed in both academic and professional quarters, gained both academic legitimacy and international currency with the studies and practices of Viola Spolin and her followers, including both teachers and directors, who have invented specific “theatre games” and playful improvisations to suffuse the notion of child’s play into adult playing.³¹ Other pedagogical techniques include the “Round Robin” classroom acting exercise, where multiple (but differing) scenes are performed simultaneously by an entire acting group, several times in immediate succession in a single room, thus creating a “playground atmosphere” in which, after conquering an inevitable initial level of distraction, actors can more fully embrace their “in play” actions without the greater distraction of an “audience” to whom they feel a need to indicate their real-life (adult) persona.³²

And the “long training” that Brecht considered necessary to properly perform the *verfremdungseffekt* is best achieved by a full consideration of the root causes of role distance, thereby permitting the actor to develop this capability through disciplined intentionality rather than falling back on simply the “bad acting” caused by ontological insecurity. A starting exercise for exploring role distance in life is simply to go back to Goffman’s first observation and ride, with some friends, on the local merry-go-round, running the age gamut from three to thirteen and thereby spiraling from embracement to estrangement on a whirling carousel.

Addressing both the high potential and the crucial problems of both employing and reducing role distance in acting performances requires addressing complex and largely disguised theoretical issues of social, cultural, and age-related identity. But the understanding that follows has the opportunity of delivering, in addition to a theoretical extrapolation of Ion's hook, extremely useful tools for making sound dramaturgical distinctions and uncovering root causes of fundamental acting problems at clear-headed (and refreshingly non-moralistic and non-psychiatric) levels.

Notes

¹ Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985) 25-26.

² Toby Cole and Helen Kritch Chinoy, *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown, 1970) 7-8.

³ Teddy Brunius, *Inspiration and Katharsis* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1966) 15.

⁴ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002) 22.

⁵ Diderot's *Paradox du Comédien* was written in 1773, though not published until 1830.

⁶ In practice, of course, the two directors were neither single-minded in their views, nor as adversely-oriented as this distillation of their theories would suggest.

⁷ Published in Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961). I am indebted to my friend, Bill Speizman, who first told me of this article.

⁸ 110; emphasis and bracketed words mine.

⁹ 106; emphasis added.

¹⁰ 107; emphasis added.

¹¹ 107-108.

¹² 108.

¹³ 109.

¹⁴ As by director Alfred Hitchcock's remark that "All actors are children" (*New York Times*, April 11, 1999) and actor Paul Newman's "The best actors are children, so to that extent that you can sustain and maintain that childlike part of your personality is probably the best part of acting" (<<darkhorizons.com>> interview, July 1, 2002).

¹⁵ Goffman 106.

¹⁶ Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage, 1987) 15.

¹⁷ Goffman 114; emphasis added.

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957) 139.

¹⁹ "I don't believe you!" Stanislavsky would reportedly thunder to his actors from the back of the rehearsal hall, reducing them to tears.

²⁰ Attacks on actors throughout history for being professional liars, hypocrites, and monsters is fully explored in Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1981).

²¹ Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions/Signet, 1955) 86.

²² Likewise the title character of this play alternates displaying an “*image of her playing boys’ games as a child*” (18) with one that “*giggles with a hand fluttering at her throat and her breast and her long throat arched,*” (20), then “*pretends not to understand, cocks her head and raises her brows as if the pantomimic performance was completely mystifying to her,*” (36), then one that, looking in the mirror, “*answers herself in a different voice which is high, thin, mocking: ‘I am Maggie the Cat!’*” (37). The self-mocking, self-theatricalizing roles are all distancing strategies to cover “Maggie’s” unwillingness to embrace her wifely “role” as “Margaret” in this classic drama of American realism.

²³ Goffman 114.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht 97-98.

²⁵ 139.

²⁶ 188.

²⁷ 204, 93, and 98.

²⁸ Goffman 108.

²⁹ *Twelfth Night* III. iv. 127-28; Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1963) 201; Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 78. Not to mention in Pirandello, Genet, or Ionesco. In grosser form, role distance was acutely evidenced in American television shows during the so-called “golden age of live television” by celebrity-performers such as Dean Martin, Carol Burnett and Milton Berle, who, during televised skits, would openly break character and collapse into fits of (largely fake) hysterical laughter, as if to demonstrate their intellectual superiority to the puerile dramatic material they were delivering.

³⁰ And the Eastern as well. In *kabuki*, audience members encourage their favorite actors in a response called *kakegoe*, shouting the actor’s *yago* (“shop name”) in appreciation for his execution of a classic piece of stage business.

³¹ See Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1963 and 1985), respectively.

³² Actors in this exercise are asked to accept the fiction (even where improbable) that scenes going on around them are simply other people living their lives, and that the fact that one is having a conversation with another character doesn’t mean that life elsewhere has come to a dead halt, as is the fiction of the theatre.