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Acting as a Living Craft: Rehearsal, Interpretation, and the Communication of Playwrights' Truths

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Abstract

Acting is one of the oldest forms of human expression, rooted in ritual, storytelling, and communal performance rather than in mere entertainment. Across history, acting has evolved from sacred enactments to professional theatre and screen practices, yet one element has remained remarkably constant, thus, rehearsal. At the same time, acting is a communicative art through which actors interpret and embody the creative visions and "discovered truths" of playwrights for a live audience. This paper brings these perspectives together by examining acting as a living craft grounded in rehearsal and as a communicative process that bridges playwright, actor, and audience. Drawing on ritual theory, classical and modern theatre history and Kenneth Burke's Dramatism Theory, the paper argues that rehearsal is not just a preparatory phase but the central space where craft, analysis, and communication converge. Using a qualitative, interpretive, and historical methodology, the study positions acting as a lifelong discipline of embodied inquiry through which actors continually practice, analyze, and communicate the playwright's underlying truths.

Keywords

Acting, Rehearsals, Communication, Interpretation, Ritual Origins, Script Analysis

1. Introduction

Acting begins with a simple but profound impulse: the desire to express experience, embody stories, and communicate meaning through the body and voice. Long before there were proscenium arches or camera lenses, people used ritual, dance, imitation, and storytelling to make sense of their world and to share that

sense with others (Schechner, 2013; Turner, 1982). These early performances were not casual events; they were communal practices that linked individuals to their communities, to spiritual beliefs, and to shared histories.

Despite this deep history, acting is often misunderstood as a special talent that some people "just have" rather than as a craft that must be developed through patient and persistent work. In practice, acting calls for training in the use of the body and voice, the imagination, and the emotions, and this training largely happens in rehearsal (Stanislavski, 1989). Actors spend hours reading, experimenting, failing, and refining before anything is presented to an audience. At the same time, acting is not only about self-expression; it is also about serving the script. Actors function as interpreters of the playwright's vision, tasked with discovering and communicating the deeper truths that lie beneath the printed words (Baron, 2013; Fernald, 1971).

This paper presents acting as both a historical and a contemporary practice. It traces how acting has developed through ritual, classical, medieval, and modern traditions, and it places rehearsal at the center of that development. In doing so, it argues that acting should be understood less as a single moment of performance and more as a sustained, evolving journey.

2. Purpose and Objectives

The overarching purpose of this paper is to examine acting as an evolving human craft and to establish rehearsal and practice as central to the actor's artistic, interpretive, and professional life. To achieve this, the paper pursues the following objectives:

- To trace the historical origins and evolution of acting from ritual enactments to contemporary theatre whiles exploring major acting theories and practitioners on their understanding of rehearsal and truth telling.
- To introduce Kenneth Burke's Dramatism Theory as a lens for understanding acting as symbolic communication.
- To reposition rehearsal as a lifelong discipline essential to artistic growth and to the communication of playwrights' discovered truths.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and historical approach suited to the complexity of acting as both practice and discourse. It draws on influential primary texts by Aristotle, Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brook, Burke, Schechner, and Turner, among others, to build an integrated conceptual and historical narrative (Aristotle, 1996; Brook, 1995; Burke, 1985; Grotowski, 2002; Schechner, 2013; Stanislavski, 1989; Turner, 1982). These works provide the philosophical, theoretical, and practical foundations for understanding acting as ritual, craft, and communication.

Secondary sources from theatre history, performance studies, anthropology, and script-analysis literature expand and contextualize these foundations (Easterling,

1997; Elam, 2003; Karmakar, 2013; Kiely & Bogart, 2016). In addition, the paper draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with actors who reflect on how they approach scripts, how they rehearse, and how they understand their relationship with playwrights and audiences. A purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants had practical experience with stage work. The interviews were analyzed thematically, focusing on recurring patterns such as character analysis, attention to subtext, thematic exploration, rehearsal collaboration, and moments of personal identification with characters.

By combining historical-interpretive reading of key texts with thematic analysis of actors' experiences, the study takes a hermeneutic stance. It seeks to illuminate how ideas such as rehearsal, embodiment, discipline, and transformation are lived, rather than treating them as purely theoretical abstractions.

4. Ritual Origins: Acting Before Theatre

The story of acting begins long before the invention of "the theatre" as an institution. In many early societies, people performed rituals to honor deities, mark seasonal changes, initiate members into new roles, or heal the sick. In these contexts, performance was inseparable from belief, community, and survival (Schechner, 2013). Individuals stepped into the roles of gods, spirits, or ancestors, adopting specific gestures, chants, and costumes. The goal was not to "play a part" in the modern sense, but to enact a powerful presence that could affect the community's fate.

Turner (1982) describes such rituals as liminal, meaning they occur in a threshold space where ordinary rules are suspended and transformation becomes possible. This idea of liminality offers a compelling parallel to the rehearsal room. Like ritual spaces, rehearsal rooms are set apart from everyday life. They provide a protected environment where actors try out new ways of moving, speaking, and relating without immediate social consequences. In both cases, participants must repeat actions, refine them, and submit to a shared structure.

Seeing acting through its ritual origins invites a shift in perspective. It becomes clear that acting is not a late invention layered onto human life, but rather a formalization of something people have been doing for centuries: using embodiment to explore and influence the world around them.

5. Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Foundations

With the rise of the Greek theatre, acting took on more recognizable contours. Playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote tragedies for large civic festivals, and actors, often masked, worked with choruses and musicians in carefully organized performances (Easterling, 1997). Aristotle's *Poetics* conceptualized drama as mimesis, a disciplined imitation of human action with a clear structure of beginning, middle, and end (Aristotle, 1996). The actor's work, even if not described in detail by Aristotle, had to align with this structure, requiring familiarity with the text and coordination with other performers.

In medieval Europe, religious drama such as mystery and morality plays kept acting traditions alive through performances in churches and public squares. These productions were usually prepared by guilds or community groups and demanded rehearsal for the coordination of large casts, elaborate processions, and sometimes multi-day cycles. Although documentation of rehearsal is limited, the scale of these productions strongly suggests sustained preparation.

The Renaissance brought a major shift as acting became a profession. Permanent theatres, such as those in Elizabethan London, supported companies of actors who played in repertory, sometimes performing different plays on consecutive days. Italian commedia dell'arte troupes developed semi-improvised performances based on stock characters and scenarios, but their improvisation was grounded in rehearsed lazzi and shared physical vocabularies (Rudlin, 1994). The apparent spontaneity of commedia relied on a deep reservoir of rehearsed material, reinforcing the idea that freedom on stage is built on discipline.

Across these periods, a pattern emerges: regardless of style or content, effective performance depends on repeated, collective practice. Rehearsal, even if not named as such, is the invisible infrastructure of performance.

6. Modern Acting Systems: Rehearsal as Laboratory

In the modern period, several influential practitioners placed rehearsal explicitly at the center of acting. Stanislavski's system, developed in late 19th- and early 20th-century Russia, is perhaps the most widely known. In *An Actor Prepares*, he frames rehearsal as a conscious process through which actors explore objectives, actions, and emotional truth (Stanislavski, 1989). The rehearsal room becomes a laboratory where actors investigate "what if" scenarios, experiment with physical and psychological tasks, and gradually build a coherent inner life for their characters.

Jerzy Grotowski took this laboratory idea further, stripping away elaborate sets and costumes to focus on the actor's body, voice, and presence (Grotowski, 2002). His "poor theatre" demanded intense training and rehearsal, not just to polish technique but to allow actors to confront their own limits and fears. For Grotowski, the actor's work in rehearsal is a process of self-revelation, a "total act" offered to the audience.

Peter Brook similarly conceives of rehearsal as a space of exploration. In *The Empty Space*, he emphasizes that rehearsal should be a place where actors and directors test possibilities without fear, discovering rather than merely repeating choices (Brook, 1995). In this conception, rehearsal is not a mechanical run-through but a creative, open-ended process.

Despite their differences, Stanislavski, Grotowski, and Brook share a common belief: acting cannot be separated from rehearsal. The craft of acting is learned, refined, and deepened through repeated practice in a dedicated space. Performance is simply the visible tip of a much larger, ongoing process.

7. Acting as Communication

Alongside its technical dimension, acting is fundamentally communicative. It is through actors that a playwright's words, ideas, and images come to life. Playwrights design scripts to explore human experience, but these scripts remain static until someone embodies them on stage (Azunwo, 2017; Johnson, 2011). In this sense, the playwright and actor stand in a relationship somewhat like creator and interpreter.

Fernald (1971) describes acting as the discovery and communication of truth implicit in an author's words. Actors do more than repeat lines; they search for what those lines really mean in context—emotionally, psychologically, and socially—and then seek to share that meaning with an audience. Effiong (2005) similarly suggests that acting is the playing out of the playwright's envisioned world by trained individuals before an audience, underscoring the responsibility and skill involved.

The audience itself is not passive in this picture. Karmakar (2013) emphasizes that theatre is a relationship between actor and spectator, a live exchange in which meaning is co-created. When an actor's work is grounded in careful rehearsal and sensitive interpretation, the audience is more likely to feel invited into the world of the play, to recognize aspects of their own lives in the characters' journeys, and to reflect critically and emotionally on what they see.

In this light, acting is less about "showing off" than about building a bridge. The actor stands in the middle of this bridge, with the playwright on one side and the audience on the other, helping the playwright's vision travel across in a way that can be felt and understood.

8. Script Analysis, Subtext, and Thematic Depth

To serve as effective interpreters, actors must engage deeply with the script. Script analysis provides the tools for this engagement. Baron (2013) notes that Stanislavski concepts such as objectives, given circumstances, and units continue to shape how actors read and break down scripts. Kiely and Bogart (2016) likewise emphasize that careful attention to action, conflict, and subtext is essential for both directors and actors. Actors tend to work along several connected lines of analysis and they include; character analysis, thus, actors ask what their characters want, what stands in the way, how they change, and how they relate to other characters. Second, dialogue and subtext, where actors pay attention to what is said and what is left unsaid. The subtext is those thoughts and feelings that lie beneath the spoken words that often drives the emotional force of a scene. Finally, thematic exploration, where actors consider the larger questions the play is raising. These might concern justice, love, power, identity, or any number of other themes (Elam, 2003; Johnson, 2005). It is evident that these approaches are widely used in practice, with some actors even beginning their work by mapping out their characters' objectives and obstacles. Others also read scenes repeatedly to uncover subtext or lingering on certain lines to understand why they matter. Some may also have

moments where they suddenly recognized a personal experience in a character's struggle, making the role feel more immediate and authentic.

Rehearsal is where this analysis becomes embodied. Choices that look promising on the page are tested in movement, voice, and interaction. Some are discarded; others are refined. Through this process, the actor moves from an intellectual understanding of the script to a lived, felt relationship with it.

9. Kenneth Burke's Dramatism: A Lens on Acting

Kenneth Burke's Dramatism Theory offers a useful way to think about acting as symbolic action. Burke proposes that human communication can be viewed as drama and introduces the dramatistic pentad: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke, 1985). Each element focuses on a different aspect of a situation: what is done, where and when it is done, who does it, how it is done, and why it is done.

For actors, this framework maps naturally onto script and character work. When analyzing a role, they consider:

- Act: What does the character actually do?
- Scene: In what context or environment do these actions occur?
- Agent: Who is this character? What kind of person?
- Agency: By what means or strategies does the character act?
- Purpose: What motivates the character? What is at stake?

Kirk (1968) and Weiser (2007) note that different emphases within the pentad can dramatically change the interpretation of events. An actor who highlights "scene" might emphasize how circumstances, such as social pressure or historical context, shape a character's choices. An actor who focuses on "agent" might stress the character's inner traits or moral responsibility.

Burke's concept of identification is equally important. Communication, for Burke, involves creating a sense of shared substance between people. In acting, identification operates on several levels. Actors seek to identify with their characters enough to understand them from the inside, even if they do not agree with them. Audiences, in turn, identify with characters through recognition of familiar emotions, dilemmas, or desires (Burke, 1985). When identification occurs, the performance becomes more than a display; it becomes an encounter with shared humanity.

Rehearsal is the space in which this dramatistic work takes place. Actors explore different ways of balancing scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose, and they test how these choices affect identification. Over time, they arrive at interpretations that feel both truthful to the script and meaningful to them personally.

10. Rehearsal as a Lifelong Discipline

Across all these perspectives, rehearsal emerges not as a single step in production but as the central rhythm of an actor's life. Practically, rehearsal is where lines are learned, blocking is set, and ensemble relationships are built. It is also where mistakes are made, where instincts are challenged, and where new possibilities are

discovered.

Actors report that rehearsal gives them a sense of safety in which they can take emotional and physical risks without fear of immediate judgment. It supports the growth of ensemble trust, as performers learn to listen, respond, and depend on one another. It also instills habits of discipline—arriving prepared, warming up, maintaining focus—that mark the difference between sporadic talent and sustainable professionalism (Hagen, 1973; Stanislavski, 1989; Grotowski, 2002).

Beyond formal rehearsal periods, many actors sustain personal practices: voice and movement exercises, private script work, or participation in workshops and training programs. These ongoing activities show that for many practitioners, acting is not something done only when cast in a role; it is an ongoing craft that demands regular attention.

11. Actors' Experiences: Approaching Scripts and Working with Playwrights

The interview findings help ground these theoretical discussions in lived practice.

11.1. Approaching Scripts

Actors described a variety of ways of working with scripts, but several common threads emerged. Many begin with careful reading and character analysis, asking what their characters want and how each scene advances those desires. Others focus first on the language—its rhythms, images, and pauses—to sense the emotional undercurrents beneath the dialogue. Some reported scanning the play for recurring themes and symbols to grasp the story's bigger picture.

Several actors mentioned experiences of "clicking" with a role when they recognized an aspect of their own life in the character's struggles, hopes, or fears. These moments of resonance often deepened their commitment to the role and made the rehearsal process more personally meaningful.

11.2. Collaboration with Playwrights

Experiences of collaboration with playwrights varied widely. A few actors had opportunities to speak directly with playwrights, ask questions, and receive clarification about ambiguous lines or scenes. They described such conversations as helpful in aligning their interpretations with the writer's intentions.

Others noted that they rarely meet the playwright, especially when performing classic or canonical works. In these cases, directors, dramaturgs, and fellow actors become key partners in interpretation. Rehearsal-room discussions, table work, and shared script analysis help the ensemble develop a coherent understanding of the play's goals.

Across these experiences, one idea stands out: interpreting a playwright's truth is a collaborative effort. The actor's individual work is enriched, and sometimes redirected, through dialogue with others.

11.3. Contemporary Pressures and Possibilities

Contemporary acting takes place in a challenging environment. Production timelines are often compressed, budgets are tight, and actors may have limited time to rehearse before performing. In screen work, preparation may be even more rushed, with actors sometimes receiving script changes at short notice.

Technological changes also shape rehearsal. Online rehearsals, self-taped auditions, and digital collaborations became more visible in recent years. These practices bring advantages, such as flexibility and the ability to work across distances, but they can also limit the physical, relational aspects of rehearsal that many actors rely on.

In this context, the actor's personal sense of rehearsal as a discipline becomes even more vital. When time in the studio is short, the quality of that time depends on how much preparation has already been done. Actors increasingly must bring a high level of readiness into the room: lines learned, choices considered, research undertaken. Rehearsal then becomes less a place to start from zero and more a place to test and refine work that has already begun.

11.4. Acting as Living Craft and Communicative Practice

Bringing together the historical, theoretical, and experiential strands, acting can be understood as both a living craft and a communicative practice. As a craft, it is rooted in ritual, shaped through centuries of theatre history, and systematically developed in modern training methods. Its heartbeat is rehearsal—structured, repeated, disciplined practice in which actors explore and refine their work.

As a communicative practice, acting is a way of transmitting meaning from playwright to audience through the medium of the actor's body and voice. Script analysis, attention to subtext and theme, and frameworks such as Burke's Dramatism all contribute to this communicative function. The actor's task is to discover the "truths" encoded in the script—truths about human behavior, relationships, and society—and to share them in a way that resonates with audiences.

In this combined view, rehearsal is not a minor phase on the way to the "real thing" of performance. It is the site where the two identities of acting—craft and communication—meet and nourish each other. Rehearsal is where technical skill is forged and where interpretive insight is earned.

12. Conclusion

Acting is more than the moment when the lights go up and the audience falls silent. It is a living craft shaped by history, theory, and the daily discipline of rehearsal. It is also a profound form of communication through which playwrights' imagined worlds and underlying truths are made tangible. From its ritual beginnings to contemporary practice, one thread runs consistently through acting: the need for repeated, thoughtful, and collaborative preparation.

When rehearsal is understood as the heart of acting, the craft appears less as a one-time display of talent and more as an ongoing journey of practice, reflection,

and growth. When acting is seen as the communication of discovered truths, the actor's role expands from performer to interpreter and partner in meaning-making. Together, these perspectives affirm that to act is to rehearse, to question, to embody, and to share. It is a lifelong discipline of entering into other lives so that audiences might better see their own.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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