

TIMING THE INTRODUCTION OF PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS IN THE TRAINING OF STUDENT ACTORS: THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OYE-EKITI EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

*Theatre production relies on the effective integration of performance elements such as costumes, props, set, lighting, and the audience to support actors in the interpretation of their roles and the realization of dramatic action. However, determining the appropriate stage at which these elements should be introduced during actor training remains a challenge, particularly in educational theatre where premature or delayed introduction may affect students' performance development. This study examines the optimal timing for introducing performance elements to actors-in-training, using the 2019 production of *The Road to Ibadan* by Elechi Amadi, directed by Tayo Isijola at the Federal University Oye-Ekiti, as a case study. This work is hinged on Stanislavski's "System" to make sense of what happens to actors. According to Stanislavski acting must be truthful. Anchored on educational theatre practice, the study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation during rehearsals as methods of data collection. Findings reveal that the late introduction of major props and costumes disrupts actors' concentration, slows rehearsal progress, and creates unnecessary anxiety before performance. Conversely, introducing basic set pieces from the beginning of rehearsals enhances spatial awareness, while integrating props and costumes*

approximately two weeks before performance improves familiarity and confidence. Lighting is most effective during technical rehearsals, whereas preparing actors for audience reactions strengthens stage confidence and performance spontaneity. The study concludes that the strategic timing of performance elements significantly enhances the training process of student actors and recommends that drama teachers and directors adopt structured rehearsal schedules that integrate performance elements progressively to improve learning outcomes and stage effectiveness.

Keywords: Timing, Performance Elements, Props, Students, Actors.

Introduction

Theatre is a team sport where actors, directors, designers, and crew pull ideas together to make something that feels real to the people watching. In educational theatre, the actors are usually new. They are called “actors-in-training” because they are still learning how to move, speak, and feel truthfully on stage. One big problem keeps coming up in training programs; when do you give student actors the actual stuff they will use in the show? The real props such as: the guns, the food, the costumes, the bright lights, and most importantly, the audience who they are rehearsal for.

Some directors hold these things back to save money because props break, food goes bad, and lights cost money to run every night. Other directors worry that costumes and props will distract actors from learning their lines and the director’s stage movements but the students often say the opposite. They struggle when they’ve been pretending for weeks and then suddenly get handed a heavy prop or blinding light few days before opening. Consequently, anxiety sets in as lines get forgotten; cues are missed as confidence drops. This puts the director in confusion and the actors in panic. This article is aimed at tackling that timing problem head-on and asks pertinent questions like: what actually happens to a student actor when you bring in costumes, props, sets, lights, and audience at different points? And when is the “right” time that helps acting instead of hurting it?

To answer this, we studied the TMA 110 Production Workshop at Federal University Oye-Ekiti the play “The Road to Ibadan” performed by all 100-level students on April 11, 2019. Majority of them had never acted in a full play before. The director, Tayo Isijola, used a mix of early and late introduction of performance elements. We watched and interviewed him, and ran focus group discussion with 8 cast members who were purposefully chosen. This became necessary because educational theatre is where young actors are trained to overcome physical tensions and not just about putting up shows. It’s where young people decide if they can do this job. If they keep freezing up because a prop feels strange on show night, they may quit. If we can give teachers a clear, simple timeline for adding performance elements, we protect the actor’s confidence and the quality of the show. That helps the whole field.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on Stanislavski’s “System” to make sense of what happens to actors. Stanislavski said acting must be truthful. Stanislavski (1936) emphasized that acting should be truthful by requiring actors to behave sincerely and convincingly within the given circumstances of the play, arguing that “truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity.” To be truthful, an actor’s body has to be relaxed and their mind focused. Physical tension is “the greatest

enemy of creativity” because it stops the body and blocks the mind. The key components of his “System” are:

1. **Given Circumstances:** Actors need to know everything about the world of the play such as where they are, what objects exist, who else is there. If you rehearse in an empty room for five weeks before introducing real furniture on stage, the “given circumstances” just changed. The actor’s body tenses up to adjust.
2. **Magic If:** Simply, this is a condition that an actor must bear in mind if a situation suddenly crops up and suddenly he asks what if? “What would I do if I were really in this situation?” However, if they’ve been miming a cup for weeks, the “if” is fake. When the real cup shows up, it’s heavier, it spills, it’s hot. The actor can’t answer the “if” truthfully anymore.
3. **Endowment:** you endow and bequeath what you value. Actors give real value to objects. A wooden gun must feel dangerous. That takes time. You can’t endow an object you meet 24 hours before curtain.
4. **Relaxation and Concentration:** an actor that is not relax is always squirming. When an actor is relaxed, he can concentrate. Concentration builds confidence and is highly necessary for good performance. However, late introduction of new elements break concentration. A sudden light in the eyes can “daze the actor” and make them lose focus but when introduced at the right time, the actor gets used to them and can adjust to their effects.

Anti-realists like Meyerhold add another angle. He said actors need physical control and rhythm with space and objects. If the set changes late, the actor’s spatial rhythm is ruined. Brecht reminds us the audience is part of the show. Actors must learn to “report” action even when 200 people laugh unexpectedly. Student actors haven’t built that skill yet.

From the above theories it is observed that performance elements are best introduced at middle of the rehearsal as too late introduction will build tension, broken concentration, and fake “endowment.” While too early introduction, before lines and blocking are solid will overload the actor’s mind.

Analysis

The activities during rehearsal were recorded week by week during the FUOYE production.

Weeks 1-3: Set only, no Props or Costumes

The director started every rehearsal with some version of the set. Chairs, boxes, and benches stood in for stools and tables. Actors never had to squat or imagine a chair; they could lean on something. This helped. Actors learned exits, entrances, and where to stand. Their “spatial rhythm” got set early. The lines and blockings were still shaky. When we asked the reason, the director said, “I was grappling with helping the students to master their lines... they have barely learnt to keep body positions on stage. So, it was not an appropriate time for me to introduce costume, props, light.” The data backs this: students overloaded with new stuff can’t remember words.

Week 4-5: Introduction of Props

The introduction of real props like bread, garri, coffee, wooden guns, plaster, bandages two weeks before show created Immediate problems like:

1. Distraction: As actors looked at the props, not the audience, lines and dialogue suffered.
2. Timing: It was hard for them to eat and talk at the same time.
3. Fear: The canon gun sound frightened actors at first.

To overcome the frights and distractions, the director used repetition and demonstration. He got on stage and showed how to handle each item such that before the performance week, most actors had adjusted. Thus by observation, two weeks is the minimum time students need to make a prop part of their body as less than that may not give the actor enough time to adjust and master the prop or the prop “owns” the actor instead of the other way around.

Final week: Introduction of Costumes and Lights

During the study, it was observed that costumes did not come “a few days to dress tech” and lights “did not come until dress tech.” This created new issues. Some students got “carried away” by costumes and started taking pictures instead of rehearsing. One actress got a new costume on show day that took too long to put on, causing a delay. Lights dazed actors who had never stood under them.

Again, to overcome the challenge, the director suggests that costumes should arrive before dress tech so you can gauge and check your changing time, make amendments or trim the costumes to the size of the actors. Furthermore, lights should be used completely on the dress tech day so that actors adapt.

Audience: The Final Element

The real crowd cannot be mimicked or imitated during rehearsals. The FUOYE audience was critical and volatile. They laughed, clapped, and even tried to take over the show. If this unfolds during performance, the director’s should warn the actors in advance to just hold on and pause when the crowd reacts. However, in some instance, actors’ morale may be boosted by the audience reaction once they knew how to handle it or “false” audience which will entail allowing few audience members (simulate) to seat and watch the rehearsals. Their reactions will ginger the actors and get familiar with their reactions. From the forgoing, the following pattern is recommended in the introduction of performance elements during rehearsals:

Set = immediately.

Props = mid-rehearsal.

Costumes = late rehearsal but before tech.

Lights = tech week.

Audience = advise and simulate.

From the above, we propose for a 6-week production Practical timeline for student as follows:

1. Week 1: Set pieces and stand-in props are introduced as the director focus on lines and blocking.
2. Week 3: Real props are introduced and repeated daily.
3. Week 5: rehearsals are run on real costumes. This will give room for adjustments and amendments to fit the size of actors as well as get accustomed to the costumes.
4. Week 6: Full technical rehearsals with lights, sound and a test (false) audience.

This is in line with both Stanislavski’s need for truth and to save cost.

Discussion

Stanislavski's idea of "creative state of mind" needs relaxation. A new prop creates tension. Give the actor 10-14 days with the prop, and the body relaxes. The prop becomes part of "given circumstances" instead of a surprise. Waiting too long hurts "endowment." In the show, a blood effect that was used deviated from the initial plan of the director, because the makeup artist and actor didn't rehearse it with the tight costume. If they'd had the costume earlier, they would have solved it. The illusion broke.

Cost of providing real props may be high. To mitigate this, directors are advised to stand-ins. The director used boxes, water for tea, and mimed bandages early on. That keeps costs low while letting actors build muscle memory before real items are brought/introduced in 2 weeks. For lights, the dazing effect is physical and since an actor unseen is unheard, it becomes difficult to act if you can't see. To get accustomed to the effects of the lights on the actors, one technical rehearsal will not be enough. Therefore, directors should endeavour to have at least two to three full runs of rehearsals with lights before the final production.

To get a mock audience in an educational theatre may not pose any threat. Although Stanislavski did not give it a thought in his theory but Brecht extensively did. Student actors need Brecht's idea as he incorporated the crowd in his postulation and practice. The director's advice to "freeze" and let the audience finish is practical and can be simulated during rehearsals and get accustomed to the student actors before the performance day. He may add "audience rehearsals" where he invites ten friends of the theatre to watch a run-through and make noise on purpose.

Conclusion

Actors-in-training are building a house and learning to use the tools at the same time. Hand them a hammer on day one and they'll hit their thumb. Hand it to them on show night and the house falls down. The FUOYE "Road to Ibadan" case shows there's a middle way. Start with space, then slowly add the real things the body must touch, wear, and see.

From this study, we adduce three rules

1. Don't surprise the body. If an actor will hold it, wear it, or eat it, get it in their hands at least 2 weeks before opening. That's how long it takes to stop "acting with the prop" and start "living with it."
2. Rehearse the audience. Young actors think a quiet room is normal. It's not. Teach them to pause, breathe, and then continue when people react. Do it before show day or the crowd will run the play, not them.
3. Fake it early, real it late. Use boxes for chairs, water for tea, and street clothes for costumes at the start. It saves money and lets actors focus. But the switch to real must happen before tech week, or you'll get delays, dazed actors, and broken moments.

For directors in educational theatre, this is a planning tool, not a rulebook. If your show has sword fights, get the swords in week 2. If it's a dinner scene, get real food in week 4. The point is: treat every element like a new cast member. It needs rehearsal time to become part of the ensemble. We equally advocate for students to speak up and let the director understand their fears and challenges as to resolve them early before performance day. If the gun scares you or the costume won't zip, say it in week 5, not 5 minutes to curtain. Your job is to be truthful, and you can't be truthful if you're fighting your shoes.

Theatre will always be a live, risky art. But we can take out some of the unnecessary risk. Timing is a craft. Learn it, and the elements stop being obstacles and start being partners. That's when acting stops feeling like school and starts feeling like life.

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