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What do actors do in contemporary theatre?

Luule Epner

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the issue of strategies of acting in contemporary (largely postdramatic) theatre. In the first part of the article, the acting is conceptualized as playing, with reference to relevant theories, particularly that of Thomas Pavel. The article puts forward the argument that the play world created in a theatre performance can be described by the continuous fictional – real spectrum that accommodates a number of strategies of acting. Within the continuum, there exists an ongoing tension between the fictional and the real; their relationship is largely variable depending on the strategies of acting at work in a particular performance. In the second part of the article, these strategies are divided into three groups: 'being someone else', 'being oneself ' and performing actions – and are then analyzed on the basis of examples that are drawn primarily from Estonian contemporary theatre.

Keywords: playing, poetics, ambivalence, political theatre, Estonian theatre, TheatreNO99

BIOGRAPHY

Luule Epner is Associate Professor at the University of Tallinn. She also lectures on theatre research at the University of Tartu. Her main research fields are the relationships between dramatic texts and theatre performances, the history of Estonian theatre and performance analysis. She has published a book on drama theory, Draamateooria probleeme I–II (1992-94), and numerous articles on contemporary Estonian theatre and drama.

luule.epner@ut.ee

What do actors do in contemporary theatre?

LUULE EPNER

What do actors do in the theatre? "They are acting" seems to be the obvious answer. However, there is every likelihood that with regard to contemporary theatre the answer would be, "they are performing", since there is a quite common perception that a concept of acting will not cover all kinds of tasks to be carried out on stage. Similarly, the notion 'performer' is liable to replace the old familiar word 'actor' in both academic and popular discourses. The goal of this article is to seek to conceptualize acting flexibly enough in order to cover a variety of strategies that are employed in contemporary (largely postdramatic) theatre. In the first part of the paper, I shall discuss the issue of 'acting' using a theoretical framework and some theories of play. The second part provides a description of the main strategies of acting employed in present-day theatre and is illustrated by a set of examples drawn from Estonian theatre.

ACTING AND/AS PLAYING

Play is sometimes considered to be merely one of the many modes of acting, distinguished by spontaneity and improvisation, and seen as being in contrast to realistic acting, which relies on psychological truth.[1] However, I find it helpful to examine acting in general through the lens of play. First of all the relationship between play and acting needs to be specified for the purposes of the present article.

The multi-faceted phenomenon of play is frequently defined by a list of its characteristics. So, play is commonly understood as a free, voluntary activity with neither an outside purpose nor material interest. This 'free' activity, nevertheless, takes place within certain temporal and spatial boundaries and follows a set of rules. Thus, playing constitutes the reality different (and safely separated) from everyday life.

Theories of acting tend to focus particularly on the relationship between actor and character, which implies concurrent oppositions such as presence vs. representation, face vs. mask, etc., all of them suggesting the dichotomy of stage reality and the fictional world. When understood in this way, acting would fall into the class of games that Roger Caillois has called mimicry (make-believe, disguise) in his seminal book *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958). Like theatre, these games rest on 'as if', which implies the emergence of an imaginary world. But even if mimetic play mostly lies at the core of theatre, the dichotomous model mentioned above fails to account satisfactorily for acting in general for at least two reasons. Firstly, because quite a number of contemporary postdramatic stage productions dispense with any fictional characters, and secondly, because the model disregards the spectator whose presence is as important for constituting the theatrical event as that of the actor.[2]

To develop a more inclusive model, I shall pinpoint some key features of the play phenomenon not discussed above: the equality of players, and a notion of the play world, as contrasted to that of the fictional world. The former feature allows for the inclusion of spectators in their capacity of co-players. Indeed, a play world comes into existence in the

course of a theatrical event, which is, "the simultaneous encounter between performer and spectator in the situation of playing".[3] When considering the play world, this is worth considering in some depth.

PLAY WORLD

If the fictional world is, first of all, an imaginary space-time populated by imaginary people, then in the case of play the emphasis lies elsewhere. The play world is created by virtue of marking off boundaries (though labile) and establishing rules (though shifting) that will control further activities within boundaries. The critical feature of every kind of play world is its ambivalence. Ambivalence firstly refers to the state of mind of players (in terms of the theatrical event, actors and spectators alike) – they experience contradictory feelings or attitudes simultaneously – which arises from play's dual ontological regime. It has been argued that play is essentially a biplanar behaviour[4], the perception of which is defined by a kind of divided mental state.[5]

Thomas Pavel, in his theory of fiction, provides a more nuanced approach to this issue. He puts forward a useful idea of dual structure and exemplifies it through the example of children's make-believe playing, which is a sort of prototype for theatre (given that theatre is viewed as play). A dual structure is made up of two levels – 'the really real' (ontologically primary level) and 'the fictionally real' (secondary level) – that are linked by the correspondence 'will be taken as'.[6] Pavel's terms point out that the level of reality never vanishes altogether, since the structure of play takes root in the actual world, while the level of fiction is a derivative. In contrast to the segregationist view of the fiction – reality relationship, Pavel makes a case for the capability of play to pass beyond the realm of fiction. He says: "… when sufficient energy is channelled into mimetic acts, these may leave the fictional mode and cross the threshold of actuality." [7]

I propose that in order to give a more detailed and dynamic description of the structure of play, we should rather think of the two levels as the poles between which play activities constantly vibrate or oscillate. The basically unstable structure of play could just as soon be described by a continuum model, which suggests gradual shifts instead of distinct levels. Within the continuum, the fictional and real/actual 'ingredients' are combined to varying extents by the agency of play. There are forces at work in the continuum that push play towards the extremes – from a historical perspective, attempts proliferate to transform art into life, or, conversely, to sever all bonds with the real world.

To start a play, consensus on the nature of succeeding actions must be reached. Any behaviour can be classified as (theatrical) acting provided that the spectators recognize the event as theatre performance. Marking off boundaries in time (the beginning and the end of the event) and in space (the stage as playing area) does not suffice to construct a (theatrical) play frame – the participants' mental attitude towards what will happen within the boundaries is of equal importance. According to Gregory Bateson, play can only occur on the condition that signals, which convey the message 'this is play' and thus set up a kind of cognitive frame, have been exchanged on the meta-communicative level.[8] The frame specifies that the following activities will be playful, i.e. ambivalent; by the same token, framing sets up the spectators' expectations. Since theatre is an institutional art having well-established conventions, spectators usually have no serious problems with the framing of a theatre performance. This may become problematic, when theatre makers send contradictory signals and/or shift the frame during the event to unsettle their audiences.[9]

Once inside the frame, actors and spectators alike are engaged in theatre play, but to different extents and in different ways. When we examine the actual theatre situation, the above-stated equality of players turns out to be a mere abstract principle: the communication of two parties is asymmetrical, i.e. their roles cannot be completely reversed as the actors retain authority over the framed activities. Theatre makers initiate a particular theatre play and normally remain in control of its progression. They also establish rules that govern the relationships between actors and spectators. Nevertheless, one could play not only by rules, but also with rules themselves, in the sense that the participants (the actors, in the first place) modify, change and/or cancel the rules during a process of play.

In terms of acting as playing, the continuous fictional – real spectrum accommodates a number of strategies of acting. Inside the continuum, the players (actors, in the first place) establish and abolish rules, now construct and now destroy fictional worlds (if there are any) or bits of worlds. From the vantage point of actors, playing appears as a dynamic process of moving and manipulating the levels of 'really real' and 'fictionally real'. In this process, they seem to delineate trajectories for perception of stage action – they distance the audience from or foster their immersion in a fictional world – though spectators are free to follow such trajectories or not. Yet, with Pavel's claim about crossing the threshold of reality in mind, one might ask whether acting on stage can stop being perceived as play and an actor being perceived solely as him/herself.[10]

In the following section I will attempt to map a number of widespread contemporary acting strategies in light of the fictional – real spectrum; yet I do not intend to propose an all-embracing system. I dwell neither on traditional realistic (Stanislavskian or Method) acting nor on Brechtian detached acting, since these modes have been sufficiently discussed in a variety of theories of acting.

ACTING STRATEGIES I: 'BEING SOMEONE ELSE' (ACTOR AND ROLE)

There are plenty of contemporary stage productions that still contain fictional characters to be portrayed. Jens Roselt has aptly observed that acting is increasingly significant in postdramatic theatre not because "no roles would be played any longer, but because they would be played differently".[11] At least four strategies for playing '*anders*' (differently) can be identified.

First: a repertory of expressive means commonly used to represent the characters is being restricted on purpose, i.e. some of the means are cast aside or replaced with apparently non-representational ones. This strategy is very likely to draw the spectators' attention to the means of expression as such, as well as to the professional skills of the actors who are forced to create roles out of the available resources. By the same token, their perception of fictional characters will be overshadowed to a certain extent. Wordless performances that turn the spotlight to bodily techniques (e.g. *The Long Life* (2003) and *The Sound of Silence* (2009) by Latvian stage director Alvis Hermanis) provide one illuminating example here.

A restricted and re-arranged repertory of expressive means was the dominant (in the sense of Roman Jakobson) of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (2009) of the Theatre NO99 (adaptation of Harriet Beecher-Stowe's novel, directed by Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper). The actors alternately read the novel aloud using neutral intonation sitting on a bench next to the wall (i.e. outside the play world) and enacted the story on stage. Two conspicuous devices (rules of the play) were used throughout the play: masks to designate black, mulatto and white characters, and an invented artificial language (mix of words and sounds from various European languages, and Japanese) that the actors spoke when communicating with each other – except Uncle Tom (Andres Mähar) who spoke Estonian. Due to these devices many of the stage figures became grotesque stereotypes – for example, the slaveholders wore animal masks with snouts, beaks, and sharp white teeth, thus visualizing the idea of a predatory upper class. Since the audience could neither understand the verbal part of the play nor observe the facial expressions – though, they were able to follow the plot thanks to the novel being read aloud – the actors had to enhance paralinguistic means and body language in order to convey the meanings. Their over-expressive acting style served several purposes. On the one hand, the overtly theatrical acting distanced the audience from the represented fictional world in favour of the perception of play, as well as assisted in the deconstruction of the melodramatic story. On the other hand, the actors could still evoke empathy, especially (but not only) for Mähar's Uncle Tom whose understandable language (Estonian) and more psychological acting manner made him distinct from the others.

Second: the means of expression are separated from each other and dissonant, so that they stop denoting one stable psychological whole that might be perceived as a character.[12] This was one key strategy in *The Big Feast* (2012, NO99, directed by Lauri Lagle), inspired by Marco Ferreri's film *La Grande Bouffe*. The four actors performed under their own names, but enacted clear-cut characters. Their pri-

mary means was body language, as the performance consisted mostly of grotesque eating scenes and other physical actions. But occasionally they delivered monologues (taken from various texts) that had no relation to the stage action and were not easy to associate with their stage figures either. So, Priit Võigemast, who portrayed a slightly immodest playboy-like Latino, suddenly started a high-sounding talk about the history of the universe. Later in the performance, the actress Eva Klemets presented a monologue of a melancholy actor from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Holzfällen*; to signal the male sex she attached a thin fake moustache to her face. Such monologues highlighted the discrepancy between the verbal and bodily part of acting, which definitely hindered the spectators from identifying with the characters, and made them perceive the ambivalence of stage figures.

Third: playing of multiple roles, whether in sequence or in turns. Depending on how the roles have been cast – who plays what set of roles – the network of relationships between the actors in performance will take shape, which obviously is not identical to the system of characters in the text. Further, different characters become interconnected through the body of an actor – thus new meanings will possibly emerge from those combinations. In Shakespeare's *Pericles* by NO99 (2008), directed by Ojasoo and Semper in an intercultural key – a combination of Shakespeare's poetical language along with Bollywood-style songs, dances and costumes – all the actors, except the lead, played several roles, marked with visual details like wigs, beards, costumes, as well as different acting styles. The actors frequently switch between their roles right on stage. So, at the outset of one scene in *Every True Heartbeat* (2013, NO99, directed by Ojasoo and Semper) Risto Kübar enacted an obstinate child refusing to go to bed, and Inga Salurand his admonitory mother, but at one point (not fixed in advance) they had to change roles: Kübar momentarily turned into a patient father and Salurand into his hyper-active daughter. The strategy in question tends to keep actors distanced from characters and calls the audience's attention to their acting virtuosity. The emphasis is on the actors' ability to adapt to the rapidly changing situations, and to fit into ever new constellations of characters and/or actors. Surely, this strategy demands, but also stimulates a sense of partnership.

The Big Feast (2012), Theatre NO99, directed by Lauri Lagle, on stage Margus Prangel, Priit Võigemast, Eva Klemets, Marika Vaarik. Photo: Tiit Ojasoo.

Fourth: doubling or multiplying roles by means of video. Experimentation with new technology has mushroomed in recent postdramatic theatre (particularly in German theatre – Frank Castorf, René Pollesh, et al.), affecting in many ways the live performance of actors. When live-feed video is employed, actors need to perform both to the camera and through the camera to the audience, and sometimes to interact with video images. As the actor is simultaneously present physically and virtually (mediated through technology), his/her role is split up, fragmented. Images projected onto the screen (usually a big one) duplicate their stage action, and they have to compete for the attention of the audience – not an easy task, since the onscreen copy of reality tends to attract spectators more efficiently than live acting. In *Stalker* by NO99 (after the film of Andrei Tarkovsky, directed by German stage director Sebastian Hartmann, 2006) the male actors played the roles of Stalker, Writer and Professor in turns. They were followed by two hand-held cameras; video images (mostly close-up shots) were immediately projected onto four large screens. The spectators, confronted with live acting and two different video images simultaneously, had to make their choices in order to construct their own performance in terms of perception – to act as co-players.

Using the above strategies, actors can manipulate the actor-character relationship in many ludic ways. They can play roles in a sense or to an extent, but, more importantly, they can also play with the roles, treating them as toys. Through such playing the artificial, constructed nature of fictional characters becomes apparent; hence, there occurs a shift towards the 'reality' pole of the spectrum. A typical attitude of audiences is possibly a kind of changing balance between immersion and detachment.

Is it necessary to make a distinction between representation of fictional characters and of real people –, as is the case with respect to so-called documentary theatre? Yes, there seems to be a role but not much fictionality seeing that documentary performances are largely built out of authentic speech, like interviews, diaries, letters, etc (true, all this will be eventually fictionalised to a greater or lesser extent). Thus, in the increasingly popular verbatim theatre, actors are required to reproduce real people's speech word-for-word. On the one hand, actors usually play an active role in devising documentary productions – they might interview people, collect and compile data –, and thus become (co)-authors of their lines. On the other hand, actors evidently have to accept some restrictions for the sake of truthfulness of their stage figures.

But do portraying real people imply a specific strategy of acting? Estonian stage director Merle Karusoo would answer in the affirmative. In her documentary productions, the actors tell the life stories of real people: of Estonians who assisted the Stalinist deporters in the 1940s (*The Deportation Men*, 1999), of convicted murderers (*Save Our Souls*, 2000), etc.[13] Karusoo suggests that actors should not 'live through' (in the sense of Stanislavsky) individuals whose life stories they present, but must 'develop' them, to use the old photographic term – to bring them to light. However, in so far as actors mimic the manner of speech and behaviour of real people, that mode of acting resembles the traditional realistic style; arguably this serves to fictionalize the individual whom an actor represents. As to the spectators, their expectations and their reception of documentary performances are, to an extent, affected by their prior knowledge of the represented people or at least by the fact that characters have their counterparts in real life.

From the actors' perspective, things look a little different, when they have to tell about their own life experiences on stage. In *The Lives* (Tartu New Theatre, 2009, directed by Andres Keil) two young actresses presented the autobiographical stories of Estonian and Russian prostitutes, but for the sake of justice, as it was stated, they told the audience their personal stories, too. The spectators very likely perceived those stories as fully authentic, all the more so, because authenticity was underlined by a pretty unusual procedure: each spectator had to sign an agreement of confidentiality, i.e. to promise not to reveal this personal information publicly.[14]

The Lives provides a link to the next group of acting strategies, in which the actor 'as oneself' begins to predominate, while the fictional character tends to decompose or vanish.

ACTING STRATEGIES II: 'BEING ONESELF'

What does 'to be oneself' mean ?[15] Performing under one's own name is obviously not a sufficient condition – even though a proper name is a strong signifier, which identifies a person, it gives no information about him/her. True, this signifier can produce coherence in stage productions that employ a variety of acting modes with actors quickly switching between them. Whatever the actors do – enact sketches, improvise, dance, and sing, etc. – their personality, referred to by their proper name, binds all this together.

For the same reason, the actor's body lays a ground for the diverse forms of his/her stage presence and interconnects them. It goes without saying that the body is a complex phenomenon. David Graver identifies no fewer than seven distinct kinds of the actor's corporeal presence, saying: "Actors are (to greater or lesser extents depending on their activities, appearance, and histories) characters, performers, commentators, personages, members of socio-historical groups, physical flesh, and loci of private sensations."[16] He helpfully makes a strong case for rejecting the simplifying dichotomy of actor – character. I will take a somewhat different approach to the issue. If acting is regarded as psychophysical practice, in which body and mind are virtually inseparable, then the actor's world view or life experience proves as essential as his/her physical body. On this account (and given a particular focus on the actor's self-presentation) I will base my classification below on the concept of identity.

Identity is a multi-layered construct that comprises layers of social, cultural, ethnic, gender identities etc., all anchored in the private personality, i.e. distinct individuality of a person. It stands to reason that different layers are inseparably intertwined; nevertheless, one can differentiate between acting strategies on the basis of what layer of identity predominates. So, a closer observation reveals that 'being oneself' is often a kind of playful exhibition and exploration of the actor's diverse layers of identity. No wonder that these strategies are mostly coupled with the practices of theatre-making that reinforce the actors' authorship (e.g. devising).

Let me offer a few examples. The actor as a citizen who possesses a certain value system and political sympathies comes to the fore when he/she overtly takes a stand on social and political issues on stage. Because of the ambivalence of play it might sometimes be hard to figure out whether an actor is serious or not. *Unified Estonia Assembly*, a simulated political event (see endnote 11), provides a telling instance. The actors gave highly populist speeches that did not express their own opinions, but were presented convincingly enough to make at least some fraction of the audience doubt whether they performed roles or spoke on behalf of themselves. Since a few non-party politicians, like a member of the European Parliament and a former Chancellor of Justice, showed up and gave speeches, too, the borderline between real politics and political performance became quite hazy. The project as a whole, though, clearly manifested NO99's critical attitude towards Estonian political parties.

A substantial amount of feminist and gay theatre delves into issues of gender identity, seeking to dismantle the habitual representations of masculinity and femininity, to throw critical light on gender roles and stereotypes, etc. One of the rare instances of feminist theatre in Estonia was *PostUganda* (Von Krahl Theatre, 2009), in which the actresses, Riina Maidre and Maike Lond, performed songs and stand-up comedy style scenes that addressed female sexuality from an ironic perspective. The performance included the deliberate objectification of oneself; a provocative, even harassing flirt with a random male spectator; exhibition of female hysteria, etc.

Issues of national (ethnic) identity inform acting in the so-called theatre based on ethnic heritage. 'Ethnic' theatre draws its material from folklore, but instead of representing the archaic world, it uses these cultural resources for redefining identity with the help of intra- and intercultural strategies. The actors confront traditional culture in order to reflect, in a playful manner, on their relationship to this heritage. One recent example is *How to Sell a Seto?* (2012, directed by Anne Türnpu) that dealt with the traditional culture of Setumaa (a region in south-eastern Estonia), nowadays drawn by two opposite forces: a desire for ethnic authenticity and a desire to profit from marketing the Seto culture as an object of interest for foreigners. The young ac-

tors who authored the performance took an ironical distance from both trends; at the same time they strove to encourage a self-conscious construction of one's identity.

The personality of the actor as a unique individual becomes the centre of attention if private experience is overtly used, as in the case of telling personal stories to the audience (cf. *The Lives*, cited above). A touring summer project, *Tiina Tauraite's Tractor* (2013), was a solo performance in which the actress told about her studies at an agricultural high school, while a brand-new tractor she drove to arrive at the performance place, provided the backdrop. Apparently, the largest part of the performance's appeal was an amazing, discordant combination of the acting and farming occupations.

Finally, a layer of vocational identity can dominate which means that the actor operates in the capacity of a theatre practitioner who possesses special skills and talents. Like in most performances employing the actor 'as oneself', stage space is primarily seen as a playing area – work environment for actors – and actors are occupied rather with inventing and pre-arranging diverse play situations than with constructing a complete fictional world. They might make use of fictional characters, but bits of fictional worlds and characters serve as mere props in and for the play. Fictional elements are subordinated to, what I would call, meta-actorial intention: to question ontological, phenomenological, ethical and other implications of acting, to explore possibilities and impossibilities of artistic self-expression or of communication with spectators, to put oneself to the test as an actor, etc. Self-reflexive acting borders the territory of 'practice as research'. One can still speak of the role in a sense, but what actors play is 'the role of the actor'. If the enactment of fictional characters can well occur behind 'the fourth wall' , then playing of the role of actor cannot, because being present on stage as an actor necessarily implies to be looked at by someone. Hence, this strategy involves the actor's full awareness of the spectators and of their vital role in the play.

The solo performance of Juhan Ulfsak *Hamlets* (Von Krahl Theatre, 2006, directed by Alexander Pepelyayev) was principally a research performance

Hamlets (2006), Von Krahl Theatre, directed by Alexander Pepelyayev, on stage Juhan Ulfsak. Photo: Alan Proosa.

into acting and the actor's personality; elements of plot and small textual excerpts from *Hamlet* were used as mere tools. The act of performing a role was in different ways taken apart and put together again, multiplied and fragmented; the actor's live body was opposed to and combined with live video images on screen, as well as with inanimate objects – like a sewing machine which symbolized Ophelia. In one scene Ulfsak first carefully prepared a soundtrack: created noises and sounds (for example, jingled keys before a microphone), voiced a few brief phrases. Thereafter he performed the scene involving three characters in mute, synchronizing his stage action with the soundtrack just recorded. Therefore, when a fictional context was added, the jingling of keys served to signify the clinks of a teaspoon against a cup. Deconstructive acting laid bare mechanisms of scenic representation.

In another solo performance, *In the end everybody is happy and if not, then it's not the end* (2012, NO99), Rasmus Kaljujärv got along without a pre-written character; he took up the emblematic role of a clown. Furthermore, he deprived himself both of his own face and of speech, (he uttered non-articulated sounds only), with the purpose of exploring the essence and margins of communication in the theatre; that is to say, whether or not an essentially lonely actor can achieve an intimate personal contact with his spectators. Such acting strategies develop the actor's awareness of his/her 'real self' and acting personality alike.

Special attention should be paid to improvisation – the strategy most intimately related to play as genuinely free, spontaneous activity. Improvisation is widely used in rehearsals, but it seems to be a much less common strategy in actual theatre performances. Unprepared collective improvisation that tests the actors' adaptability and quickness of mutual communication is naturally a risky business, since failure keeps endangering each performance. Free improvisation, governed by chance and risk, vividly demonstrates how play functions as "a machine of introducing uncertainty".[17]

One of the key scenes of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (NO99, 2009) – a stage production that reflected on acting as contrasted to and combined with performance art – was improvised on the spot, with a view of bringing in the element of unpredictability and creating unrepeatable images. The sequence to be improvised had to meet two rules: the playing area was defined as an imaginary town square where people meet (tribute to Peter Handke), and the scene had to end with one actor turning into a 'dog-man' (tribute to Oleg Kulik). The players attempted to achieve the state of flow in which things seem to happen by themselves – sometimes succeeding, other times not.

By analogy with 'site-specific' performance, the group of strategies under discussion could be called 'actor-specific' playing.[18] Play provides actors with flexible means for dealing with identity as something that is subject to constant construction and reconstruction. I suggest that the 'acting personality' (in other words, the vocational identity layer) is fundamental to all kinds of self-presentational performance: whatever layer of identity the actor has chosen to highlight – be it social, gender or another group identity – he/she cannot stop being perceived as an actor, in the first place. The audience is most likely to appraise his/her professional mastery and stage charisma, but also take an interest in his/her personal life, in so far as actors are public figures. Actor-specific performance still involves fictionality to varying degrees, from usage of fictional characters to a few rhetorical devices utilized to shape a personal story. Acting in the mode of 'being oneself' can produce a strong effect of authentic self-expression, nonetheless. An audience's response probably depends, to an extent, on a spectator's prior knowledge of the actors' private life, political views etc., that may affect the interpretation of the ambivalent elements of performance.

ACTING STRATEGIES III: PERFORMING ACTIONS

How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, cited above, included a long wordless scene (an allusion to environmental works of the art of Christo): the actors carefully made a big package of all the objects on the stage, pulled it up, and left it to hang over their heads. They performed physical actions as such with no rational meaning to be assigned. The actors like-

wise performed bits of contemporary dance, created a sound installation and carried out physical exercises, etc.

Here, I come to the third acting strategy that is closest to the pole of real on the scale: performing actions with no intention of impersonating someone else. There is neither fictional character nor pursuit of self-expression, even if some professional skills are still needed. This kind of stage behaviour is primarily found in hybrid forms that combine theatre, performance art and/or contemporary dance. Unconventional acts of behaviour, e.g. a fully dressed woman washing herself; actors hurriedly peeling carrots and then tossing them onto the stage (examples from the productions of NO99), can work as image because of their strangeness – which in its turn results from the absence of any narrative context. In other cases, actors perform everyday actions in a way that calls attention to preciseness and beauty of their gestures. This mode of acting offers vivid perceptual experiences and/or stimulates affective responses rather than intellectual interpretation. Carrying out actions in theatre generally occurs as one of the several modes of acting that are employed in a stage production and combined with each other. Physical actions are frequently executed by a group of actors, and that is likely to create intricate rhythmic patterns or choreographed sequences. By virtue of the play frame, such stage behaviour will create meanings and/or effects different from the everyday actions represented on stage.

Moving further towards the reality pole of the continuum one has the performing of supporting technical tasks in front of audiences, most likely by non-actors such as stagehands moving scenery or video camera operators filming the actors. In the case of actors, heightened attention is paid on how they perform their tasks, while the stage crew and the cameramen, who show up on stage, presumably stay out of focus, although they do not go unnoticed. They probably lack 'presence' or charisma, and do not fit the category of actor proper. Yet they fall doubtless into the category of players, in so far as they assist in constructing a world of play. Surely, actors too, can switch to performing mere technical tasks, for example when an actor operates the video camera for a while. The fact that the difference between actors and non-actors rests largely on convention was wittily pointed out in *Hamlets*, cited above: if Ulfsak wore casual clothes, then a computer operator made his single brief appearance (to pass a sword to Ulfsak) in a showy historical costume.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Not so long ago I attended a public conversation on the issue of acting in contemporary theatre. In a discussion, a renowned actress of an Estonian fringe company declared that she prefers to call herself „actor" (and not "performer"), because she firmly believes that the conceptual territory of „theatre" must be broadened, in order to include new modes of stage behaviour, no matter how close to performance art they seem to be. Sharing her stance on this issue, I have attempted to address acting in the theatre by likening it to play(ing).

The concept of play offers an opportunity to approach flexibly the relationship between the real and the fictional in acting. In place of the opposition actor (real person) – character (fictional entity) acting as playing could be described using a continuum model that accommodates a range of acting strategies and states of being of the actor. Within the continuum there exists an ongoing tension between the fictional and the real. Hence, their relationship is largely variable depending on strategies at work in a particular performance and may be further complicated due to the play's intrinsic ambivalence. Playing always implies a degree of detachment from the fictional world created in its course. Actors also have an option to enter 'extra-daily', but not necessarily fictional situations they construct in and by playing. However, the two ends of the spectrum – full identification with the fictional character on the one side, and an actor being nothing but private individual on the opposite side – could hardly ever be reached, except maybe for a short while. It is unlikely that acting will cross the threshold of reality irreversibly. Similarly, spectators perceive neither the fictional character exclusively nor an actor outside of any fictional frame at all. It can be argued that apart from the fact that play captivates players; it also makes both actors and spectators aware of their specific position in the theatre.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Cf. Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2006.

2 Actor – spectator axis is inherent in three-part models, for example Willmar Sauter distinguishes between exhibitory, encoded, and embodied actions of the performer, deeply interwoven with each other: Willmar Sauter, *Eventness: A Concept of the Theatrical Event*, STUTS, Stockholm 2006, pp. 51-6.

3 Willmar Sauter, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2000, p. 82.

4 Yuri Lotman argues that a play is "…the *simultaneous* realization (not their *alternation in time*!) of practical and conventional behaviour. The player must simultaneously remember that he is participating in a conventional (not real) situation [...], and not remember it." See: Yuri Lotman, "The place of art among other modelling systems" in *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2/4, 2011, p. 254.

5 See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Why Fiction*?, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 2010, pp. 164-5.

6 Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 56.

7 Ibid., p. 60.

8 See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2000, p. 179.

9 The 44-days project, *Unified Estonia* (2011) by Theatre NO99, offers a perfect example. The artistic team intentionally blurred the boundaries between theatre and politics; the whole project was double-framed as theatre performance and as the political process of founding a new party. A strong sense of ambivalence proceeded from the shifting and overlapping of these frameworks. The project culminated with assembly, a simulated party congress that was held at Saku Suurhall (i.e. outside a theatre building).

10 Michael Kirby's well-known scale from not-acting to acting is intended to measure the amount of simulation, representation in performance behaviour: see his "Acting and Not-Acting" in *TDR*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1972. His scale is too general for my purposes. I also find identification of acting and pretence very questionable.

11 "… keine Rollen mehr gespielt würden, sondern weil diese anders gespielt würden", Jens Roselt, "In Ausnahmezuständen. Schauspieler im postdramatischen Theater" in *Theater fürs 21. Jahrhundert*, Edition text + kritik, München 2004, p. 168.

12 Ibid., p. 169.

13 *Graveyard Party* (2010) by Latvian director Alvis Hermanis, was composed of stories about Latvian cemetery culture, resembles Karusoo's theatre in many ways.

14 See Anneli Saro, "Postdramaatiline teater ja autobiograafiline lavastus sotsiaalses kontekstis" in *Methis*, no. 5-6, 2010.

15 On the topic of being oneself see Henri Schoenmakers, "Being oneself on stage": Modalities of presence on stage" in *Playing Culture: Conventions and Extensions of Performance*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2013.

16 David Graver, "The Actor's Bodies" in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Vol. II*., Routledge, London and New York 2003, p. 159.

17 Anne Türnpu, *Trikster loomas maailma ja iseennast*, PhD thesis, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Theatre School, Tallinn 2011, p. 58.

18 Pauliina Hulkko uses the term 'performer-specific' referring to practices that proceed from the performer's particular corporeal state of being. See her "Liha tiskiin ja ruumiita permannolle" in *Nykyteatterikirja – 2000-luvun alun uusi skeene*, Like, Helsinki 2011.