

REVIEW

Øystein Stene

Skuespillerkunsten

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The central challenges to modern theatre historiography are the following recognitions: All human actions are performative, but not everything is theatre, and Western theatre is not all theatre. These challenges are easier to state than to meet. So was the state of affairs a century ago, so it still is, and so it shall probably be for the foreseeable future.

Add to this that, professionally speaking, “the art of acting” is a broad concept. What we actually have are various traditions of acting – some belong to the past, some coexist today but are more or less incompatible, and some have been more or less merged as parts of the standard scope of capability expected of a present-day actor.

If you want actors to know their craft and be precise, you had better be precise yourself when you write about them. In my experience, such precision comes at the price of very hard work, but even so, we are all likely to find faults with our work after publication, hopefully not too many. As is the case of the more general Western theatre history paradigm, histories of acting tend to have a more or less encyclopedic ambition and corresponding factual shortcomings. The subject is too vast and complex to be contained in any one work. Did not Hamlet warn: “O God, I could be bound in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” (II, 2). No doubt, the actors and actresses *performing* Hamlet would do well to take his hint and consult more than one authority or book about their craft. In libraries, we may find very many other generalized, as well as more specialized, works on acting to consult whenever we need to learn more.

To put the book under review here into perspective, a small selective survey will suffice. The Danish actor and stage director Karl Mantzius filled a gap with his pioneering work in six volumes, *Skuespilkunstens Historie (A History of the Art of Acting, 1897-1916)*, which ranged from tribal masked dances to the 19th century, but primarily focused on Europe. It was immediately published in an English translation with an introduction by William Archer as *A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times* (1903-21, then republished in 1937 and 1970). The Danish scholar and theatre critic, Frederik Schyberg, delved more into surveying contrasting methods of acting in his books, *Skuespillerens Kunst (The Art of the Actor)* (1954) and *Skuespilkunst* (1962, simultaneously published as *The Art of Acting* over three issues of the American *Tulane Drama Review*). His survey ranged from play and tribal ritual to his own day seen in a European perspective. As to sources about Western acting, Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy filled a vast gap with their anthology in 1949, *Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques, and Practices of the Great Actors of all Times as told in their own Words*, which has remained an inescapable classic. The Norwegian Helge Reistad contributed with the anthology *Skuespillerkunsten (The Art of Acting, 1991)*, which surveys present-day as well as historical approaches to acting. Recent scholarly surveys in English include Jean Benedetti's *The Art of the Actor: The Essential History of Acting, from Classical Times to the Present Day* (2005), which confines itself to Europe; and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting* (2015) edited by Simon Williams, which announces itself as being

“the first encyclopedia of stage actors and acting” and having a global historical approach.

It is a rich field. Of the above works the work under review here, Øystein Stene’s book in Norwegian, *Skuespillerkunsten (The Art of Acting)* from 2015, merely uses Cole-Chinoy and Benedetti, but on its list of references there are plenty of others.

Stene opens his book with the following statement: “I have written this book for one reason: I have always missed it. An introduction to the history and methods, perspectives and problems of the art of acting. A book, which dares define the field, say what it consists of and where to find it. A book, which can outline a map. It is strange that this book has not existed before, neither in Scandinavia, nor in English or in other major European languages” (*Denne boka er skrevet av én grunn: Jeg har alltid savnet den. En innføringsbok i skuespillerkunstens historie og metoder, perspektiver og problemstillinger. En bok som våger å definere feltet, si hva det består av, og hvor det finnes. En bok som kan skissere et kart. Det er underlig at denne boka ikke har eksistert, verken i Skandinavia, på engelsk eller andre store europeiske språk*, p. 9). Well, I must say that to me as a reader and theatre scholar it is perhaps not so strange: no one but Stene could write a book on the art of acting as he wants it to be. Only he could write this particular book, others have written and are without doubt going to write others.

With his book, Stene further states, he aims “to create a broad knowledge of the art of acting. In order that actors, theatre workers and film workers may escape the condition of having no history in their work” (*for å skape en bred kjennskap til hva skuespillerkunst er. Slik at skuespillere, teater- og filmarbeidere skal slippe å være historieløse i sit arbeid*, p. 29). This is a sympathetic aim indeed, but also something of an overstatement, given the bulk of literature on the subject already available.

Stene sensibly explicates that “the book has been written at a specific time, from a specific position, and its point of departure is the art of

acting in Western culture. [...] When non-Western acting is mentioned, it is because it has had a central influence on us. [...] I have written the book as a chronological narrative with more or less independent thematic chapters, conscious that many are probably only going to read parts of it” (*Boka er skrevet i en bestemt tid, fra en bestemt posisjon, og utgangspunktet for boka er skuespillerkunsten i den vestlige kulturen. [...] Når ikke-vestlig skuespillerarbeid omtales, er det fordi den har hatt sentral innflytelse hos oss. Boka er skrevet som en kronologisk fortelling med mer eller mindre selvstendige tematiske kapitler, med bevissthet om at mange nok bare vil lese deler*, p. 10). That said, he claims it to be an authoritative book on the subject: “In short, this book establishes a *canon*, a delimitation of what has been important to the actor’s craft. And as all canons within all professional fields this one as well is open to criticism for shortcomings and omissions” (*Denne boka etablerer altså en kanon, en avgrensning av hva som har vært viktig i faget. Og som alle kanoner innenfor alle fagfelt vil også denne kunne kritiseres for mangler og utelatelser*, p. 24).

I read Stene’s book with interest. As so many Western theatre histories, it covers the history of Western acting chronologically from Ancient Greece until today. He primarily focuses his chronological account of the pre-history of modern acting on the specialized fields of “acting” and “theatre” as defined by traditional theatre histories. However, in his account of the more modern situation, he opens up the all-encompassing performative perspective on human action, which he sums up as follows in the last sentence of his book – its punch line, if you will: “If we want to know who we are, we all have to be actors as well” (*Vil vi vite hvem vi er, må vi alle også være skuespillere*, p. 325). Since this broad performative approach is just as relevant to all earlier social activities, this double narrative strategy in the book’s composition – a “narrow” diachronic beginning and a “broad” synchronic ending – unbalances it somewhat. The book’s splicing the two meanings of “acting” in this particular way makes it a hybrid as to genre. It

REVIEW

starts as an intended history and canon and ends as a – quite useful – mapping of simultaneously existing modern approaches to acting.

The book is an ambitious patchwork, which has clearly taken much effort and time to make. I welcome the ambition and the effort. However, I find some of its presentations of particular subjects more convincing and interesting than others. I find some of its chapters very thorough and informative, but others less so. Given the bulk of material covered, this is perhaps only to be expected – and as we know, a book without faults is in itself a miracle. Even so, it has to be said that there are too many avoidable factual errors here and there on the pages of this one, which a more solid treatment or proofreading ought to have caught and corrected.

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