

# The Actor's Gesture as A Mediator of Inner Feelings: Examples of Extroversion in the Theatre of the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

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As early as in the seventeenth century, the human body was seen as a mediator of passions and as a conveyer of authentic communication. In the eighteenth century it may finally have been viewed as a sensory whole ('I don't have a body but I am a body'), after having come a long way from the groping individualism of the Renaissance thinkers ('a body must first of all *assume an appearance*: It is none of your business what I am; what matters is what I appear to be!') and from René Descartes who turned rational order into the dualism of body and soul ('Me has a body'). The Baroque period rejected dualism after all, rejected the fatal separation of body and soul, in order to achieve the salvation of the *spiritualised* corporeality of the world, and returned to the being as hidden beneath the surface.<sup>2</sup>

From the seventeenth century onwards, the human body on stage – the actor's body – became the theme of reflection among physiologists and philosophers, including Francis Bacon, Thomas Wright, John Bulwer, Robert Burton, Edmund Gayton, Marin Cureau de la Chambre, and others. They sought to answer the question whether the physiological changes rouse passions, or if it works the other way round. Where is the origin of the inner motive, what generates it, and how does it manifest itself in the body?

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimír Mikeš: *Divadlo francouzského baroka* [Theatre of the French Baroque], Prague 2001, p. 31

Thomas Wright published his *Passions of the Mind* in 1604, and in 1621 Robert Burton completed his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, introducing his theory of three *spirits* which in their final appearance communicate with the body, controlling the muscles and moulding the body to the image of soul. Wright's attention is focused on the actor's deal, because actors may often fall victim to their occupation if they cannot control the *spirits* flowing in their bodies: therefore he advises the actor, in particular, *not to create gestures with his left hand only*, since the left side of the body is pervaded by a larger number of spirits. An actor gesticulating wildly with his left hand merely loses control of himself. The actor must remain cool even in the heat of passion, regulating the great natural forces of his body for the benefit of acting hygiene. Excessively passionate acting may turn him into a moron, an absent-minded figure with his arms hanging down, a limp body, which at that time was referred to as a *changeling*. This threat posed by acting was described by Edmund Gayton in 1654.

In his 1649 treatise *Les passions de l'âme*, René Descartes opines that the human soul can control the flow of spirits to the nerves and the muscles thanks to its function – the will or the imagination. He also describes six principal passions/affects: *wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness*. There is no passion which cannot be read in the eyes. John Bulwer, celebrated for his treatise *Chirologia* (1644), was convinced that every movement stems from some detectable cause in the human body. Rhetoric is also deduced by him from the conception of the body as a home for spirits (weeping is caused by the compression of *spirits* in the brain, and the contraction of the brain sets off the wringing of one's hands).

These were the ideas that helped form the principle of Baroque acting that may be described as extroversion. The actor must convey appropriate affects/passions to the audience, which are the basis of Baroque art, and at the same time he must find a way to avoid ruining himself. He is helped by the gesture as a mediator of inner feeling, the gesture as shaped by the rhetorical content, the gesture as a conveyer and stimulator of emotion. At first, it is necessary to arouse emotion through the eyes – every Baroque gesture begins with the eyes<sup>3</sup> – and then apply the principle that the body never maintains the same position if the stream of ideas changes the subject on which it is fixed. The expressive movement of the body and the very gesture change with each new idea or passion.

Gestures, which were often adapted from those used at pulpits or in courtrooms, helped actors to express and convey emotions without having to immerse themselves too deeply in them each time they performed. Baroque gestures should not be seen as a merely aesthetic, formal matter – which is often the case when Baroque plays are enacted today – nor do they merely represent the rhetorical eloquence of the actor's arms, conveying verbal meaning without the emotional quality. The gesture of the

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<sup>3</sup> See also Reinhold též Kubik and Margit Legler: "Gestik. Eines der Grundprinzipien barocker Gestaltung" in *Ausdrucksformen der Musik des Barock*, Karlsruher Händel-Beiträge, Vol. 7, Laaber 2002, p. 39

Baroque interpreter (actor, singer or dancer) was something between a skill (a suitable gesture had to be chosen from established conventions and its shape had to be sufficiently mastered) and the artistic rendering of the emotional outbursts of human beings. The actor was not allowed to invest his gestures with too much of his own inner motives, so as to keep on top of things and not lose control, yet at the same time he could not gesticulate without emotional involvement, for then his movements would become mechanical and the spectator would be disgusted with the actor's coldness: such acting would not stir any emotions in the spectator, who would then feel deceived. After all, it is in general as true today as it was then, even if contemporary actors use far fewer gestures.

Gradually, the actor's movements on stage became regulated by rules based both on the application of rhetorical principles rediscovered in the Renaissance, and on the Baroque visual concept of the 'plastic body' grafted onto the period's conventions of academic dance. The eighteenth-century actors received dance education, and were required to stand in the same positions on stage that were used in ballet: with their feet turning outwards (most frequently in the third and fourth positions). They had to show at least two thirds of the body when facing the audience, i.e. both their shoulders had to be seen. When the right arm was moved forward, the left foot had to move forward as well, according to the rule of opposition formulated by the French ballet masters in the latter third of the seventeenth century. "We have to imagine an art which is called *saltatio* and which does not include solely the art of dancing but also the art of gesture, that is to say, a dance without any dancing. . . Thélestés was the inventor of this silent acting in which you dance without jumping and lifting your feet and which is now called the art of gesture. In antiquity it was named Chironomia, which in literal translation means a rule for hands," wrote the Abbé du Bos in 1719.

The gestures were performed first by the right hand, which was then followed by the left hand, left-hand gestures being particularly dangerous according to the above quotation. The left hand was also used to express things loathsome, such as hell, etc.<sup>4</sup> In his memoirs, Johann Christian Brandes (1735-99) provides important evidence of the requirements acting gestures had to meet later in the eighteenth century: first, the upper arm was slowly separated from the body and lifted up until it reached the level of the shoulder; then it was necessary to smoothly lower the elbow a little, finally activating the lower arm and the hand, and now the content of the text was to be suggested by a gesture with slightly curved fingers. This was called the 'snake curve' or

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<sup>4</sup> On this issue, see also Reinhold Kubik and Margit Legler: "Discordia Concors: The harmony of Poetry, Music and Action in the 18th Century" in *The World of Baroque Theatre: A Compilation of Essays from the Český Krumlov Conferences 2002, 2003, Český Krumlov 2003*, p. 156

'wavy' movement. It was also important that the eyes followed the rising arm.<sup>5</sup> The application of these principles to performance was of prime importance to the reviewers, and the actors were judged accordingly. Therefore, every troupe engaged ballet masters providing actors with appropriate training.

Undoubtedly, one of the great actors of the second half of the eighteenth century was August Wilhelm Iffland (1759–1814). He began his career in Konrad Ekhof's company in Gotha, then played at the Mannheim National Theatre, and eventually he became the director of the National Theatre in Berlin. In Gotha, he was instructed in movement by the court ballet master Charles-Hubert Mereau. As late as in 1809, Iffland described in the Prague Theatre Almanac<sup>6</sup> how Mereau had implanted in him a sense of the plasticity of the theatrical character, which the actor-mime should see as the main aim of his endeavours. Every narrative contains many details and remarkable features that require truth, charm and beauty, and it is here that the economical, deft and graceful movement comes to the fore; this is how a character is created by mimic art through a symbolic and purely plastic representation. To the readers of the Prague Theatre Almanac, Iffland commends Mereau's *Reflexions sur le maintien, et sur les moyen d'en corriger les defaults* (Gotha 1760).<sup>7</sup>

From a close study of the surviving portraits of the famous English actor David Garrick (1717–79) we may conclude that many of the depicted gestures were already found among Bulwer's illustrations in 1644. Such gestures were also used, according to the preserved iconography, by the young Iffland and by the outstanding French actor François-Joseph Talma (1763–1826). So how much did the gestural expression change in the course of the eighteenth century? It seems that its substance remained the same at least until the early nineteenth century. We find evidence for this when examining the gesture for 'pain'. The illustrated edition of Joseph Franz von Göz's melodrama *Lenardo und Blandine* (performed in 1779 in Munich and published with illustrations accompanying the stage action of each verse in Augsburg in 1783) is a perfect tool for gaining insight into the practice of the extrovert movement acting of the latter half of the eighteenth century. This unique material truly calls for theatrical enactment.<sup>8</sup>

With this in mind, the resolute assertions that the expressive movement of eighteenth-century acting movement cannot be effectively reconstructed are

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<sup>5</sup> Johann Christian Brandes: *Meine Lebensgeschichte*, Vol. I, Berlin 1799/1800, p. 169: "bei [sic!] einer solchen Bewegung der Hände müsse sich erst der obere Theil des Arms vom Körper lösen, bis zu einer gleichen Linie langsam erheben und dann in der Mitte sanft biegen; hierauf würde der untere Theil und endlich die Hand in Bewegung gesetzt, welche nun mit leicht gesenkten Fingern den Inhalt des voryutragenden Textes andeuten müsste. . .".

<sup>6</sup> *Prager Theater-Almanach auf das Jahr 1809*, Vol. 2, Calvischen Buchhandlung, Prague, p. 61

<sup>7</sup> Charles-Hubert Mereau: *Reflexions sur le maintien et sur les moyens d'en corriger les défauts*, Mevius & Dieterich, Gotha 1760.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Franz von Göz: *Lenardo und Blandine* [reprint of the first edition, Augsburg 1783], Frankfurt a. M., 1980.

unsubstantiated, for we have abundant information, especially from the latter half of the century and onwards. Another very convincing source of information is the iconographic record of the 1781 enactment of *Il racconto della morte di Oreste*, involving verses from the drama *L'Oreste* by Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803). The illustrations of particular gestures were published in Florence in 1832 as a part of Antonio Morrocchesi's (1768-1838) work *Lezioni di declamazione e d'arte teatrale*.<sup>9</sup> The re-enactment of this fusion of the actor's bodily expression with the text hence poses a great and formidable challenge. The illustrations, moreover, show how the actor managed the body weight and how he made use of space through his gestures; the two-dimensional drawing notwithstanding, it is clear that the overall impression was amazingly plastic. Enhanced by the duly affective voice and use of pauses, during which the actor's gestures and posture changed, the performance could not be watched with indifference. And that was the aim of eighteenth-century extrovert acting: arousing the spectators' emotions by means of the interpreter's bodily movement.

**Note:** *The presentation was followed by the author's enactment of verses from the said source, accompanied by gestures.*

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<sup>9</sup> Reprinted in Silvio d'Amico: *Storia del Teatro Drammatico*, Milan 1950.