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Mihaela Bețiu

ON ANALYSING THE STAGE PROCESS

**Three key moments in the pedagogy of the actor's art:
Andrea Perrucci, K.S. Stanislavski, Viola Spolin**

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FOREWORD

*“Exceptional talents...
are without a doubt not subject to
the laws that govern the theatre,
rather they themselves are the ones
who craft these laws.”*

K.S. Stanislavski

Everything that is human has a normative quality.

All of creation operates according to rules that ultimately remain a mystery to humanity.

Art is defined in the vast space between the norm and deviation.

When genuine creation takes place, the actor is utterly free. He nevertheless carries within him a **method**, marking a point in the creative process. The public rejoices when an athlete scores a goal, yet for the athlete, what's crucial is the teammate who made the decisive pass. For the coach, it's the entire trajectory of that pass and the level of each player's participation in the final result. Similarly, for creative actors, the important elements are their natural gifts, the direct and effective individual experiencing, the essential encounters they have, their cultural experience, and, above all, the **method** by which they are trained as professionals—capable practitioners and theoreticians of their art.

The norm or the deviation from the norm are not sufficient for artistic creation or performance. The actor is pre-eminently the type of creator whose art combines with deviation, exceeding the boundaries of the familiar. Therefore, we are convinced that ***the art of the actor is simultaneously norm, deviation, and “something” more.*** The actor whose natural skill is ordered by method, thus allowing for creative deviation and the brilliance of spontaneity, can be called an artist, a wonder, a genius because they are exceptional (the term itself includes the meaning of “deviation”).

Great actors cannot be compared with each other, just as one cannot speak of superiority or inferiority in the face of unique works belonging to different personalities, because each one is integrated into a culture and an aesthetic formula.

The paradox of rules, which, by limiting, ennoble, and by prohibiting, expand, is not truer for anyone than for the religious person and for the actor. After all, if we are to speak of paradoxes, I don't think there is any other art that holds so many paradoxes in its essence and whose definition arises from their very combination.

Genius is the supreme embodiment of creative freedom. It is the demiurge of new rules. Professor Cojar used to say: "The art of the actor is reinvented with each great personality, and personalities are unique."¹ Genius transcends humanity and time. It teaches us from beyond, often showing us the way and living on through its contributions and the unceasing fruit of the seeds it has planted. The same can be said for the characters that spring from its laboratory, for the theatre is a living art, forever contemporary with us.

Before Stanislavski, theatre creators pursued truth, just as playwrights sought verisimilitude, but often settled for a simple imitation of nature when they fell short. Stanislavski, however, strived to banish such theatrical mimicry. It was Viola Spolin, though, who delivered the definitive blow to this tradition of mere naturalness by elevating improvisation to the level of creative norm.

While traditional theatre is perceived as a closed and repeatable form, contemporary performance art redefines theatre as an open one. This shift is rooted in the understanding of the human being as a complete entity, defined by its uniqueness and ephemerality. Consequently, improvisation is justified as the perfect expression of this human uniqueness, and the performer becomes the total actor, equally brilliant across all genres of dramaturgy, song, and dance. In this new landscape, genius has a clear purpose: to make discoveries and to proclaim them.

In this work, we analyse three key moments for the art of modern actors and for the pedagogy of their art: Perrucci, Stanislavski, Spolin. The methods presented, in addition to tools, procedures, and principles, have a system of norms and rules that we have tried to synthesize, to support those who want to delve into the pedagogy of the actor's art.

Regarding the terms used in the work, most have already been expressed. We would like to specify that we have relied on a differentiation between "rule" and "norm," considering that:

¹ Cojar, I., *Poetics of the Actor's Art*, UNATC PRESS & Paideia, 2025, p. 47

The Rule is the (formal) criterion for ordering/organising/systematising and the means for achieving the goals of art, its general principles, its norms. **The Norm** is the guiding principle of creation (or the few principles, as there cannot be many), the “solid principle,” as Stanislavski would say, which determines the interdependence between rules, but also homogenises/harmonises them, thus forming a functional, coherent, and unified system in conception.

Therefore, an actor’s method, while based on a system of rules, can be distilled into a single, foundational norm that defines its entire conception. (For example, Diderot’s creative norm is Reason, which is reflected in the rule of lucidity, or the “paradox,” as he called it: the actors must move the audience without being moved themselves. For Eleonora Duse, the creative norm is Truth, embodied in the rule of total identification with the character. In the same vein, Stanislavski takes organic supra-conscious creation as his norm, which is expressed through a series of rules that serve as a conscious means to stimulate the unconscious creative nature.) However, a **method** is more than just a system of rules; it is an evolutionary, process-oriented journey. As the Romanian theorist (professor, actor, director) Ion Cojar eloquently states: “Method means path, road, or a set of procedures by which one can reach knowledge of the objective, the discovery of one’s own solutions to any situations and problems, to one’s own truths, objective and subjective, about things.”²

In general, the term **Performance** has two dimensions: on the one hand, the technical side (emphasised in by the Commedia dell’Arte actor and the 20th century actor), and, on the other hand, originality and creative genius.

² *Ibidem*, p. 11.

CHAPTER I

**ANDREA PERRUCCI—CORE TENETS FOR
THE ART OF THE MODERN ACTOR**

In an attempt to observe the roots of modern acting methods, I have researched the poetics and methods of the professional actor. Although quite interesting, they were generally personal and lacked the value of a working system applicable to all practitioners. Up until a cornerstone moment—the appearance of Andrea Perrucci’s *A Treatise on Acting, From Memory and by Improvisation* (1699).

This work bridges the gap between the ancients and the moderns in Italy, using the theatrical experience of the ancients while arguing for the elimination of what is “bad” for the modern, Christian man (here, he builds on the writings of St. Cyprian, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine). It also advocates for preserving the principles of eternal art stated by the great ancient philosophers and rhetoricians (Aristotle, Horace, Demosthenes, Cicero, Tacitus, Cato, Ovid, Livy), brilliantly continued by Lope de Vega (whom he himself translated into Italian). Regarding the Italian Renaissance scholars, Minturno and Castelvetro, Perrucci, who held the same opinion as his master Lope de Vega, entered into a polemic with the adherents of the rule of the three unities: “I wish all those who praise the insufficiently-praised *Aminta* explained to me what pleasure there could be in bringing to the stage and listening to that single act—with one or two scenes, one or two characters—who tell a long story and then exit without any action, without intrigue, and without any overt deeds, given that the play is made according to the rules and too good to be learned.”

For he is of the opinion that, however brilliant the ancients may be, they should not be the subject of a servile imitation. Instead, we ought to make intelligent use of their complex heritage. That is why he is convinced that modern authors, endowed “with judgment, literacy, and prudence,” are capable of writing new and interesting things themselves: “Because [who] would want to step on the dryness of the ancients and clothe the skeletons, as if the entirety of mankind were so poor in spirit that people didn’t always know how to come up with novel things and constantly enrich the existing inventory?”³

Being a work of the classical era, Perrucci’s treatise is representative in this regard and serves a precise purpose: *the theoretical rationalization and methodical standardization of the actor’s creative process*. This theoretical approach was necessary not only for raising the moral level of this profession, but especially for saving Commedia dell’Arte from its precipitous decline at that time through a set of creative rules.

³ Translator’s note: Mihaela Bețiu’s work includes quotes taken from the Romanian version of Andrea Perrucci’s *Dell’arte rappresentativa premeditata, ed all’improvviso—Despre arta reprezentației dinainte gândite și despre improvizație*, in Romanian by Olga Mărculescu, Publishing House: Meridiane, 1982 (in this case p. 60). Due to lack of access to the English version of Perrucci’s work (*A Treatise on Acting, From Memory and By Improvisation*, Scarecrow Press, 2007), all the quotes presented in the current chapter have been translated to English from Romanian. The footnotes indicate the pages in the Romanian version.

And even though the Commedia eventually disappeared, its techniques being absorbed by high art theatre, the value of the manual does not diminish for us at all. This is because it systematizes the experience of this improvisational theatre, being the only manual for those who want to improvise. It also provides rules for written plays, and it is based on a vast theoretical knowledge of theatrical aesthetics. It may not be the only, but for contemporary actors, directors, and theorists it is certainly the most valuable direct source regarding the art of the Commedia dell'Arte actor. In addition, it has often been claimed that "Perrucci is outdated." It depends on how one reads his work. That is why I have organized his manual around principles, problems, and exercises.

Unfortunately, Andrea Perrucci is not explicitly present in the consciousness of theatre people because his 1699 treatise, well known until 1800, but thereafter forgotten for a long time, reappeared in a very restricted Italian circle only after the First World War. The manual is, however, impressive in its modernity; it refers to the actor's work with himself *avant la lettre*, systematizes the principles of modern acting, and suggests exercises for each of the actor's shortcomings.

The two fundamental Perruccian rules, inherited from the ancients, are *Verisimilitude* and *Measure*:

Est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique Fines. ("There is (a) measure in things, there are after all certain boundaries." Horace, *Satires*)

Ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris. ("Fiction intended to please, should resemble truth as much as possible." Horace, *Ars Poetica*)

But what best defines Perruccian poetics is the predilection towards improvisation. Therefore, the most fitting motto for the work is the deviation from the rule: "**To sometimes depart from a rule is the best rule that can be found.**"⁴

Andrea Perrucci was born in Palermo on June 1, 1651; he spent his last 30 years in Naples, where he also died in 1704. He lived and worked during the golden age of the Commedia dell'Arte but was also destined to witness its decline.

The author uses his talent as a lawyer, revealing throughout his poetic works ancient laws that defended the actor and allows for theatrical performances to take place in cities and markets. A member of several academies and religious associations, and a devout Christian, Perrucci supported his statements with texts from the Church Fathers, defending theatre even through the parable of the

⁴ Andrea Perrucci, *Despre arta reprezentăției dinaintea gândite și despre improvizație*, Trad. Olga Mărculescu, Meridiane, 1982 p. 59

juggler whom an Angel preferred over a hermit for the holiness of his life. This art can be “good or evil, depending on how it is used; when it is done in a proper fashion, with sincere actions, and noble manners, it becomes worthy of all praise. But when it is done dishonestly, with lewd gestures, with evil thoughts and for dirty gain, any reproach, any condemnation is well-deserved.”⁵

A Treatise on Acting, From Memory and by Improvisation is a treatise on “good acting, with well-chosen words and balanced gestures, with measured actions.” In it, the author lays down rules for the art of representation as an imitation of life, a mirror of tradition, an image of truth (“*Imitatio vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis.*” – Tullius Cicero). Perrucci reveals the reasons why he wrote this treatise, the same reasons, of course, for which he practices the acting profession and defends “good acting”: “it helps to instruct your mind, to loathe vices and embrace virtues, bringing onto the stage examples or parables of condemned mistakes and glorious, rewarded actions.”⁶

The knowledge of the laws of this art does not solely benefit actors, directors (Choregoi), or playwrights, but all who wish to perfect their means of communicating with others, as Cicero also states: “Comedy is of great use to Oratory.” The address to the reader, with which Perrucci begins his study, is prophetic for our times when, because “the techniques of the theatre are the techniques of communication”⁷ (Viola Spolin), anyone who wants to can develop their skills with the help of theatrical training. Orators, teachers of liberal arts and sciences, members of Academies, ambassadors, military leaders, and preachers have a great need for this art to convince, express, arouse, describe, urge, animate, correct, and to know how to attract the souls of their listeners.

Teachers, “through the sweetness of their words and beautiful speech,” make their lessons easier to understand and remember. As for preachers, it is not the most learned who are sought out, but those who have the gift of speech and who, in a theatrical style, charm the audience with the imagery described in their sermons, enticing the faithful “with a sweet lure, to make of them a pleasing offering to the Lord.” Lawyers employ it when arguing a case in court, seeking a favourable judgement. Doctors benefit greatly from being able to not only comfort their patients but also showcase their talent in colleges. For it is often the case that a very learned individual either lacks the ability to control their emotions and cannot express themselves properly or speaks too quietly and cannot be heard, thus their value remains unknown. However, this art is not only useful in public settings but also in private discussions, as it helps develop the gift of conversation.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 36

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38

⁷ Spolin, Viola, *Improvisation for the Theater*, first ed.1963, p. 14

“Therefore, O, most honourable reader, in *A Treatise on Acting* that I present to you, you will find, perhaps, suitable food for your taste, as it does not only deal with the skill of acting in a play but also with remembering, controlling your voice, knowing how to gesticulate with your whole body, inventing pranks, jokes, and subjects.”⁸

The Perruccian treatise is divided into two major chapters, each containing 15 Rules, in which the author refers to all the component parts of the art of performance:

- I. ***On acting from memory*** (i.e., with a text from a particular author and with rehearsals)
- II. ***On improvisation*** (on the improvised performance, based on a scenario, type-characters, monologues, short dialogues, pre-established “lazzi”)

First of all, Perrucci defines the subject of his study: “Acting (distinguishing it from the Composition made by poets for being performed) is live imitation—with voice and gesture—in the theatre, of an action in its entirety, whether historical, phantasmagorical, with song, or with speech, written in its entirety by the Poet, or partly imagined by him within the subject of the composition, with the words invented by those who play; performed to delight with some benefit.”⁹

1.1 Verisimilitude

The principle of verisimilitude (or plausibility), formulated by Aristotle and revisited by Horace, has remained fundamental to the theatrical art. Perrucci chooses one of Horace’s directives from *Ars Poetica* as his first rule: “Ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris.”/“Fiction intended to please, should resemble truth as much as possible.”

This is the first and foremost demand Perrucci makes of the actor: “You must express everything with such *feeling* and *naturalness*, as if it had truly happened.”¹⁰ For this reason, the actor and the director must go “on the hunt for the plausible”¹¹; furthermore, the effort of all artists involved in the performance must be to make it seem as real as possible, as “a well-thought Comedy mirroring human life.”¹² Even the flight of a character must be performed with such mastery

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31

⁹ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 1, p. 31

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95

by the actor, technician, and architect that, although we know it is not real, it seems more real than if it were true, for Art replaces Nature in this regard.

For this reason, Perrucci recommends that the stage scenery be magnificent, thus getting as close to reality as possible and being a delight for the eyes. For changing scenery during the play, the supreme example is the Venetians, who managed to do it with speed and artistry, thus captivating the spectator in the desired delight, that is, in the potential realm created by theatrical illusion. With the help of the scenery, we know **Where**¹³ the character is. Otherwise, actors are forced to say: “Now I am in the city” or “Now I am in the antechamber”—a technique used by the Spanish, which Perrucci “bluntly” says he dislikes because it is unnatural for the actor and boring for the spectator.¹⁴

Garments indicate **Who** the character is. Here too, the rule is the same: the actor must be dressed according to the custom of the country where the action takes place and according to the specific nature, fashion, and rank of their character, so that “you must believe that some random person would be a Prince in such garments.”¹⁵

The same principle of plausibility must also be sought in the case of **Speech** on stage. The rule Perrucci gives in this regard links the actor’s speech and movement into an organic unit, which “must come forth as twins in this very moment.”¹⁶

Together, they form the actor’s **Action** on stage (**What**). For this to be natural, the actor must consider the following aspects:

- they must know their role by heart perfectly.
- they must speak “as is customary in the market,” avoiding the “affected speech of the Courts,” fleeing from affectation “like the devil flees from holy water”—and here the author refers to speech as well as facial expressions, gesticulation, and movement.¹⁷
- the actor must speak in prose even if the play is in verse. “Because good Actors with perfect skill will turn verses into prose; and, on the contrary, those who are not good at this craft, or are beginners, will sing prose as well.”¹⁸ To successfully speak in verse as if it were prose, actors must

¹³ I have underlined the elements of the stage situation even though Perrucci himself does not formulate them this way (*Where, Who, What*), but with the respective terms (“The Scenery,” “The Character,” “The Action”); our goal is for the method to be explained as accessibly as possible, and for the reader to be able to notice the multiple similarities with **Viola Spolin’s** method. Obviously, Viola Spolin dedicates the largest part of her method to theatre games, but the norms she suggests are very similar to those of Perrucci.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 2, p. 48

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 3, pp. 51-52

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 10 and 11 pp. 90-105

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 5, p. 77

practice diligently, so that their speech communicates without losing the grace of the verse. Even those who are naturally skilled in this craft might experience difficulties if they lack experience. Beginners, in particular sing prose as well; as for those who cannot get rid of this “cantilena” despite practice, Perrucci advises them to change professions.

- The “**aside**”, even though it does not exist in reality, is of great necessity in theatre because it helps the audience know the character’s thoughts and feelings, so they can understand and follow the play. For it to be natural, the aside must be done simply, without affectation, as if by chance, with a voice that is not so high that the stage partner can hear it, and not so low that the spectators cannot. The partner, whom Perrucci calls “playmate,” must create the conditions for the actor’s aside by not listening to what is being said and by performing another action. The actor delivering the Prologue must be patient enough for everyone to be seated and should only begin speaking when there is silence. Regardless of what he has to say in his Prologue, whether written by the author or the “Choregos” he must win the attention and goodwill of the spectators and therefore must address them naturally and respectfully.

The principle of plausibility must also be considered when casting roles. The person who assigns the roles should give each actor a part that suits them and which they can play; that is, it should match their age, appearance, “symmetry of face,” voice, and they should have the “talent” and “knowledge” to succeed. The author knows from experience that all actors want to play the main role, but it sometimes happens that some, “pygmies in body, Thersites in countenance, Blaesius in tongue, and Margites in every deed,” demand the hero’s role, thus putting the play at risk of becoming ridiculous. Similarly, there are some, both men and especially women, who, although old, relying on “makeup,” want to play the roles of young people. He then recommends a mirror for everyone and, if even that doesn’t convince them, they should go to the Oracle of Delphi to read the famous “Nosce te ipsum”/“Know thyself”.

I.2 Art and Nature

The question has always been and continues to be: What does an actor need most to succeed? Beauty or skill? Memory or knowing how to use it? A beautiful body or one made harmonious through exercise? A warm, sweet, and sonorous voice or the art of using it according to the role and the configuration of the hall? Talent, intelligence, temperament... Andrea Perrucci “bluntly” states

his opinion and recommends that those for whom Art cannot prevail over Nature should change their profession. Analysing the interdependence of the elements of the Art–Nature binomial throughout his work, the author is firmly convinced that **Art triumphs over Nature** and takes as his motto Horace’s principle: “Is it nature or art, the question is put, that makes a poem praiseworthy: I do not see what study, without a rich vein of natural ability, or raw talent alone, would be able to accomplish. Each asks for assistance from the other and swears a mutual oath of friendship.”¹⁹

The present analysis has been divided into themes identified throughout the treatise:

- Beauty and craft
- Memory and its use
- Voice and practice
- The body and how to master it
- Art and Nature in a performance

But first and foremost, a clarification is necessary: in classical thought the concept of *Nature* (in the purest sense of the Aristotelian mimesis) refers to human, inner nature. Outer nature, in the landscape sense, was even ignored by classical writers, with the exception of La Fontaine.

1.2.1 Beauty and Craft

According to Perrucci, quoting Cato, beauty is “a special gift from heaven,” “a letter of recommendation,” or even more—“a hidden deception that persuades you without words,” according to Tacitus.²⁰ And yet, if it is not accompanied by skill, it remains like an abandoned garden.

The author draws on his vast experience as an actor and company leader, telling us that he knew a lot of actors who lacked the gift of beauty and elegance and who seemed powerless at the beginning of their careers, but who became wonderful actors by dedicating themselves entirely to study and “caring for their faults”. They were then called to perform in front of the greatest Princes of Italy, and were rewarded accordingly. But he also knew beautiful and talented actors who, being very lazy and “trusting in that small gift that Nature had bestowed

¹⁹ O.B. Hardison and Leon Golden (eds.) *Horace for Students of Literature: The “Ars Poetica” and Its Tradition*, University Press of Florida, 1995, p. 20

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80

upon them, were never seen emerging from their native tangles.”²¹

Therefore, the greatest fortune would be for the actor to combine both, and what they lack from Nature, they should strive to acquire through Art. Nevertheless, someone who lacks beauty “should not despair in the least, because they can achieve applause through study, for skill will bring it to them for their cleverness”; and he who has the precious gem of beauty should strive to polish it, so as not to leave such a great treasure buried.

I mentioned above that an actor must be cast considering their physiognomy and beauty. Thus, although all actors long to play the main role, Perrucci advises them to look carefully in the mirror and take into account what they see. A frail person can play an Old Man or an Old Woman; the young, beautiful, graceful ones can have the much-desired roles of heroes; those with a violent or sullen physiognomy can be Sinons and Zopyruses; but all must know what they are talking about and understand the purpose of the performance they are giving (***Why and For what purpose***), because the actor is not a parrot who utters some accents or a monkey who imitates some movements. Furthermore, “graceful and comic roles should only be given to those to whom Heaven has entrusted, through a special grace, beauty or humour; ...whoever is not seasoned, may say the cleverest words, have the greatest vivacity, ... the most astonishing equivocations, but they will get on your nerves.”²²

1.2.2 Memory and its use

Memory is one of the most “necessary” things for an actor. If an actor does not have this beautiful gift from Nature, he should try to acquire it through Art; if he still fails, no matter how talented or beautiful he may be, he ought “to give up this virtuous practice.”²³

Why is memory so important? Because the *Rule regarding the actor’s Action* says that speech and movement must come forth as twins and in the same instant, and an actor with a poor memory, waiting to hear the prompter—sometimes hearing him after the entire audience has heard him—risks losing his good name. Thus, the actor must learn his role by heart so well that when saying it “freely, with ease and skill, without stumbling,” he is aware of the words, listens to and watches his partner and not the prompter, and accompanies his words with “the appropriate movement,” thus delighting the audience with his art.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81

²² *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 6, p. 80

²³ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 8, p. 86

As for prompters, whom the ancients called *Monitores* (advisors), they are very necessary because memory is unstable. But they are the drogue to a ship caught in a storm and should be used only in case of need. For what force can the words and gestures of an actor still have when he is constantly turned towards the prompter?

What kind of memory is useful to an actor? “Having a great span, or an aptitude for learning?” According to Aristotle having both is impossible. To be like a wide-mouthed vessel that fills up quickly but also empties immediately? Or better yet, like one with a narrow mouth that, although it fills up with more difficulty, empties just as slowly? If a good memory span, accompanied by its best friend—the quill, is more useful to the writer, teacher or lawyer, Perrucci says that “easy learning” is more useful to the actor, given that he often has to memorise a text very quickly for a specific occasion.

This is what happened to him: his troupe, along with others, had to present a play at “the feast dedicated to the wedding of the crowned heads,” and one of the actors could not remember his role. Perrucci himself was then forced to learn about 400 verses in 24 hours; “it seemed a miracle to my companions, but of this role, in a few days, not a single word remained in my mind, scattering more quickly than it had come.”²⁴

Perrucci offers actors and company leaders a few techniques for easier *memorization* of the text:

- the text should be learnt in the evening, before bed, and revisited early in the morning because learning the text is not about learning some words alone, but seeing the images it speaks about. Thus, the images “are imprinted along with the shadows of the night” and in the morning they are seen again “with the mind and with thought”. The process continues like this until the actor retains the **story** they will tell, having all the story’s images in their mind.
- if he has a lot of text to learn, and especially if it is in verse, the actor can help himself by putting symbols along the margin: if the text is about war—a sword, about agriculture—a hoe, about navigation—an anchor; this will make it easier for him to remember what a certain fragment is about, “the craft of memory being in things and names according to Quintilian” The symbols Perrucci talks about today stir what we call visual memory.
- also, if the role is long, it would be best to fragment it into “small parts” (into “chunks,” according to the term we use today), for food is digested

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Part I, Rule 8, p. 87