

# The Feeling of Reality – Performance and Authenticity

By Ayad Akhtar

*Only the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real.*

D. W. Winnicott

## Introduction

As performers, we have few benchmarks with which to assess and learn from our work. The literal impossibility of watching oneself as one performs forces the obvious conclusion that we must somehow learn to trust our own experience. And yet, the very structure of performance creation, consumption, and pedagogy — the hierarchical relationship of director to actor, show reviews, the awards season, scene study class — all of these enforce a different message: That we must, above all, rely on the opinions of others.

Orientation to the evidence of excellence as provided by others is problematic for many reasons, and it will be the contention of this essay that such an orientation is not a reliable path to consistently authentic results. I will suggest, rather, that performers are best served by learning to understand, work with, and trust their own experience when it comes to their performances. I will further suggest that, when working with one's own experience, it is the feeling of *being real* that is the best barometer of powerful and consistent performance results.

In learning to work with — and to trust — one's own experience, there is often a preliminary step required which has to be taken, a step without which any discussion of *feeling real* or *the Real* is meaningless: We have to become less dependent on the audience. Indeed, it is the ability to be alone in the moment of performance — to know and accept one's own solitude as one is in the very act

of being observed — that is *the* necessary step in creating performances that feel authentic, alive, and compelling, not only to performers, but to the audience as well. And yet, in speaking of a performer's solitude, I do not mean at all that a performer is ever — or should ever be — *isolated* from the audience. On the contrary, it is meaningless to speak of performance without reference to an audience. The audience is the performer's partner, and acting — indeed, all performance crafts — cannot be divorced from this fact. And so, while, in the pages ahead, I will critique the performer's centrifugal tendency (always to look *outside* herself), and while we will discuss at length the possibilities of a performer's independence from the audience, nowhere will I advocate, as recent performance visionary Jerzy Grotowski did, that a performer *isolate* herself from the audience.

## I. A Case Study

### Learning to Orient Within

Let's begin with a specific example:

Rudolf is an actor in his early thirties, statuesque and stilted. He has been struggling for a few years to understand how to feel more comfortable onstage. Because of his remarkable good-looks, he works regularly, but his career has not taken the direction he would have hoped. He senses that it has something to do with the lack of spontaneity, the excessive control, in his performances. But he hasn't known how to do otherwise.

My teaching partner, Sigrid Reisenberger, and I have worked with Rudolf a week here, a week there, for a total of some five weeks over the course of three years. When he first came to work with us, Rudolf was entirely oriented toward his appearance. His performances seemed like little more than an elaborate manipulation of his body and expressions to the music of text. He tried to make the words sounds as beautiful as he knew his body and face looked, his gestures

always informed by a gaze of the audience that he had learned to internalize. After a series of initial diagnostic exercises intended to shed light on an actor's habits of awareness while performing, Rudolf was able to identify that his attention was primarily on the act of looking at himself. He experienced this physically as a sensation that his own eyes were somehow externalized, looking back at him. We worked together for some time at the task of moving his awareness from outside himself to within himself, and we were finally able to come up with an exercise for him that facilitated this transition. Rather than "looking at himself," he began to focus on "looking through his eyes," thus shifting the observing vector from *outside-to-in* to *inside-to-out*. The change was immediate, palpable to everyone watching. All the workshop participants noted they could clearly distinguish the moments when he looked through his eyes, and those when he reverted back to looking at himself. With the new vector of attention, he engaged simple actions on stage and worked with text. He was easier to watch, a more compelling and more engaging stage presence.

An initial period of work centered on retraining Rudolf to break the habit of observing himself. It wasn't easy. Given that his primary focus was usually the audience's gaze, he had to fight the urge not only to observe himself, but also the feeling that focusing on something as "trivial" as "looking through his eyes" was a worthy use of the time before an audience. As a support to the work he did during rehearsal, he sustained a daily regimen of performing simple actions in his life while "looking through his eyes" rather than "at himself." This was of particular interest considering that Rudolf, regularly the object of attention because of his remarkable physique and good-looks, would often practice out of the house, in public, where he felt himself to be practicing *against* the gazes of others. Used to feeling he is being noticed, when he felt himself being observed, rather than participating vicariously with the observer, he would use the opportunity as a reminder to stay anchored and to "look through his actual eyes." The progress was significant and the strides he made as a performer were clear to all, including himself.

And yet, this shift was not enough really to erode the habit of self-control that all those years of self-observation had long ingrained into his body-self awareness — no doubt with a very deeply entrenched neurological corollary. Rudolf's self-controlling mechanism was operative in all of the acting techniques he engaged with, whether Stanislavskian physical action, Strasbergian Method, or Chekhovian psychological gesture. And so while his attempts to shift the focus away from self-regarding were somewhat successful at rendering him more watchable on stage, there was still a marked sense that his work was stilted, lacking freshness and aliveness.

What followed was more work. More attempts to break the grip of the audience gaze on his attention and on his work. By continuing to keep these concerns at bay, we were able to descend more deeply into an *analysis-in-action* of how Rudolf's habits of awareness affected him. What began to reveal itself was the full extent of his self-manipulation, a sense that he was always fragmented in his awareness of himself. Now here, now there. Now moving this, now saying that. Always under the oppressive watch of an internalized gaze that was like an armor within which he could only move with difficulty. And he came to the realization that even the exercise — once liberating — of “looking through his eyes” had lost its ability to restore some sense of grounding and centrality, because now he was doing *that* in order to appear a certain way to others.

### A Breakthrough

Despite the setbacks, the reality is: Rudolf's dedication laid the ground for the step that was to come. Still haunted by a sense of not feeling real — and knowing that this meant others would not feel he was real — it was nevertheless possible for him now to relate to the experience he was having as a performer, his body's experience, as something independent of the audience's gaze. This scintilla of independence — this *space*, as we might call it — allowed Rudolf to explore and focus on his own body's experience as he performed. Further work with text and

with simple stage activities began to reveal a consistent theme: Rudolf's stage presence was more consolidated and forceful when he focused on his feet (as he stood) and focused on his rear-end (when he sat). And it wasn't simply the process of being aware of his feet and rear-end, but being in the flow of what happened in his experience when he stayed with this awareness. In one exercise, he connected to this awareness, then allowed the flow and stayed with whatever emerged for him from moment to moment. As he did so, he performed a text from the German classical tradition, unconcerned with the "situation" of the character, but rather, focused on his body's experience. And in the course of a particularly rigorous patch of self-inquiry as he performed from Schiller's *Don Carlos*, Rudolf tumbled into a moment of jarring authenticity. We were all — he, the observing audience, the teaching staff — startled. Before us was an actor who was fully alive, spontaneous; his mien was transformed, as if illuminated by an inner radiance. Most notable to us, the teachers, was the clarity with which his features and his actions presented. It was an impression shared by all onlookers, but which gave us to think that, by comparison, the work he had done until now was in soft-focus.

I inquired with him as he worked, trying to reveal the living dynamics of the process he was engaged in. This inquiry yielded another startling development:

"What is your experience as you're working, Rudolf?"

"It feels great."

"Great, how exactly?"

"It feels easy, comfortable."

"Even now?" His countenance was unchanged, still radiant, still present.

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm talking to you." Laughs from the audience.

"And where is your attention?"

"Still on the process. I'm staying aware of my feet. My butt."

"Staying with your experience in your body."

“Yes, but on the parts that feel grounding.”

“And how is that for you?”

“Not easy. I can feel there is some resistance to staying connected to that.”

“And what are you doing with the resistance?”

“I’m letting myself feel it.”

“And what does that feel like?”

He paused, frowning, as if not understanding the question. Until it was clear that the pause was because he was having a realization: “I just realized I am not many different parts, like I always look at myself as this and that and something else. My awareness in my body is not an awareness of something different than me. It’s me. It’s all just me.”

“And what does that feel like to you?”

“Like I am one thing. Whole.”

Rudolf’s stage presence and magnetism were only growing by the moment.

“And how does that feel?”

Rudolf paused again, now offering a gentle, magnanimous smile: “I feel like me...I feel *real*.”

He continued to work, moving back into his rendition of the Schiller text, but rigorously staying aware with his experience as he did so. The work he did was more compelling than anyone in the workshop could recall him doing, which surprised him, as he wasn’t “doing the text” at all as far as he understood it; rather, to him it seemed as if he was using the text to explore his own experience. Most remarkable was his ability to understand how to calibrate and relate to his sense of authenticity, a capacity for which he had shown almost no aptitude until now. And he seemed to have no difficulty remaining with the state as long as he continued to remain aware of the his body’s experience, that is, as he continued to stay aware of his feet and rear-end.

Over the following week and a half, further work and further exercise consolidated some of the gains Rudolf had made. Ten days of solid daily practice engaging with the process of being connected to his body’s experience as he

remained aware of his feet and his rear-end — he did the exercise at home and in public for a total of twenty minutes a day — stabilized him in the sensation of feeling more real. It was an impression echoed not only by his own experience, but by those taking the workshop with him. And it was much easier for him to slip into a more authentic state as he worked with text, provided he did not forget that the result he was achieving was something he could only attain by remaining committed to the step-by-step process he had discovered. His colleagues in the workshop were amazed by the leap in his work. But rather than causing him to fret that he would lose what he was discovering as a performer, Rudolf felt awed by the amount of attention and vigilance required for him to stay with his process. He recognized the only way to retain the result he was achieving was to stay focused on the process and perpetually to discard the orientation toward a result. In his own words:

“It’s like I have to always forget what happened before. I have to be with what is happening now. But in order to do that, I have to stay with the process, step-by-step. It’s like baby-steps. I have to accept the baby-steps. It takes so much concentration!”

### Remarks

This account leaves much out, in particular, the question of why Rudolf’s awareness of his feet and rear-end — as opposed to some other part of his body—provided such swift and efficient access to a productive and authentic process. The matter has a long history, too long for us to describe here fully, but suffice it to say there were issues of “grounding” and “being grounded” that continually came up for him as a performer and — according to him — in his life as well. It’s important to bear in mind that the work took time. We discovered together which drills and exercises would best serve him in the process of retraining his body and his awareness. There was much experimentation; much trial and error. It cannot be stated enough: every actor is different; each

performer's personal and performance history mandates that every approach needs to be unique, arrived at as a collaboration between the teacher and the subject. I am insistent in the context of work to make the point over and over: Nothing applies to everyone.

As for the specific methodology employed in the process of working with performers to understand their performance habits, their habits of awareness, their specific body-image identifications and tensions...this is obviously a subject of great interest, and it will be in extensive length elsewhere. For the purposes of the subjects at hand — namely independence as a stepping stone to authenticity, and the feeling of being real as the primary benchmark in this process — we would simply like to draw attention in Rudolf's case to the very first stage of his work, during which he worked to create sufficient independence from the audience — sufficient space between him and his notion of what the audience was expecting — in order to be free enough to turn his attention to something other than self-regarding. Without this *space*, Rudolf stood no chance to be able to relate to and work with his own experience.

“To relate to and work with his own experience.” Admittedly, the formulation is somewhat cryptic. (This is one of the challenges of writing about phenomena — such as performance — that are primarily experiential, and not theoretical.) But cryptic as it may be, the formulation suggests something important: namely, that Rudolf's orientation toward what is happening to him — primarily as his *body's* experience, until he could relate to it more holistically — implies curiosity, an active questioning and engagement that is the hallmark of all *flow experience*. What does it feel like to be aware of his feet now? And what happens next? And next? And what does it feel like to look through his eyes now? And now? And how does he feel to himself as he does so? And how does it feel to stop doing so? And etc, and etc, *ad infinitum*...

In short, it's never enough simply to do these things, i.e. to be aware of this or that part of the body. This is only a starting point. In Rudolf's case, he remains aware of his body, and then allows himself to continue relating to the experience

he is having as he *maintains that awareness*. This curiosity breeds an aliveness and connects him to the inner life of his body, his own inner life. And it was this engagement with the concrete unfolding of his inner experience that led to the result that he could replicate time and again: Feeling more whole, more real.

One of the participants in the workshop remarked of his work on *Don Carlos* that he finally believed what Rudolf was doing as an actor. And yet, what was Rudolf doing? He wasn't pretending to be Don Carlos, a character in a play by an eighteenth century author. Rather, Rudolf was simply engaging the process that allowed him to be — from moment to moment — with what we could continue to call his body's experience, but which he, himself, articulated more simply, and more profoundly as *himself*. And when we asked him what it felt like to be himself, he said:

“It feels real.”

*The second part of this essay is entitled “The Feeling of Being Real” and will deal with the connection between aloneness and authenticity in the performance context. The work of D.W. Winnicott will serve as a way of framing the discussion and exploring the salient technical and theoretical issues.*