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Original article

THE ATHLETE AND THE ACTOR ON THE ROAD TO HIGH PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The present essay discusses common aspects in the psychological and physical training of both highly performing athletes and young actors with additional information that can be successfully used in both areas: Sports and Theatre. The constant effort of those involved in these areas – athletes and actors – generally revolves round a set of common principles. We shall enumerate similarities and useful elements that can be transferred from one of the domains to the other.

Key words: athlete; actor; psychological-physical training.

Introduction

A plea for psychological-physical training in sports and theatre.

The information and ideas in this paper are extracted from training activities involving drama students of the Acting and Puppetry sections of the Drama School within the “George Enescu” Art University, Iași, as well as the use of various specialised resources in the domain of Sports and Drama; it is also the result of the teaching experience accumulated in years of practice and specialization in the area. We shall present only a part of the ideas that are conducive to acquiring excellence in Sports and Theatre and the material can be completed for those interested.

Excellence in sports and theatre raises the issue of personal efficiency, related to personal talent and to the responsibility of managing one's own resources: the individuals are their own manager. They have to assess their resources realistically, to set their objectives and confidently approach the psychological and physical training program for professional qualification. This should be the athlete's / actor's starting point towards professional excellence.

As if in support of our beliefs, Ioan Cojar, director and professor states in his book *A Poetics of the Actor's Art*: “Formation is a delicate process of retrieving human wholeness, the integral potential of an individual, a complex mixture that creates new habits, specific of a high quality spiritual, psychological and physical performance, of transcending the limitations of the ordinary human being.” (Cojar, 1996)

The athlete and the actor start on their path to excellence after a detailed selection base on their psychological and motor abilities, the most important of which are: talent, motivation, confidence, imagination and will force. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that talent is not enough to achieve success, to reach the top. Many talented actors and athletes waste their gift on the way, tempted by various seductions. If an individual has the talent and instinct to think along a

particular sport or can think in terms of dramatic conflict, his/her talent will be shown to hold or not depending on how he acts when he takes charge of his own life. Where talent is strengthened by other psychological qualities, remarkable results will be seen.

To us, the athlete able to achieve excellence following detailed selection can be seen as a companion of the actor: they share aspirations, professional joys and disappointments, the toil of the training sessions, the principles underlying their practice, but they also share and exchange subtler methods that are characteristic of each domain, with the aim of broadening their respective psychological and physical horizon.

Psychological training in each domain is extremely important in achieving excellence. It is common knowledge that the human body and psyche influence each other and are in constant interaction. It must also be mentioned that, in their training, both the actor and the athlete use methods belonging to Physical education. Teaching the practical course in Physical education to drama students gave me the opportunity to implement many physical exercises – also used in the athletes' training programs for general fitness. Moreover, in collaborating with colleagues who teach motion disciplines at the Iași Drama School, we have discovered that the actor's training is organized systematically around the same underlying principles as those in the athletes's training who have reached professional excellence. Looking back, we found that where representation and ceremonial are concerned, **physical exercise** and motion are used, sports competition or theatre show in forms that vary but are different from performance. Sports, Physical Education and Theatre are reunited in terms of forms and practices that succeed each other, yet retain their autonomy.

The Importance of Physical Education in Sports and Theatre

Physical Education is important for these two domains as it has a vast arsenal of methods required in

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professional training. The fact that Physical Education is present as a compulsory discipline in the curriculum of drama schools facilitates the young actors' access to clearly set physical exercises, adapted to the specific nature of acting and adequately tailored. There is this **common point** in the athlete's and the actor's path called Physical Education, which is the source from which they can extract principles and methods which can subsequently be adapted to their professional specific purposes.

The ideal held by Physical Education in the athlete's training tends to enjoin the spirit and the physical force in an interdependent relation, as the spirit needs a language to express itself, while movements centre round psychological concepts. The issue of Physical Education cannot be indifferent to the drama environment, since it is also implicit that **Physical Education** facilitates the students' training for other Movement disciplines in the curriculum for drama schools. The high quality of the actor's training is ensured by the maximized development of all physical and psychological abilities. By psychological abilities we mean psychological components such as thinking, will power, memory. Physical Education should be seen as a genuine informing process whose end lies in the range of abilities, skills and attitudes acquired by drama students. Once it has been acquired, this set of motive stock will have a great impact on the other motion disciplines and on performance on stage implicitly. It is of essence that the actor should be familiar with the methods needed to acquire the components of Physical Education (abilities, skills and motive attitudes), that can be stabilized mentally and in physical expression, at the same time removing technically incorrect aspects in execution (in the case of acrobatic elements, for instance). Acquiring a new physical ability implies an increased degree of educability/trainability which is to be acquired through continuous training, of great complexity both technically (correct clear executions, with minimal effort) and artistically.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the common elements in the actor's and the athlete's physical training and to suggest the use of elements from the actor's mental training in the athlete's psychological training. We consider the exchange of experience, the borrowing of methods and techniques from one domain to the other very useful. Therefore, the actor's physical training can be significantly improved by applying and adapting methods used in sports competitions, while mental training suggested by

the books devoted to drama practice can be a step forward in the athlete's progress and improvement.

Besides being an academic discipline in higher education, Physical education represents the domain that provides the methods necessary for the actor's and the athlete's physical and psychological training. The role of **Physical education** in the curriculum of higher education drama institutions is to introduce the students to physical exercises, skills and abilities in their "natural state", which are to be subsequently adapted to the artistic specificity found in the other motion disciplines. The important objectives of Physical education should not be ignored in the actor's training: harmonious physical development, acquiring and developing basic and applied motive abilities, cultivating a love for movement, the formation and development of desirable personality features such as will force and strength of character.

The actor's body training is an increasingly investigated topic and has been since the beginning of the 20th century; the beginning is to be found in K. S. Stanislavski's research. Along the time, the actor has used his voice and physical motion to express himself, but the physical component was less investigated in the past, even if it was present in the actor's training process. By practicing certain elements or motive sequences, the training is in fact achieved, along with endurance in effort that will result in good technical and artistic quality as well as fitness.

The future actor's training meant to enable him to perform the whole range of **motions** with a credible expression starts from the simplest exercises in **motion**, being of a purely physical nature; they are acquired through physical education (the appropriation of theoretical and practical elements). The same is done in the case of competing athletes, who accumulate in their stock of motive abilities natural physical exercises which will be subsequently directed towards their technical, tactical and artistic training, while all these elements are in a specific relations. For this reason, in the actor's and the athlete's training, the simplest exercises provided by **Physical Education** will reveal their true value only when the conditions of sports competition and of the dramatic performance are met. It is the first step in the process of acquiring professional excellence.

The figure below (Fig. 1) shows the relationship between Physical education, Competition sports, Theatre and success; we have tried to capture the connection between the two domains:

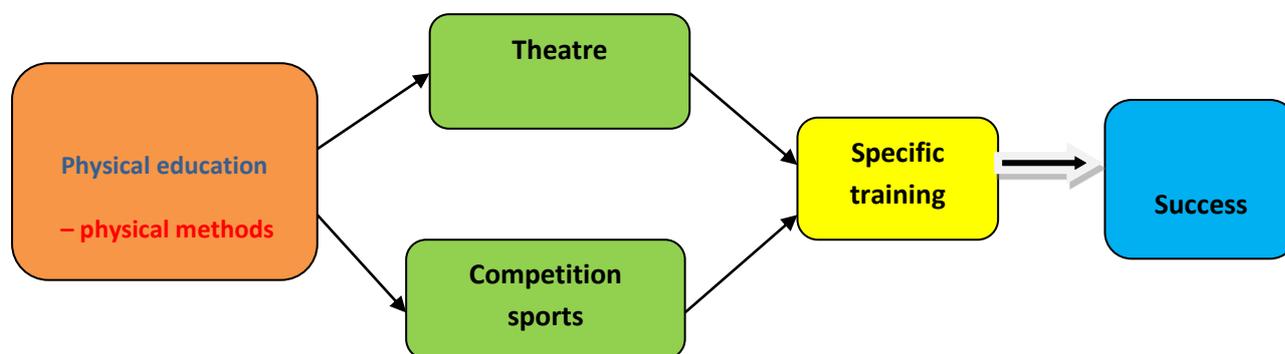


Fig. 1

Shared aspects of the two domains, Competition Sports and Theatre:

- ▶ Physical education supports both the actor's and the athlete's professional training by methods (physical exercises, motive habits) extant in its stock. It is known that an athlete undergoes physical training all throughout his career. Similarly, the actor needs the entire range of components to prepare a role: memorizing the stage, voice coaching, preparation of stage movement, psychological and physical training.
- ▶ The methodological principles in the two types of training (for athletes and actors) are phrased along the same lines: an intercorrelation between the theoretical and practical aspects; the progressive approach to effort; careful systematization of the methods meant to develop motive abilities and of the morpho-functional indicators; conscious participation, individual, pair or team work; continuity. In her academic course *Stage Expression and Improvization*, Suzana Badian, Professor at the Bucharest Academy of Drama and Film, lists the principles that can also be found in the methodology of Sports and Physical Education according to several other authors.
- ▶ Competition athletes and actors start in their respective careers from a particular inborn level of technical, artistic and physical capabilities, and in the course of years undergo special training based on the mental and the physical component as well as other components that define their respective professions.
- ▶ Actors of established reputation, highly experienced in performing, can be compared to reputed athletes – however, this sets the basis for another side of the debate. We shall eliminate from our assessment of the two types of training – for the athlete and for the

actor – the individuals of exceptional capabilities, the geniuses. Most people know athletes and actors who did not become famous mainly for industrious training, but mainly for their exceptional talent. Even in such cases, permanent practice was not excluded, as it is known that, as the saying goes in both **sports** and **theatre**, **talent** alone is not enough for an actor or athlete to reach the top of professional achievement and recognition. Some examples in this respect are:

- Muhammad Ali, the best heavy weight boxer in history
- Usaid Bolt and Carl Lewis, the best athletes in sprint
- Grigore Vasiliu Birlic, a comic genius in Romanian theatre
- Charles Spencer Chaplin, one of the greatest cinema actors in the 20th century. There are many more who made themselves recognized for their genius.
- ▶ The competition athlete and the young actor have to develop their talent, their artistic and physical capabilities and bring them to a higher level. Both theatre and competition sports are domains where success is achieved with difficulty and only after constant effort.
- ▶ By voluntarily submitting to strenuous training in order to achieve professional excellence, the athlete and the actor transmit their message to the audience mainly through the medium of movement and of their body.
- ▶ The key word which is movement establishes the dynamic nature of the theatrical performance, and that of the athletic performance, too. Movement, this “guiding and, at the same time, reconciling, principle” (Adolphe Appia, 2000) will result in the union between the various practical and theoretical aspects of the two domains in order to bring them to a common point: authentic, qualitative performance. We shouldn't doubt for one



moment the role played by Physical Education in sports and theatre. In this respect, we shall emphasize the **authentic quality of the motions** generated by the practice of physical exercises, which is placed in a natural connection with excellence.

► The human body, “alive and mobile” (Appia, 2000) is the essential element in the creative act in the arena and on stage, for which the performer has to prepare in advance.

► Thus, the starting point will be the inborn physical quality of each athlete and actor to be used in his gradual development.

► The first stage, however, in the development of the technical and expressive qualities of his body is to acquire the natural, purely physical motions that are part and parcel of **Physical education**. The next stage is that of training (athletic in the case of the athlete) and of the Movement disciplines (bodily expression training, fencing, pantomime in the case of the actor).

An insight into the training for excellence in theatre and sports

A professional exchange

Within a project named *Artists' Movement*, preparatory exercises were introduced for the game of basketball with the aim of inviting a few professional athletes (in basketball and handball) for an exchange of ideas.

The athletes also took part in some acting classes based on the concentration method. The drama students attended a basketball and a handball game between the teams consisting of pupils of the Sports highschool, cadets I, Iași. Then other teams were made containing three students from the drama classes each, while the rest consisted of athletes. These games were played for two hours on three consecutive days.

The students learned to get physically and mentally involved to a higher degree in the sporting events, under the influence of the pace of the game. They also were introduced to specific steps to move in the ground, and acquired improved collaboration skills with their team members and the ability to devise attack ploys depending on the opponents' behaviour.

On the other hand, the athletes had a unique experience by participating in acting courses, where there were exercises based on the development of attention, concentration and impersonating a certain character.

Even if the actor's psychology does not exist as a discipline in higher education in the curricula of vocational institutions, certain psychological processes are approached at the various stages of the actor's training; there are many exercises in this area that can be taken as models for the athlete's mental training. Great personalities in 20th century theatre, Stanislavski and Mihail Cehov among them, developed and

implemented methods of psychological training, thus raising the value of acting. The reverse is that Sports have the discipline *Sports Psychology* – however, the existing methods are scarcely applied. One thing is certain: psychological training is vital in the athlete's development towards achieving excellence in his career. Many famous Romanian athletes train in clubs, most of which are American, and find real support in mental training. It is true that research in the area of *Sports Psychology* in Romania is striving to implement the best options in the athletes' psychological training; however, the results in competitions in the past years has not been encouraging. With this in mind, we suggest the researchers in *Sports Psychology* some of the models of psychological training for actors. We should not forget that, on seeing the need for improvement in the area of mental training, Mihai Epuran, the Romanian specialist in *Sports Psychology*, states that “any means that can bring the smallest progress in training and excellence must be used.” (Mihai Epuran, 2008)

The exercises used in the experiment described above were similar to those used by the famous drama teachers K.S Stanislavski and Mihail Cehov, who left an indellible mark in world theatre.

The exchange described brought together the exercises used in the psychological training in theatre and sports. The positive effects of these exercises should be continued by introducing them in the daily program of athletes and actors. Adapting other exercises according to the model experimented in the exchange can represent a step forward to professional excellence.

Conclusion

In our paper we have aimed at revealing a connection between the psychological and physical training in the athlete's general training and in that of the actor in order to obtain remarkable results.

We have compared the actor with the competition athlete since their level of training is closest. Of course, a parallel can be drawn between the athlete with a level of excellency in his results and the highly experienced and acclaimed actor who prepares many dangerous acrobatic elements, or stunts. This is, however, a different issue.

The idea we would like to emphasize is that one should concentrate on training for success. The result of interest for this topic is the transfer of specific methods from the psychological and physical training between the two domains, Sports and Theatre.

The physical methods in the domain of Physical education build a bridge between the two. For the general physical training, the drama student allots two or three hours per day during the movement courses (stage movement, physical education, dance). The difference between the two types of training, in sports and in theatre, is made by the methods and techniques used to achieve the respective objectives.



The actor's and the athlete's **psychological training** respectively consists of the development of certain abilities and qualities in the area of the **intellect, affection, will force and personality traits**.

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