



How do you look to your audience?

Recitalists can benefit by borrowing the tricks of stage deportment of an experienced actor

By BASIL RATHBONE

As told to Rose Heylbut

UNLESS THE RECITALIST performs behind a screen, the first impression he makes is a visual one. From his initial step out of the wings until he begins his music, his audience derives a definite reaction from the way he manages himself.

The instrumentalist, as well as the vocalist with a modicum of stage coaching, bulwarks his peace of mind by learning how to control his body under scrutiny. He can borrow a number of points from the basic training of the actor.

To the average layman, *acting* means *doing things*, preferably at high emotional pitch. Nothing could be farther from the truth! The actor's goal is to learn repose—how to be still; how, without stiffness of self-consciousness, to do nothing whatever but be himself. And this is the most difficult thing to learn. Actually, you cannot learn it all at once, as you memorize a poem or master a dancestep. Repose comes gradually, as the result of *control*.

I got my own training in Sir Frank Benson's Company of Shakespearian Repertory, one of those fine British institutions to which one was attached as a student, studying many skills, assuming many parts, and rounding out experience in various types of performance.

Training in Shakespearian repertory is particularly valuable because of the strictures imposed by the costumes. The actor in a modern play can always fall back upon two stock gestures—he can put his

hands in his pocket, or he can smoke. The Shakespearian actor can do neither; he must rely solely on his own control.

The best way to master controlled ease of gesture is to practice before a mirror. At first, you will be overwhelmed with self-consciousness; but that will pass—and with it, the first qualms of being looked at.

First you must learn to stand. Find an easy, erect posture in which you feel comfortable and not as if you had swallowed a ramrod. Keep your feet together, hold your head high, put your shoulders back, and stand tall. Make this position as natural as possible, and get used to it—before the mirror.

Maintaining this posture, you must next learn to walk—not stride or gallop. To aid balance, try this helpful device: draw a straight chalk line across the room and walk on it *slowly*, one foot exactly in front of the other, keeping the steps even and throwing the legs. At first you can hardly negotiate a distance of four feet on the line. Keep on trying. Presently you manage the four feet. Presently you cross the room. At last the line-walking begins to come naturally. When this happy moment arrives, use the same gestures and walk toward a mirror. You will be surprised to note the rhythm which has come into your step. Keep on practicing!

In learning to sit, there is no fixed gesture. Unlike the step-by-step process of walking, seating oneself depends upon individual physical type. A short, stumpy

person seats himself differently from a tall, thin one. In general, sit back, let the base of the spine (but not the upper part of the back) touch the back of the chair, and keep your legs naturally straight, neither stretched out nor pulled in. The best way is the way that feels easiest. Again, watch yourself in a glass.

In using your hands, remember that, in an accomplished actor's gestures, there is no such thing as a straight line. Straight-line motions are jerky and hard. Always there must be a slight curve. We had our first lesson in the use of hands through the business of a handshake, and for this, our Director's wife, Lady Benson, took us in charge. First she thrust her hand out in an unbroken line from shoulder to fingertips—as a lesson in what *not* to do. Next, she changed this into an exaggerated curve, palm and wrist out, elbow in. Finally, she took out the exaggeration and extended a gently and gracefully curved hand.

The actor learns never to use his hands—or any other part of his body—without a purpose. One moves only as a means of conveying thought. Where nothing purposeful is expressed by a gesture, don't make one. Stay still. There is nothing more effective. There is nothing less effective than meaningless motion. This, precisely, is the basis of the *controlled repose* of which I spoke before, and which flows into you as you learn to stand, walk, sit, use your hands—and *not* use your hands.

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control, you grow in repose. We have all found ourselves in the presence of some stranger of whom we know nothing, yet whom we immediately judge to be ill at ease by the way he walks, sits, moves. By careful study and practice of control, one can overcome showing a lack of ease—and, after a while, one conquers feeling such lack.

Drawing again from my own training, I most heartily recommend fencing as the best means, perhaps, of mastering balance and ease. The very postures required in the use of the foils assure control. A practical knowledge of ballet-dancing is also most helpful. We young Shakespearians were, in addition, put through a rigorous course in old dances—gavotte, minuet, mazurka, etc.

But *physical control* is generated by one's state of mind. No stage person ever rids himself completely of the feeling of excitement which comes from working before an audience. Nor should he! The actor who felt absolutely nothing would arouse absolutely nothing. The trick is to keep natural excitement from degenerating into fear. If you know what you are about, there is no cause for fear. No one knows exactly how to throw off scaredness—if he did, he'd possess the secret of eternity!—but you can help yourself greatly by sane thought, by control, and most of all by experience. Start as early as possible to exercise self-discipline.

By way of a practical help, just before you walk out to the stage, stand by an open window and fetch a dozen deep, rhythmical, diaphragmatic breaths, inhaling as much oxygen as you can.

And how are these skills going to help the young recitalist who is not an actor? By *control* and *economy* of gesture, he can make a favorable impression the moment he shows himself.

Once you have learned posture and walking, come out of the wings with a natural, rhythmical step. Don't rush on—don't stroll on; both gaits betray self-consciousness. Just *walk*. Keep your gestures few and simple. There is a simplicity of ugliness, to be sure, but this can be rooted out by assiduous practice before the mirror.

Make your bows simply, graciously. Don't gesticulate. Don't be coy or what is called "cute"! If you carry an instrument, don't hold it as if it were a kettle; don't swing it. Grasp it firmly yet relaxedly, hold it still, close to you, and don't do things with it. Avoid fidgeting, twitching, or fussing with your hair or your clothing. Take the time to seat yourself comfortably, easily (or to find a natural stance), and then

stay still.

For the sake of your own stage deportment, take time from listening to great artists, to observe them. Watch the utterly sure and controlled repose of Heifetz and Horowitz. Note the beautiful economy of gesture of Reiner or Bruno Walter. From the moment they come on, you feel complete mastery emanating from them.

The recitalist's stage presence is affected by the way he is dressed—in this case I should say how *she* is dressed, for the man's prescribed garb admits of few variations. Avoid being exotic or "different"—avoid being anything but yourself. An over-loading of jewelry or of shining sequins and the like tends to glitter in the audience's eyes and becomes distracting. Select good materials of non-disturbing colors, and have them designed *simply* and in harmony with your particular personal type. If I were to counsel a young lady in the choice of a concert gown, I should suggest her going to a good dressmaker and asking, "How would you dress me to suit what I look like?"

The great solution for such problems, of course, is the diligent acquisition of good taste—in everything, beginning with food! Here, too, the kind of training I was lucky enough to receive was enormously helpful. In England, the young actor serves years in one of a hundred stock or repertory companies, before he dares show himself in London. In those years, he learns much more than parts—he learns how to live, how to eat, how to distinguish between styles, between good and bad taste.

Admiring the American people as I do, standing in profound respect before their wonderful receptivity, I feel sorry that similar opportunities do not exist, on a large scale, for the young American actor. What a splendid thing it would be if each of the smaller American cities had its own repertory company, where routine training could go forward all through the year, and where great

• *Rhythm is both the life and soul of all music.*

—Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)

actors and actresses would come for lectures and discussion! You can't give a child his full educational advantages by sending him to school two days a week—you can't train an actor on occasional bit parts. Given the chance, the American people can be the most beauty-loving audiences in the world. It's the chance that's needed!

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