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Let's Play Melodrama

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ABSTRACT

Melodrama is a show of emotions. It is a question of heart, in a mixture of feelings for the audience. In my 40 years of work as an actor, I am fascinated by this form of art: it is a sort of game between performers with a very accessible style for the people. Probably, this is the secret of its worldwidesuccess.

KEYWORDS: *acting, melodrama, audience, performance*

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What is melodrama? It is the overblown, overdone physical expression of a deeply-felt emotion. It emanates from the chest, around the heart, on an in breath, and it expands from there throughout the actor's entire body.

Like an accordion, it can expand and contract fully, affecting the sound of the actor's voice. The emotion can lead you to lean against objects, walls, people – only to push off again with a new heightened reaction to a new emotion.

It is egotistic – all about the one who feels the emotion. Like a small child, the actor may pivot from one heartfelt emotion to another – happiness to sadness, hatred to love.

It is a manipulation of the audience's emotions, an attempt to win them over and make them feel something for the actor emoting. When successful, it causes the audience to breathe together with the actor, and those sitting in close proximity in the theatre. When most effective, the melodramatic actor gets the entire audience to breathe together.

This is a heightened sense of physical being that causes the actor to carve out huge swaths of space as they move across the stage – up, down, forward and back, right and left. Even their stillness is dynamic and meant to show their emotional state.

Though the actor's feelings are private ones, they are exhibited shamelessly to the other actors on stage, and for the audience.

Melodrama is a show of emotions. If the emotions were true and real, this melodrama would turn into a tragedy. They are not. The actors don't want to feel what is true and real. This would bring them real suffering. They want to show the audience what it looks like to suffer, love, be happy, sad, angry, hopeless or dying of an emotion over which they have no control.

Lovers love unapologetically, and with great heart. Those hearts can be stoked with the fire of passion and affection, and they can express jealousy and deep disappointment. Happiness and sadness live side-by-side in them and can express themselves as immediately and surprisingly as a baby laughs, then cries, then laughs again.

All performers in a melodrama have the same potential to shift from one emotion to another on a single inhale and exhale, revealing the ability of any felt emotion to change and become another.

Each melodrama character (whether they are the heroine, the hero, or the villain) has at least three partners. They are another character, or the group of characters on stage with them, and the audience. Each character's job is to move their partners to respond to them and their immediate need.

All the characters in a scene inhale and exhale in synchronicity with each other. There is also a dance-like "action and response" between them.

Riding on their huge movements is the voice. Each has the size of their emotion and is married to their every movement. Their words flow in a certain tempo. Words may be said directly before the movement, or directly afterwards. They only happen on the movement when the movement is of supreme importance. The voice of each actor suits the physical character and their heightened actions. It cannot be the actor's every day voice. Instead, it rides on the breath of the character, motivated by their overdramatic actions and reactions.

The subject of a scene may be as mundane as soup or as exciting as dark chocolate. Whatever it is, each character is invested in getting some, and not losing any. Each cannot live without it and will do anything to get it.

The differences the audience perceives in the words, actions and intentions of each character are based on who the actor is playing.

The Hero and Heroine have pure hearts and behave accordingly, with great size in their emotions, happy to share either their love or current plight with the audience, hoping to win their support.

The villains also strive to win the audience to their side. When they elicit boos and hisses, this affects them deeply, and they either show their disappointment or take the audience on directly for the unfairness of their response.

Two villains in a show are great fun because they can work off each other. They can move in tandem, in counter time or against each other. All are possible between them.

Each character's entrance and exit is energized. They see the audience immediately upon entering and speak to them as if they know them intimately. Large poses on an entrance are expected. Each pose reveals all the audience needs to know about the actors physical and emotional state. After the pose comes the line, revealing what is happening for them in their story.

A character posing on their exit is also normal, such as turning to the audience before disappearing off stage with some important words they simply have to share with another character or their main partner, the audience.

Melodrama is a game the actors love to play with each other. The audience knows this and is ready to root for their favorite players.

By the show's logical end, every character is dealt with. The audience leaves pleased that their favorites have won the game, and good has triumphed over evil. But there is also a sense that these same characters will have a go at the game again, and then the results could be different. It's all part of the melodramatic tension in each show, and it's what the actors and the audience love about this very accessible style of performance.

So, let's play Melodrama and let's play it with no holds barred.