

Insight

Sisters and Brothers of Design Field

The joy of stretching your design toolbox

By Tajrobeh Design Studio | Autumn 2018

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Genuine Encounter

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We write only about what we have experienced first-hand and lived genuinely.

First published at
www.tajrobeh.design



The most visited TED talk so far has been Sir Ken Robinson's talk about education. He explains beautifully that most of the educational systems in the world focus on the "head" (and mostly on one side of the brain) and our bodies are just a transportation device to carry our heads around. He gives a sample about a girl who used to think kinesthetically. She could think by dancing.

The reception and comprehension tools (Input), Synthesis tools (Process) and Rendering tools (Output) for designers and everybody that does creative or even scientific work, aren't limited to logical tools made for left-brain activities.

There are various attractive and challenging fields that their approaches, methods and tools can help designers to expand their emotional, tactical and intuitive toolbox and therefore, their horizon and vision. Two of these fields are "Dramatic Art Forms" ("Acting" to be more specific), and "Military Training and Strategies".

Part 1: Acting

Acting students get trained in various dimensions. Body and physical training, digging deep into their souls and minds and cultivating different emotions, rendering and delivering their emotions, training their intuition and impulsive responses, verbal skills and tones, analyzing the plot, atmosphere and characters of the story, etc.

All these trainings and mental/physical/emotional challenges and experiences help actors to open and widen their detection channels (Input), understand the situation and character (Process), and strengthen their expression abilities (Output). A process in which the actors learn to live beyond themselves and live as another human being (the character) and in doing so, experience life from different perspectives.

These kinds of experiences to understand other peoples' lives are familiar to designers. Designers need to be able to understand the users (the character of their story) by experiencing their life style in their culture, context, and situation.

In theatre and acting, the most important tools for artists are themselves. The actor and the tool are the same. In the Design field, the best tool to explore the context of the project is also the designer her or himself (not a software or the Internet!).

The designer her or himself should become the research tool for the design mission, using methods like Immersion, Body Storming, etc.

Of course, there is a difference between "Acting educational tools and methods" and "Design educational tools and methods". The history of Acting education goes back hundreds of years. Actors have been trained since ancient Greece, where the first Tragedies and Comedies were performed on the stages (not to mention all the ethical, mythical and Folklore rituals in primitive tribes and ancient societies that are almost as old as human species). Afterward in Elizabethan era the Dramatic art forms started a whole new chapter. And up to the contemporary schools, the education systems and methods have got richer and more sophisticated, based on the works of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Strasberg, Grotowski, Meisner, Adler, Peter Brook and other great mentors.

Backed by this history, the Acting students get richer and more refined educational materials, compared to Design students that get their education from a 100 years old history.

That's why the Design field can learn too many things from Acting profession.



Theatrical vision for Designers

Physical, Sensorial, Emotional and Mental exercises for Actors can help designers at least in 3 main categories:

1- Communicating with "self"

This communication, connects the designers with their inner being, emotionally and spiritually, and awakens their intuitive and impulsive responses.

In this path, the actor should be able to deal with her/himself, overcome the mental obstacles and unlock deep emotions. You may encounter some parts of your deep "self" that are not very pleasant to deal with.

After dealing with these parts of your "Self", you can have stronger and more impactful tools for understanding and expressing your emotions.

2- Communicating with the surroundings (physical and non-physical atmosphere around you)

You can find too many environmental designs (interior, exterior, public, urban, etc.) or environmental accessories design (public street furniture, guide signs, etc.) that have no human-touch in them. These designs don't create a dialogue with their context and other elements in that context. Designs that are isolated from their surroundings, context,

location, situation and the life around them. These designs not only don't help to circulate the energy of life in the space, but even cause parasite and environmental stutter.

There are various acting exercises that help actors to communicate with space, physically, visually, mentally and also human-wise (distancing language, territories, relative physical movements toward partners and audience and etc.). The actor shall not cause any visual parasite and unnecessary movements on the stage that has no communicative value.

3- Communicating with other people

A very crucial part of acting is how the actor gets connected and communicates with other people like acting partner, writer, director or set designer.

Working with partner is especially important for great actors. You as an actor (designer) should keep your detection channels (eyes, ears, ...) wide open during exercises and final performance. You should see and listen to your partner carefully and clearly.

Interacting properly during performing dialogues and physical movements, helping the partner when she or he gets in trouble during performance (like forgetting her or his lines), creating an emotional connection to form a mutual give and take, and performing appropriate and proportionate act during the partner's dialogues (or monologues) are some of the abilities of a great actor. These abilities can help designers to communicate to their working ecology, consisting of teammate designers, design director, the client, the target audiences and users, etc.

To engage with audiences, theatre can inspire designers in many ways. In the book "Empty Space", Peter Brook, a Dramatics Art guru, explains that having "Audience" is the common ingredient in all theatrical art forms. In theatre, the audience completes the creative efforts of artists. In other forms of art, the artist may be satisfied when he or she stands in front of her or his final art work, without showing it to any other soul. But in theatre, the art work won't be complete until there is an audience to watch it. In this matter, design is very similar to dramatic arts. We always have an audience, a target user, for our designs. If no audience, then our work would be merely and usually (at best) a visual art piece. The existence of an audience makes design efforts meaningful.

Every character in a play (story) has a problem and agenda that wants to solve it. Finding these problems and agendas is actor's (and director's) task. In the design field also, every client has a problem and goal, and the client's target audience (the character of our story) has also a problem and desire to be solved and fulfilled. The difference here is that the responsible person for solving these problems is not the target audience, it's designers (in collaboration with client).

In acting, there should be a proper translation from the humane concepts of the story (the problems, needs, agendas, etc.) into acting style, based on the atmosphere (context, theme) of the story. There is a similar process in design. Translating user's needs and desires into the foundation of design brief and mission, considering context and culture.

The most important impacts of acting exercises on designers

1- Parallel Processing

In the documentary "Objectified", Jonathan Ive, the design director of Apple, explains the logic behind the simplicity of Apple products. He tells us that if working with Apple products is too easy and simple, it's because the design team have come a long way to solve too many problems and they combined all the solutions in an integrated experience that forms the body and soul of the product. So that the users don't need to think about those problems.

Great actors should also be able to do that. They need to process and synthesize too many different kinds of emotional, physical, logical and intuitive inputs and deliver an integrated complex of these inputs as one piece (the dramatic character). Some of these inputs are: understanding the atmosphere of the play (culture, context, location, situation, time period), the emotions of the character in each and every moment, finding the proper vocal tone for the character, controlling the physical relation with the location and other acting partners, performing dialogues in a way that sounds "in the moment" and "real time" (not memorized), proper usage of face and body language without making awkward and unnatural postures and gestures, the ability to handle the probable problems like forgetting the lines and etc.

2- An organic understanding of human interactions and life ecosystems

You can see too many designs the "try" to demonstrate the "design efforts" put into them. An effort to inject design into life in a demonstrative manner. And even sometimes the presence of designer is more obvious than the design itself. The final outcome is an "announcement" and "news" about the designer and design effort instead of trying to improve the quality of audience's life. This approach has the same effect when an actor "tries to act". These kinds of actors are known as amateurs and non-professionals.

But great actors aren't like that. When you watch Marlon Brando in "The Godfather", you don't see Marlon Brando, you see the Godfather. You see Don Corleone. You get immersed in his story, not his acting. Great actors have the ability to perform and deliver their dialogues and story in an organic and lively way (although memorized beforehand), so that we don't see the "design" behind it, but the character and the story.

This wonderful (and amazingly contradictory) capability requires tons of practices to nurture and develop the ability to fully understand "the structure of human mind and life" and "the nature of human interactions".

In the design realm also, the great and timeless designs are the ones that get embedded in the fabric of human life. Not "an attachment" to living or a sign for the "designer's skills", but an organic part of the social and humane ecosystem of life.

Another point about this ability is that it helps designers themselves to be a natural and organic part of the ecology of their profession, including teammates, design directors, parallel teams (like technical and financial teams) and clients.

3- Intuitive Insights and Impulsive Responses

With several years of practicing and training for using body language, facial expressions, verbal skills, and in one word, expression skills, actors can achieve “Intuitive Expressions”. At that level, they don’t need to think about their choices of tools and techniques and can express their emotions in an intuitive and impulsive manner. Even their reactions to their partner’s dialogues or dramatic events is very impulsive and real time (even if they play the very same role every night on the stage). In contrast, the amateur actors put their body and face in unnatural postures and gestures, so the audience will see “obvious acting” instead of a believable character and story.

The training of intuition won’t be left in the hands of passing time. The acting mentors and trainers design specific exercises to cultivate intuition of the actors and help them to have more impulsive responses to dramatic events of the performance. In these exercises, the students should use their thinking (or as Sir Ken Robinson puts it, their “head”) much less than usual. Instead they should listen to their hearts and inner impulses. Of course, these kinds of exercises are not just for acting lessons. In intensive sports, like Martial Arts that there is no time to think about proper reactions, the desired level of mastery is to have intuitive and impulsive reactions.

These exercises help designers to cultivate their intuition to have a deeper understanding of the context and generate more organic insights and ideas. In the long run, designers can develop their “Abductive Thinking” skills that gives them a winning card in ambiguous and unclear situations.

Part 2: Military and Design

The other field and inspiration source for designers to learn from and develop their mental and emotional toolbox is operational and strategic capabilities of military Special Forces. The kind of capabilities that help designers to be the Special Forces of the society; commandos of business world. Some of these capabilities are:

1- Ambiguity Endurance - Accepting the mission, without having all the information

The special forces have the ability to “do the mission definitively” in “nondefinitive conditions”. You can be sure that they will accept and do the job. The might fail, but this probability won’t be a reason for not going for the agenda of the mission.

Designers with this kind of mind-set can give hope to people and businesses in the times of encountering with problems.

Especially when the problem seems to be unsolvable, people can ask designers to the impossible mission of solving them. These designers will accept the mission, even if they don’t have enough information to start with. Enduring ambiguity is one of the pillars for creative thinking.



Diving into the mission in an ambiguous situation ; Designers' attitude and task.

“Insight detection” and “creative Idea generation” tools are the most effective weapons for designers in these missions. And their main motivations are their sympathy, empathy and compassion for the people.

2- Efficiency - Economy of Movements

The military forces don't have time for marginal and unnecessary actions in their strategies and tactics. They do their mission with the least possible action and movements. As their job is about life and death, they plot their missions with maximum efficiency and use of resources. They focus on the main defining factors and efforts, not marginal actions.

Sometime to maximize the efficiency of the mission strategy, they design some specific weapons for that particular mission (despite having various choices among previous options). A similar approach is necessary in some design projects in which the design process itself, should be designed.

This approach helps designers make the best use of the client's resources to design the process for achieving the goals of the project. Not to mention that design is also about people's life (and sometimes death).

3- No One Left Behind

In military operations, all the team members are meant to be and operate as one. If someone is left behind, all the team members would go back to save him or her.

In design projects, designers should also be advised that their project, consider and include all the members of their project ecology such as: different segments of audiences, suppliers, sales people, producers, the users with special needs like left-handed people, disabled or old people, children and etc.

These capabilities combined, can give the Design profession three characteristics of a charismatic persona (you can read more about it in the book "The Charisma Myth"):

1- Presence (I'll be there for you):

A characteristic that lets people know that they can come to you and count on you in times of trouble and difficulties.

2- Power (I'll move mountains for you)

People will have faith in you to be able to solve the problem. They know that you'll accept and fulfill the design mission, even if you don't know enough about it at first.

3- Warmth

People will count on your good will and humane attitudes and approaches. They know that you support them and have sympathy, empathy and compassion for them.

With these characteristics, the influential index of design in the society will increase. A power, and at the same time, a responsibility for designer to reshape the world in a better way.

In this article we briefly explored two professional fields that can be a source of inspiration and learning for designers. A learning mind is definitely the best tool for designers to expand their capabilities. With this tool they can learn from any profession, field and person.

We write only about
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