

Acting as Reading

The Place of the Reading Process
in the Actor's Work

David Cole

Ann Arbor

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Acting as Reading

But not *only* as reading, surely?

That reading is a phase or aspect of the acting process I suppose no one would deny. The actor reads for his role (usually a “cold reading”), reads the script, attends a first reading or read-through, perhaps participates in some developmental staged readings. But all this is generally viewed as merely preliminary to “getting it on its feet,” “walking through it.” Only when the actor has at last *come off book* (as in “off drugs,” “off the sauce”?) is the “real work” often felt to begin.

Clearly, reading is more in evidence at some stages of an actor’s work than at others. Nevertheless, it is the entire acting process—from first encounter with the script through performance—that I am going to present as, essentially, a reading process. And by “reading,” though eventually I shall have some things to say about reading aloud and reading to others, I mean first of all *silent, solitary reading to oneself in a chair*.

Stated in the broadest possible terms, my argument is as follows: Acting is a physicalization of the act of reading. But the act of reading which acting physicalizes was itself originally—had its origins in—a bodily process. In acting, then, what was once physical becomes physical once more. *Acting is the recovery of a “lost” physical of reading.*

What this “lost” physical is, why reading lost it, and how acting restitutes it I will attempt to show in the chapters that follow. First, though, it seems important to suggest what advantages there might be in approaching acting as reading and what answers might be made to some of the rather obvious objections that could be raised to such an approach.

It is not as if to pronounce acting “reading” immediately cleared up every difficulty about it. Reading, after all, is anything but a straightforward

ward act. It has physiological aspects (eye, mouth, and throat movements), cognitive aspects (sign/sound matching, letter and word recognition and grouping), interpretive aspects (the discovery of literary structures and meanings), and intrapsychic aspects (the assimilation of fantasy material). Not all these levels will be of equal concern to us: When I speak of acting as reading I do not mean simply that actors “interpret” a role, much less that they merely “construe” its signs (though, of course, an actor’s reading, like anyone else’s, proceeds by interpretation and construal). But, however much or little we choose to make of each, all these levels are present in the single activity of reading.

Assuming, that is, that reading even *is* a single activity—for we call a bewildering variety of situations by that name. Psychics and poets both “give readings.” Significance may be “read into” a book, and members “read out of” a club. My “early reading” is a collection of books; my “best reading” an informed guess. Someone who chooses to “read economics” at a university has chosen more than a reading list, while someone who “reads me like a book” may never read books at all. Hunters “read sign” (animal tracks) in the absence of a text;¹ lasers “read” video disks in the absence of a text and reader alike;² and “do you read me?” asks the pilot of the tower, meaning “can you *hear* my *voice*?” “Curiously unreadable metaphor of reading,” muses Paul de Man, “which one never seems to want to read.”³ But perhaps the universality of the trope is traceable back to the ancient view of the universe itself as a Book: Dante’s “single volume” in which “substances and accidents and their relations” are “ingathered”;⁴ Sir Thomas Browne’s “universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans’d unto the Eyes of all.”⁵ If all the world’s a text, then every experience you can have of the world is reading—which is to say, reading is no one single experience.

But even if we limit the term to its most literal sense, perusal of print, is there some one thing you do when you comb want ads, check ingredients, look ahead to the next line of a manuscript you are typing, run your eye over the four of seven letters of a crossword line you have thus far filled in?⁶ “Do we read the string $30 = 50 - (4 \times 5)$? What about the string of characters that used to be popular in comic books, $\$ \% \& \& * \& \% \$$? Does reading necessarily include comprehension? If so, what is it we do when we pronounce the letter string, hyperphractic?”⁷

Reading, in short, is every bit as great a puzzle as acting is. What can one possibly hope to gain by offering an explanation of the actor’s work in terms of another process at least as mysterious as acting itself?

First, let me acknowledge a personal hope. I am a playwright, which is to say, a writer whose readership is composed of actors. Like any writer, I feel I have a stake in understanding how my readers read, and for a playwright this means understanding how *actors* read. Therefore, this book covertly begins, and openly ends (chaps. 6 and 7), in a meditation on the playwright-actor relation considered as a writer-reader relation.

There is, however, an argument for treating acting as reading which goes beyond my or anyone else's predisposition to do so. Reading is something that all actors actually and necessarily *do*. One can argue endlessly about whether the actor can or should or might function as a "social critic" (Brecht)⁸ or "skilled worker" (Meyerhold)⁹ or "secular saint" (Grotowski)¹⁰ or "signal[er] through the flames" (Artaud);¹¹ but meanwhile there is no question that he *is* functioning as a reader. Every actor—whether he works for Robert Wilson or the Shubert Organization, the Royal Shakespeare Company or the high school dramatics club—*reads*.

I mean, of course, in his capacity as actor. As individuals, actors vary as much as other people in their reading habits and skills. I know actors who pride themselves on reading the *New Republic* and actors who pride themselves on reading nothing, actors who are skilled sight readers and actors who are near-dyslexics. (Indeed, I know one actor who is, clinically, dyslexic.) It must be said, however, that even a performer's most personal reading problems are likely to bear some relation to his acting process. When an actor repeatedly stumbles over a word or phrase this is often the outward sign of a difficult *acting* moment. When an actor feels (as many do) a general aversion to reading this is probably not, as is generally assumed, the result of "anti-intellectualism" but, rather, of an instinctive reluctance to squander what are unconsciously felt to be *acting* energies in the wrong place. "I never pick up a book," claims the great British actress Billie Whitelaw. "I only read what I'm working on."¹² But this perhaps is no more than to say: My work as an actor being reading, I must save myself for my work.

Still, to speak of reading as something all actors do may seem an overstatement. What about actors in non-Western performance traditions? What about actors in antitextual or nonverbal forms of contemporary experimental theater? What about actors in preliterate societies? No model of acting—not the "skilled worker" or "social critic" or "secular saint"—fits all theatrical cultures equally well, and, clearly, acting as

reading fits best those that provide the actor with something to read. This, however, is far less of a limitation than might at first appear.

With certain non-Western performance traditions I confess I can do nothing. “We learn the dialogues of all two hundred and fifty plays by rote,” explains an actor in the Japanese Kyogen theater. “Somewhere they are written down in a book, but we never see the book.”¹³ Such a practice falls outside the bounds of acting as reading, not only because the actors literally don’t read but also because, as we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, it is the very essence of the actor-reader’s project to be the reader in whose reading others read, whereas in Kyogen this “first reader” is always someone other than the actor.

As for the actor in contemporary nonverbal theater, his doing without a dramatic text does not necessarily mean that he does without reading. The participants in happenings and performance pieces work from instruction sheets or scenarios. And even when no script, however rudimentary, is in evidence, reading—displaced from scripts to other kinds of texts—quite possibly still forms the basis of the actor’s work. In such cases the script-surrogate may be a manifesto or theoretical document: The antitext enthusiasts of the 1960s read to pieces their copies of *The Theatre and Its Double*. Or it may be an acting manual. Viola Spolin’s “theatre games” method of actor training is the last thing from text-oriented. Yet her highly structured book of acting exercises, *Improvisation for the Theater*, itself presents the actor with, in Spolin’s own words, “a full text . . . a charted course” of “activity that brings about spontaneity.”¹⁴ As this last example suggests, even the *improvising* actor may be, in some degree, a reader—if only of his improvisation handbook. Managers of *commedia dell’arte* troupes counseled their players to read widely in dramatic and other literature so as to deepen their stock of usable material.¹⁵ Indeed, I shall suggest in chapter 4 that improvisation itself may best be understood as a limiting case of acting as reading, in which the actor simultaneously “writes” what he “reads.”

Actors in preliterate societies seem excluded by definition from the ranks of actor-readers. Yet even here there is some overlap. If in *The Theatrical Event* I was able to offer a shamanistic model of the actor’s transaction with a text, this is because the two phases of the shaman’s trajectory—the exploratory (*shamanic*) and the self-abandoning (*hunganic*)—correspond, as we shall see in chapter 4, to phases of the reading process. Perhaps not even the Kyogen actor, who “never see[s] the book,” is on a wholly different path from that of the actor-reader. For,

as a nonreader, he “must absorb the movements physically,”¹⁶ and reading itself, we shall find, originally was, and in acting once more becomes, a process of physical absorption.

But even granting that the literacy of actors places some limits on a view of acting as reading, the limits are not, at least so far as Western theater is concerned, very constricting ones: As far back as we choose to look, it seems that actors could read. While it is just barely possible that the citizen-members of the Greek tragic chorus were taught their roles orally,¹⁷ present-day authorities on Greek literacy take it for granted that the actors themselves could read.¹⁸ (For one thing, we know that Greek singers were literate—they are depicted on Attic vase paintings performing from book rolls that “no doubt would have contained both text and musical notation”¹⁹—and actors in the Theater of Dionysus sang their roles.) One might not suppose the medieval townsmen who put on the Corpus Christi cycles were as well educated as their Athenian counterparts, and indeed the roles they played, being both brief and rhyming, could certainly have been imparted “by ear.” Nonetheless, the town archives of both York and Coventry contain records of payment for the copying out and delivery of parts to actors.²⁰ Two such copies of parts, one from the fourteenth century and one from the fifteenth, survive to the present day.²¹

From the sixteenth century on, the literacy of actors may be taken for granted. Of course, the mere fact that actors *could* read in a particular society is no evidence that reading was regarded by that society as germane to the acting process. Nor will direct evidence on such a point be soon forthcoming. Most earlier periods did not even possess the conception of an “acting process,” never mind issue statements as to what constituted it. There are, however, three types of indirect evidence which suggest that the link between acting and reading is a long-standing one: (1) early endorsements of the value for actors of supplementary reading; (2) early instances of reading rehearsals; and (3) the role of the lector (“reader”) in the development of medieval liturgical drama.

1. *Supplementary reading.* That reading has at least an ancillary contribution to make to the work of the actor has long been recognized. I have already mentioned the commedia-master’s recommendation of “outside reading” to his troupe as a source of improvisatory material. In the first full-length acting manual in English (1710), Thomas Betterton urged upon actors the study of moral philosophy as an aid to character analysis. Garrick recommended to a colleague the perusal of “other

books besides plays.” (Salvini and Bernhardt thought the study of historical works especially useful.)²² And in our own day Uta Hagen exhorts her students to acquire “a thorough education in history, literature, English linguistics,”²³ while Joseph Chaikin encourages the members of the Open Theater “to read material on wild and isolated children” in preparation for their portrayal of such figures in *The Mutation Show*.²⁴

2. *Reading rehearsals*. A clear indication of the importance a given era attaches to reading in acting is the emphasis it places on reading as a rehearsal technique, i.e., on “reading rehearsals.” Rehearsal “at the table” is sometimes thought to be an innovation of the Moscow Art Theatre.²⁵ But Goethe had pointed out the usefulness of “book rehearsals” over a hundred years before Stanislavski.²⁶ And in Leone di Somi’s *Dialogues on Stage Affairs* we have an account of a reading rehearsal which dates from the mid-sixteenth century:

First I have all the parts carefully copied out and then . . . gather [the actors] all together in one room and give each one that part for which he is most fitted. I get them, after that, to read the whole play in order that they . . . may learn the plot, or at least that portion which concerns them, impressing on all their minds the nature of the characters they have to interpret.²⁷

3. *The lector*. From earliest times the reading of biblical passages has figured in the worship of the church, and from the second century on such reading was the province of a special reader, distinct from the mass-celebrant.²⁸ As early as the eighth century, these readings (*lectiones*) began to be chanted or sung, and the lectors who chanted or sang them to be chosen specifically for their performance skills. Eighth-century Roman lectors, for example, had to pass a singing audition administered by the Pope himself.²⁹

But the lector was not only a performer; he performed in those very antiphonal exchanges between a choir and a soloist which some regard as the origin of medieval drama.³⁰ Furthermore, his performance in these antiphons was not purely musical but at least prototheatrical. By the early ninth century lectors were varying their voices to distinguish one biblical character from another. It is even possible that different lectors were employed to sing different “roles.”³¹ And even when, over the course of the centuries, lection singing passed to other functionaries (e.g., subdeacons and priests), these were obliged to stand where the

lector had formerly stood, dress as the lector had formerly dressed, and be summoned by name to their task, as the lector had formerly been summoned³²—as if in acknowledgment that, when one takes one's place as a performer, it is the place of a reader one takes.

Yet, after all, the lector is more a symbolic precursor of the actor-reader than his literal origin. It is really only in our own time, in fact with Stanislavski, that reading begins to be consciously understood as the essence of the acting process. Although, or perhaps because, his own view of reading was a paradoxical one,³³ Stanislavski never wearies of stressing the ties between reading and acting.³⁴ He compares learning to act with learning to read:

This ABC and grammar of acting are, comparatively speaking, not difficult, although in the majority of cases they take years to acquire. Without them, it is impossible to live on the stage. . . . How can anyone read fluently and feel it, when the letters and commas keep distracting his attention?³⁵

He associates bad acting with perfunctory reading:

Now let us compare our method with what is done in any theatre of the ordinary type. There they read the play, hand out the parts with the notice that by the third or the tenth rehearsal everyone must know his role by heart. They begin the reading, then they all go up on the stage and act, while holding the script. . . . At the predicted rehearsal the books are taken away.³⁶

And he identifies progress in acting with progress in reading:

[The script] must be read over and over, and with each additional reading we must guide ourselves by what was established the time before.³⁷

Of these many readings that the actor is presumed to bestow on the script, the first—i.e., the one that is most purely a *reading*—has, Stanislavski repeatedly asserts, a special significance: “This all-important moment can be likened to the first meeting between a man and a woman . . . destined to be . . . lovers or mates.” Consequently, “the external circumstances for the first reading . . . should be properly

set. . . . The occasion should be accompanied with a certain ceremoniousness.” The first reading is accorded this degree of importance by Stanislavski because he looks upon it not as a mere preliminary to acting but as already part of the acting process—“the first stage of creativeness.” Listening to the play being read aloud, the actors are already in motion:

They are carried away by the reading. They cannot control the muscles of their faces, which oblige them to grimace or mime in accordance with what is being read. They cannot control their movements, which occur spontaneously.³⁸

But, if the first reading stands at the origins of acting, it also stands for its eventual goal:

In the beginning, when they [the actors] read the play, the words, both their own lines and those of the others who play opposite them, seem interesting, new.³⁹

“Interesting” and “new” is what the words of the script must one day seem again—in performance. That “first time,” the illusion of which acting tries to recover, is the time of first reading,⁴⁰ at which, in the words of Stanislavski’s American disciple Lee Strasberg, “actors can give you such wonderful results that the problem becomes, ‘How do you keep this?’”⁴¹ The work of the actor is born of, and aspires back to, that lost paradise of fresh imaginative response which was formerly his as a reader. For Stanislavski it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that acting begins and ends in reading.

I therefore naturally find the Stanislavskian account of acting a congenial one. But to rest the case for acting as reading solely on Stanislavski may seem to prejudice the outcome. Of course, Stanislavski, with his emphasis on interiority and process in acting, stands ready to welcome into acting the interior process of reading. The surprise is that, when we turn to acting approaches far less hospitable to inwardness than Stanislavski’s, we still find reading accorded a prominent place. Brecht, for example, views reading as a means of preserving rather than abolishing emotional distance between actor and role—and therefore welcomes it into an acting technique whose aim is to preserve just this distance:

To safeguard against an unduly “impulsive,” frictionless and uncritical creation of characters and incidents, more reading rehearsals can be held than usual. The actor . . . should go on functioning as long as possible as a reader (which does not mean a reader-aloud).⁴²

But even in approaches to acting which openly denigrate reading, reading may find a place. Artaud and Grotowski, for example, in leaving so little place for the text, would seem to be leaving none at all for the actor-reader. And yet, the audacities these innovators contemplate against the text are audacious acts of reading. Grotowski defines his theatrical enterprise as “confrontation with myth.” But what exactly are the myths to be confronted? “In the theatre,” Grotowski asserts, “the text has the same function as the myth had for the poet of ancient times.”⁴³ Our myths are *texts*—the numinous, daunting masterpieces of earlier dramatic literature—and one confronts a text by reading it. As I have argued in *The Theatrical Event*, all such confrontational productions, with their foregrounding of certain motifs at the expense of others, their search for acceptable contemporary “meanings,” etc., are, in effect, onstage critical readings—even those productions that imagine that it is the impossibility of reading they confront.⁴⁴ “The library at Alexandria can be burned down,” declares Artaud, who, however, has only read about the library of Alexandria in a volume that escaped the blaze. The Artaudian production of a classic play, “stripped of [its] text,” “without regard for text,”⁴⁵ not only presupposes a reading of that play, it *is* a reading of that play.

The indisputable involvement of acting of most sorts with reading of some kind, the mass of historical evidence which suggests that the acting-reading tie is a long-standing one, the centrality accorded reading by some of acting’s most important practitioner-theorists—all these seem good reasons for venturing upon a consideration of acting as reading. And yet, whatever the advantages, there also appear to be some very evident objections to such an approach. There are, after all, so many ways in which readers are *not* like actors: immobilized, silent, self-absorbed, solitary, passive. But it turns out that each of these “unactorlike” characteristics of reading may, under certain circumstances, characterize acting itself. Let us consider each in turn.

1. *The reader is immobilized.* So is the actor playing Beckett’s Winnie or Aeschylus’ Prometheus. So is an actor working on such exercises as this of Viola Spolin:

Have student-actors sit quietly concentrating on the profession each has chosen—nothing more. If concentration is complete, what he needs for the problem will arrive for his use.⁴⁶

Or this of Stanislavski:

Let us do a little play. This is the plot. . . . The curtain goes up, and you are sitting on the stage. You are alone. You sit and sit and sit. . . . At last the curtain comes down again. That is the whole play.

Stanislavski's answer to the student who complained that this was "not action" may also serve as a reply to those who raise the present objection to a view of acting as reading:

The external immobility of a person sitting on the stage does not imply passiveness. You may sit without a motion and at the same time be in full action. Nor is that all. Frequently physical immobility is the direct result of inner intensity.⁴⁷

Moreover, if we ask why readers tend to immobilize themselves while reading, the explanation is such as to suggest a further tie with acting. People stay still when they read because there seems to be an "intimate connection between motor inhibition and regression into fantasy."⁴⁸ But actors also seek to regress into fantasy—and to do so by this very means. For *motor inhibition* is only another term for relaxation of muscles, the precondition for any fruitful work on an actor's part:

Muscular tautness interferes with inner emotional experience. As long as you have this physical tenseness you cannot even think about delicate shadings of feeling or the spiritual life of your part.⁴⁹

No less for the performer than for the reader is motor inhibition conducive to a "regression into fantasy."

2. *The reader is silent.* He has not always been, as we shall see in chapter 3. But grant that he is: So is a mime. So are actors doing an Emotion Memory or mirror exercise. So is the actress playing Miss Y in Strindberg's *The Stronger* throughout her role—or any actor playing any role through large sections of it.

3. *The reader is self-absorbed.* But self-absorption is also a possible

state for the actor—arguably, the ideal state: “Forget about the public. Think about yourself. . . . If you are interested, the public will follow you.”⁵⁰ One might argue that an actor’s “self-absorption” is really only in the interest of subsequent public performance. But, of course, the solitary reader, too, may aim at eventual performance for others: Consider a student reading poems so as to impress his poetry professor or a lawyer reading precedents so as to sway a court. Conversely, there are acting practices that, not being meant to issue in public performance, may, like solitary reading, benefit only those who participate in them: the closed workshop investigation, for example, or the Brechtian *Lehrstück* (“teaching play”).

4. *The reader is solitary.* Not necessarily. One can read to oneself in a library or a restaurant or a train. Of course, in such situations one is not especially concerned with, or even aware of, the other library patrons, diners, or passengers: Such reading is a form of “solitude in public.” But this is Stanislavski’s very term for the actor’s ideal work state:

It is what we call Solitude in Public. You are in public because we are all here. It is solitude because you are divided from us by the small circle of attention.⁵¹

Moreover, even when a reader is literally alone, he is only apparently so. We read a novel or poem as members of a “company of readers”⁵² (the actual or intended audience for such texts) and as members of an “interpretive community”⁵³ (those whose reading strategies and assumptions we share). Clearly, the actor, too, reads as a member of an interpretive “community” or “company”: the other actors working with him on the show. If an actor is a reader, another actor is *another* reader—a simple fact that, as we shall see in chapter 4, makes it possible to extend the “one-person” model of acting as reading to the work actors do with one another.

Now, while communities of readers sometimes actually convene (say, in a classroom or discussion group), companies of actors are far more likely to do so: They convene at every rehearsal. Still, the contrast in question is between the literal and merely implicit presence of other readers, not between solitude and society.

What further complicates the distinction between *reading alone* and *acting with others* is that much of the actor’s work, too, goes forward in solitude. Character workups, “beat” and “through line” analysis, and,

of course, line memorization are all solitary labors—and, not coincidentally, all labors of reading. “It’s good to be here with you, my friends,” muses a vacationing actress in Chekhov, “delightful listening to you, but . . . sitting in my hotel room, all by myself, studying my part . . . how much better.”⁵⁴ To yearn to act is, among other things, to yearn for a reader’s solitude. Not only is the actor often solitary, he is often a solitary reader.

But, even if we concede that, as is obviously the case, readers spend a good deal more time alone with texts than actors do, there still remains the question: How alone is one when one is “alone” with a text?

Not very, according to a long tradition that views the text as, in some sense, “another.” Everyone from Plato to the New Critics has assured us that a text is “a sort of living organism,”⁵⁵ “formed out of living matter . . . an organic web.”⁵⁶ Texts, in other words, are bodies (“the text is . . . a verbal body . . . that can be sounded, weighed”)⁵⁷ or, at any rate, *have* bodies (“every discourse . . . like a living creature . . . has a body of its own”).⁵⁸ These textual bodies may possess *minds* (“the book faces us like the body of another mind”)⁵⁹ and even *souls* (“the whole of the law seems . . . to resemble a living being, with the literal commandments for its body, and for its soul the invisible meaning stored away in its words”).⁶⁰ But to conceive the text as a body-mind or body-soul amalgam is, in effect, to have conceived it as “a sort of human being”⁶¹—indeed, as a *self*, for a text conceived in such terms “acts or works like a self.”⁶² This, in turn, suggests that texts are capable of standing in all the sorts of relations to their readers that one self may stand in to another—for example, that of *friend*:

[Books] are the one set of friends of whom, quite often, we take our leave with feelings of regret. And when we have left them we are oppressed with none of those thoughts that spoil friendship—what did they think of us?—didn’t we behave rather tactlessly?—did they like us?—or with the fear that we may be forgotten by someone. All such agitations expire on the threshold of the pure, unruffled friendship which is what reading really is.⁶³

Or *therapist*:

The prior text . . . becomes rather like a sympathetic psychotherapist who helps us bring to consciousness repressed thoughts we had

never dared avow openly, and hence to recover energy previously wasted in repression.⁶⁴

Or lover:

The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*.⁶⁵

Reading a good book is not much different from a love affair, from love, complete with shyness and odd assertions of power. . . . One can marry the book . . . add it to one's life, live with it.⁶⁶

To the extent that texts are experienced as others, reading tends to be experienced as interpersonal encounter. One “doesn't speak *about* literature,” says Julia Kristeva, one “speaks *to* literature.”⁶⁷ And the literature speaks back: There arises a “‘dialogue’ between text and reader,” a “dyadic interaction.”⁶⁸ In short, “the pleasure of the text is the pleasure of meeting another self.”⁶⁹ And, one must add, the challenge of the text is the challenge of meeting another self. For the “dialogue” is also a confrontation (“even the most competent reader before a text is, finally, one self confronting another self”)⁷⁰ and, like any confrontation, may issue in violence, in a “psychic warfare between . . . texts and readers.”⁷¹

Any full explanation of *why* encounters with texts should seem like interaction with others must await the detailed account of the reading process to be given in chapters 3 and 4. What concerns us at present is the challenge that their seeming so poses to any straightforward conception of a solitary reading contrastable with acting. The figure of the reader may at first appear an obvious image of solitude, self-communion, even isolation. (We speak of being “lost” or “buried” in a book.) And yet, of course, the text is the work of another, tells of others, is even, as we have just been seeing, likely to be experienced as *itself* “another.” The “solitude” of the solitary reader is therefore a problematic one, for reading is both a solitude and its interruption. The person with a book in his hand holds off a world he holds converse with, holds converse with a world he holds at bay.

To be “alone” with a text, in other words, is to be already *interacting with others*. The very phrasing of this statement suggests what might be the effect of taking it as a statement about the actor. The “(inter)acting with others” which seems to commence only when the actor's solitary reading is interrupted—i.e., when he comes to rehearsal—is “already in