Questa Stanza

THIS ROOM

The Process as Performance

October 13, 2026 by **Gabriele Vittorio Di Maio**

Gracemoon Arts brings the audience into an open rehearsal, a space defined by the Strasberg method, raw emotions, adjustments, and frustration. Here, the actor's craft becomes a shared experience within the realm of experimental theater—one where even mistakes are woven into the performance itself.

On October 10th, at PignetOff in Rome, the audience witnessed the very moment a production begins to take shape. With "This Room – The Process as Performance," Gracemoon Arts Italia opened its creative process to spectators, revealing what typically remains hidden during theatrical rehearsals: warm-ups, trial and error, corrections, and repetition.

The actors—all present at the back of the stage—would, in turn, construct the setting required for various dramatic fragments (John Patrick Shanley's **Doubt**, Neil LaBute's **Fat Pig**, Theresa Rebeck's **The Contract,** and David Ives's **The Red Address**). A table, an easel, or a few simple objects were enough to completely transform the scene. The actors would then begin to perform, under the ever-watchful eye of acting coach and director Michèle Lonsdale Smith.

A scene might be brought to a halt because an actor's voice had grown too loud, or because a performance had become overly contrived—overshadowing the actor themselves. The audience did not merely observe a work-in-progress on stage; they witnessed the psychological and human vulnerability required to bring it to life.

The Weight of a Note

During a standard theatrical rehearsal, an actor can make a mistake, receive a note from the director, and start over—all while knowing they are in a protected space. Here, that same creative process unfolds in front of an audience. The psychological difference is significant: receiving a correction means confronting the possibility that one has failed to achieve what was intended within an empathetic performance.

Receiving such feedback while others are watching inevitably adds another layer: the presence of an external gaze. A note does not merely concern the scene; it can easily touch upon one's

self-esteem, the need for approval, and that small part within each of us that tends to translate “this doesn’t work” into “I am not good enough.”

During the final discussion, this very question inevitably arose: how does one handle being corrected in public without experiencing it as humiliation? The answer, implicit in the theater company’s approach, lies in training. Constantly exposing oneself to correction can serve as a form of practice—a way to distinguish one’s personal worth from the outcome of a single performance. This does not mean eliminating frustration, but rather learning to tolerate it without allowing it to hinder subsequent work on stage.

“Don’t Act”
Modigliani

The work directed by Michèle Lonsdale Smith begins with the teachings of Lee Strasberg, which she has since evolved through a personal approach developed over more than twenty-five years of research. In the Method Acting associated with Strasberg, an actor’s work is not merely about producing a credible expression from the outside; rather, great importance is placed on relaxation, sensory concentration, and the ability to tap into internal experiences that lend authenticity to the action on stage.



Riccardo Pieretti, MODIGLIANI

This sheds light on the phrase “*don’t act*”—an instruction heard from time to time during rehearsals, slipping from Michèle Lonsdale Smith’s lips to land, as it were, in the actor’s gut. It is, of course, not a call to stop acting—quite the opposite: it is an invitation to stop *showing* the audience that one is acting. There is no need to contrive a fictional action when one already possesses the right tools to bring that action to the stage authentically.

When an emotion is portrayed too explicitly, the actor risks merely illustrating anger, pain, or fear, rather than truly inhabiting the situation that should give rise to those feelings. Shouting louder does not necessarily mean being angrier; moving about frantically does not necessarily mean being more agitated. An emotion becomes credible when it does not appear to be “added on” to the scene, but instead emerges from a genuine engagement with what is unfolding.

And this is perhaps the most profound essence of Lonsdale Smith’s request within the work: do not “demonstrate” an emotion—instead, cultivate the organic conditions that allow it to naturally arise.

The actor between emotion and character

An actor does not step onto the stage as a blank slate. They bring with them a body, a personal history, the events of the day just passed, and a pre-existing set of thoughts and emotional states; then, they encounter the emotions demanded by the scene. The work lies in finding a point of contact between these two levels—without ever conflating them entirely.

This theatrical experience only truly resonates if the actor can forge a credible entry point into the situation, while simultaneously maintaining enough awareness to continue performing, listening to their scene partner, recalling the script, and adapting to directorial changes. In this sense, the “here and now” becomes crucial: being present means genuinely reacting to what unfolds within the scene, rather than mechanically reproducing what was dictated by the script.

An open rehearsal introduces an additional layer of complexity: beyond the presence of fellow actors, the text, and the director, there is the acute awareness of being watched by an audience.



Cristina Cappelli, Riccardo Pieretti, FAT PIG

Frustration is an inherent part of the creative process.
Fat Pig
A particularly compelling aspect of the evening was the way it brought to light something the audience usually only encounters in its final, polished form: temporary failure. A scene doesn’t work—so it is stopped, adjusted, and begun again. In the creative process of dramatic art, failure is not necessarily the antithesis of a successful outcome; rather, it is a fundamental stage of the journey.

Learning to inhabit this state means cultivating what might be called “frustration tolerance”—the ability to remain committed to a task even when the initial outcome does not align with what one had hoped to achieve. In contemporary theater, this is particularly evident because the material being worked with is, to a large extent, the self.

A painter can alter the details of a canvas through what, in the language of art, is known as a “rethinking”; an actor, by contrast, must modify their own body, voice, rhythm, and capacity for listening. Consequently, any correction strikes very close to the person—sometimes hitting them squarely in the face. The artistic challenge, therefore, lies in ensuring that this process does not become overly personal or take root in one’s very soul.

Catharsis, emotion, and the risk of conflating actor and character
When discussing emotions brought to the stage, it is easy to invoke the term “catharsis,” though a distinction is warranted. While this differs significantly from the meaning attributed to it in depth psychology—which involves the reactivation and expression of emotional content linked to traumatic experiences—there remains a broader point of connection: the idea that an emotion is not merely described from the outside, but is instead experienced and transformed through a concrete theatrical process.
On stage, the goal should not be to achieve a therapeutic release of an emotion; rather, the performer must learn to harness it, contain it, and give it a precise, artistic form.

The ensemble that remains constantly visible.
The Red Address
The positioning of the actors also contributes to the impression of witnessing a non-traditional performance. The ensemble of actors remains at the back, stepping in to rapidly alter the stage space and prepare the props needed for the next dramatic segmen

Among the many performers involved on the evening of October 10th at PignetOff was Cristina Cappelli, who had previously starred alongside Massimiliano Caiazzo in *Il Giocattolaio*—a production the company had staged in the same venue just months earlier. Her presence thus serves as a small thread of continuity in Gracemoon Arts' Italian journey, yet she is integrated into a work that is explicitly ensemble-driven, where the group—rather than the individual performer—forms the true living organism of the evening. The constant shifting between observer and performer further reinforces the idea that no one is truly outside the creative process.



Alessandro Riceci, Chiara Tomei, THE RED ADDRESS

The final conversation:
the audience enters the process

Once the excerpts conclude, the work is not over. The evening includes an open conversation between the company and the spectators—not merely a Q&A session about the show, but a genuine exchange regarding what has just unfolded, akin to an emotional dance between actors and audience.

- Why can a correction be painful?
- What does "don't act" really mean?
- Does being watched during a rehearsal heighten tension, or does it better prepare you for the actual performance?

These questions easily arise from the audience, yet they also resonate far beyond the theater walls. Receiving criticism without perceiving it as a wholesale judgment of one's character, tolerating the possibility of making mistakes in front of others, and remaining present when things don't go as planned—these are skills relevant to many other aspects of everyday life.
The audience arrives expecting to see how an actor works but ends up witnessing something they know intimately outside the theater: the attempt to do something, the act of exposing oneself to judgment, the experience of momentary failure, and the decision to try again regardless.

In **Questa Stanza – Il processo come performance** (This Room – The Process as Performance), the theatre does not hide the process that precedes the final result; instead, it boldly places that process center stage. Suddenly, even the mistake becomes part of the performance—just as it is part of the universal human experience in its entirety.

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