

TRANSFORMATIONAL VIDEO

by Ned Bobkoff

Performing is an act that has something to do with learning from experience and using what you have learned to grow into something you have never been before. *Character* can be thought of as what the performer becomes in the act of growing into it, a process, as opposed to a rigid previously grounded concept, a superimposition of behavior, or a systematic collection of effects. It is a process that has never occurred before, done by this person in this time in this place with these means, so that it stands out directly as his own, and at the same time, *someone we recognize*.

Video feedback is an effective tool for making that process palpable to the performer, helping him to achieve self-transformation, and turning it into an art. Taped images, combined with a live performer and closed circuit TV, can also create a fresh, lively, and new perspective for the audience as well. I explored this recently staging Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

The play is a moving, compressed, oddly provocative memory play, telescoping time. A constipated sixty-nine year old recluse spends his time listening to tapes made when he was younger, in this instance, when he was thirty-nine years old. Without changing the lines or the sequence of events, we simply substituted video for audio tape. The effect mesmerized us. It gave us an opportunity to choreograph the minute physical changes and the interplay between Krapp at thirty-nine on videotape and Krapp onstage live at age sixty-nine. An intense choreography of protracted movement basic to Beckett's aesthetic. For the performer, Jac Trapp, video created a fresh dimension, a way of reaching into himself and creating *character* without the use of indirect and remembered observations, traditional stereotyping or generalized indications.

Our objective was to find a way for Jac to become open to *how* his behavior affected his expression of it, and to help him understand *what* in his behavior created the knowledge of *how* he was doing it. We wanted the technique to make immediate sense, so that *mistakes* could be eradicated promptly and insights capitalized upon efficiently. We wanted it to occur in a fluid and natural manner, without a break in rhythm or tension.

We set up and treated the video monitor as a kind of *confession* box. There was no movement of the camera; it simply witnessed—patient, stationary, and still. Jac's face was lighted so that its naturally strong structure was sculpted on the monitor like a bas-relief, the high contrast of the medium sharply defining what is usually only fat in the mind's eye. Playing directly into the monitor, he made, immediately, contact with himself, controlling his images, and transforming himself on the spot.

A rich and evolutionary catharsis took place. He became intimate and passionate, the charm and impact of the feedback carrying him away. He worked like a painter, using his face like a brush, subtly, with penetration, and at the same time, shaping a keen and rigorously defined physical expression of Krapp at thirty-nine. And he performed Krapp's long monologue on the first take without a break.

He later testified to the effect the *confession* box had on him. He felt as if he had been carried along on a *slide of emotions*, the intimacy allowing him to reveal feelings he didn't know existed, feelings he had previously kept guarded in rehearsal and public performance. In short, it opened him to new possibilities of expression, and helped the audience gain new insights into the play and their experience of it.

We had pressed the past, the present, and the future together. We now had three images of Krapp to work with during performance. The live high-contrast image on the monitor, like a death mask, a ghostly haunted presence, a projection into the future, plus Krapp at thirty-nine, recorded on tape, mobile and passionate. Finally, the live Krapp onstage, fleshed out with the ashes of himself—a stark presence of loneliness and despair. Especially now that he had passed through the machine and back into himself.

