

# Current Challenges in Doctoral Theatre Research

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**Innovation  
and acting techniques**



## Body and Movement as a Pedagogical Tool for Actor Training

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Carole Zucker, in her book *In the Company of Actors: Reflections on the Craft of Acting*, quotes actress Jane Lapotaire, who states:

You cannot teach acting, you cannot. People either have it or they don't, it's as simple as that. You can teach them how to speak better, or breath properly, to analyse a text, but the actual spark that transmutes words on a page into a living, believable human being... is a process of mystery and myth that no-one can analyse. That's what makes it so magical (Zucker 2001: 79).

Her statement is neither new nor exceptional; indeed, it is one of the most important issues that actor training has continuously contended with – even today, as the formation of the actor is becoming more methodical than ever before, with academies, universities and workshops all around the world doing their best to prove that the art of acting can actually be taught. Nonetheless, there is no general agreement on *how* this “spark”, or whatever we want to call it, can be taught. In my opinion, systematic actor training does in fact focus mainly on the technical requirements of stage work, as described in the above excerpt. Without depriving acting of its mystical aura, I will attempt to show that even the most subtle and magical powers of an actor can be addressed directly in the course of training.

We can all agree that the Western tradition of acting, and consequently, actor training as we know it today, is predominantly based upon the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski, regardless of the theatrical style or genre the actor may be performing in. In my view, at the core of stage realism as it relates to acting technique, the only requisite that must be fulfilled is a pursuit of psychological reality within the dramatic context. In representation, the effect should always be a believable display of emotional reactions and an inner logic in the succession of actions and reactions. Hence, any method of actor training that seeks this kind of emotional truth focuses on the intellectual, cognitive act of analysing the dramatic text.

At the same time, an accurate rendition of a character's psychological life is not the only thing that makes an actor. Another crucial factor is the quality of the performer, Jane Lapotaire's “spark”, the ability to engage and move the audience in a special, hard-to-describe, yet absolutely tangible way. This is what we call *the presence of the actor*. As Jane Goodall points out in her book *Stage Presence*, attempts at verbal description of the phenomenon have been forced to borrow either esoteric or scientific terminology (Goodall 2008). Thus, we speak about magical, hypnotic, magnetic, mesmerising, electrifying performers. As hard as it is to grasp, a kind of energetic radiation emanating from the actor at work is a common experience to both professionals and theatre-goers. In the past, the nature of the actor's presence appeared to be a special gift, an esoteric capability, too volatile to be part of the curriculum in institutionalised actor training. Now we are closer than ever to understanding its nature, thanks to extensive research in the fields of neuroscience and psychology. The discovery of



mirror neurons<sup>1</sup> and the systematic comparison of a performer's brainwaves and heart rates with that of the audience are gradually transforming our notion of stage presence from an act of magic into an actual analysable neurobiological phenomenon.

Even in the light of these scientific results, however, the question still remains: Can stage presence – another expression for the above-mentioned magical quality of the actor – be taught? Is it tantamount to another, equally vague concept that we call *talent*? Is it a gift only possessed by some chosen ones? As I see it, few and scattered attempts are made to include systematic training of this ability into the formation of the actor within the Stanislavski's tradition. This is exactly the point where physical methods enter into our story.

So, what do the words *physical methods of actor training* mean? The expression covers a wide range of different approaches, from the Chekhov Technique to Viewpoints. All these methods share at least one common principle: they are all based on the substitution of Cartesian dualism – the artificial dichotomy that suggests that body and mind are two coexisting but separate entities – with a holistic model in which these two are inseparably connected to each other – a fact that has been recently shown to be true by prominent neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio (Kemp 2012: 164). Not only do our feelings and emotions provoke changes in muscular tension, heart rate and breathing patterns, but any change in our physical state to no lesser extent affects our emotional life. From the actor training point of view, this means that movement can be used to provide acting students a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that form their craft. In a word, the body is no longer used as just a tool of expression, but as a field and vehicle for exploration in training, rehearsal, and performance situations as well.

But how do physical methods work? Each offers a specific approach, and therefore has slightly or fundamentally different goals, while the ultimate target is always the same, namely a state of readiness, a suggestive performance, and a strictly present-time creative process. I would like to demonstrate this with some examples from three of the methods I have studied or worked with in the past few years: the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, Stephen Wangh's *Acrobatics of the Heart*, and my own method of movement improvisation. The following examples are not to be considered representative descriptions of each of the methods or their underlying principles. I would simply like to provide a glimpse into the pedagogical process these methods present.

The Suzuki Method of Actor Training may be the physical method most commonly known around the world today. Japanese theatre director Tadashi Suzuki started developing it with his own company, the Suzuki Company of Toga, in the early 1970s. Watching a performance of the renowned Noh actor Hisao Kanze in Paris was the key experience that turned his attention to the classical Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre styles. He summarised the results of his research in his book *The Grammar of the Feet* (Suzuki 1987). Its most important thesis is that the human race has lost its ancient relationship with the ground as a result of civilisational progress and technological development.

In my method of training actors, I focus on the lower body and especially the feet, because I believe that consciousness of the body's communication with the ground is a portal into a greater awareness of all the physical functions: a point of departure to all theatrical performance (Suzuki 2015: 65).

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1 "Mirror neurons mechanism consists of nerve cells that activate when a person executes an action as well as when he observes the same action performed by someone else" (Sofia 2013: 174).



Thus, one of the main purposes of the physical exercises that the Method relies on is to recreate this special bond. Movements are to be performed in a strictly settled, meticulously devised way. The Method emphasises a very strong, highly energised and controlled lower body and a relatively free upper body as the vehicle of artistic expression. The tension this division creates makes otherwise simple movements such as stomping, squats, balance positions, and different walks extremely difficult to execute.

Another, no less important, feature of the Method, which is invariably found in all physical methods, is the compulsory use of imagery in all the exercises. An image may be any thought or emotion that the actor can relate to, and that motivates and influences his actions, independent of the fact that, in the specific case of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, the choreography of the exercises allows very little improvisation. The constant use of images during the training is what actually makes physical methods creative actor training.

One of the most basic exercises of the Method is *slow ten tekka ten*. Participants are asked to form two lines at the far ends of the rehearsal room, each line facing the other. First, the actors walk through the whole length of the room, the centre of the body drawing a perfectly straight line in space. Practically, this means the actor should avoid any bouncing or swinging either to the side or back and forth, both of which are part of our everyday walking. Advancing in this even, smooth fashion requires an incredible amount of concentration, balance, and body control. Music is used to provide an even rhythm throughout the whole exercise. Nonetheless, an additional challenge is that the actors standing in the lines must advance in complete unison, splitting their attention between their own bodies and those of the others. Once they reach the end of the room, without any outward sign, all members of the line must turn around at the same pace and begin the walk again in the opposite direction. During the second and third phase of the exercise, arms are added, first in a fixed position, and then permitted to move freely. During the whole sequence, image-work is used as the focus and motivation to any movement made. For example, one might have to picture a partner to whom one is advancing. As a matter of course, the image must be strong enough to provide a powerful emotional relationship. This again creates a lot of tension – having a burning need to get closer, or, eventually, away from something or someone, and at the same time, being restrained from going faster than the exercise allows. Consciously created and employed resistance, both bodily and emotional, is a powerful source of energy that organically becomes what Stanislavski called “radiation”, another widespread expression for what I have previously described as “stage presence”.

Stanislavski suggested deconstructing any role into the duality of goals and obstacles. The Suzuki Method of Actor Training takes this one step further: obstacles become part of the physical existence of the actor. What Stanislavski saw as a source of the energy that provoked actions proves in this way to be a source of communicative energy as well – a switch that helps the actor engage the audience’s full attention to her performance.

My second example comes from Stephen Wangh’s method, *Acrobatics of the Heart*. Based mainly on the teachings of Jerzy Grotowski in the late 1960s *Acrobatics of the Heart* uses a series of movements coming mostly from Grotowski’s early experiences with yoga. Actors training in this method connect movements called *corporels* and *plastiques* (Wangh 2000) in free improvisational movement sequences. The Method accentuates the two-way body–soul communication, forming a constant dialogue between the actor’s body and emotions. During the improvisation, the actor listens to any emotional content that may arise from the mere ac-



tion of moving, and simultaneously allows emotions into her movement patterns. The result is a heightened sense of being present in the moment, living any emotions that may arise, and developing them dynamically through physicalisation.

Let us examine a fragment of a possible sequence during an Acrobatics of the Heart training session. At the beginning, the actor jumps into a tiger leap. Although she was originally running forward to meet an imaginary lover (as I said before, image-work is an indispensable part of any physical method), a moment of unexpected weakness right before the moment of leaping transforms the act of jumping towards an image into a jumping away from another. Letting her mind wander freely among images while in the air, her imagination becomes engaged in fleeing from a pack of wolves swiftly approaching from behind. Fear takes over as she turns around to face the danger, throwing her arm forward in an aggressive manner to scare away the enemy. The power of the movement surprises her, and self-confidence becomes the dominant emotion. She looks up to encounter the suddenly appearing image of an annoying boss. The arm, poised to strike a moment ago, stops in mid-air to avoid the consequences of an open confrontation, and is lowered slowly, gently trembling with frustration and humiliation, all the physical energy of the whole arm now concentrated in the shaking of the fingers.

At an initial, superficial glance, the sequence described above may seem no more than a playful improvisation. Yet it involves a whole series of extremely useful experiences for the acting student, experiences that may easily become acting skills for the professional actor. So, from a pedagogical point of view, what happened during those few seconds of moving in space? Stanislavski dedicates a whole chapter in his book *An Actor Prepares* to the importance of a flexible and rich imagination as the actor's most important tool (Stanislavski 1988: 69–93). When it comes to actor training, it is important to realise that mental skills can be trained just as much as physical strength and stamina. Acrobatics of the Heart, according to its name, is above all a psychological training, developing and “keeping in shape”, among other things, the imagination. Leaping from one association to the next reinforces openness in work, meaning that the actor is ready not only to perceive but also to adopt any incoming impression and allow it to influence her actions and decisions. The value of this kind of readiness in any stage situation cannot be overestimated, as it grants a real-time, actual communication to one's self, partners, and audience alike. Ultimately, what an actor may achieve from this training is an embodied experience of a series of non-physical skills ready to be put into action at any time. Of course, this kind of open exploration forms part of an actor's pre-performative preparation. When Acrobatics of the Heart is used as part of the rehearsal process, the character and rules of the improvisation are adapted to the specific demands of stage work.

My third and last example comes from my own experimentation with acting students as a movement teacher. In the past few years, I have been developing a method for actor training based on movement improvisation. First developing a common movement language through technical exercises and combining free movement with the use of imagery focused primarily on interpersonal relationships, my aim is to create a form of communication that relies on neither verballity nor gestures. During the training, actors find themselves able to engage fully in the act of speaking through their bodies, experiencing the immense energy that comes from the imperative desire of making themselves heard and understood by another human being. Thanks to the preparatory training, they are able to let go of any kind of planning and devising of forms – in a word, of any cognitive process. Instead, they let their body “do the



thinking". Very much in the way Acrobatics of the Heart works, movement improvisation opens the gate for a free flow of emotions.

In one of the most successful exercises I have used during sessions, I ask the participants to find a partner and take a place facing each other at a distance of approximately three meters. One of the actors works as the "speaker", the other one as the "listener". The speaker starts to move, concentrating on a relationship image and an inherent message as a starting point; the task of the latter is merely to watch and, on a deeper level, to give full attention to the speaker. Even though, due to the stylised, dance-like movements of the speaker, the message cannot be fully and literally deciphered, the effort of the speaker affects the listener – and if a third party is watching the exercise, the audience as well – rather strongly. This exercise is characterised by a very special communication; following this kind of work, students often report gaining a very deep knowledge of their partners. From the speaker's point of view, the impact they make on their partner is in no way less perceptible or powerful. This, for both participants, is a joyous moment of acting at its purest. The flow of energy that connects the two actors is almost palpable; turning stage presence into a bodily feeling and a state they can consciously create and manage in the future, not only during movement improvisations, but in any work situation. This is precisely what Michael Chekhov speaks about when he says "experience more and more of that strong feeling that may be called [...] presence on stage" (Chekhov 2002: 7).

This has only been a short illustration of what is in reality a vast range of pedagogical approaches. My choice of examples does not in any way imply a rating or assessment of the physical methods I have come to know during my doctoral research; I do not see the point in comparing them to one another, as each of them bears a set of specific merits and possibilities. All I wish is to give a short introduction into a world that has thrilled me ever since I began to experiment with my acting students on movement improvisation.

I would also like to point out that physical methods do not determine any style or technique of acting. Therefore, I believe that they should not be considered as substitutes to traditional methods of Western actor training, but rather as complementary elements of a manifold academic educational system. Persistent reconsideration of the ways in which we express ourselves on stage as directors, choreographers, playwrights, and actors is an inseparable part of making theatre, and should it not be so where the art of theatrical creation is taught? The popularity of physical methods and their underlying holistic perspective has experienced a boom in the last two decades. I truly hope that they will soon be integrated into the syllabus of more and more theatre academies and universities in Europe and around the world. To expedite the process, I can only but encourage academic research into this incredibly rich and fascinating field.

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