Naked to all but ourselves: some notes on actor training and phenomenology

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Publication Details
Hayes, J. E.. Naked to all but ourselves: some notes on actor training and phenomenology. Australian National University. 1 July. 2010.
AUSTRALASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THEATRE, DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES
2010 CONFERENCE

STRIPPING BARE …!

29TH JUNE – 2nd JULY 2010

Thursday 1st July 2010

Naked to All but Ourselves:
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Abstract

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Just as an audience can critically view the synthesised structure of any performance, evaluating the component elements which create meaning, so too each performing body in itself reflects nuances of embodied cultural meanings. Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology (1962; 1965; 1968) argues that human consciousness is ‘caught up’ in the ambiguity of the corporeal body so that any human body is both materially of the world that at the same time it is consciously directed towards (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 146). The body that is in action is already immersed in a subjective reality of its own and others’ making. For the actor, the negotiations between intentionality and viewed action are a daily consideration. These interactions between any body/subject and her lifeworld are partly visible for others to see. Yet the immersion in a lifeworld and the commitment to it mask reflection most particularly from those enacting it. We are revealed to others through our bodily performances in ways for which we ourselves do not have access.

This paper is based on the author’s doctoral research (Hayes 2008), where Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is used to explore the experiential processes of actor training in Yat Malmgren’s actor training technique. My aim in this paper is to outline several of Merleau-Ponty’s concepts, in particular Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of ‘refusal’ (1962, p. 82) and his more recognised concept of the ‘chiasm’ (1968, p. 152), in order to offer a rich means of researching the development of actors’ skills, both concepts enable new means of challenging actors’ habitual performance modes, whilst at the same time supporting their embodied agency.
I would like firstly to introduce myself in this setting as an actor trainer. I have been working with actors – teaching primarily students of Acting the Yat Malmgren training technique of Character Analysis for the last twenty-five years. I am still fascinated by processes of acting and the field in which I work. My doctoral thesis (Hayes 2008) which is termed, ‘The Knowing Body: Meaning and method in Yat Malmgren’s actor training technique’ examines the ways in which students studying the technique comprehend the development of their acting skills. The research is framed through phenomenology and it is through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment that this paper proceeds.

A range of researchers have utilised Merleau-Ponty’s theories of phenomenology in order to explore the experiential and kinaesthetic processes of acting (Stanton B Garner Jnr 1993, 1994; Alice Rayner 1994; Peta Tait 2000, 2008; Zarrilli 2004). My aim in this paper is to outline two of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical concepts of embodiment and then to briefly consider these with respect to acting in the light of Antonio Damasio’s neuroscience (1999) in order to consider actor training.

I have spoken at ADSA before (Hayes 2005) about Merleau-Ponty’s metaphorical image of the ‘chiasm’ (1968, pp. 152-3) - a crossing point between the material and perceptual aspects of a subject/body - a body that is intertwined with the perception of itself as a material entity in its own perceptual world. It is this concept, as well as another lesser-known idea of Merleau-Ponty’s termed ‘refusal’ (1962, pp. 76-82), which considers the body/subject’s ability or inability to adapt to its circumstances, that I wish to speak about today.

Firstly I want to refer to the theme of this conference, Stripped Bare… It evokes immediately something of the processes of acting. At this conference we have heard more about actors and their trainings and their processes than at many theatre conferences. The problem that still exists for the students of acting is the difficulty of translating spoken direction into pragmatic embodied responses. The actor in training is constantly required to translate others’ perspectives into her or his own embodied forms. Whatever is communicated may serve to obfuscate or confuse as readily as elucidate, and for the reasons that Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1965, 1968) is able to elucidate.
Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 146) argued that human consciousness is ‘caught up’ in the ambiguity of the corporeal body so that this body/subject is both materially of the world that at the same time it is consciously directed towards. It is through the performance of a body that, as Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 303) has stated ‘I am at grips with a world’. In Merleau-Ponty’s model of the body/subject, consciousness is distributed across the body and is expressed through action towards a *perceived* material world. In other words we are creating a world at the same time as we are imagining that we are within it.

This is the ‘lived-world’ or the ‘lebenswelt’ of Edmund Husserl’s (1970) phenomenology. It is as much an affectively experienced world as a sensed one, as much an experience of memories and future hopes as an experience of the present, as much an experience of the mythical and the instinctual as of the rational. Merleau-Ponty (1962) establishes the body/subject as embedded. As Garner (1993) jokes in his Theater Journal essay on Merleau-Ponty we are like Beckett’s Winnie immured in the earthliness of our existence – We can’t ever escape our embodiment.

Each body/subject in its ‘Lebenswelt’ is interactive with every other body/subject creating phenomenal fields of experience (Merleau-Ponty 1968). In his hermeneutics of philosophy Hans Georg Gadamer (1975, p. 289) proposed a term – ‘horizontverschmelzung’ – to indicate how cultural presuppositions influence experiences and enable separated individual consciousness to understand one another, calling this a ‘fusion of horizons’. These shared horizons are structured through more than simply our language or words but through posture, gesture, and responses to senses. This reflexivity of one body/subject gaining access to another precludes any privileged access to oneself. You in fact can see more of me than I can see myself; you are able to understand all sorts of things about me that I cannot as easily see objectified. Perhaps this is why so many people imagine that acting must be such a simple thing to do. We reflect on the materiality of others’ embodiments and our own and equally others are open to similar reflexivity.

Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology returns the transformative power and mystery to the meeting of bodies in performance. The link between audience and performer is a chiasmatic, intersubjective one carrying the possibility of bodies constituting new understandings through their meeting. This negotiation or chiasmic outcome Merleau-Ponty
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(1968, p. 139) calls the flesh, a pregnant sensibility that is constantly open to becoming through interaction.

The thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication…It is thus, and not as the bearer of a knowing subject, that our body commands the visible for us (1968, p. 135).

In these ever-changing phenomenal fields and with a limited access to the sense of our own materiality within any field, how does and in fact why does any body/subject construct a ‘sense of self’, which must by its definition be a limitation?

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) in his work, The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness theorises that the human development of a sense of self which he terms ‘core consciousness’ arises from a relationship between objects and the body. He elucidates the dynamic and relational biological means through which the brain structures consciousness.

The sense of self depends … on the brain’s ability to portray the living organism in the act of relating to an object. That ability, in turn is a consequence of the brain’s involvement in the process of regulating life (Damasio Feeling book jacket).

Like Merleau-Ponty Damasio see processes of action constituting consciousness, and this in turn forming notions of a self.

How do these theorists help in the work of training young actors? Particularly in the teaching of acting in tertiary institutions, consciousness in action is mediated in an environment still dominated by paradigms where mind and body are considered as separate. In an emphasis on the rational, explanations and words are almost always prioritised. Yet each acting student is already immersed in a partly imaginary world that is structuring the students’ movements and actions.
Theatre researcher Rhonda Blair (2002, p. 182) uses Demasio’s research to reassert the primacy of character narratives as a core element of the student actor’s work. My own approach uses personal narratives, often in relation to objects, but more substantially in relation to gesture predicated by Yat Malmgren’s technique. My aim is to enable young performers to experience the ways in which their bodies move and change in relation to their own fictions. Malmgren’s method notes gesture, posture and directions of the body’s movement in space in relation to particular and shared character narratives, which Malmgren terms Inner Attitudes.

As an acting teacher my work is primarily relational: to open the relationships that exist in an actor-training course between firstly the actors and their bodies, then between each actor in the training, as well between the trainer and themselves, and most importantly between the actors and their audiences. This is somatic mind/body work. It aims to throw a light on the students’ bodily signals (in fact all bodily signals) so that together we can consider the many partial narratives that are already revealed through actions. We are already naked – but to all but ourselves.

In this encounter, using Yat Malmgren’s terms and methods of Inner Attitude exercises, using the working action definitions of Punching, Slashing, Pressing, Wringing, Dabbing, Flicking, Gliding and Floating, considering shadow moves and character types the actor’s journey is one of discovering the means through which bodies communicate within lifeworlds.

One means that Bennan (1967, p. 78) notes from Merleau-Ponty’s work is the ability of the body in relation to its ‘Lebenswelt’ to act at one time as a ‘release [of subjectivity] to the human world’ whilst it can ‘at another [time] offer refuge from it.’ So whilst many acting teachers may be interested by what student actors can release, one process I am particularly interested in is that of bringing students to consciousness of how their body can become as Merleau-Ponty puts it (1962, p. 164) ‘the place where life hides away’.

This brings me to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘refusal’. Firstly he considered the habitual body (1962, p. 82) – a body where a practical or impersonal consciousness is maintained on a daily basis. Events that have affected the phenomenal field of a body/subject may have caused a lack of adaptation to the present. He suggests that events in the past may remain, almost as a commitment to the past and that present actions may retain traces of the past, because the past
is structuring all movement forward. Hadreas (1986, p. 91) reflecting on Merleau-Pontys concept of refusal notes that the outcome is always ‘a shrinking or contraction of the world which circumscribes what choices are available.’ The body in effect withdraws and maintains its past narratives, although it still may be visibly present.

Merleau-Ponty considered the phantom limb but his theories are applicable to the physical anomalies that disturb students’ learning processes in acting. For instance the student who loses her voice, or who has an accident just prior to the performance, two students who I teach at present who faint in classes but for whom no medical reasons can be found, each of these I regard as refusals. On a subtle level refusal appears when trainee actors cry uncontrollably, or throw up or throw infantile tantrums, or when trainee actors appear dazed and incapable of responding to simple requests in action.

My research indicates that these behaviours are unwilled and whilst disturbing they are also imbued with meaning for the actor in training. These irrational and uncalled for behaviours are not erroneous by-products of studying acting but rather are the deeply mulled over experiences or perhaps ‘symptoms’ that hold worth to the trainee in terms of her or his progress in understanding the processes of being a performing body. My interest in bodily symptoms that arise through actor-training have become a means through which a light can be thrown on the processes of body/subjects in action.
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