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Janys E. Hayes

University of Wollongong, janyshayes1@outlook.com

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The 'Interplace' in Actor Training:
Yat Malmgren's Character Analysis**

**by Janys Hayes
BSc (Hons), Dip Acting, MCA
Lecturer Performance, Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong
Australia**

The 'Interplace' in Actor Training: Yat Malmgren's Character Analysis

Abstract

Using Henri Bergson's concept of the human body as an 'interplace', an ambiguous 'place of meeting and transfer' between materiality and culture, this paper examines the actor training practices of Yat Malmgren. Malmgren's technique of Character Analysis sets particular movement and vocal patterns for trainee actors to perform, based on its traditional underpinnings from German expressionist dance. Integrating the phenomenologies of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty this paper illustrates the complex modalities of embodied experience inherent in actor training and Malmgren's training in particular, where actors become keenly aware of corporeal dimensions of expression.

Structural elements in the Malmgren technique highlight the chiasmatic relationship for actors of being both the viewed, constructed surface body of contesting discourses, as well as being the viewer, an embodied agency with direction. The resultant 'excess' or lack of congruency between these positions enables new movements in physical expression and language, as well as revealing sedimentations of habitual modes of engagement with the world.

Malmgren's emphasis is on otherness. In this actor training context otherness is first experienced as the intertwinement of the actor's sense of self with the materiality of her own body, reflecting Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of alterity.

The 'Interplace' in Actor Training: Yat Malmgren's Character Analysis

I firstly want to introduce myself in this forum as an actor trainer. In the early 1980s I studied at the Drama Centre London training in Yat Malmgren's technique of Character Analysis. I had worked as an actor previously in Australia and I returned to this after Drama Centre. However my teaching of Malmgren's technique has become my principal direction. I have taught Malmgren's technique to actors for 23 years, in independent acting institutions, at the National Institute for Dramatic Arts (NIDA), at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and now the technique is housed at the University of Wollongong's Faculty of Creative Arts, where I teach it as a component of Performance Skills in a three year Bachelor of Creative Arts Performance degree. Character Analysis, Malmgren's actor training technique is the subject of my doctorate.

I had considered changing the title of this paper. I wanted to call it 'What Performing Bodies Do.' simply to emphasise the peculiar and unique position of any performing body, being viewed, being aware of itself being viewed and yet being engrossed in action at the same time. Bruce Wilshire (1991, p. 184), a phenomenologist and performance theorist speaks eloquently about this in his seminal text *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*.

The body that one lives and that is inseparable from oneself enjoys a precarious identity. ... My expressivity is knowable for my own reflection only because initially it is known pre-reflectively through the expressive and responsive bodies of others.

It is certainly an odd thing – and that in performance the audience has as much to say about what any performing body is expressing as the body that is doing the performance itself. As Wilshire (1991, p. 232) states,

The self is an occasionally conscious body that displays itself in a theatre-like way to others, and the first and third points of view on it are deeply intertwined.

Of course writings about performing bodies and the role that others take in shaping performing bodies may not be particularly helpful to the performer in the act of performance itself. I thought we could play a performative game here. Let's take me, my performative role here— I'm a performing body in this instance. You and I know all sorts of things about performing bodies. I know that Foucault (cited in Butler, 1999, p. 308) has said that my bodily surface is a web of contestations of ideologies set historically. I am a set of bodily inscriptions that you as my audience are reading. So? What? What am I to you? I am a white female academic – no that's right I've announced myself as an acting teacher – I'm a white, middle aged female acting teacher – or I'm an Australian in New Zealand – or perhaps I'm at the wrong conference because I am primarily a theatre practitioner and perhaps not an academic at all! These are definitely contexts. Moreover there are many contexts that you are reading that I am unaware of even as I am in action. And they definitely do shape viewings of whatever I am up to here. But I am also an experiencing body and there is a negotiation in process between your context for me (whatever that might be!) and my subjective positioning of myself (though specific to this temporality and space).

This brings me to the real title of my paper –'The 'interplace' in actor training'. This term, 'interplace', is originally Henri Bergson's (cited in Casey, 1998, p. 213), an early phenomenologist investigating consciousness and its role in memory. Edward Casey, in 1998, used Bergson's term in a paper about embodiment entitled, 'The ghost of embodiment: on bodily habitudes and schemata.' Casey to a certain extent aligns his position with Bordieu in the paper. He develops the concept that any learned bodily movement demonstrates the 'quasi-technical' (1998, p. 210) ability of the human body as an 'intermediacy', a 'meeting' place between the 'cultural' and 'physical'. Quoting Casey's (1998, p. 213) paper, he argues

as such an inter-place, the lived body lends itself to cultural enactments of the most varied sorts, all of which are themselves dependent on particular corporeal techniques for their own realization.

Of course if I stand here then I must have used the 'apparatus' of my body to construct this paper, I must be applying 'the apparatus' which is my body to face you, to speak audibly, to read. But Casey himself dismantles the notion that any body can be

considered as apparatus. It seems that as well as being the rather objectified image of Foucault's 'regime' (cited in Casey 1998, p. 213) I also stand here as Casey's 'inter-place' having gained a set of performative skills, practiced and shaped through time, whilst being conscious of my corporeal involvement in the adjustment and enactment of those skills; my vocal qualities, my stance, my impact, my relatedness, these are corporeally involved dimensions to my surface representations.

This notion of 'the inter-place' is directly applicable to Australian actor – training and it forms the background for my discussion today, a questioning of actor training and who it serves, as well as an introduction to Yat Malmgren's Character Analysis.

The skills acquisition which takes place in actor trainings in Australia throughout post schooling institutions whether within Universities, TAFEs (Australia's Technical and Further Education system) or independent acting schools, are corporeally embedded learning processes that whilst having varying cultural heritages are learnt viscerally. My doctoral thesis tracks just some of these skills trainings (Hayes, 2008, p. 126), indicating for instance the background of methods and influences that Tony Knight brings to his acting teaching at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) which is Australia's premiere acting institution. Knight states in an article in the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance publication of *Equity* (Mill, 2002, p. 16), that his principal influences in his teachings are Stella Adler's Stanislavskian method of training actors and Rudolf Laban's movement theories as expressed by Yat Malmgren. In comparison the heritage of techniques that Lindy Davies brought to her years of teaching and directing at the Victorian College of the Arts are quite different (Woollard, 2002, p. 43). Davies speaks of Balinese trance, of the influence of Peter Brook's techniques and Grotowski. Jane Woollard (2002 p. 43) writing in *RealTime* about actor training in Australia has argued that a 'genealogy of method' prevails at institutions where, like an apprenticeship model, the acting techniques offered at any one institution are the techniques in which each teacher has been trained. She indicates that training institutions' curricula have on the whole been formed by their staff. This is the case in my own department at the University of Wollongong's School of Music and Drama, where staff create their curriculum and where each staff member brings to that their own heritage of how they themselves were trained.

My use of the term 'inter-place' through my added introduction of Wilshire, and his reference to identity, begs a more probing question than simply the cultural heritage of actor trainings. – What role does the identity of the performer have in shaping her own expressivity within any actor training institution? For although performance skills form the backbone of an actor training, the notion of what a body is or may be or the questioning of how expression is shaped through a human body remains primarily an unconscious rather than conscious negotiation. Each training method was created historically for a purpose, which may no longer be pertinent.

Malmgren's Character Analysis was created over his time at the Drama Centre, London, where he was the co-director of the institution with Christopher Fettes from 1963 until 2001. Malmgren was born in Sweden 1916 and lived until 2002. He retired from teaching Character Analysis at Drama Centre, London in 2001 at the age of 85. Malmgren wrote nothing of his work. In this latter half of his life he behaved as an introvert who taught principally from one room. He did not collaborate on the many theatrical productions staged at Drama Centre. Yet he is referred to as being a seminal influence on numbers of famous British and International actors, Sean Connery, Diane Cilento, Anthony Hopkins, Anne-Marie Duff, John Simm, Pearce Brosnan, Colin Firth – the list goes on and on.

The technique of Character Analysis rests on a body of work entrusted to Malmgren by Rudolf Laban, the movement theorist and artist whose written works were banned by the Third Reich and who escaped to the United Kingdom to establish Movement Dance techniques and theories there in the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1954, when both men Malmgren and Laban were teaching at the Art of Movement Studio set up by Laban in Addlestone, Surrey in the United Kingdom (Willson, 1997), Laban entrusted a set of documents to Malmgren outlining Laban's newly developing technique of Movement Psychology (Malmgren, 2000). Malmgren taught Dance at Laban's Art of Movement Studio. He had been a modern dance soloist as well as dancing with internationally renowned companies such as the Ballet Jooss, and the International Ballet in the war and post war years. The material that Malmgren received from Laban centred on Laban's growing interest in the movement patterns of differing psychological types. It is this research that Malmgren moulded into an actor training technique, which it needs

to be stated he used for the purposes of training actors for the performance of characters in realistic theatre and film.

Of his intention in all this Malmgren spoke with me saying (you have to understand – Malmgren never fully learnt English – It was a kind of device that he used – his own style of English)

But then I worked as an actor all the time, behind the dancing form,... I express myself through the movement you know as if I was an actor. ... It is easier to think about a relationship if you are acting. My relationship with the one person, that person has an objective and I must create a relationship with the problem of that person, that is then an obstacle for me. So I must be in constant contact with the person, outside of me. So I receive from this person, by which I then transmit.

(Malmgren, 2000)

Malmgren here is speaking of the model of action that he created, a figure of eight movement, which he often danced, indicating how a body reaches out in action in an encounter with another and then adjusts or adapts to that meeting. What I am stressing here today is firstly the corporeality of that action and secondly the ‘otherness’ of that meeting. This was the reason that Malmgren gave for being attracted to or understanding Laban’s perspectives. Psychological types in Laban’s Movement Psychology, which was influenced by C G Jung’s psychological functions, are established corporeally and are different from each other. Thinking types don’t necessarily understand the perspectives of Feeling types, Sensing types may see the world differently than Intuiting types. I am sure you know about these theories through the popularity of the Myers-Briggs testing system (Myers –Briggs Personality Types, 2007) so often used in management for job selections and which assumes differing modes of behaviour for differing types. Malmgren’s method is predicated on types, expressed corporeally, stemming from Laban’s movement research. Character Analysis substantiates the meeting of performative bodies and the establishment of ‘otherness’ again through corporeality.

Malmgren's figure of eight is extremely similar to Elizabeth Grosz' (1994) image of the Mobius strip which she uses in her text *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* as a means of elucidating how bodies in action become loci for both experiencing as well as inscribing. Malmgren's types, termed Inner Attitudes, are revealed through action.

Malmgren's model of action also has similarities with the image of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *chiasm* (1968, p. 143). Merleau-Ponty argued that human consciousness is 'caught up' in the ambiguity of the corporeal body so that it is both materially of the world that at the same time it is consciously directed towards (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 146). This conceptualisation of the body in intentional action, already immersed in an imagined world, correlates clearly with Malmgren's models of action, as structured through Malmgren's Inner Attitudes. It is through an intentionality that is already embodied in particular ways of viewing the world that the performer in Malmgren's technique conceptualises the Inner Attitude and the action of any character. Spatial directions, rhythms, status, motivational stances all constitute the world lived-through the actor's body. Moreover this body, the body in performance is subjected to scrutiny both by the actor, herself, and the audience. Merleau-Ponty establishes the body-subject as embedded and interactive with every other body-subject, creating as it were 'phenomenal fields' of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *chiasm* (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 143), that is the relationship of the seer to the seen, of speech to the listener, of touch to the touched, opens the vision of a web-like world of reflexivities. Through the reflexivity of bodies, one person has access to the reality of another through their bodily expressions. Embodiment means that there is no privileged access to oneself, and other people are equally not closed to oneself. Despite this Merleau-Ponty precludes any notion of a unity of subjectivities that might create a 'reality' but rather posits a network of provisional adjustments, always open to reformulations.

Feminist theorists however in critiquing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the *chiasm* are critical of Merleau-Ponty's assumption of a neutral lived body (Young, 1989; Sullivan, 1997; Butler 1989; Grosz, 1994). Although Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 154) states that sexuality is bound to bodily existence and an intrinsic element of being-in-the-world, he never provides an account of sexual difference. Whilst Merleau-Ponty supports a

reversibility of subject-object positions, feminists such as Judith Butler, Iris Young, Elizabeth Grosz and Shannon Sullivan stress the ‘otherness’ of the encounters of these bodily chiasmatic relationships and that any reversibility is questionable.

This is vital in the consideration of the specificity that is being referred to in this paper that is the intertwining between actor and herself as body, actor and another actor as body and actor and audience as intertwined bodies. Merleau-Ponty suggests that our first encounter with a lack of congruence in ourselves is between ourselves (as a subject position) and the materiality of our own bodies. In acting processes you could call it a corporeal resistance. Malmgren called it our ‘density’. – we have an image but can it be released through our body? We have an intention a knowing of ourself in silence – but can it be expressed? Can it be seen? The performer is ushered into the liminal state that Zarrilli (2004, p. 661) speaks of developing in his eastern martial arts trainings for actors of *t'ai chi chuan*. He refers to the actor's body as ‘a process of encounters’ (Zarrilli, 2004, p. 655) and terms the ability or attention of a performer to be intune with a deep connection to their actions whilst also being aware of being watched, as the Outer Aesthetic Bodymind connection. The Malmgren technique charts this kind of connection through working actions – Laban's (1971, p. 76) terms of Punching, Slashing, Pressing, Wringing, Dabbing, Flicking, Gliding Floating and through Malmgren's Inner Attitudes. What is seen and unseen is pinpointed in a structural tension. The performer in action may think “I am more me than what you are seeing!” As well in Malmgren's technique an actor becomes minutely aware of the ways in which a body moves intuitively and flowingly towards that which it recognises as similar to itself and the ways in which, like an amoeba, a body retreats from what is intuitively alien. How is it that we have constructed these movement towards or away?

The ambiguity of being an already established, sedimented set of habits as well as being a desire to enact something beyond this experiences dwells in what I am describing as the question for the performer of “Whose is the body that is being viewed?” This is the actor's dilemma. The identity of the body that is being viewed is destabilised. A set of culturally placed set of habits may appear to be more substantial than any agency that has been enacted.

To return to 'the interplace' in actor training, experiential embodied learnings in the shape of actor training techniques assume intentional directions. My probings here today question the notion of for whom these directions serve. If these intense corporeal learning processes are to serve the student herself, as lifelong learning processes, the question of how the actor's agency can assert itself in a corporeally prescribed method becomes crucial.

In asking for whom do each of the methods of actor training that are historically situated in our Australian actor training institutions serve, I am questioning the recognition of otherness within actor training institutions. I am questioning the presence or absence of negotiated chiasmatic relationships in acting institutions and then the performative directions that accrue from these encounters. My argument here is that the complex modes that create corporeal schemata need to be experientially revealed for those involved. Whilst the actor's body is treated as either only a representation or only as the quasi-technical site for the corporealisation of skills, the experience of the existential dilemma of our visceral ambiguity is bypassed.

Malmgren's figure-of-eight process as a representation of the ongoing flow of intentionality and movement between a body and its response to its environment, allows for an awareness of the dialogical interaction between the subjectivity and materiality of a performer's lived world. It identifies the actor's body as a process of becoming. Through the experience of this 'interplace' new positions of embodied performed agency and self-directions of performance are able to emerge.

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