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Actor training across cultures: the interplace in actor training (Keynote address - APB Forum)

Abstract

A friend recently told me that he taught a condensed course in Acting at the Australian Film and Television School, in Sydney, specifically designed for film directors in which he introduced film directors to 12 differing methods of actor training. The methods ranged over Russian techniques, Japanese techniques, a Brazilian method and several American methods. Yes. There is a multitude of actor training methods and if one searches historically there are even more to be found from the past.

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**TEACHING – LEARNING AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN
THEATRE PERFORMANCE**

Actor Training Across Cultures: The *Interplace* in Actor Training

By

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Actor Training Across Cultures: The *Interplace* in Actor Training

A friend recently told me that he taught a condensed course in Acting at the Australian Film and Television School, in Sydney, specifically designed for film directors in which he introduced film directors to 12 differing methods of actor training. The methods ranged over Russian techniques, Japanese techniques, a Brazilian method and several American methods. Yes. There is a multitude of actor training methods and if one searches historically there are even more to be found from the past.

Looking at the fundamentals or the commonalities in actor training methods it clear to say that all methods involve the human body and the human voice in expressions that are culturally coded. A set of vocal and physical gestures in a Russian production of an Anton Chekhov play may not mean the same for an Australian audience as it does for a Russian audience and likewise an Australian production of the same play may not be considered as fine acting for a Russian audience. Shakespeare in the United Kingdom is performed differently than the way it is performed in Australia. I am sure this week we are going to see a range of new texts with wonderfully hybrid theatrical forms of cultural symbolism and styles. Whilst the globalized cultures of Hollywood or even Bollywood dictate common modes of expression for actors, the majority of nationally specific theatre and performance works require groundings in the cultures from which they emerge for actors to excel in their field.

I have been an acting trainer for the last 28 years, working across a range of actor-training institutions in Australia, but also having had an excellent experience of working interculturally with both Vietnamese actors in training and Korean actors. In 2011 I was here in Ho Chi Minh City and in Soc Trang with the Lequyduong company. I ran a 10-day theatre workshop with Le Quy Duong's theatre events company and Khanh Hoang's acting students with Pham Huang Minh as our sole translator. I will show you a little of those workshops later in this talk. What made it possible for me to work

across our cultural divisions and language barriers was the knowledge that the fundamentals of Acting are constituted in the workings of the human body, which has a universality across our human species.

One of the unique and peculiar aspects of any performing body is that it is being viewed, whilst 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 yet a universal phenomena 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.

What does this tell us for actors and especially for actors in training – Well firstly actors are vulnerable, because an audience can say and see as much about an actor's performance as the actor herself; secondly actors in training need feedback to allow them to begin to discern clearly what their bodies are doing or rather showing; thirdly that actors in training inevitably are initiated on a journey where they are required to integrate an objective view of themselves with their own subjective view.

This for me is the crux of the matter – beyond whatever theatrical method is being studied, beyond whatever cultural theatrical expression is the norm. The actor's body or perhaps we can call it a body/mind lies at the heart of all expression and requires an acting trainer to take this expression seriously, with care and compassion and deep regard for the human condition.

In my intercultural work, the value of the interpersonal transactions created between myself and students or actors from differing cultures have been of primary importance. I have not wanted to fall into the many problems of intercultural theatre that have been written about in theatre studies and performance studies literature. I certainly have not wanted to perpetuate western imperialism and yet I have wanted to be able to share my actor training processes. My solution in these matters has been to concentrate on developing bodily awareness, through games, through physical exercises and lastly through acting exercises where gesture and movement have been scrutinized, rather than a more psychological approach. I have prioritized the human body!

In 2011, whilst teaching here in Ho Chi Minh City I was asked by a journalist, why westerners always played games in theatre workshops. Great question! He wanted to know if games revealed the true nature of actors' personalities. Instead I think games enable actors to playfully engage in differing modes of behaviour, to try on different approaches to solving problems, to realise that tactics colour the way in which anyone is perceived. Physical games provide a way of inviting actors into 'dressing up', so to speak, as differing characters. After finishing a game an actor can reflect on why they played the game in a certain way; did they make the game enjoyable for themselves; did they insist on winning or how did they win? etc. These all become ways of reflecting on action, perhaps ways of becoming conscious of bodily choices of action, perhaps ways of becoming conscious of our bodily impulses.

Phillip Zarrilli (1995, 2001, 2004), performance theorist and expert Indian Martial arts practitioner, has written extensively about acting and bodies. He suggests that performers can

develop an awareness not only of the psychophysical actions that they perform for an audience, but that performers can develop more subtle internal awareness of more visceral aspects of their own experience. These include the actor's breath, the actor's emotional contacts, the actor's precise placements of her body. In his 2004 publication, 'Toward a phenomenological model of the actor's embodied modes of experience', he writes of the actor's encounter with these differing layers of experience. Zarrilli, whose physical training is in Kalarippayattu and Marma Adi has identified a deeper level of experience in acting. He terms it, the 'Outer Aesthetic Bodymind' (2004, p. 660). It is not important what it is called! This experience is where an actor can be totally concentrated in the performance and yet at the same time aware of the audience's gaze and aware of how she is appearing as an object to the audience. It is a highly developed performance state, where the actor's view of herself and the audience's view of the performance can rest easily with one another, or where these differing views are intertwined comfortably.

First and foremost, therefore, I try and teach actors to follow through with their own bodily impulses in improvisations and games: to be less of their rational minds and more of their instinctual entities. Then too with the use of text, the body needs to be totally involved in the physical score for the actor, allowing a point of view to emerge in action, dependant on senses and memories and experiences, rather than on prearranged decisions. Every word emanating from an actor needs to be grounded in a physical posture. What is the physical attitude of the character at that point of speaking? The 'lived body' as phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) termed it is a pre-reflective one where the lived experience is allowing the meaning of any encounter to emerge through action.

It is through the establishment of these means that slowly actors in training develop a knowingness about their own bodies. Rather than living in an experience where there is an alienating schism between the objectified view from the audience and the actor's own sense of self, an actor is able to slowly gain a relationship with an embodied sense of self,

J. Hayes

23/08/13

In my book, *The Knowing Body* (2010, p 222), I have called this living experience on stage, the 'interplace', a term utilised by Edward Casey (1998, p. 213), an American phenomenologist. The 'interplace' signifies that any human body is capable of learning new bodily movements or techniques that are culturally coded. So the 'interplace' is an 'intermediacy', it's a 'meeting' place between the 'cultural' and the 'physical'. This is what Edward Casey says,

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.

The human body is capable of learning and extending and trying out new techniques. As acting trainers and actors we can teach and/or learn numbers of differing theatrical techniques, stemming from a diversity of cultures, but I use the term 'interplace' to note the lived experience of actors as they undertake these new extensions of themselves. So for me the 'interplace' is *our* experience that precedes or intertwines with any cultural theatrical expression. It is *ours*, it is *personal*, it is a construct of our identity and as such forms part of an intimate journey along the way to our developing as an actor.

I want to share with you a number of images now of the workshop that I ran here in Ho Chi Minh City in 2011 with members of the Lequyduong company and members of Khanh Hoang's Ho Chi Minh Drama Theatre touring company, which specializes in *Kich Noi* or spoken drama.

Just to add some background to this, my own involvement with Vietnamese theatre stems back to 1998, when through the University of Wollongong, I enabled the staging of Le Quy Duong's first Australian performance of his play *Market of Lives* (*Cho Doi*), through an Australia Council grant at Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney. I contributed to the translation of his text as a dramaturg and with a cast of Theatre students produced it through the University's Faculty of Creative Arts. In 1999 I travelled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in an Australian theatre delegation viewing a wide range of Vietnamese traditional and contemporary theatre

J. Hayes

23/08/13

productions and theatre schools, organized through Le Quy Duong's VACEP (Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program).ⁱ In 2005 and 2010 my Theatre students, from the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, travelled with their student productions to firstly The Hanoi Experimental Theatre Festival and then to the Hue International Arts Festival.

With this introduction here are some images from the work in 2011.





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ⁱ From 1-15 December 1999 the author travelled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with Le Quy's VACEP (Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program). At an official theatre forum on Dec. 7, at the Hanoi Opera House, chaired by Professor Dinh Quan, with staff from the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and representatives from major theatre companies, the issue of the need for the preservation of traditional theatre practices formed the principal topic of discussion.