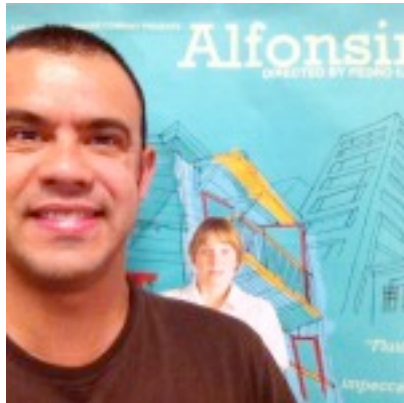


Heart, Honesty and Discipline: Mask Training and the Foundation of Lab: Research Theatre Company

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Abstract

The culture of actor training is central in the work of LAB: Research Theatre Company. This paper explores the principles behind the development of the company's own theatre language and the ethos that informs the utilization of mask and improvisation techniques. Members of the company discuss their learning process and discoveries.

Key words: actor training; mask improvisation; devising

“The Neutral Mask is a tool that forces the actor to search deep within”

(Lecoq, 2006, p. 105)

This essay focuses on the analysis and documentation of the work developed by LAB: Research Theatre Company in 2009. The LAB project's objective was to identify and define the main elements of actor training within a research theatre company context; its aim was to create a theatre group that would function as a place of study and investigation of acting methodology as well as creating original theatre shows. In this essay I will describe the process of training developed over a period of nine weeks, involving three actors with an emphasis on training in neutral mask and reflect on the impact of this process in the formation of the ethos of the company.

Genealogy

The Brazilian Theatre Director *Geraldo Cunha* transmitted to me the knowledge and exercises regarding mask training: movement analysis and coordination, the study of scenic presence, levels of tension and breathing, the first contact with the mask and its basic rules, the concept of economy of gesture and movement, sustain, transition and use of the space. This knowledge came from the teachings of Jacques Lecoq, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Jerzy Grotowski and accumulated over a period of eight years when I was working as an actor with *Grupo de Pesquisa Teatral Atormenta* (1992/2000) in Brazil. The company applied and adapted these exercises according to their own needs and objectives. Thus, Geraldo Cunha is my reference point as he was the director who introduced me to mask work. His work with mask training started around 1988/89 and he has been developing it systematically ever since with emphasis on Neutral Mask and the Red Nose (Clown).

The work of LAB: Research Theatre Company was in this way a mix of all the work done with Cunha and my personal discoveries training actors, directing theatre shows as well as my experience as a student with Christian Penny during the Masters in Directing at *Toi Whakaari New Zealand Drama School* (2004/2005). I would like to also to acknowledge a brief encounter in 2009 with a former Jacques Lecoq student from Italy, Giovanni Fusetti, as the source of my knowledge in mask work.

Sustaining and Transition: Economy

The first step was the study of sustaining. These exercises served to teach actors the organic integration of the different parts of the body: economy and awareness of levels of tension and relaxation. They demand concentration, control, physical strength, balance, flexibility, rhythm and awareness of the use and independence of different parts of the body within the whole. This work helps the actor to identify the parts of the body that are not energised or too tense, as well as weak in terms of muscle power and deficiencies in rhythm. One of the actors identified the value of this work:

Participant 3 – *Yes, sustaining. I think it just asks us to eliminate every gesture and movement that is unnecessary and you notice it straight away...*

The sustaining exercises are based on coordination of the body with breathing in order to eliminate all superfluous gesture and to identify the parts of the body that either accumulate too much or that lack tension. The main exercise of sustaining consists in starting from a neutral position (centralised, balanced, calm, vertical, eyes in the horizon, integrated, feet parallel, arms alongside the body and a neutral level of tension evenly distributed around the body). The body is divided into two parts: the aerial and ground parts. The aerial part will be working independently from the ground part. The sequence of movements will always be synchronized with breathing. It starts with the work of the aerial part: in-breath, the arms go upwards, moving in a 45 degree angle until the elbows reach the shoulder level. The movement with the arms should follow these steps: first lifting the lower part of the arm, the hand is leading the movement, and then the elbows until it reaches the same level of the shoulders. The second part of this is the journey back to the original position. In the out-breath the arms will travel back to the initial position with elbows arriving first and then the lower part of the arms, without losing the quality of movement and creating tension in other parts of the body. Points to observe: no tension or floppy relaxation in the shoulders and shoulder blades, hands and face.

The next step is to apply similar principles to the ground part of the body. The body will sink, lowering the centre of gravity; the knees will bend until the heels start lifting from the ground. At the end the feet will be at an almost 90-degree angle from the floor. This movement downwards must not lean forwards or backwards, and should stop before the actor sits on the heels. The final result is the alignment between toes, ankles, pelvis, shoulders and head into a line where the actor doesn't need muscle power only to sustain the body, but the weight is distributed in a way that is balanced. Next the movement is the journey back to the initial position and all the different parts of the lower part of the body involved in this exercise will arrive at the original

position. Work with aerial and ground parts should have the duration of one sustained breath synchronized with movement.



Photos by Lissa Reyden

The next step is to coordinate aerial and ground with synchronized breathing. Legs and arms start travelling up and down at the same time, arriving at their higher and lower points simultaneously and returning to the original position without accumulation of tension or hesitation, with calm, energised, centred, balanced, integrated movements and with rhythm.

This work is very demanding for the actors; it requires a high level of coordination, concentration and control over breathing, movement and gesture as part of an organic unity. The final result is precision and control. One of the actors commented:

Participant 2 – To me in the rhythm (of the exercise) what I felt is that I was aware of every single centimetre in space... A beginning, middle and an end. That is gesture. The awareness of the whole movement of the whole journey...

Gestures and movement become a journey, a narrative, the actors become aware of every single unit that is a gesture, as structure with a beginning, development and an end. This awareness brings a sense of rhythm and precision a central idea of Vsevolod Meyerhold's *bio-mechanics*. For Meyerhold actors should be aware of the rhythmic component of gestures and movement. Meyerhold was interested in creating a way of teaching the actors the necessity of finding an economy of gesture by organizing the way the body moves that is efficient without waste of energy and gesture.

Economy of gesture is the ability to convey any idea or thought through minimum gesture. In other words, the simplest way of communicating through gesture and movement without excess. The idea of economy is central to the use of mask. Precision and economy go hand to hand together.

The exercises of sustaining vary in degree of difficulty from the simplest to the most complex, demanding coordination, economy, precision and control. As the training progresses the actors become able to endure the physical exercises for longer and to take more challenges; they become familiar with the idea of pushing further their own limitations and they find a point where their bodies start to codify the techniques experienced. Like Grotowski's *Via-Negativa*, the actors see no direct result during the training; they will only discover blocks and limitations on their physical preparation. In this way the training is a process of elimination of all the obstacles that stop the body and mind from freely expressing an idea.

Directing the actors during this part of the training is basically correcting the positioning of the body, identifying problems and showing what is not working. It is very important to observe the actors one by one during the exercises. First, the actors do the exercise together and then the director must quickly identify the problems and start working with each of the actors while the others observe. There will be a moment when the actors start to work in pairs helping each other; while one does the exercise the other one observes and gives feedback. This allows the director to move around the room and see how the obstacles are being dealt with. This kind of exercise can not be done alone or in front of the mirror; it needs a specialized person coaching the

entire process as the chances of making wrong choices are too high when working without direction.

The next exercise is called Transition. It consists in developing the ability to transform an activity into another without the use of the rational process. Basically, the actors stand in a circle and one of them executes a simple activity. Cunha explains that this simple activity is an action that doesn't have a conflict; it doesn't tell a story and doesn't have a character. It is like executing a task; it is a verb in the infinitive form; for example 'painting'. The actor starts executing the action of painting and repeating it over and over again until fixing a physical score. The execution of the activity demands the actor to avoid changing the pattern, this is something challenging in itself, and it involves memorising the action quickly and repeating it with precision. This exercise must begin with the actors in a state of neutrality. The exercise starts with the entire group in a circle in silence, and then any performer may initiate an activity. The whole group will observe a couple of times the activity, the way the performer is doing it, the rhythm, the dynamics in the space, the support on the floor and then everybody begins to copy the initiated activity. Only the person on the right side of the initiator will then start the transition and the others will follow it.

The transition happens when something is modified by each consecutive person. Hence, the original action changes and the objective is to discover a completely new activity in the end of the transition. Economy is a key point to observe in this transition exercise – we can't execute the transition by changing several parts of the body at once. Something small will change, and then next time it will change a bit more, and again, and the transition itself opens up the path to the discovery of the new activity or movement. Progression is another key point to observe – every time we change something, we leave the original activity behind and we cannot go back. If, in the beginning, the original activity is 100%, after something is modified there will be 95% of the original left, next it will be 90% and so on. In this way the transition stops if the change is too big or too small or if the performer starts repeating the same pattern over and over again. The transition develops the

ability to discover in the moment of doing. It is very easy to perceive when an actor has previously decided what the transition will be in the end. The exercise is a great way to reveal those individuals who rely too much on their rationality to resolve dramatic situations. When transition fails it is because the actor is thinking too much and not allowing space for discovery.

Transition is an exercise that helps the actor understand the need to respect all the different stages of transformation from one movement or gesture to another; and the idea that everything that happens in the actor's body and mind is connected by a continuous flow. Transition is everywhere. The day doesn't turn into night at once, it goes through all the different shades of blue until it gets dark, summer doesn't turn winter in one go and we gradually age from childhood to the end of life. This movement respects all the different stages of the process of transformation, there is no skipping of any part of the journey. Transition then becomes the way that moves drama forward. When actors develop their intuitive ability to play, it is because they have learned and codified in their bodies all the principles developed in transition exercises.

The key is not learning how to be an expert in transition, but to discover when and why the actor stops the transition. The director must be pay total attention to the execution of the exercise, because it is fundamental to see when the actor skips a moment, or repeats a movement more than once, or loses concentration and economy. In these cases the director must stop the exercises and give a short feedback and restart the exercise. There is no room for intellectual analysis in this work, the director simply points out what has happened, indicates when there was too much thinking from the performer and carries on with the work. Talking about the work during the exercise is useless, even afterwards when the group talks about its learning, avoid long reflections about how they felt or their understanding. This should be learned through the body.

Improvising with Neutral Masks

The neutral mask training started with very basic exercises where the actors had to simply wear the mask by experiencing the presence of the object on

the face, by breathing and distributing tension around the body. Simple improvisations were introduced later and finally, they had to deal with more complex dramatic situations.

The work with the masks started with the discovery of moments when the actors were not neutral. The neutral mask should not present any conflict, it has no particular ideas, gestures, psychology, characteristics or individual way of moving. Every gesture is full of personal stories and carries the history of one's existence. The work with the neutral mask is an attempt to find the universal, the common denominator of all human beings. In the first exercises it was not difficult to pick up the subtle hesitations, the anxiety or the hurry of simply lifting the head. We began to adjust and discover the sustaining of the mask and the presence of neutrality. The actors identified quickly the difference of rhythm required by the mask. It was not difficult to perceive that the neutral mask simply doesn't accept anything that resembles a personal way of moving. One of the actors stated that

Participant 1 – As soon as you see somebody else putting on the mask, because it just magnifies everything all of a sudden you realise how much you do that is unnecessary and that isn't related to the intention of the game or the actual task and, it really teaches you about sustaining one thing at a time and one necessary thing at a time ...



Photos by Lissa Reyden

The mask magnifies the body; it puts in evidence all the excesses and the lack of gesture, and above all, the mask helps the actor to organise gesture and movement. The idea of doing one thing at a time is far from trying to develop a particular vocabulary of gestures or a style of theatre, neither the mechanical or robotic gestures where life no longer exists. The mask imposes a discipline where the performer is only able to move by respecting the timing of the mask. The timing of the mask is centred on the focus on each activity or unit of action separately. The whole body is concentrated on one thing. When the performer starts to move too quickly, other parts of the body are actioned and that creates great confusion in the viewer. This principle of doing one thing at a time creates the awareness of the actor's presence and its objective application on a determined point. It also denounces the lack of control in the

body. Sometimes the actors don't know, in fact most of the time they don't know, that they are dealing with two or three things at the same time. Doing one thing at a time brings concentration of attention and, as a result, we start to see more and the body becomes 'bigger'. It has room for the viewer to follow the action and to enjoy the development of the narrative.

Freeing the Intuition

The process of unlocking intuition is central to Neutral Mask training. It is easy to perceive when the actor is trying to resolve the improvisation exclusively through a rational process. It is quite easy to see the actors thinking about what is happening in the scene and trying to see with the mind what should be seen with the body. Ariane Mnouchkine says that 'theatre is the art of the present' (Williams, 1999, p. 109). An actor has only one second to react to any stimuli – all the dynamics of memory, emotion and thought should be left alone because they will come to the surface anyway if the actor is reacting to the present moment. We are not able to see what is happening inside the actor's mind unless it is physicalized. In theatre only action exists and in order to develop the ability to respond to anything, the training should focus on freeing the body from excess of rationalisation. Actors must learn how to discover things and to surprise themselves; they need to unlearn how to control everything through analytical thinking. Stanislavski commented that 'training actors is the act of eliminating the distance between thinking and doing' (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p 151). The ideal actor thinks in action, is constantly reacting to everything all the time. Thinking is doing and doing is thinking. The Cartesian duality is destroyed and the body is continuous with the mind as an organic psycho-physical unit. During our training we had moments of absolute beauty and truth; the actors in those moments 'lost themselves' in the game and stopped thinking and simply followed their instinct, or the ability to see the game. One of the performers related to this experience in this way

participant 3 – It was, actually, not until the end part because suddenly I had just started to let go and I think it was a lot to do with the breath as well. Letting go and breathing and not being afraid of the mask. As

soon as that happened it was like things started popping up in front of me and I just started seeing things, rather than trying to think of something that I was now going to see because so many of the improvisations were about discovering the space around us, discovering things that aren't there.

The phenomenon of 'things popping up in front of me' was the key to the whole process of training the actors and using the mask. The discovery of freedom to a point that one doesn't need to prepare anything in order to be creative; the idea of 'seeing the situation' is crucial. The development of the ability to see the possibilities and what is happening in the scene rather than creating an ideal world inside the mind and trying to match that image with the situation. This is the biggest problem for any actor, the problem of dealing with the material conditions of the scene. Rather than imposing a fictional world on top of the concrete reality of the scene, actors should engage with the material conditions in order to reveal fictional reality. Another actor discovered this principle in one of the improvisations

Participant 2 – I got up there and started putting flowers into a vase, cutting the end of the roses and putting them in the vase. I found the timing within it and then one of the flowers had drooped over and broken, so I noticed it and went into that and I started to take out the flower and the improvisation just started to grow and I wasn't really thinking about it anymore and it was just really fluid.

Heart, Honesty and Discipline

According to Mnouchkine the process of mask-training affects profoundly the body and the spirit and helps the performer to understand the dislocation towards 'the other'. The actor finally comprehends the development of the 'double consciousness' where the performer is conscious of both realities the materiality of the performance situation and the fiction that he/she is just creating in front of the audience. The neutral mask imposes the sign of theatre and its paradoxical nature. The neutral mask training and the process of developing the show ALFONSINA revealed the ethos that now corresponds to

the core of LAB: Research Theatre Company's work. One of the actors reflected on the philosophical meaning of the training *Participant 1 – Heart, Honesty and Discipline... We don't lie to ourselves, we don't lie to each other, we are there doing what we have to do and with no layers or lies or trying to hide ourselves, just being open to receive what we have to and that's how we learn.*

The condition that is present in every single aspect of the training is self-sacrifice. The learning process is fundamentally a journey of self disarming and finding a place where the every-day mask will be removed, revealing what is more essential and personal. It is very interesting that these three words represent the principles that are intrinsically connected to the work of masks. The discipline of mask-training opens the doors for the performer to find the integrity of artistic creation and the path of sincerity in the work. This process also allows the communication of something that is profoundly human and poetic. The idea of heart is also the idea of generosity, the ability to create something that will be given to the audience because it needs to be given. It's not a transaction where the performer is exchanging goods; it is an offering, a gift that must be given, something that has no value to keep, as it only finds meaning when passed on. The training becomes this preparation of selflessness, this process of stripping oneself bare and publicly offering what is left. The performance becomes a ritual where the audience will be given the heart of the process with honesty and discipline. What becomes evident is the development of the artist and the individual; these two things cannot be separated from each other in any circumstance. The performer is a cultural agent dialoguing with the audience at many levels and the personal level cannot be hidden from the audience. It is not a display of vanity or cult of personality, but the performer being extremely honest with the audience. Another actor concludes:

Participant 2 – That's trying to avoid skimming the surface, superficiality and really delve in deep into what it means to be performing artists and creating work that has heart, that may be

hilarious, but also so deep and profound and socially impacting at the same time.

The role of the performer goes beyond the process of training and delivering quality theatre shows to the audience. The performer is also an individual participating and questioning the contradictions of reality. In other words, the training poses questions at a personal level and places the performer in the socio-political context where the actor will begin to reflect on the meaning of his/her own work and the methods utilized. The same actor goes on identifying the symptoms of this problem in the general way processes are dealt with in the professional world of theatre

Participant 2 – Theatre that often has its only aim is to entertain or doesn't have much to say and I think that comes from the fact that most companies and groups only rehearse for about four weeks before they put on a show. In that space of time it is almost impossible to foster that sense of heart because you are working with people firstly that you have never worked with before and material that you are not given long enough to really cook and it takes a long time to discover what that deeper message is and I think that is the heart.

The notion of heart comes in another form here, the discipline of training together and discovering a theatre language that is the direct result of the process of learning. The focus is directed towards the development of a set of principles that constitutes the technical base of the work. In this way, the focus is a systematic approach with a continuous and permanent regime of training. This idea is opposed to the notion of a group of individuals working together for a period of five to six weeks to create a show that will be performed for a season of a week or two and then ending with those individuals going in different directions. The idea of having a type of work that extends itself for many years and actors training together permanently has its own roots in Commedia Dell'arte where the troupes were a corporation who worked together permanently, sharing the same vision and developing their craft by continuous work for long periods of time.



Photo by Cleide de Oliveira – Vertice Brazil 2010

The same actor also perceived that this discipline is not merely an attitude towards the ‘seriousness and engagement’ needed to do the work in the best way. There is something else that is lacking in the more superficial, short-term theatre processes, namely, evidence of a transformation, which has moved the individual to another level, where the rigour and the training reveals an element of necessity and change in the individual. As a result the performance satisfies the eye, but disappoints the soul.

Participant 3 – Often I go to shows that are good , they are clever and well rehearsed and do the job but they lack that beauty and that poetry I guess, both in the way that they perform it and especially if it is a play that has been beautifully written that has got so much in the text, rich, rich, rich text with the potential for so much heart, but I feel like a lot of the theatre today is just skimming on the surface.

The question of honesty and heart is only accessible through rigorous training. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty for example materializes this idea: a theatre with this uncompromising commitment to life. He explains that Cruelty is not sadistic or bloody – it doesn’t cultivate horror – Cruelty for Artaud is: Rigour, Appetite for Life and Necessity. Rigour is discipline and seriousness; it is the capacity to overcome all the limitations and to not compromise. Appetite for Life is the urgency for change; a disciplined and rigorous approach will generate this hunger for life and the feeling that things need to be changed.

Necessity is what is needed to be done now, something needs to change and there is no reason to do it later. Artaud sees Cruelty as the highest form of rigour that forces the individual towards change, a disciplined approach to life where the individuals cannot compromise or deny their own condition. The performer will be confronted by the demands and the discipline of the training and that will affect the way he/she sees the world. Change is inevitable and will liberate the individual from personal neurosis and fears. Artaud was interested in a theatre that would free the metaphysical forces of society, a cathartic ritual where the performer was the shaman of a secular ceremony. The performer becomes a secular saint and the image of a Grotowskian actor purified from everyday delusions returns to the surface offering the performance to the audience as a testimony of self-sacrifice. When asked about the relationship between the three aspects of the work of the company one of the actors answered:

Participant 3

Can we have heart with no discipline?

No.

Can we be honest without discipline?

No.

Can we have honesty without heart?

No.

Can we have honesty without discipline?

No

Can we have discipline without heart and honesty?

No, not at all.

Concluding, heart, honesty and discipline are the core foundation of the work of LAB: Research Theatre Company and these three concepts are deeply embedded in the principles of mask-training. These principles are intrinsically interwoven and they represent the ethos that is applied to the process of discovering the company's own theatre language and the meaning of the work. The three ideas function like a tripod that sustains the investigation of actor's training and the development of our theatre shows. Missing, or putting too much importance on one of them, is to lose the balance of the work of the company. At times I think they are all different aspects of the same thing, a rigorous approach to theatre making engaged in developing the performers as better individuals with richer lives in order to understand the contradictions of our times. The mask-training was crucial to develop these principles. The field is open and this project has no desire to put a full stop to this debate. The discussion around the use of masks as a training tool, discipline and the meaning of being an artist in the contemporary time does not end here. There is far more to be rediscovered, tested and to be confronted by the findings.

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