

# **TOWARDS *BODYDIALOGUE***

DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR ENHANCING THE ACTOR'S  
PHYSICALISATION SKILLS IN REHEARSAL AND  
PERFORMANCE

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## KEYWORDS

The following is a list of keywords that appear within the thesis or are associated with the thesis topic. These keywords have been listed for cataloguing purposes.

Keywords that apply to this study are: Stanislavsky, Method of Physical Actions, movement, physicalisation, acting, theatre, *Bodydialogue*, Body Dialogue and actor.

## ABSTRACT

*Bodydialogue* is a coherent and simple system of exercises, rehearsal techniques, principles and aesthetic values which in application enhance the actor's ability to physicalise dramatic action and behaviour. It can be applied directly within a rehearsal process to heighten the physical life of a play or performance event, or it can be taught separately as a system for providing student actors with concrete skills in movement, stagecraft and physical characterisation.

Unlike many other movement systems taught in drama schools, such as Mime, Dance, Acrobatics or Alexander, which are grounded in their own discipline base, *Bodydialogue* is grounded in Stanislavsky's Acting through the Method of Physical Action, and as such is centered in the discipline of text-based Acting. It is thus first and foremost an approach to Acting via Physical Action and Physical Behaviour, rather than a study of Movement, or a movement genre.

This thesis describes the development and application of *Bodydialogue* physicalisation techniques to a workshop production of *miss julie downunder* – an adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* – and situates the place of these techniques within contemporary Acting discourse.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

The following abbreviations have been used throughout the main text of the thesis.

**ADSA** – Australasian Drama Studies Association

**QUT** – Queensland University of Technology

**USQ** – University of Southern Queensland

## STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

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# Chapter one

## *prologue*

The general problem of the actor's *movement*, and how one might help to make it more interesting and more expressive within the evolving aesthetics of contemporary theatre, is one that has concerned me for much of my professional life both as a director and as an acting teacher. As a director I became ever increasingly critical of the choices made by myself and by other directors about how, where and in what manner the actors should move in relation to each other, to the stage set and to the audience. As an acting teacher, I became increasingly aware that traditional actor training, with its emphasis on text analysis and on vocal or emotional skills, runs the risk of producing actors with limited physical expressivity, despite often extensive training in disciplines like Feldenkreis, Stage Combat, Clown, Mask, Biomechanics, Dance or Gymnastics. So in both these roles I found myself becoming ever more engaged with the problem of how to help actors to find the physical expressiveness necessary to imaginatively fulfil the demands of a playwright's text, and to integrate it with vocal and emotional expressiveness.

Of course both as director and as teacher, there was never a time when I was not experimenting with practical ideas and approaches to physicalisation. However this pattern of sometimes intuitive and sometimes explicit experimentation was applied pragmatically to the immediate problem of how to make a particular play work to maximum effect within its given artistic and resource circumstances. There was therefore nothing very methodical or scholarly in this approach, either practically or theoretically. Although in retrospect, it is certainly possible to see a consistent pattern of progress in understanding the problem of effective physicalisation, and in devising solutions to it which over time advance in technical and aesthetic sophistication. However it has only been within two recent practical research projects - the 'Miss Julie Projects' (1999 & 2002) - with their more formal research parameters, that I began to wrestle with the problem of physicalisation in a relatively methodical way, and it has been through these two projects that I have engaged much more thoroughly with the body of discourse surrounding actor's physicalisation. It is the second of these two projects that is the subject of this dissertation.

In January and February of 2002, I was privileged to lead a team of performance makers in a Creative Practice as Research project, funded by an internal QUT creative development grant. This project brought together three actors, a movement specialist, a

stage-manager/producer/lighting designer, a dramaturge, the translator, and a multi-media projection artist, to work on an adaptation of Strindberg's classic play *Miss Julie*, that in its new form became known as *miss julie downunder*.

The central research goal of this project was to test the application of physicalisation techniques (and continue their development) within an authentic rehearsal process, techniques which had been first developed in the earlier project of 1999 (similarly based on Strindberg's *Miss Julie*) and reported at the Australasian Drama Studies Association (ADSA) conference later that year.

As I have intimated, this investigation was in response to a frustration with certain actor training methods, and with the superficial and predictable nature of much of contemporary theatre, and was part of a bigger search for ways to create a theatre that could engage its audiences at a deeper and more satisfying level than seems to be ordinarily achieved, at least within Australia. That such a theatre could exist was convincingly exemplified I felt, by the work of practitioners such as Peter Brook, or of companies such as Shared Experience, whose productions occasionally tour through Australia, and by certain landmark Australian productions that broke the mould of the 'ordinary', and of 'standard acting'. I had in mind productions like Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Mahabharata*, of the Market Theatre of Johannesburg's productions of plays like *Sizwe Banze is Dead*, and *The Island*, of Shared Experience's *Anna Karenina*, or of the Nimrod production of *Metamorphosis*, directed by Steven Berkoff. Other productions featured performances by some extraordinarily expressive actors that also broke the mould of the 'ordinary'. Darren Gilshenan in Bell Company's *Servant of Two Masters* is a recent case in point. Less recent, but just as noteworthy was Geoffrey Rush's performance as Thersites in Bryan Nason's 1989 production of *Troilus and Cressida*.

It goes without saying that the art of theatre is a complex and unpredictable one, involving the integration of many elements by the actors, and the input of many other collaborating artists. However the element that I saw as common to the exemplary productions I so admired, and which seemed to be absent from so much current theatre, was a quality of physical expressiveness in the actors that one can only describe as 'heightened'. By this I mean that the actors achieved an intensity and inventiveness of expressive movement that was powerfully passionate, psychologically and emotionally complex and deeply revelatory, such that the actors seemed to tap into expressive powers that took them out of the world of everyday experience and into a world rich in spiritual and metaphoric resonance.

Naturally there were other equally important elements necessary to the success of those benchmark productions, such as the originality of the overall theatrical concept, or the imaginativeness of the designs and the *mise en scene*. But central to the act of story telling that deployed those various scenic elements was a dynamic physical expressiveness in the performers that lifted the act of theatre out of the everyday and into the extraordinary. I became convinced that one of the keys to making more interesting theatre must lie in the development of methods of stimulating more exciting and imaginative physicalisation by the actors, within the rehearsal process, in order to produce this type of performance.

There were other equally valid elements I might have focused on, but I chose this one, or perhaps it might be truer to say, it chose me. This current phase of my exploratory work, climaxes for the present, in the 2002 MA project described in this dissertation. It centres on the development of a comprehensive methodology of physicalisation that I am calling *BodyDialogue* and which I believe, when applied in the manner that I will be describing, provides the actors with the tools needed to provoke that 'heightened physical expressiveness' that I believe contemporary theatre so urgently needs.

### **The research project**

The script I chose as the vehicle for the 2002 investigation was an adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* made by Dr Jacqueline Martin, that transposed the action of the original Swedish story into an Australian outback setting of the 1890's. I had already used the earlier draft of this adaptation in the 1999 creative development project mentioned earlier. However, for this 2002 project, with the encouragement and backing of Dr Martin, I chose to further adapt the script in rehearsal to give it a more contemporary aesthetic flavour, and to reinforce its postcolonial emphasis by self-consciously aligning it with an understanding of Indigenous/settler history inspired by historian Henry Reynolds. This was the adaptation that we named *miss julie downunder*, in order to distinguish it from the earlier adaptation.

While developing a new adaptation undoubtedly complicated the creative process by introducing a secondary research focus, it anchored the exploration of physicalisation processes into a genuine artistic problem – how can the power of the original *Miss Julie* story be exploited in order to illuminate contemporary relationships within contemporary aesthetic and historico-political parameters? Because physicalisation is a creative and artistic tool with multiple applications, I was unable to resist the temptation to test it in a multi-dimensional and artistically rich context. I have to accept that this made the research inquiry more complicated, but I felt that it was important to carry it out in a 'real

world' artistic context. It should be noted that this second focus is not the subject of this dissertation.

## **Defining the problem**

So are there reasons why contemporary Australian conventional acting, apart from the exceptions referred to earlier, by and large fails to achieve 'heightened physical expressiveness', reasons which would be helpful for us to understand? And what exactly is meant by this key phrase?

Let's begin with the second question first – that of 'heightened physical expressiveness'. It will be useful to interrogate it a little. There are various ways in which one might understand this phrase, both from the perspective of 'ordinary life' and from the perspective of performance culture. Approaching it from both perspectives will give us a better understanding of what it could mean in the context of this project.

From the perspective of 'ordinary life' in Australia, we would think of physical expressiveness as the normal day-to-day gestures with which we emphasise or support verbal points we are making, or we would think of the non-verbal physical reactions or gestures we might make in response to other people. Sitting down in astonishment, patting a friend on the shoulder, giving the finger to a passing motorist, or participating in a Mexican wave are all part of the non-verbal physical expressiveness of ordinary life.

Translated into acting terms, this understanding tells us that the contemporary actor's physical task must be to selectively observe and imitate these physical and gestural forms, applying them appropriately to the character and the story they are performing, and this is by and large what the contemporary actor aims for. However if we were to accept this as the sole definition of the actor's physical obligations, then we would be accepting some very obvious limitations, because the overall human potential for physical expressiveness is so much greater than is manifested in 'ordinary' Australian life.

This is immediately obvious if you have experienced more physically expressive cultures. I grew up on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, a white boy fascinated by the dynamic expressiveness of many of its people, particularly the Afro-Caribbeans, an expressiveness that lived in their music, their story-telling, their dance, and in their everyday lives. By comparison my own Anglo-European-ness felt very tame and undynamic.

Clearly 'normal life' in one's own culture is not necessarily a touchstone for understanding the human potential for expressiveness, physical or otherwise. Willmar Sauter makes a similar point in his article *Acting, Life and Style* (2002), commenting on the striking

differences between contemporary Swedish and Italian acting, the one reserved, the other highly expressive, arising he suggests, from the differences in their respective social contexts particularly in relation to how they perceive and then express their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and class.

Clearly one can argue for a richer potential for the physical expressiveness of the mainstream actor, and it is only necessary to look at some of the alternative performance genres outside 'mainstream' theatre, even within Australia, to find evidence for it. One can look at deaf people signing in the heightened setting of theatre of the deaf. One can look at the extraordinary expressiveness of the trained modern dancer, or one can examine the trained performer in physical theatre companies such as Zen Zen Zo or Frank, both grounded (in different ways) in a Suzuki-based philosophy of performance. In all these instances, one will find performers whose skills suggest a greater potential for physical expressiveness than is generally achieved by mainstream actors not trained in such a tradition.

So the question that naturally arises for me is quite simple – can the 'mainstream' theatre, the text-based theatre, inspired by this potential, find ways to radically enhance the physical expressiveness of its actors, and in so doing help re-vitalise itself? And this leads to the central question of this project - could this objective be achieved by the integration of physicalisation techniques into current rehearsal processes, rather than by the setting up of exhaustive training regimes as is the case with the physical theatre ensembles? In other words could this be regarded as an *acting* problem first and foremost, rather than as a *movement* problem, and could these solutions articulate with an actor's current understanding of their process, rather than by setting up a competing methodological and aesthetic regime?

The answer this study will put forward is broadly yes (with certain qualifications), and that the 'tools' for achieving this goal already exist, but they need to be applied in new ways, whether in the drama schools or in the professional theatre's rehearsal processes, in order for them to work.

### **What might enhanced physical expressiveness look like?**

This is a term that will mean different things to different people. There are a number of distinct and identifiable elements or dimensions that make up what the spectator sees as physical expressiveness, each of which can be examined and enhanced separately. For example actors may, through certain schools of training, be able to enhance their 'presence', (a quality that Eugenio Barba refers to as Pre-Expressivity) (Barba and Savarese 1991:186-204) such that even before they move into expressive behaviour,

their very stillness seems to both captivate and communicate. Alternatively actors may work on their 'personal expressiveness' to the point where they seem so 'alive' and 'reactive' in their bodies that every internal impulse becomes expressed visibly in body movement or gesture. Then at a wider artistic level, actors may, in an inspired choice of action and gesture, create such a rich communication, that their performance becomes subsumed into the metaphoric and symbolic dimensions of the overall performance. And at another level altogether, the performers may invent or take on an entirely 'created' vocabulary of movement, action, gesture and image through which they tell the physical story. Jacqui Carroll's Frank ensemble for example, uses a physical vocabulary based on forms derived from Tadashi Suzuki. Lindsay Kemp's company used forms derived from Japanese Butoh. Ariane Mnouchkine's company also uses Asian derived forms.

I should probably declare here my own interests as a director within the 'text-based' theatre, for although I am fascinated by all these aspects of physical expressiveness, my professional concern is with the 'consumer' end of the spectrum. I am concerned with the *meaning* that the 'mainstream' audience constructs from their emotional and intellectual responses to the actor's performance, and to the playwright's text, and so I am interested in the physical expressiveness that can be developed in the text-based performance-making processes that belong to the 'mainstream' theatre, rather than in long-term training processes that belong to the Physical Theatre companies and which require extensive time commitments from the actor. Of course any methodology that allows me to harness the physical training the actor has already invested in is going to be additionally useful.

Consequently the physicalisation techniques explored in the two Miss Julie projects, and in subsequent teaching, do not attempt to address every dimension of movement equally. For example, while these techniques assist actors to mobilise the 'presence' they already are capable of realising, or have achieved through physical training, it does not provide an alternative to that training. The techniques work particularly well to help actors develop and use their 'physical expressiveness' and certainly can be used completely independently by the actors in their private work. At the artistic level however, while they provide great tools for both the actor and the director, the kind of rich communication I have referred to still requires an exacting creative and ensemble process, probably exploiting a quite traditional actor-director partnership, in order to bring it into being. And I have certainly not aimed to develop a 'created' physical vocabulary that moves the actor completely out of the zone of 'everyday' behaviour.

So the physicalisation that I have aimed to achieve has the following qualities:

1. it deepens and harnesses the physical focus and concentration of the performer;

2. it stimulates creative choices and ideas within an improvisatory framework;
3. it serves to create a rich 'physical score' that either deepens our understanding of the words, or provides them with a sub-textual counterpoint that through the power of juxtaposition unlocks meanings that cannot be achieved without that juxtaposition;
4. It enhances the development of the traditional features of mainstream text-based theatre, such as character, actions, objectives, relationships, emotional life and theme.

### **Why is it that so much conventional acting fails to achieve a heightened level of physical expressiveness?**

There are I think both practical and conceptual reasons why this is, that we need to clearly understand if we are to gain traction on this problem.

#### **Culture of short production periods...**

In Australia, due to low levels of funding, production periods tend to be very short. Even well-funded theatre companies find they can only afford to rehearse for four or perhaps five weeks. A recent (2002) La Boite production of Louis Nowra's *Così* rehearsed in the studio for only three weeks. One profit-share full-length production I directed had to be rehearsed in twelve days. It is remarkable how Australian actors in such a short time period achieve so much, but even with all their skill and talent, there is an absolute limit to what can be achieved in such a short time frame. Inevitably there have to be shortcuts, simplifications and compromises. The priorities are necessarily always to do with finding the simplest way to communicate the writer's story effectively, memorising the lines, working out simple moves and actions, finding moments of strong emotion, and expressing adequate differences of character and relationship. Beyond that, little can be achieved in the time available. It is little wonder then that heightened physical expressiveness leading to a wonderful revelation of character and sub-text is rarely attempted and even more rarely achieved.

If inadequate financial resources were the sole reason for a lack in physical expressiveness, then clearly this study would not be able to remedy the situation. However I will argue that the physicalisation processes I call *BodyDialogue*, have the potential to provide a physical up-skilling for the actor that they can then apply in the straitened rigours of professional life.

## **Short production seasons...**

In the big national companies in the UK, such as the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, but also in many commercial theatre companies, it is often the case that a production will continue performing in a season that might be anywhere from six months to two years in length. John Gielgud was reported as saying that it took him six months just to relax into a role. In this kind of time frame it is possible for actors to develop characterisation, gesture, and physical and vocal expressiveness to a degree of sophistication and artistry that is impossible in the average Australian theatre where even six weeks is a long season.

A long season to some extent compensates for the shortness of the rehearsal period. Actors working regularly in such a system can build up a body of physical skills to a level unimaginable in the standard Australian context, skills which they are able to draw upon when they too are forced into much shorter preparation time frames.

I hope to demonstrate that one benefit of *BodyDialogue*, is that it can dramatically accelerate the actors' physical exploration, permitting them to access within a few hours the physical creativity they would normally reach only towards the end of their season.

## **Influence of television naturalism ...**

The original intention of the naturalistic and realistic movements in the nineteenth century theatre was to put the life of ordinary people under the microscope. There was a rebellion against the notion of highly theatrical character stereotypes associated with the melodrama, the dominant theatre form of the time, and an emphasis on creating characters drawn from observation and personal experience. These movements were associated with the dramatic social and political changes sweeping through Europe. In order to truthfully reflect the new kinds of social vision being incorporated into playwrights' stories, a new acting style was needed that could move away from the rhetoric and the bombast associated with the old theatre forms. In Russia these new acting styles were being developed by Stanislavsky and his contemporaries, and incorporated new ideas in psychology and an interest in reflecting the actions, gestures and speaking styles of people of all social classes, and based on observations of 'real life'.

However one unexpected result of these developments was the formation of a simplified acting style that these days is often called naturalistic, or referred to here as television naturalism. It involves what Michael Chekhov calls 'the actor imitating himself' (cited in Gordon 1987:155). Instead of working towards artistic character transformation in the service of the play's themes and the playwright's vision of the world, the actor imitates



how he or she might physically and emotionally respond in any given situation in 'real life'. The actor merely plays him/herself within the fictional circumstances of the story. In effect the actor's social role is demoted from expressive artistic interpreter of the human condition, to little more than a human animator of the writer's plot.

This type of depleted acting has so corrupted the imagination of particularly young actors that they find it difficult to imagine that there could be a higher artistic dimension to acting with its attendant skills and artistry. This highly simplified form of acting, involves only the simplest physicalisation skills, usually consisting of performing very simple actions associated with everyday domestic behaviour, such as pouring drinks, sitting and standing, using everyday objects, gestures and so on.

The extraordinary physical expressiveness one sees in modern dance and in the work of companies like DV8, or in Frank, or Zen Zen Zo, or the Expressions Dance Theatre is almost completely absent from TV naturalism, a form of acting which is now so widespread that it tends to dominate contemporary notions of 'standard acting'.

I hope to show that *BodyDialogue* not only can help actors to optimise their physical expressiveness regardless of the medium or style setting they are working in, and so fight back against the deadening tide of depleted naturalism, but also can give them an appreciation of alternative and much richer visions of the actor's artistry.

### **Influence of current training methods...**

Financial pressures are not only experienced by the industry, they are also experienced by the acting schools. Their response has been a parallel one, cutting back on training to a list of skills covering only the bare essentials and adopting the sorts of compromises and short cuts forced on the professional theatre. The long and arduous physical training developed by the Russian Theatre and described by Bella Merlin in *Beyond Stanislavsky* would never fit into the average Australian three-year training program in the current climate of budgetary cutbacks.

The result is that some young actors graduating from training schools have minimal physical skills, and this in itself leads to a depleted artistic aesthetic and to depleted characterisation skills.

Additionally, I think it is true to say, and this is a personal opinion, that some acting schools, for reasons specific to their individual development, have over-emphasised the teaching of analytical skills or the application of isolated acting exercises and approaches that are relatively easy to deliver, but which have become decontextualised from an

artistic investigation and communication of story, character and theme. We see as a result, the graduation of young actors who are either overly analytical or overly self-centred, particularly in the expression of emotion, while at the same time very under-developed in their creativity, and in their expressiveness in communicating with each other and with their audiences.

Each of these influences and pressures further reinforces the shape and scope of what one might call 'standard acting'.

Though not yet fully tested, I am convinced that a *BodyDialogue* approach can become a central plank in acting and movement training. It can do this in three ways:

1. it can provide the actors with concrete, specific and immediately useful skills;
2. it can integrate the benefits of other aspects of training such as voice, dance, combat, Alexander and so on;
3. it can provide actors with a means to understand and act upon their own creative impulses and to flow with them in an interactive ensemble environment.

While these obstacles certainly exist – the shortness of conventional rehearsal and production periods, the influence of television naturalism, the influence of current training methods – they do not have to have the power they currently exert. Within this dissertation I hope to convince the reader that a physical approach to acting, which *BodyDialogue* largely embodies, and which I will show includes an enhanced perception of the poetics of both Acting, can give actors and directors the tools and the methods needed to quickly and economically acquire a more physically enhanced or heightened performance.

In Chapter Two I show how such an approach is actually grounded in an Acting tradition that is already a hundred years old, and only needs a little illumination to uncover.

In Chapter Three I show how the project to develop and codify these approaches was designed and how it was contextualised in a 'Creative Practice as Research' framework, and in Chapter Four I describe the *BodyDialogue* techniques, both as a set of practical exercises and as a set of practical understandings about Acting.

The application of the *BodyDialogue* exercises to a rehearsal process, specifically *miss julie downunder* is described in Chapter Five, and In Chapter Six I try to characterise the responses of the audience to the showings of the work achieved so far.

# Chapter two

## *the theory journey*

This chapter outlines the *theory* journey that I have followed in pursuit of a solution to the problem of physicalisation, and how it might be understood as an acting problem, rather than a movement problem, and what techniques and understandings one might gather or formulate to help deal with it.

My engagement with theory has certainly not been orderly, in a conventional scholarly sense. A conventional research model would require the researcher to complete a literature review as a first step in order to identify 'gaps' in existing knowledge, bits of the map as it were, still unsurveyed, before embarking on a research study. This approach however does not apply quite so well for the practising artist engaged in artistic research. There is not the same descriptive or explanatory relationship between discourse and practice that *in theory* at least exists in the more scientific domains of knowledge. Theory, which by its nature is grounded in discursive language, struggles to describe or explain an artistic practice that itself is seeking to occupy the non-discursive domains of human understanding and communication. Such artistic practice grounded in tacit knowledge and intuitive leaps, and deliberately ambiguous in its manipulation of the responses of the observer, provides insubstantial traction for theory's instruments of survey.

There is of course a growing body of theory that seeks to understand the work of performance itself, or seeks to understand the responses of an audience to it. Interest in performance theory has exploded over the last twenty years. However performance making, or acting, as Willmar Sauter has noted, is much less theorised, and what constitutes theory is likely to be personal or subjective or traditional, rather than scholarly or scientific.

There is not too much research on the bookshelves on acting: books on acting are either more or less outspoken instruction on how to become a good actor, or journalistic biographies in which anecdotes are more important than artistic achievements. (2002: 56)

For the artist – the performance-maker - the relationship between theory and practice is therefore a more problematic and ambiguous one than exists in other conceptual domains. Since existing theory does not provide a complete map of the current field, its

survey does not automatically uncover research 'gaps'. The gap is more likely to manifest within the practice as a 'problem' demanding definition and investigation. Existing theory may of course partially illuminate practice, but equally and in reverse, practice is often necessary to make sense of pre-existing theory, which is often incomprehensible when read in isolation from practice. Indeed sometimes the only way pre-existing theory can be fully comprehended is when it has become illuminated by practice. The thence illuminated theory can then be turned around again to counter-illuminate practice in a never-ending dialogue between the two as the problem is submitted to interrogation, similar to Susan Cole's notion of the director's creative process as a 'kind of hermeneutic circle: the problem has to be fully understood in order to be resolved and yet only the right resolution fully illuminates the nature of the problem'. (Cole 1992:7)

This notion is echoed by Sharon Marie Carnicke. Much writing on theatre practice, by theatre practitioners, falls under the category of 'lore', the writing down of what is essentially an 'oral tradition':

Knowledge generated by practice becomes shared in lore more satisfactorily than in theoretical books. In the first place, practice escapes verbal boundaries. It taps an experiential realm called the "tacit dimension" by philosopher, Michael Polanyi. Actors know more than they can say.... Oral tradition that allows for verbal approximations, subtle restatements, parables, and metaphors encodes "tacit knowledge" better than clear expository prose. (Carnicke 1998:67)

## **Stanislavsky**

Any engagement with physicalisation theory must start with the writings of Stanislavsky relating to the Method of Physical Actions, which are further investigated in the writings of Sonia Moore, Jean Benedetti, Shomit Mitter, Sharon Marie Carnicke, Bella Merlin and many others. That the path is a hundred years old says this is by no means a new enquiry, yet, as I have asserted, the problem of how to systematically generate exciting physicalisation remains unresolved within the Western tradition of Acting that we inhabit in Australia.

Stanislavsky is popularly associated with an analytical approach to acting using the vocabulary of action, objective, super-objective and so on, and also more crudely with emotional memory techniques that are at the core of Method Acting. His Method of Physical Actions coming in the later part of his career has a more limited currency. In theatre mythology the name 'Stanislavsky' has become a 'brand' for a highly simplified theory of acting that flattens out all the changes and developments that took place over time in his work, and which largely focuses on analysis and emotional memory, at the expense of his other, perhaps more important work.

However as Jean Benedetti demonstrates in his studies of Stanislavsky and his work (1982, 1988) there are many important insights to be gained by the practitioner, in understanding the complex stages through which Stanislavsky's work came to develop, and in which directions it moved. Benedetti advances several arguments relevant to this study relating to the problematic nature of understanding Stanislavsky's work, particularly when viewed from an English-speaking contemporary perspective. A major point he makes is that the published writings by Stanislavsky available in English are themselves quite problematic, both in their editing and in their translation, and that in large part they are based on incomplete notes, which make them on their own unreliable conveyors of his teaching. It follows that to obtain a proper understanding of those writings they need to be examined within the perspective of Stanislavsky's artistic work both as an actor and as a director; and they also need to be cross-referenced against the work of co-creators and co-teachers, such as Vakhtangov for instance, working on the same problems. Finally they need to be balanced against the practical teaching that comes down to us from Stanislavsky's pupils. Benedetti argues, and this point is re-made by Bella Merlin in *Beyond Stanislavsky*, that many of his later and more advanced ideas were not recorded in his books, and can only be accessed by students training within the tradition of practice he bequeathed to the Russian theatre. Significantly for this study, his later work was very much concerned with physicalisation.

Mel Gordon in his book *The Stanislavsky Technique* (1987) also problematises the texts that come to us from Stanislavsky. Both *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* are works of fiction – idealised accounts of an acting school's curriculum. What is sometimes forgotten is that the Studios upon which these accounts are supposedly based were run as virtually independent entities by other teachers such as Vakhtangov, Meyerhold and others. Stanislavsky himself was too preoccupied as a director, writer, producer and administrator to spend much time in day to day teaching. So it is difficult to gauge the gap between Stanislavsky's idealised theories and the practical realities of Studio teaching. However Gordon suggests it fluctuated widely, to the point where on the one hand Stanislavsky's ideas could be irrelevant or out of step with Studio practices, or on the other hand were directly co-opted from the work of the Studio teachers, including even the Method of Physical Actions:

The Method of Physical Actions was predicated on a simple discovery that Stanislavsky borrowed from Michael Chekhov and Vakhtangov's followers (who, in turn were influenced by Meyerhold): all physical action is psychophysical. (Gordon 1987:208)

## **Stanislavsky and Physical Actions...**

Benedetti identifies three major phases in Stanislavsky's artistic career as an actor and as an acting teacher, of which the last was the development of the Method of Physical Actions.

The first phase saw him investigating intensive text analysis as the basis of great acting. This was the period of the Moscow Arts Theatre's first theatrical triumphs – in particular bringing to the Russian stage the works of Anton Chekhov.

The second phase investigated various methods of emotional recall based on notions of emotion and sense memory. This phase grew out of an artistic crisis experienced by Stanislavsky, as he grappled with the problem of how to stimulate and control the creative mood (or inspiration) of the actor. Intensive text analysis could enlarge an actor's understanding of the artistic potential of a role, but it did not solve the problem of the unreliability of the actor's inspiration.

The third phase that sought to solve this problem was based on an investigation into physical actions. Unlike Stanislavsky's earlier methodology, which had been published in translation in the West (*An Actor Prepares*), much of this later work did not result in similar publications. It was recorded in notes and in descriptions by contemporaries, and then became tacitly embedded in the actor training culture of Russian theatre (Merlin 2001). It is only with more recent scholarship (Merlin, Carnicke etc.) that those of us in English speaking countries have been able to broaden our practical understanding of the Method of Physical Actions.

An essential difference between the last two phases has been sometimes characterised as this: Using an emotion memory approach the primary question an actor asks of himself/herself is – if I were in this situation, how would I feel? Using a Physical Action approach the question becomes – if I were in this situation, what would I do? Focus on the actions and the given circumstances, says Stanislavsky, and the emotions look after themselves: "Do not speak to me about feeling. We cannot set feeling; we can only set physical action." (Stanislavsky cited in Benedetti 1982:68)

The primacy given to physical action by Stanislavsky in his later years seems to point to physicalisation as a powerful entry point for more interesting acting, and as an obvious antidote to the sterility of contemporary 'standard acting'.

According to Benedetti, the core of this method is to find and develop the spine of organic actions that constitute the physical action of the play. These actions will non-verbally

communicate the essence of the story, the essence of the characters and the essence of their psychological actions. Stanislavsky uses the term *organic* to mean that each action is connected causally to the action that precedes it and the action that follows it. Each action must be *caused* by the previous action, and must *cause* the action that follows. When the right sequence of actions is found, each actor should find themselves effortlessly drawn into the action of the play, and should find themselves effortlessly reacting with actions that express an appropriate emotional intensity.

It is important to understand that the principle of *causation* is not just a dramaturgical one. It must be capable of being *experienced* by the actor at an affective level. In other words a physical action carried out by one actor must be capable of directly and organically stimulating the reaction of the other actor, which in turn must equally act on and “affect” the first actor in return. In other words the spine of organic actions must be in the form of a physical interaction between the actors, or in other words a physical *dialogue*.

The brilliance of this ‘breakthrough’ lies in the double role that the physical action plays. On one level the physical action is the visual signifier that the audience receives and interprets. Taking creative control of this dimension of communication is of critical importance to both actor and director seeking to maximise the theatre’s impact.

On the other level the physical action is one of the most powerful ‘triggers’ of the actor’s personal creativity, both in rehearsal and in performance. In rehearsal, physical stimuli can open access not only to physical invention, but also to emotional reaction and appropriate verbal delivery. In performance the physical action can effortlessly trigger an associated emotion in the actor, which combined with the visual signifier that action creates, can inspire a similar or contrasting emotion in the audience. Mitter calls this associative quality ‘recoverability’:

...material cues, being solid, also have the advantage of being more easily fixed to recur. Where the actor's task is not merely to generate feelings but to retain them over extended runs, the body has the advantage of being far more easily disciplined to respond than feelings which are capricious....

Whereas the dictates of logic and continuity are fragile, the products of conscious contrivance merely, somatic work inspires confidence because it is always concretely recoverable in performance. When characters have to be played repeatedly, the plastic approach to emotion is more reliable than the machinations of psychological subterfuge. (1992:20)

However it would seem that the actual rehearsal methods Stanislavsky employed were still very overshadowed by his earlier analytical methodology (*Benedetti, Gordon*). Actors spent weeks round a table analysing actions, objectives, character and theme before they even ventured on to the studio floor. The play and its inner forces needed to be

understood intellectually before it could be translated into physical actualisation. Summarising his teaching a few weeks before his death, Stanislavsky outlined a preliminary scheme that involved three stages of intensive analysis covering action, objectives, images and ideas. Further analysis then followed:

Once this preliminary work has been done there are five further processes to be gone through: first, a more detailed consideration of the episodes and incidents in the play; second, a deeper investigation of the given circumstances in terms of historical and social background, period manners and behaviour; third, the cast are to establish the inner and outer characteristics of the person they are playing as they are revealed in the script. Once the inner characteristics have been established the actor can use his knowledge and observation of other people to find the outward forces. Fourth comes the establishment of the perspective of the role, the distribution of energy, where to give out and where to hold back. Finally comes the question of fixing the specific rhythm and tempo for each incident, for each episode, for each character and for the through-line of the play as a whole. (cited in Benedetti 1988:339)

Obviously this approach is very time-consuming, and its emphasis on intellectual understanding, while clearly satisfying to Stanislavsky himself, runs the risk of alienating or even demoralising more intuitive or kinaesthetic actors. What is significant is the establishment of a 'spine' of organic actions, and the use of improvisation and other imagination exercises to fill in the 'gaps' and allow the actor to complete his/her understanding of the world of the play and the world of the character. What is missing is a practical methodology for generating this physical dialoguing of organic action.

To be fair Stanislavsky was not unaware of the dangers of cerebral work (Gordon 1987:202), and in the last stages of his life he experimented with combining intellectual analysis with a more improvisational approach. In *Creating a Role* there is a section, written between 1930 and 1933 according to translator Elizabeth Hapgood, where the imaginary director Tortsov introduces his students to a technique whereby the action of the play is created by improvisation before they even have contact with the text:

"Here is my approach to a new role," said Tortsov. "Without any reading, without any conferences on the play, the actors are asked to come to a rehearsal of it."

"How is that possible?" was the bewildered reaction of the students.

"More than that. One can act a play not yet written." We were at a loss even for words to express our reaction to that idea.

"You do not believe me? Let us put it to the test. I have a play in mind; I shall tell you the plot by episodes and you will act it out. I shall watch what you say and do in your improvisation, and whatever is most successful I shall jot down. So that by our joint efforts we shall write and immediately act out a play not yet in existence. We shall share the profits equally." (Stanislavsky and Popper 1981:213)



One weakness though, in asking an actor the question 'what would you do?' is that it does not of itself automatically produce interesting answers. In fact it is just as likely to provoke the actor into further mental analysis that will not necessarily produce interesting and creative physical responses. There is a need for an alternative way of provoking physical creativity in the actor – one that does not rely on verbal questions to stimulate it.

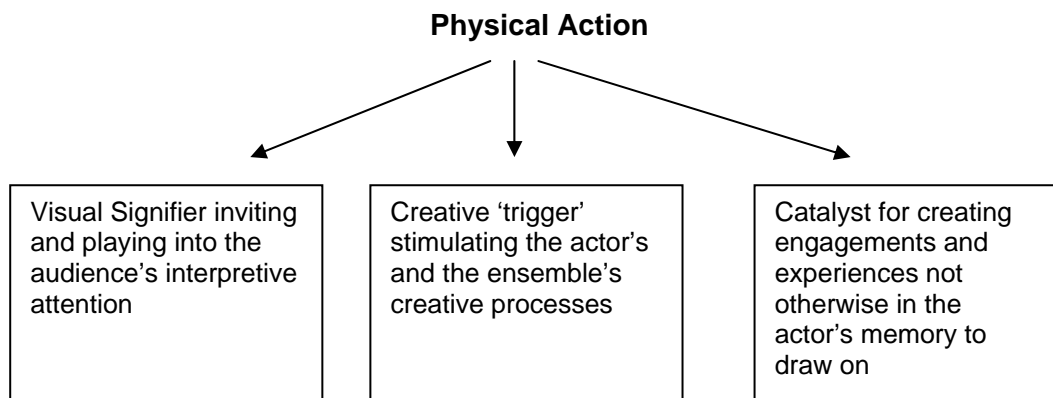
## **Shomit Mitter**

Another problematic aspect of Stanislavsky's work is brilliantly and incisively analysed by Shomit Mitter in his book *Systems of Rehearsal*. Mitter proposes that there is a fundamental contradiction between Stanislavsky the actor, and Stanislavsky the theoretician, and that the theoretician imposes a rationalisation of the actor's work that oversimplifies or even contradicts the success of many of Stanislavsky's practical and intuitively derived working methods. He too, along with Benedetti, identifies the three phases in Stanislavsky's working career, but sees them as distinctly more problematic. From this analysis emerges a way forward to a physical approach to acting that in retrospect I recognise both foreshadows and matches my own journey.

Mitter's theoretical exploration of a physical or what he calls a somatic approach to acting illuminates an idea of Stanislavsky's that has tremendous applications for the present. It is the idea of 'experience'. For the actor to respond truthfully to the play's given circumstances, or to the words and actions of the other characters, they must be able to directly 'experience' those elements, rather than intellectually 'know' them. Mitter's point is that through physical action the actor is able to kinaesthetically experience his/her character's world even when its reach extends beyond the lived experiences of the actor:

...somatic work has the advantage that it can create experience where there is none to be remembered. In so far as belief is usually a function of experience, a product of recognition rather than revelation, it is theoretically required that actors accumulate in the normal course of their lives an enormous range of attitudes and feelings. This is of course impossible - actors are required typically to play roles of greater amplitude and diversity than they can be expected naturally to have experienced. It is then vital that directors have at their disposal solid and unerring means of introducing actors to concerns with which they are unfamiliar. ...The task of the director is then to generate those experiences in workshop so that they may subsequently be used in performance. Here the cerebral approach founders as it cannot reasonably create and then construe as real what it does not already know in some measure. By contrast somatic work, relying as it does upon external prompts, can engender novel dimensions of engagement and experience. (Mitter 1992:20)

This notion that somatic or physical work 'can engender novel dimensions of engagement and experience' opens up a third level for physical action to operate in. Physical Action can create an experience for the actor that is as powerful a stimulus as personal memory.



Ideally then, a methodology for generating physicalisation needs to be capable of performing across all three dimensions.

### **Sonia Moore**

It is common knowledge that the development of Stanislavsky-based acting in the West was mainly influenced by the teachings and writings associated with his first two stages, the stages that focused mainly on analysis and emotional memory techniques. The Method of Physical Actions remained largely confined to the Communist bloc countries. However some elements of it filtered back to the West via the actors who sought training in Moscow.

Sonia Moore was one of these students. She studied at the Moscow Arts Studio in the 1950s, and brought back to America her understanding of the then current Russian actor-training tradition, which was based on a much fuller understanding of Stanislavsky's work than prevailed in the American Method schools dominated by the thinking of influential teachers like Lee Strasberg. The key difference she identifies between the two systems is that in the Russian school the focus had shifted towards physical action as the key to generating, exploring and channelling complex emotional and feeling reactions, and away from emotional memory techniques which ask the actor to engage in psychological self-analysis, which was still the prevailing focus of the American school. Quoting Stanislavsky, she says:

...what he called "the method of physical actions"... is the means for stirring emotions, thoughts, imagination – all the psychic forces. "I thought before that for a moment of creativity an actor needed this technique and that," he said. "Now I insist that only one inwardly justified physical action is necessary. The method of physical action is the greatest achievement of the System." (Moore 1979:34)

The actor must still investigate what his/her character is feeling, but rather than trying to directly induce him/herself to experience that feeling s/he must take another step and ask the question – ‘given what I am feeling, what might I now *do* in the circumstances I find myself in?’ this leads to an understanding of Acting focused on the playing of Actions.

### **Problematizing the Method paradigm of Acting**

When I asked this question of actors I was working with, as far back as 1988, it gave me a first breakthrough in terms of generating interesting movement options, but I discovered that by itself the method can be problematic. Firstly, as noted before, the act of verbally asking the question can push the actor into ‘thinking’ about an answer, rather than intuitively acting on one. Secondly if it is applied within a ‘method’ paradigm of mimetic acting, its usefulness is inhibited by the actor’s continuing search for interesting emotional expression, and by their corresponding ‘blindness’ to the possibility of a much wider and more expressive physicalisation.

To attack these two problems requires firstly a non-intellectual method of triggering the actor’s physical creativity, and secondly a greater understanding of what it is about the Method that creates confusion in the actor’s mind as to the nature of their art, and how this is clarified when, as Richard Hornby puts it, we move from a *mimetic* understanding of drama, to a *semiotic* understanding (1992:213-234).

In ‘Training an Actor’ Moore herself problematizes the Method. She sees it as an early and incorrect response to an incomplete understanding of Stanislavsky’s System. For her the problem lies in confusion about what constitutes ‘truth’ a term much used by Stanislavsky in discussing the actor’s work: “Superficial knowledge of Stanislavsky’s technique has created another point in confusion about what he called “truth”. Life’s truth is often confused with theatre’s; Stanislavsky insisted on theatre’s truth.” (Moore 1979:18)

However in the Method school ‘truth’ is held to mean ‘real’ or ‘actual’. This leads to its central tenet which is that the actor in order to be ‘believable’ or ‘truthful’ must be experiencing ‘real’ feelings or emotions. Where this collapse in the distinction between life’s truth and theatre’s truth came from is difficult to say, and one cannot automatically assume that Lee Strasberg the founder of the Method School must have been responsible. For example Richard Hornby in his book *The End of Acting* strongly argues that:

Strasberg did not call for real emotion, did not maintain that the actor should literally believe that he was the character, did not want actors to hallucinate that the play was actually happening. Strasberg’s approach was emotion-based, which is the source of both its strengths and its weaknesses, but he made it

abundantly clear that the actor was not to use “real, honest emotion,” but remembered emotion. (Hornby 1992:177)

By contrast Sharon Marie Carnicke argues that: “...Strasberg reminded students that the purpose of the affective memory exercise is to produce ‘a real emotion, which means something that is happening to the actor and which means that the actor actually created a true and real event, a true and real experience.” (in Lovell and Kramer 1999:84) However this collapse in the distinction between the two modes of emotion might have come about, the moment the actor makes ‘real’ or ‘truthful’ the yardstick for evaluating emotional responses onstage, a whole minefield of problems open up. This is particularly the case when every aspect of onstage life has to submit to the test of ‘real’ or ‘truthful’. As David Mamet asks – real or truthful to *what*? (Mamet 1994:201). The *what* invariably becomes what belongs to everyday behaviour. The whole gamut of expressiveness that the actor is capable of (and the potential of which was often what drew them to the art of acting in the first place), shrinks in legitimacy to this limited sphere. Little wonder that in a desperate bid to remain interesting the actor focuses more and more on the erotic, the neurotic and the dysfunctional, as a way to try and transcend the everyday’s inherent banality.

The physical expressiveness of the actor becomes particularly problematic (which is not to deny that vocal expression is also a problem). In fact the Method’s apparent emphasis on generating *real* feelings, which are to be perceived by the audience as ‘authentic’, rather than fabricated (called ‘indicating’ in traditional Method parlance) absolutely abandons the actor with the problem of how in physical terms such emotional responses should be communicated. David Krasner (Krasner 2000:19) in his elaborate defence of the Method, suggests that when the actor is experiencing ‘real’ emotions, they will *spontaneously* express them in appropriately expressive sounds, language and movement:

Sense memory and Strasberg’s controversial affective memory exercises are meant to evoke physical action. Affective memory is designed not merely to provoke emotion but to motivate the actor *to act, to produce active, physical behaviour*. Strasberg structures the affective memory as a way of recovering creative action rather than preordained, eidetic images.

But that still leaves us with the problem of what if the actor’s instinctive spontaneous physical responses cannot be seen or understood by the theatre audience, because they are not expressed in a physical or vocal language that communicates with meaning and clarity? The assumption that the Method Actor in full emotional flight will spontaneously move into heightened physical expressiveness is not borne out by experience.

This is a critical issue for our inquiry. The impulse to express does not automatically call forth a physical language or a set of physical *forms* ready for the using in the theatre. These have to be learned or developed. The physical language and forms the actor *naturally* possesses are those that come from their personal lives, embedded in and constrained by the culture they grew up in. But as previously noted, there is often a huge gap between the expressiveness of 'real life' (even when animated by an actor) and the expressiveness that can be achieved by a trained physical performer. The key issue for those concerned with physicalisation is how can the actor develop and use those physical forms?

There is a second problem with a Method approach to acting. It is based on the assumption that there is an exact 'fit' between the actor's 'truthful' and remembered emotional responses in his/her own life, and those appropriate to the character created by the playwright. Stella Adler in the documentary *Awake and Sing* complains forcefully that the Method (Lee Strasberg's Method that is) leaves no room for the imagination to create entirely new responses stimulated by the playwright's vision.

Bella Merlin suggests that emotion when focused on as a goal to be achieved, is highly vulnerable to distortion and self-suppression, and she notes that Stanislavsky himself observed this problem:

The psychologist Magda B. Arnold describes affective memory as playing a very important part in the appraisal and interpretation of everything around us, calling it 'the matrix of all experience and action'. She goes on to say that, of course, it's intensely personal, as affective memory is the living record of the emotional life-history of each individual person: it reflects his or her unique experiences and biases. This is one of the dangers of affective memory. Because of the intense subjectivity, Arnold actually advises against relying on affective memories, as they continually distort the individual's judgement. This also applies to the acting process, where aligning a character with the actor's personal memories can lead to a distortion both of the writer's original intention and of the actor's creative emotions.... Stanislavsky himself wrote that the more an actor violates an emotion, the more that emotion resists and 'throws out invisible buffers before it and these do not allow emotion to approach that part of the role which is too difficult for it.' Recent experience of a television shoot in which I had to play a beaten-up young mum reminded me of that danger only too well: the more my brain nagged me that the script said, 'The tears begin to fall', the more those invisible buffers pushed the emotion away from me. (Merlin 2001:11)

This problem will be very familiar to actors and acting teachers who have been thrilled by an actor's exciting emotional dynamism in an improvisational class, but have been frustrated by the inability of the actor to reproduce that dynamism in performance reliably and repeatedly.

Underlying this problem is a belief that when it comes to emotion in acting the keywords 'truth' and 'believability' are somehow interchangeable. Ever since Diderot, the question that has seemed important has been – to what extent does an actor need to 'feel' or experience an emotion, in order to express it convincingly and truthfully to an audience? (Crawford 1980:2) And the classic answer of the Method school of acting has consistently been that only when an actor is directly and 'truthfully' experiencing an emotional response, will they be honest, convincing and interesting.

The question though is a false one. It leads to a fruitless debate that is grounded in a false assumption that the believability of the actor (to the audience) is related to the genuineness (truth) or otherwise of the actor's emotional expression.

In fact the believability of the actor's emotional responses does not stem from some essentialist emotional quality. It comes from the actor being so grounded in the circumstances of his or her role that the emotional responses are seen to be believably caused by, and are appropriate to, those circumstances. In other words the linkage that must be absolutely unbroken for the audience is between the response and the provocation that caused it, not between the response and the degree of realness or fakery in the producer of that response.

That is perhaps why Stanislavsky, towards the end of his life, appeared to repudiate the technique of emotional memory. He saw that it led the actor to a false question – did you believe my emotion? Was it real? Did you believe I was really feeling it, or did you believe that I was in some way faking it?

The actor who asks this question will inevitably end up 'faking it', because it is only possible to be 'real' in the sense that the question implies, within the artificiality of the classroom exercise, removed from the practical demands of telling a story. The application of the method to the realities of performing a script produces a requirement in the actor to induce emotional states artificially. Why this should be so is not difficult to explain.

Within the classroom the usual pattern of these exercises is that the actor is asked to respond to a circumstance drawn from their own life. For example the actor is led back to a crisis in a personal relationship or to a vicious argument with a parent. In re-enacting this circumstance they are encouraged to express the emotional responses they experienced at the time, and usually the more extreme that expression is, the more high the praise they receive.

Such exercises risk leading the actor down an entirely false path.

Firstly the emotion may be evaluated purely for its authenticity. If the actor is *really* crying, or *really* shaking with anger, then they score more highly. This encourages the student to believe that the mark of good acting is determined by the extent to which the actor was *real*, in the sense of physiologically actually experiencing and expressing a particular emotion.

Secondly it may encourage them to stereotype emotional expression down to a reduced set of clichéd responses. The student reliving the fight with their father gets no marks for reproducing the complexity of emotional response they actually experienced, the restraint, the bottled up anger, the suppressed tears. Instead they must express the simplicity of the underlying emotions, in some kind of cathartic release that belongs more to the psychiatrist's couch than to the realities of family life. The student may be thus led to a fundamental double deception. The first of these is that cathartic release is more theatrically truthful or more interesting than the human complexities of emotional suppression, projection or sublimation. The second is that the actor's fundamental task is the expressing of emotion, rather than the telling of a story, and the depiction of codes of behaviour appropriate to that story, which may indeed involve the concealment of emotion.

Thirdly it can lead to a notion that theatrical emotion is something that the actor relives or directly experiences, rather than something that is *communicated* to the audience. This leads to the widely noted phenomenon that actors in the grip of an emotional state are so 'moved' by their own emotion, and in such a state of physical stress, that they are unable to clearly articulate the words they have been given to speak. The audience find themselves in the frustrating situation of sensing what the actors' characters are feeling, but not why they are feeling it, simply because they cannot adequately hear what the actors are saying, or make sense of what they are physically doing. In his explanation of the concept of *restraint*, Stanislavsky's character Tortsov makes the same criticism:

A person in the midst of experiencing a poignant emotional drama is incapable of speaking of it coherently, for at such a time tears choke him, his voice breaks, the stress of his feelings confuses his thoughts, his pitiful aspect distracts those who see him and prevents their understanding the very cause of his grief. But time, the great healer, temper's a man's inner agitation, makes it possible for him to bear himself calmly in relation to past events. He can speak of them coherently, slowly, intelligibly and as he relates the story he remains relatively calm while those who listen weep. (Stanislavsky and Hapgood 1968:73)

Michel Chekhov made a similar point in a 1941 lecture:

When we are possessed by the part and almost kill our partners and break chairs, etc., then we are not free and it is not art but hysterics. At one time in Russia we thought that if we were acting we must forget everything else. Of course, it was wrong. Then some of our actors came to the point where they discovered that real acting was when we could act and be filled with feelings, and yet be able to make jokes with our partners – two consciousnesses. (cited by Chamberlain in Hodge 2000:83)

Fourthly, and most seriously, the actors can absorb the lesson that they are emotional mechanisms that must be switched on and off at will according to the needs of the text, and that this is what acting fundamentally is. This is the point made exactly by Phoebe Brand in Hirsch's *History of the Actor's Studio*:

I got to the point where I couldn't stomach the affective memory, I lent myself to it for a while – it is valuable for a young actor to go through it, but it is too subjective. It makes for a moody, personal, self-indulgent acting style. It assumes an actor is an emotional mechanism that can just be turned on. Emotion can't be worked for in that way – it is rather a result of truthful action in given circumstances. (Hirsch 1984:77)

Actors trained in this way, and locked mentally into this paradigm, find it extremely difficult to imaginatively build the given circumstances of the play and the moment in such a way that their feelings become engaged naturally, organically and creatively. Instead they read the text, identify what they believe are the emotional responses implied by the words, and then seek to directly express those responses. David Mamet calls this approach 'acting by numbers' as it directly parallels 'painting by numbers'. (Mamet 1997:52-54) This leads them to a habitual form of emotional expression that is forced, inorganic and which blocks further creative responses. After all, have they not experienced in the classroom how quickly and simply emotion can be induced by the teacher through setting up a so-called acting exercise? Shouldn't acting in a play produce the same experience?

These dissatisfactions with the method of emotional memory perhaps help us understand why Stanislavsky abandoned the technique and instead developed his method of physical action. He understood how difficult it is to build the given circumstances of the play in such a way that they lead the actor towards organic emotional responses. As every actor knows, a logical or psychological understanding of the circumstances does not lead automatically to organic responses. It leads to an intellectual understanding, but not necessarily to a way that automatically engages the actor's responses. The search for this way led to the method of physical actions.

Sonia Moore's achievement was to bring back from Moscow a fresh set of questions that guided the actor into physically expressed actions, which carried both emotional and



symbolic meanings. For example, feeling intense disappointment and sadness, the actor (in character) might slowly tear up a precious letter. The action conveys not only the emotion, but also many other layers of meaning as well, which the audience imaginatively decode and fill out with their own responses and recognitions.

Though not fully articulated by Moore, the significance of this extension of methodology is that it intrinsically redefines the actor's central artistic responsibility. It leaves behind the notion of the actor as an imposter whose task is to skilfully impersonate a character, and whose greatest triumph is to so live the role that they find themselves genuinely emotionally responding, as if they forgot they were crafting a fiction, and believed the events they were portraying were real.

Instead it embraces the notion of the actor as a story-teller, symbol-maker and interpreter, who in collaboration with the other theatre artists, will take the audience into a world rich with meaning and meaningfulness. There is a tension emerging here between two quite different theories of acting – what Hornby in *The End of Acting* (Hornby 1992:7) summarises as the *mimetic* and the *semiotic* points of view. The mimetic view understands acting as essentially imitative, with great acting being seen as imitation so successful it appears to be 'real'. The semiotic view takes a much broader perspective, combining re-enactment skills with a mastery of communication that includes a dynamic use of space, action, proxemics, kinesics, symbol, mood, language and any other signifier of meaning that can create for us an imaginary world highly charged with meaning and significance. Haseman and O'Toole in *Dramawise* (1987) call this rich communication 'dramatic meaning'. Of course it should be said that great actors have probably always intuitively combined both approaches.

## **David Mamet**

David Mamet in his article *Realism* similarly defines the differences between these two points of view, suggesting that Stanislavsky very much saw theatre as making meaning rather than reflecting reality:

A necessary response to the artist who says 'It's not true' must be 'True to what?'

Stanislavsky and more notably Vakhtangov suggested that – that to which the artist must be true is the aesthetic integrity of the play.

This places a huge responsibility on the artist. He or she faced with this charge – to care for the scenic truth – can no longer take refuge in a blanket dismissal or endorsement of anything on the grounds of its being not realistic.

In general, each facet of every production must be weighed and understood solely on the basis of its interrelationship to the other elements; on its service or lack of service to the meaning, the action of the play. (Mamet 1994:201)

He goes on to make what is for us the very important connection between meaning making and physicalisation:

Let us cast aside concerns of comfortability on stage. Why should one be comfortable acting Othello or St. Joan? The study of all theatrical artists should be action. Movement. A first test of all elements should be not 'Do I feel comfortable (i.e. immobile) when considering it?' but 'Do I feel impelled? Do I start to move? Does it make me want to do something?' (Mamet 1994:204)

In *True and False* he goes even further, and rejects outright those aspects of Stanislavsky's theories enshrined in most Method Acting approaches:

"Emotional memory," "sense memory," and the tenets of the Method back to and including Stanislavsky's trilogy are a lot of hogwash. This "method" does not work; it cannot be practiced; it is, in theory, design, and supposed execution supererogatory – it is as useless as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane. (Mamet 1997:12)

Instead he proposes an approach to acting based on the centrality of *action* – both physical and psychological – and in so doing moves into philosophical alignment with a contemporary understanding of Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions. The goal of the actor, he maintains, is to strive for their character's objective. All else is distracting decoration. There is a seductive simplicity in his recommendations, but the supreme eloquence with which he articulates them, masks the difficulty of carrying them out, and the complexity of judgement required to distinguish between which objective and which behaviour. For having cleared the way of distracting misconceptions relating to the task of the actors, and having defined their central objective, there is still the question of how we can best help them achieve it.

In defining the differences between Method Acting grounded in a mimetic vision of theatre reliant primarily on emotional expression, and an alternative approach to Acting that includes heightened physical expressiveness and which is grounded in a semiotic vision of theatre, we can see how heightened physical expressiveness might be a crucial component of the actor's skill in communicating dramatic meaning to an audience. This potential is more than a matter of skilfully conveying character or action, or carefully observed gesture, or helping to communicate strong emotion. It is the possibility for conveying the otherwise invisible inner life of a 'character', both as a specific but limited individual personality, and as a symbolic representative of the universal human condition existing outside the dimension of the playwright's words and outside the dimension of the emotions triggered by the events of the story. This inner life that we must make visible

through the agency of the body, will communicate itself through the language of abstract movement, through symbolic action and focus, through sensory evocation, through the depiction and violation of those unnoticed physical codes and conventions that underlie our physical relationships with the world and with other people, and through the subtle communication of the changing flow of the actor's kinaesthetic awareness, which impacts on us the audience almost subconsciously. All of these communications are non-verbal and non-discursive, and come to us juxtaposed one against the other and with the other elements of the drama (including the verbal), creating a kind of high bandwidth signal that we will semiotically download and actively engage with and actively create the meanings it presents us with. By contrast the mimetic vision of theatre gives us a low bandwidth experience that in the main we passively observe, and whose unambiguous meaning and emotion come to us pre-packaged and pre-known like a food-chain burger.

The two methods, Strasberg's and Moore's, are certainly not mutually exclusive, nor do they solve all the problems of the theatre. Moore's achievement as I see it, was to move Acting discourse forward from its narrow Method base, and reconnect it with its Moscow roots, even though she was herself still perhaps grounded in the mimetic approach advocated by Strasberg. In practice the Method went on as before. One reason for this is that possibly Strasberg (to his credit) was as equally interested in the problem of inspiration and creative mood, as he was with emotion, and devoted much of his work to stimulating it. Many actors found that the emotional stimuli provided by the Method also provoked powerful creative responses that helped them enrich their work.

### **Sharon Marie Carnicke**

The problematic nature of Stanislavsky's writings is taken up by Sharon Marie Carnicke, in her book *Stanislavsky in Focus* (1998). She applies close analysis both to the Russian texts of his work – themselves already compromised by their editing – with the English translations made by Elizabeth Hapgood. The results help to illuminate many of the inconsistencies and lines of debate I have already sketched out, and which continue to preoccupy the acting community. For example, the English version of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Works on Himself, Part I*, which we know as *An Actor Prepares*, is only about half the length of the original. In order to meet the demands of the publisher, much of the work has had to be cut, or modified, often to the detriment of vital concepts and distinctions. Additionally, the precise, but complex use of terminology in Stanislavsky's Russian, is sometimes simplified in a direction which distorts their understanding and application. One example is the Russian word *zadacha*, which means 'problem'. Hapgood translates it as 'objective' a term that has become an icon of Stanislavsky-speak in the theatre world. According to Carnicke this leads to a telling confusion. Objective tends in English to be synonymous with 'goal'. This puts it into the realm of the psychological, for goal

indicates a wish or a desire. Problem however is much more concrete and immediate. The actor must understand the problem his/her character faces in a given scene, and take the 'action' required to confront or resolve it. Western training has perhaps tried to compensate by using the term 'obstacle' alongside the word 'objective' or 'goal'. Robert Cohen includes it in his book *Acting One* (1984) for example. But it is not the same.

Ironically the word 'problem', or 'task' is the word used by Strasberg – he obtains it from the oral tradition of Stanislavsky teaching brought to America by Russian actors such as Richard Boleslavsky and Michael Chekhov. Carnicke suggests that Strasberg, while a self-proclaimed disciple of Stanislavsky, was pragmatic enough to discard or ignore what he couldn't make work himself, and to keep that which seemed to prove itself in practice:

As [Strasberg] said in 1956, "All this discussion, all these theories, all this thing about wanting to solve something by having an opinion, I think you're right and you're wrong, it's crazy. It is suicidal in the theatre. And the only thing that counts is what you see." (Carnicke 1998:66)

## **Bella Merlin**

To gain an understanding of contemporary teaching of Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions, we should turn to Bella Merlin's book *Beyond Stanislavsky*, which is both an account of her experiences training for ten months in psycho-physical acting in Moscow, and an elucidation of the Method of Physical Actions as it has been developed today over generations of practice in Russia. Her 'thesis' turns on two central points. The first of these is the primacy of action over analysis and emotion memory:

With both analysis and affective memory, the actors were really starting at one remove from the stage experience. They were sitting around a table or conjuring up imaginative memory: they weren't actually experiencing the encounter. The potential of the Method of Physical Actions, however, lay in its immediacy. The actor didn't ask, 'What would I do if I were in this situation?', but simply said "Here I am in the concrete reality of this stage environment, so what do I do now?" Paradoxically, it was by acknowledging the actuality of being in a theatrical situation that the actor's imagination was liberated, rather than being constrained within pretend circumstances. This was the magic of physical actions. (Merlin 2001:17)

The liberation of the imagination is a key point worth exploring. Many of the training exercises she describes channel the actor's entire attention on to the other actors, and the improvisations that follow are woven entirely out of the spontaneous interaction with fellow performers. Freed of the need to bring a weight of information or study into the scene or improvisation which they feel obligated to incorporate, the actors are able to act and react to every stimulus coming from their scene-partner. Time and again Merlin comments on how liberating that is to an actor trained in the old school of analysis and

emotion. There are immediate points of similarity with the methods and philosophy of the great Master of Improvisation, Keith Johnstone, particularly in his pursuit of spontaneity through reacting to every 'offer'. Equally significant are the similarities to David Mamet's beliefs concerning the centrality of action, and the impossibility of creating it out of analysis and emotion memory techniques.

The second point in Merlin's thesis is the inter-connectedness of feeling and action:

...the basis of psycho-physical acting is that *inner feeling* and *outer expression* happen at the same time. In other words, whatever emotion you may be experiencing, your physical response to that emotion is instantaneous. And *vice versa*: whatever physical action you execute, the inner sensation aroused by that action is spontaneous. (Merlin 2001:27)

The significance of this point is obvious. If the actor's process leads them to build the right chain of organic physical actions, then every action communicates an emotional resonance to the audience, and every emotional expression finds the action necessary to communicate it effectively. Again the result is the reduction of pressure on the actor. There is no obligation for them to 'feel' anything – which is to say that they do not need to force themselves to feel anything. However at the same time, each action is actually stimulating in them an emotional resonance as well as communicating it to the audience.

Returning to our model on page 18, we can see again this three dimensional understanding of the physical action. The action is of itself a signifier that the audience interpret, the action liberates, indeed stimulates the imagination and the emotional responses of the actor, and in so doing lays down an actual 'experience' that informs and nourishes future responses.

Here is one example of this notion of 'experience' taken from *miss julie downunder*. During the scene when Jack and Miss Julie are engaged in a wild and erotic scene of seduction, Christine, still wrapped in her blanket, and apparently asleep, circles the floor around them. The effect is one suggestive of a terrible nightmare, where the sleeper seems to see their partner with another, but can never reach them. For the actor playing Christine, the physical participation in this nightmarish vision creates a disturbing 'memory' that she brings into a later scene when she 'finds out' for real Jack's infidelity. And instead of spending the interval between her entrances in the dressing room, the actor remains connected with the unfolding drama, her imagination stimulated by this emotional and physical participation.

We can turn this model around to give us three central criteria for any methodology aiming to stimulate heightened physicalisation.

1. It must lead to the liberation of the actors' imagination;
2. It must help generate an unbroken chain of interconnecting organic actions;
3. It must engage and intensify the audience's interpretive attention.

To these we should add a very important fourth criterion, expressed in an earlier part of this chapter:

4. It should lead to the development of a communicative physical language – a set of physical *forms*.

A brief account of two systems for stimulating physical creativity – Bogart's Viewpoints and Whelan's Tape Technique - takes up the remainder of this chapter.

### **An improvisatory approach to movement**

As we saw previously Stanislavsky used improvisatory methods to help stimulate creativity in the actors. Indeed many of his exercises and methods survive in one form or another in the training repertoire of acting studios today. In addition however, there is now a whole body of knowledge regarding improvisation that has been investigated, practised and recorded by leading artist-practitioners such as Keith Johnstone, Augusto Boal and Anne Bogart to name but three. As different as their respective goals and outcomes might be, they share in common a belief, indeed a commitment to stimulating highly creative states in the actor-improvisers they are working with. They do this in a variety of ways, but with a single end-point – to tap into the spontaneous creativity of the actor, the source of their inspiration, and to intuitively generate dramatic ideas, situations, characters and behaviour. In this creative state the actors seem to easily and spontaneously generate multiple options and choices which can either be incorporated into an immediately performed improvisatory drama, or which become a rich resource of material for a more slowly evolving dramatic piece.

Clearly then, a physicalisation process that can use an improvisatory approach will have the benefit of spontaneously generating movement ideas that can come directly from the performers themselves, rather than have to be provided by separate movement specialists or choreographers.

## Tape Technique & Viewpoints

In 1996 I became very interested in The Tape Technique, developed by Jeremy Whelan in his book *Instant Acting* (1994). I started exploring it as a rehearsal technique with trainee actors. I applied his methods very much as he describes them, and found, as he predicted that they brought a number of benefits. It did help the actors to learn their lines faster, and it did encourage them to be physically and emotionally freer. The result was a greater naturalness of movement, and a greater confidence in the actors, who felt more in ownership of a stage blocking they had developed themselves.

However its usefulness was limited by a number of factors that needed to be solved separately. At a theoretical level the technique was developed and applied to the making of 'American Acting' with all its emphasis on emotion: "In modern dance, emotion begets movement. In acting, the feelings that move us often come out in words, but the words are only the bowl in which the soup is served." (Whelan 1994:2)

The soup is of course emotion, which in the American paradigm is regarded as the end point of acting. Understandably, any movement gains obtained by this technique, if applied as directed by its author, serve a *mimetic* or emotion-based approach to a theatre, rather than a *semiotic* or meaning-based one. At a practical level there are other difficulties:

1. The actor can only perform his/her *understanding* of the character, the scene or the play. Deepening this understanding is most easily achieved by text analysis, whether achieved by the actor, or by the director who then communicates it to the actor. This still of course takes time, taking the *instant* out of the acting;
2. As noted previously, the actors' ability to improvise a richly meaningful physical life for their characters is constrained both by the current limitations of their personal physical expressiveness, and by the acting paradigm they occupy;
3. Applied as directed the method does not automatically encourage actors to move beyond their comfort zones – there is a danger that 'instant acting' tends to become instant clichés.

So while the Tape Technique could be useful, its limitations led me to turn away from it. Until that is, I developed further improvisational exercises associated with it, through a series of projects, including the *Miss Julie Project*, which brought it into a direct relationship with Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions. Once I brought the two together, I found its usefulness as a rehearsal technique dramatically enhanced.

A defining moment in this journey towards integration was in 1999 when I was introduced to the technique of Viewpoints, developed by Anne Bogart and the SITI Company. Viewpoints is a system for facilitating movement improvisation for the stage. It works by breaking down movement into constituent layers, or viewpoints, which the actor can separately explore and improvise. For example one layer is simply the patterns made by movement over the floor. Another layer is movement in relation to the dominant architecture of the space. Another is movement in relation to objects in space, such as furniture. Another is in relation to other actors inhabiting the space and so on. (Landau in Dixon and Smith 1995:20-23)

The value of Viewpoints is that it provides a set of 'rules of play' that stimulate the actor's physical creativity and playfulness into highly theatrical physical interactions with other actors, with the space, the architecture, the objects, the audience and so on. Using this improvisation system, actors can develop a physical vocabulary appropriate to the world of the play they are working on. Its uses can also be extended to provide the actor with the means to physically and spontaneously explore and experience aspects of character and relationship.

Viewpoints provides an improvisation system that enhances the actor's physical expressiveness, both as an individual and as a member of a creative ensemble. It can also challenge the actors to move beyond their personal movement clichés by giving them the tools to explore collectively the principles of movement that govern the creation of new or different performance styles.

The value of the Tape Technique is that it frees the actor to spontaneously develop an improvised physical score that is completely connected to the intricacies of a complex verbal text, and yet at the same time frees the actor from the demands the delivery of that text makes on the actor's creativity and concentration.

The combination of these two improvisation systems forms a foundation upon which a number of other exercises were collected or invented, in order to fulfil our criteria for effective physicalisation techniques.

These techniques provide the actor and director with the tools needed to shatter the bonds of cliché and convention that hold much of contemporary theatre in its grip. And even more usefully, they can be applied to the creation of new physical languages and styles, which can provide the heightened physical expressiveness and creativity that I believe is one of the elements missing from much of contemporary theatre.



The next chapter describes the methodology and the project design used in the development and application of physicalisation techniques to an experimental adaptation of Strindberg's classic play *Miss Julie*.

# Chapter three

## *methodology and project design*

### **Background - The need for a deeper investigation**

Although my investigation into ways to heighten the physical life of a production can be traced back nearly twenty years, its crystallisation into formal research really only began in 1999 with a small creative development project funded by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). This involved a collaboration with two actors, Caroline Dunphy and Paul Denny, and movement choreographer and teacher Graeme Watson. Our goal was to develop a set of physicalisation exercises and approaches that could assist actors to heighten the physical life of their characters. The findings were partially reported in a paper entitled *Dialoguing the Bodies*, which was published in the 1999 ADSA Conference Proceedings. Subsequently in the same year, Watson and I applied the same exercises and approaches we had developed to a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with second year acting students at QUT. The tangible success of this production was an encouraging affirmation of the work we had achieved at that point. The following year we tackled *The Mill on The Floss* with the same group of students, but significantly did not replicate quite the same approaches. The production though not a failure, was certainly not as successful, and in retrospect I believe that we could have achieved a much better result had we followed in full the methodology we had been developing. At that time though I do not think we completely understood the significance of what we had learned, and so did not fully appreciate its proper application. It was fortuitous then that we were given the opportunity to further explore our methods in a workshop production of *Miss Julie* also funded by QUT.

The need for this deeper investigation was grounded in three considerations. Firstly it was important to build on the development of the exercises and approaches we had used previously, but this time within the context of a 'real' preparation process. For while physicalisation techniques can continue to be developed in a variety of settings, such as workshops, classes or creative development projects, to truly test their usefulness they need to be integrated within an authentic rehearsal process leading to public performance that at the very least approximates a 'finished' production. Otherwise without this performance pressure, the techniques are never tested under fire, so to speak. And though we felt we had successfully applied our techniques in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, their application was subsumed into a normal professional practice with trainee

actors, and there was no sense in which we were deliberately researching or further developing their effectiveness.

A second consideration is in fact the choice of performers - to properly test the application of the techniques and their usefulness in a professional context, they obviously have to be developed in collaboration with professional actors who are already highly advanced in their craft. When these exercises are applied in the context of a student production they inevitably become subsumed into 'training', and their usefulness within the broader context of the professional theatre becomes difficult to gauge.

With these factors in mind, a 'small' performance project using three professional actors was an appropriate choice that ensured we had the time and mental space to productively experiment with the techniques, within a three-week rehearsal period leading in the fourth week to four performances before invited audiences.

The final consideration involved the desire to ground this investigation in a formal research framework, so that the techniques and their benefits could be rigorously and methodically tested and evaluated. The obvious research framework to use was Creative Practice as Research.

### **Creative Practice as Research**

As Alison Richards (1995) so clearly articulates, while much artistic practice might involve considerable investigation, it must fulfil a number of criteria before it can properly be called research. These criteria have in common a methodical, indeed rigorous approach to the articulation of a research question, research design, data collection, analysis, openness, and contestability.

The making of such distinctions between traditional artistic investigation or 'creative development' and 'Creative Practice as Research' reinforces the close, indeed natural relationship between the two. It is probably true to say that Creative Practice as Research is in many ways the offshoot of 'creative development'. If so it explains why Creative Practice as Research should be the 'natural' research methodology for the artist wishing to investigate artistic problems within a formal research framework. From my own point of view it certainly delivers the artistic (and practical) goals that really matter to the artist – the investigation and/or improvement of process or product. Of course the applicability and benefits of Creative Practice as Research are much broader than that, and can be applied to a wider investigative spectrum, but for a practising artist such as myself, it is its close relationship with artistic investigation that makes it an appropriate research methodology.

## **Key features which separate Creative Practice as Research from professional practice**

The essential feature of Creative Practice as Research is that it is research conducted in the context of and through the processes of making art:

Investigation as the primary objective is the methodology of research training – Research Higher Degrees – however the processes of investigation are those of the innovative artist rather than the scientist or the scholar.... (Geoff Parr cited in Strand 1997:49)

In professional practice or creative development the goal, to use a commercial analogy, is the development of the 'product' or of a 'process' that leads to a better product. In a Creative Practice as Research while these goals may still be of central importance, there is another goal – the *reporting* of the process and its 'place' within other reporting regimes, within contextual theory and so on, in a form that other practising artists can access, in order to evaluate, test or apply the ideas to their own artistic work.

Achieving this research goal requires the artist to fulfil certain 'task' obligations that parallel key features of more traditional research. These key obligations come sharply into focus when we ask the question - how does the Creative Practice as Research context make the project different from professional practice? These differences must be clearly 'designed in' to the project, or there is the risk that while the artistic aims of the project may be fulfilled, the research aims may be compromised.

The research framework that needs to be integrated into the project design can be summarised under five category headings:

- Focus and Intentionality
- Data Collection
- Analysis of the Data and Testing of the Findings
- Engagement with contextual 'theory'
- Publication/Dissemination

These five 'differences' were designed into the *Miss Julie* project in the following ways:

**Focus & Intentionality** The central requirement is that the researcher's intent should be expressed in a specific research question or issue, which will engage with a common problem in the 'field' – to engage with a personal problem may produce personal development but may not constitute Creative Practice as Research if it is not a problem shared by others (Richards 1995, Strand 1997).

I come back to intent – the intent of your practice. If the methodologies you employ in your practice are investigatory in their intent, then it can be called research. If their prime aim is to produce quality product, it's professional practice. (Geoff Parr cited in Strand 1997:49)

The project design should facilitate the exploration of this problem at all the appropriate levels of the performance-making process, and should focus on a specific question or issue.

The research question at the centre of the *Miss Julie* project was this:

*How can selected physicalisation techniques be appropriately used/ developed/ framed in a rehearsal process to assist the actors to prepare a performance with heightened physical expressivity?*

This issue of 'appropriate use' was not regarded as simply how to sequence the exercises into the rehearsal process. At the heart of the rehearsal process are complex issues of creativity, integrity and respect for the actor's prior knowledge, skill and experience that cannot be set aside. It follows that the application of physicalisation techniques must be scaffolded by a philosophical, artistic and creative framework that engages with, respects and energises the actor's artistic needs and ambitions. The development of this framework and its connectivity with traditional rehearsal processes and discourse is as crucial to the success of the project as the actual exercises themselves.

**Data Collection** To enable the artist-researcher to meaningfully re-engage with the problem after the normal artistic processes have been completed, there have to be appropriate data collection points designed in to the project, which will provide useful material for analysis and reflection.

For this project a simple rehearsal diary was kept, consisting of notes and reflections made during the rehearsal process, as well as a record of new exercises, or new variations of older ones. Each of the four performances was

videoed, and each of the post-show discussions with the audience was also videoed. The debriefing session with the actors and production team was tape-recorded. A complete description of the exercises and techniques employed was made soon after the project was completed.

Of the data collection mechanisms, the most useful were the performance video, the record of exercises and the diary.

It is worth observing that the value of the performance video as a set of 'data' to be analysed, increased in proportion to the distance in time accruing from the original live event. I personally found that it was almost impossible as the performance-maker not to bring to an examination of the performance video a host of subjective judgements, impressions and responses, which clouded any ability to make objective observations and analysis. I noticed for instance that even up to six months after the live event, the viewing of the video tended to prompt a set of responses similar to being present at the original event. I am sure that these responses were quite different to those of someone seeing the video for the first time never having witnessed the live event. However after a year, when the memory of the live event had faded sufficiently not to be re-prompted by the video, it was possible to examine the recording in a much colder and more analytical way. This however can easily lead to another phase of subjectivity.

This is because overhanging one's relationship with the live performance are one's own subjective hopes and fears, ambitions and disappointments, and what they might mean in terms of one's artistic ambitions or career goals. Sometimes these feelings can be so strong that viewing the video becomes too 'warm' an experience, making objectivity impossible. At other times, particularly later, when one has become more analytical and more 'cold' in a judgemental sense, watching the video becomes a very uncomfortable if not unbearable experience, as one ruthlessly focuses on moments that call out for improvement or reworking. Again, as time goes by, and one's personal 'investment' in the project diminishes, or is transferred to newer projects, it is possible to disengage from that high level of subjectivity.

At that point one can more objectively scrutinise the video and make a personal judgement as to what 'worked' in terms of one's personal goals, and what didn't, and make some kind of assessment as to what might need to be done 'next time' in order to achieve the aimed for result, both in terms of answering the research question, and in terms of broader artistic goals.

**Analysis and Reflection and Testing of the Findings** This is the process of scanning back and forth over the data and the personal memories it may evoke. It may involve collating, sorting and other methods of re-organising the material in order to generate useful responses to the research question.

These responses may be further tested or verified in a secondary stage of the research project.

In this project the analysis and reflection, both of the performance video and of the log of exercises were distilled into a set of physicalisation approaches to acting called *Bodydialogue*. These approaches were further tested in two teaching contexts – one with third year Drama students at QUT, and one with second year Acting students at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Both experiences led to a further development of some of the exercises and of an underlying *Bodydialogue* theory.

**Engagement with Theory** The focus of this study was on physicalisation as an ‘acting problem’ rather than as a ‘movement problem’, and a wide range of texts on Acting was consulted before the commencement of the project. However the most useful reading of theory came after the project in the Analysis stage as I worked to understand how my own ‘findings’ related to discussion of physicalisation issues by other writers.

**Publication/ dissemination** To a greater or lesser extent (depending on the nature of the project), the artwork itself is both an embodiment of the ‘findings, and a substantial part of the ‘data’. While it is possible to imagine it being entirely one or the other, in practice it is probably a mix of the two in varying proportions. Some phases of the research framework extend beyond and after the art-making has been completed. This may result in the production of findings that are not embodied in the current art work and will require another form of publication. By corollary, some of the findings may only be properly appreciated within the context of the artwork, and cannot be extracted from that context into ‘data’, without losing their meaning.

The format for publication needs to be appropriate to the project and the potential users of the findings. Publication in the form of articles in refereed journals may provide external validation, but if potential end-users (particularly in the field of professional practice) don’t read journals, other forms of

publication may be required.

There are three sets of 'findings' inherent in this project. There was the live event itself, embodying physicalisation processes at work. Some of these findings were captured on an archival video, and will be analysed in Chapter 5. There is a set of exercises that have been tested and sequenced. And there is a contextual body of explanation and instruction for those exercises, called *Bodydialogue*. This dissertation will be accompanied by a DVD or a VCD containing a complete video record of the performance, as well as a number of extracts chosen for illustration and analysis. Accompanying these are a number of short video examples of some of the exercises being carried out by student actors at USQ.

### **Project Design: Defining the difference between a 'normal' rehearsal/performance process and one contextualised within a research paradigm**

There are three ways in which the research context alters the rehearsal and performance process, and these correspond to three distinct phases in the time-span of the project.

- Pre-production
- Rehearsals & Performances
- Post-production

#### **Pre-production**

The research question, and the intention to conduct research alter the whole intentionality of the production process. This in turn influences the choice of actors, the way in which resources are directed, and the choice of co-artistic creators.

For example in a normal production one might cast the actors first, and subsequently suggest to them that a little 'experimentation' might be helpful in the early stages of rehearsal, hoping that they will see the potential benefit, or at least participate in a spirit of positive good will. In a research project one chooses actors who in advance one knows will be sympathetic and committed to the research methods and outcomes. Indeed one ideally wants actors who can see how the research investigative process and its outcomes will be immediately useful to their own artistic and professional development. I was very fortunate in having three such actors to work with.



## **Rehearsals & Performances**

In any rehearsal process time is of the essence. For all the participants, but for the director in particular, the management of that time is a crucial issue. In any production process there is never enough time to do everything that could be done to fulfil a complete preparation of the play. Consequently the director must be a master of compromise, sensing when the time for exploration must cease, so that a final score can be 'set' and then presented to the awaiting audience.

Setting a project within a research context potentially alters the patterns of those compromises, in a way that is often difficult and challenging. The research question demands priority in the allocation of time, forcing the director to reconsider what is necessary to bring before the audience, and what will need to be sacrificed.

## **Post-production**

The continuing focus on the research question, after the practice itself has been completed, culminating in a written report or dissertation, brings together the necessary analysis and reflection required to advance the inquiry.

Within pure practice the artist moves on quickly to the next project, and the 'findings' as expressed in the artistic form remain implicit within that form, and may or may not continue to be advanced in the subsequent project.

The research project, framed in a research context, takes those findings still implicit in the artistic form, and attempts to make them explicit, in order to allow them to be further developed, or to allow them to remain a focus for further inquiry. The dissertation 'points' to the findings within the artistic form, and attempts to make them explicit for the reader, and in the process makes them more explicit for the artist-researcher.

This also involves contextualising the inquiry and its findings in the work of those currently in the field, a process of analysis reported on in the previous chapter.

## **The Research Design**

The research design is best visualised by referring to the accompanying schematic diagram. There are essentially three strands or layers of *interweaving* activity.

On the top layer are indicated periods of reading and analysis – these occur between each of the phases of creative practice.

ILLUSTRATION OF MODEL GOES IN HERE

The middle layer follows a typical cycle of planning and practice that any practising artist might follow.

The bottom layer incorporates cycles of Reflection, Analysis and Reporting, sometimes interspersed with small scale further testing. This activity follows each of the major phases of creative practice, and is enriched and contextualised by the Reading and Analysis indicated on the top layer.

## **The Creative Practice Project Details**

### **When**

The project ran over February 2002, allowing us to present four performances in Orientation Week at the University.

### **How**

It was funded by a QUT Creative Development Grant, and rehearsed and performed in the Woodward Theatre. The 'set' consisted of a few items of furniture that were placed within an inner 'circle', allowing action to take place within the furnished circle, and outside it. Suspended from the ceiling at the back was an iconic sheet of corrugated iron which not only functioned as a symbol of an outback sheep-station, but also served as a projection screen.

### **Who**

Pivotal to the study was **Graeme Watson** in his role as movement consultant and choreographer. Graeme's morning warm-ups created an atmosphere of physicality and grounded the actors' kinaesthetic awareness into their bodies and into a refreshed understanding of physical movement. Graeme also contributed and developed some of the exercises, and was able to contribute insights gained from his own experiences working in indigenous communities and with indigenous artists.

In casting for an investigative research project like this, we needed actors who would not only be sympathetic to the research aims, but would be willing and enthusiastic partners who would see the project as an opportunity for them to explore and gain new skills. We also wanted actors with a strong physical background, who would have no physical or mental difficulties in exploring intensive physicalisation processes. This led us to choosing actors who were both graduates from QUT and thus would understand the research paradigm, and who also had subsequently trained in physical theatre.

For the adaptation we also wanted two indigenous actors for the roles of Jack and Christine. A few months before we were due to commence work, our original choice for Jack, an Indigenous actor and QUT graduate Wayne Blair, finally admitted that the escalating commitments arising from his film career would make involvement in the project impossible, and we chose a second actor, **Jason Klarwein**. Jason fitted perfectly the physical and academic requirements, and had some Indigenous connections, but not at the deep cultural level of our first choice. However given the shortness of time and the need to fulfil the other criteria we welcomed him into the project.

Our second performer was Indigenous actor **Sandy Greenwood**, and although she had only just graduated from a drama degree, and therefore came into the project with much less experience than the other two actors, we knew that she would be an excellent team member, and would grow into the work. Indeed she was able to bring into the project many insights coming from her connections with her own Indigenous family, and brought a wonderfully grounded integrity and conviction.

The role of Julie herself went to **Caroline Dunphy**, an actor who has trained intensively in the Suzuki process, and also now teaches Movement at QUT in the Actor Training Program. Caroline was the one actor who had worked in the first *Miss Julie* investigative project, and so brought a useful sense of continuity into this second project.

Supporting the project were **Michael Fitcher**, who acted as literary dramaturge assisting with the performance adaptation of the script, **Peter Nielson** who created the digital projections, and **Tanya Malouf** who stage-managed and produced the event. We also received assistance from **Victor Hart** of the Oodgeroo Unit at QUT, who gave us feedback on the text and suggested rewrites and rewordings which we enthusiastically embraced.

**Jacqueline Martin** who created the original translation and adaptation came into the process towards the end, offering feedback after an early run, designing the audience feedback mechanisms, and providing crucial support and encouragement.

## **Reporting**

This dissertation, (accompanied by the DVD or VCD containing a video recording of the Performance, Performance extracts, and video recordings of some of the *Bodydialogue* exercises) reports on the Reading and its Analysis that both preceded and was subsequent to the project (Chapter 2), and reflects on and analyses the application of the physicalisation techniques to the process of rehearsing and performing *missjulie downunder* (Chapters 4-6).

# Chapter four

## *the BodyDialogue exercises*

### **Part 1. Description of Exercises used**

### **Part 2. Framing the *BodyDialogue* Exercises**

If we regard physicalisation as an acting problem, rather than as a movement problem, then an approach to it needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of Acting theory and lore. This dimension I have attempted in Chapter 2, The Theory Journey. In a more pragmatic and practical dimension, physicalisation need to be explored and developed using a range of improvisatory exercises, and in a third dimension physicalisation techniques need to be presented within an aesthetic, conceptual and performance framework that guides their application within the performance context. These latter two dimensions are now the subject of Chapters 4 and 5. This chapter describes the exercises and how they are framed, and Chapter 5 describes their application within the missjulie downunder performance project.

### **1. Description of Exercises used:**

- Viewpoints style warm up
- BodyGesture
- Tape Technique
- Hand of Power
- Hand of Power with Tape Technique
- Hand of Power with Music and Action
- Silent Movie
- Silent Movie & Music
- Silent Movie warm up
- Eye Dialogue
- Breath Dialogue

## Viewpoints style warm up

*This is generally done to music. The description of this warm up compiles variations on the exercises developed within this research project, and within the two testing phases at QUT and USQ. The warm up was first taught to me at NIDA in 1981 by a Le Coq trained performer, but I have called it a Viewpoints style warm up firstly because anyone who has trained in Viewpoints will immediately recognise it, and secondly because my more recent development of it has been influenced by Viewpoints as taught by Peta Downs at QUT.*

**Touching Down...  
Entering the  
Now...** **Phase 1:** The actors walk at random in the space. They are asked to put their awareness on the space, as if it was a plastic substance, and to head always into the biggest space they are aware of. They are asked to breathe down into their bodies and to focus on and build their awareness of what is going on inside their bodies. What sensations are they experiencing? What feelings? And so on. Bella Merlin describes similar exercises which sensitise and focus the actors' awareness of their own feelings and impulses.

**Phase 2:** Now a movement 'script' is introduced. They must find random moments within their walking of stopping, turning, leaning, sitting. (Each of these 'events' is added in to the script one at a time.) Every time there is a 'point of change' there must be a corresponding change in pace and rhythm. Each random moment is broken into three sub-moments – a beginning, a middle and an end. Each time they enter a moment they must find a slightly different beginning, middle and end. Each time they exit their moment back into the walk, the walk must have changed in pace and rhythm. Explore changes of level and body shape. Giving the actors a highly specific task like this reduces their self-consciousness, taking their focus off themselves and on to their craft.

At first these changes might be quite deliberately and consciously formed, but as the script becomes familiar, the changes become more impulsive and unconscious – reacting to the stimulus of the music, the room and its contents, other people and so on.

Breaking each moment into three stages encourages greater and greater degrees of precision of movement. Stanislavsky equated this precision with 'diction':

Because he considered physical actions the chief element of stage expressiveness, Stanislavski always demanded clearness and dexterity in their use by his players. He tried to get "good diction" in their physical actions.... To achieve this he recommended daily... exercises with imaginary objects to develop concentration.... Each time he repeats these exercises, the actor makes them more complicated: he divides them into small, separate sections and thus develops his "diction" in physical actions. (Toporkov 1998:163)

**Phase 3:** Incorporate use of props, furniture and architectural features (e.g. doors, windows) into the 'script', similarly exploring the three part structure of each moment. An actor might explore different ways of looking through a window, or drinking a cup of tea, feeling how mood, energy, rhythm and body position effortlessly interact with each other.

**Phase 4:** *This exercise only applies when there is a group of at least eight people.* Actors continue the movement script more intuitively and less structured by Phase 2 stipulations, but they now select one other person and keep them in their field of vision at all times.

Continue but now add a second person who must be kept in their field of vision at all times. This can be increased to a third person, before they are released from this stipulation.

**Phase 5:** The actors continue, but gradually let all their 'changes' be provoked or suggested by their awareness of other actors. They must 'deny nothing, invent nothing' (Mamet 1997:71). This could lead them into an opposite reaction or a repetition or an echo or a variation on the original event they are responding to. Gradually these reactions cohere into interactive events (or BodyStories – see next section). These are not consciously invented, but rather spontaneously found. The actors are both encouraged to instantly surrender into these events, but also to let them go gracefully when they are finished.

...invent  
nothing, deny  
nothing...

**Purpose:** The goal of these exercises is to bring the actor into the here and now, helping them connect with their impulsivity and reactivity, towards a creative and playful use of space, other actors, furniture, props etc..

**The BodyGesture or Gestural Dialogue Exercise** (contributed by Graeme Watson)

*This is perhaps the most important of the exercises, and as its name implies, is the keystone for the BodyDialogue system.*

Phase 1: Two actors face each other. The first plants a gesture on the body of the second. For example he/she might touch the other person on their forearm. The second actor reciprocates with the same gesture, and then adds a second gesture. The first actor now reciprocates with those two gestures and adds a third, and so on. The two actors build between them a sequence of perhaps six or seven gestures. They then 'subtract', removing the last gesture from the sequence, then the second last, and so on, until they once more face each other in stillness.

*Reacting...* Phase 2: Having now established this sequence, the actors repeat the exercise. (This can be performed in silence or to music.) This time the actors are encouraged to 'yield' to each gesture planted upon them. From here on the exercise grows through the reactions. They are encouraged not to perform each gesture exactly or mimetically, but to allow it to grow or evolve or *morph*, according to the organic chain of reactions it is embedded in. This

*Morphing...* *morphing* could be in size, or intensity or in rhythm or mood for example. The gesture could be performed while moving, or with a slightly different part of the body, and so on. Through the medium of this exercise the actors find themselves spontaneously developing and exploring interactive stories, relationships, moods and non-verbal content.

*Moving into space...* **Purpose:** The goal of this exercise is to develop a sensitivity towards the dialoguing of bodies, and at the same time to generate a heightened gestural vocabulary that the actors will draw on when they move on to the text. Once the basic 'score' has been constructed, the exercise becomes improvisatory.

*Let yourself react into the space as well as into your body.* It gives the actors the experience of acting and reacting organically and truthfully within a constantly evolving physical dialogue. It also gives the actors a direct experience of the spontaneous release of creativity that occurs through the physical stimuli the exercise generates.

## Tape Technique

### Short Description:

The Tape Technique as I know it was developed by an American Acting teacher named Jeremy Whelan (Whelan 1994), and works like this:

The actors record their scene on to audiotape. They then get up and move into the space. The tape is played back, and they then move to the tape. In so doing they make all kinds of physical discoveries that will affect the reading of the text. So they sit down again and re-record, informed by the discoveries and deepening their emotional involvement. Then back on their feet to explore the movement, and so on, through six or seven repetitions, each one developing in physical and emotional complexity

### Detailed Description:

Stage 1 The actors sit at a small table on which is set a tape recorder and external microphone. We pick a scene to work on and then the actors read the dialogue into the recorder. Where there is action in between sections of dialogue, they



try to leave enough blank space on the tape to let them perform the action before resuming the dialogue.

They then get up and move into the space. The tape is now played back, and the actors attempt to feel their way into the moves that seem appropriate for any given moment in the text. We start with the simplest level of movement possible, as advised by the Technique's developer Jeremy Whelan. Movement at this level consists of movement towards a person or object, movement away from a person or object, and not moving, or holding ground, or circling – movement that maintains distance/proximity while moving around the other person or object.

In the first sweep through the scene the actors are only trying to discover what is the implicit action within the scene and where should it take place. At the end of the scene we review those decisions and decide which we wish to keep and which to modify. Usually this means determining the broader outline of actions such as where characters enter from or exit to, and where key items of furniture are best placed to facilitate the action.

Stage 2 The process is now repeated. The scene is re-recorded, and already the delivery of the dialogue will be developing as the actors incorporate their heightened understanding of the spatial and physical needs of the scene. Back on the floor, and now the actors will be consolidating the broad spatial movements of the play, and starting to explore some of the smaller textual impulses that may incite them to a more detailed use of the space and its physical contents to express those impulses.

Each time the actors sit down to re-record the scene, they are further developing the verbal and emotional aspects of the dialogue, increasing their sensitivity to each other, and thus heightening what Whelan calls their 'emotional involvement'. While the actor is recording the text, sitting down, they are free of that awkwardness of standing in the space not quite sure what to do that is associated with traditional rehearsals, and can surrender completely to responding to the verbal and emotional nuances of their acting partner. However, because they have reactively explored the space, they bring a different consciousness to the reading, one that has already become more 'embodied'.

Each time they perform the actions of the scene to the soundtrack of their own voices, they are finding more ways to express, through physical actions, the psychological impulses they hear in the words.

Stage 3 After the third reading, the actors go on to the floor and may now explore the gestural impulses suggested by the text. The shared intimacy of action and response may now become much more focused, moving from broad sweeps of the floor to close-up action,

where touch becomes possible, where even the smallest nuances of body language, a hand stroking the back of a chair, a shift of body weight by the listener towards the speaker becomes both reactive and communicative.

**Tape  
Technique  
+  
Music**

At this point it can be useful to discard the taped text altogether. The actors  
Stage 4 have now developed a rough physical score for the scene, where each physical impulse causes a physical response in the other person and so on, so that a chain of interconnecting reactive impulses can easily be re-performed by the actors without much strain on the memory. Just to be sure though, the actors can be given a few minutes to walk through the scene checking the details, particularly the turning points. A piece of music is chosen in the meantime that roughly suggests the mood or the intensity of the actors' interactions. This might be strong and dramatic, it might be moody and idiosyncratic, it might be comic and playful.

The actors are now given the direction to abandon their awareness of the words and to surrender completely to the music and the movement. They are to create the dramatic movement version of the scene. The first time they do this they find themselves exploring the movement in a free and impulsive way, enjoying the interaction and the mood. The second time, they are asked to intensify their physical responses – more sudden turns, stronger movements etc. – in response to the impulse given to them by their partner. The scene quickly takes on a life of its own, effortlessly building tension and developing the storyline.

The objective of this crucial stage is to move the actors into directly *experiencing* the other person's effect on them, on their own responses, on the important given circumstances. It quickly becomes apparent which aspects of the scene it is possible for the actor to experience, and which aspects are not.

### **The difference between *information* and *experience***

This is a point that absolutely needs emphasis – a round-the-table intellectual analysis of a scene will bring an actor to an expanded awareness of multiple elements that appear to be 'in' a scene. These could take the shape of ideas about character, motivation, relationship, dramatic function, theme, meaning and so on. This is the stuff of what is known as text analysis, and it may generate useful contextual information, however it can also mislead the actor. For many actors, the danger is that having formed a 'picture' of the character – what they are doing, why they are doing it – they will now attempt to 'act' this picture. In effect they imagine the scene as if it was a real event, and then attempt to imitate or embody their character and their characters' actions within this event. They try to 'become' the character, jumping directly from intellectual understanding to psychological identification.

The result for the individual actor falling into this trap, is superficial and stressful. Superficial because the actor's improvised verbal and physical behaviour, not having been deliberately constructed, can only communicate a fraction of what the actor believes he/she knows about the scene. And stressful precisely because the actor's inner experience is one of failure, for it is not possible to discover the inner life of the character, merely by analysis, or by 'acting out' the storyline of the scene. In addition the obligation to communicate the body of analytical information to the audience distracts the actor from connecting with the sole source of what is 'real' in the scene – the other actors and the physical setting. Ariane Mnouchkine has made a similar point:

When I see young students work on what they call the "Stanislavsky Method," I am surprised to find how much they go back to the past all the time. Of course Stanislavsky talks about the character's past: Where does he come from, what is he doing? But the students are not able to simply find the present action. So they go back and I always tell them, "You enter leaning backwards, weighted by all this past, while in the theatre only the moment exists." (Féral 1989:91)

The development of the scene using the *BodyDialogue* techniques needs to take the actor quickly to a point where they can directly and kinaesthetically (and as a consequence, emotionally) *experience* the essence of the scene, so that all their subsequent development grows on this deeply felt organic foundation. The actor should not have to pretend a desire, they should be able, by finding its appropriate interactive physical foundation, to experience immediately both their own desires and those of their partner. From there the body's own spontaneous and impulsive behaviour can then be shaped. Any 'information' that cannot be directly experienced is discarded and replaced by the actual sensation of what can be actually experienced.

*The goal of Stage 4 is to identify and build on this kind of 'actuality', and to play with the physical forms that will communicate it concretely – first to the other actors, and secondly to an audience.*

Stage 5 The next stage might return us to the Tape Technique. Now when the actors record the scene, the words are very changed, informed by a new and much deeper experience of the scene's dynamic forces. When they move on to the floor this differently charged text will cause them to find other movements and nuances, and the quality of the movement itself will be much deeper because now the actors are working from imagination connected to experience, rather than imagination trying to work from intellectual understanding.

**...imagination connected to experience, rather than imagination trying to work from intellectual understanding...** This can be a very big step. I have seen actors shaky with the excitement, indeed the shock of rediscovering their physical expressiveness. If they had previously thought of themselves as physically expressive, it was an expressiveness controlled by the intellect rather than by the body. Once the body took over the reins, they found themselves experiencing what a more inspired and a more playful acting could be like, a feeling they normally might only touch in the second half of a performance season. Unlike psychological acting techniques, which can also bring an actor to a similar level of absorption and imaginative engagement, it does not require any intrusive probing of private experience, it does not require the actor to expose their private self, and it does not require careful de-briefing. It is a process respectful of the actor's professional and personal humanity, and does not leave them dependent on a guru-acting teacher to return them to the same level of creativity. And in addition it is communicated in a physical language that fulfils our three criteria of movement introduced in Chapter 2:

1. Visual Signifier inviting and playing into the audience's interpretive attention;
2. Creative 'trigger' stimulating the actor's and the ensemble's creative processes;
3. Creation of engagements and experiences not otherwise in the actor's memory to draw on.

Stage 6 In this, the final stage of the first session, the actors move into their first run through of the scene bringing words and actions together. Moreover they are now ready to perform the scene without scripts in hand, almost word perfect. This is because the actors in repeating the chain of actions they have developed find that by a process of association, the words that accompany each action spring spontaneously into their minds.

**Purpose:** The goal of the Tape Technique exercise is to assist the actor to develop a physical 'score' for a piece of text. Although it is entirely improvisatory in nature, its special advantage is that it allows the actor to develop physicalisation that remains intimately connected with the specific psychological and emotional impulses informing the verbal text.

## **Hand of Power**

This exercise is an adaptation of one described by Augusto Boal in his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992). The exercise goes roughly like this: In pairs the performers face each other and the first actor places his/her hand, palm open about ten centimetres in front of the face of the second. He/she then starts to move his/her hand.

The task of the second actor is always to keep his/her face exactly ten centimetres away from the first actor's open palm. The first actor can move his/her hand wherever he/she wishes, leading the second actor into a variety of moves and positions. At a pre-arranged signal from the facilitator, the two actors will switch roles. As they become more skilled at leading and being led they take over the moment of switching themselves, feeling the moment where a 'sentence' of movement has been completed by the leading actor, and it is the right moment for a 'reply' from the other actor. In this way a kind of dialogue of movement is established.

The exercise becomes even more powerful when it is performed to music. The music can strongly suggest mood and situation, and often inspires the actors to extraordinary sequences of interactive play that explore and push the boundaries of character and relationship.

**Purpose:** This is a brilliant exercise for compelling the actors to enter into a dynamic and forceful relationship with each other. Each actor seeks to manipulate the other, and then is manipulated in return. It not only becomes a telling physical metaphor for the interactive action that must drive the verbal text, but it also sensitises the actors to the feeling of what it is like when they are in control of action and counteraction. It is a good antidote to that kind of delivery of text that seems very expressive, but is not really 'doing' anything to the listener.

### **Hand of Power with Tape Technique**

The Hand of Power can also be very effectively applied to the Tape Technique.

In this exercise the actors record the scene as normal, but when they move onto the studio floor they take up a starting position facing each other. The audio-tape is then played back. To begin with, whoever is currently 'speaking' has the hand of power, and manipulates the listener. Control changes to the other actor as soon as they 'reply'. Gradually however, the actors shift to a more subtle use of the technique. For example, where a character is really driving a section of a scene, the other actor, even when he or she is 'replying', does not necessarily exert any power. They may just be trying to defend themselves. In situations like those, the passive actors may when they 'speak' have the other actors in the palm of their hands so to speak, but they will be retreating – almost as if the dominant actor is controlling the hand, rather than the hand controlling the actor.

**Purpose:** The great value of this exercise is that there is no room for a non-physical action. An actor cannot simply stand and speak, nor can they stand and listen. As a result the actors must start to listen as actively as they speak, and in both cases they speak and

listen with their bodies as well as their minds. The body is in pursuit of the underlying action, while the voice articulates the dialogue similarly endowed with a will to action.

### **Hand of Power with Music and Action**

There is a further development to the above exercise. For by this stage the actors are developing a familiarity with the action of the scene, and it becomes possible to take away the pre-recorded dialogue altogether and to replace it with music. Now the actors interact, using the Hand of Power exercise, following the broad storyline of the scene, and instead of the played back dialogue there is a carefully selected piece of music whose mood will help liberate some of the deeper passions of the scene. Extraordinary things can happen at this point, with the creativity of the actors now fully engaged. It is a time when great discoveries are made, both in terms of scenic possibilities and in terms of deepening the physical and emotional life of the characters' desires and relationships.

It is worth acknowledging here the powerful role that music plays in all these exercises, acting as a stimulus or trigger for the actors to unselfconsciously pursue strong emotional needs and reactions.

### **Silent Movie Technique**

Here is another exercise that became profoundly important to the physical development of the scenes.

At its simplest level the actors must communicate the scene without dialogue, using only movement and action. The easiest way to develop the silent movie is through the use of the Tape Technique. The actors will find the physical shape of the scene as they run through each recording cycle.

We now run through the scene without any dialogue. Since what we are seeing should consist of a sequence of clear physical actions each one causing the next, it is easy to identify those moments where actors lack a clear physical action, and have relied on the dialogue to convey their intention. They are those moments when the actors, in performing non-verbally, are suddenly unsure where they have reached in the dialogue, and in moving to the next obvious physical action they find they have 'cut' whole sections of textual story, or they have had to fill them in with generalised hand gestures to simulate speech that is no longer there.

We then go back to those unclear moments and investigate them more fully, trying to create clear movements, actions or gestures that correspond to each verbal intention.

Again the actors work non-verbally through the scene performing the sequence of actions until they feel confident not only that they have memorised them, but also that each moment grows organically (indeed visibly) out of the previous moment. No moment should rely solely on a piece of textual communication to drive the action forward. The Silent Movie is complete when both actors and audience know what is going on moment by moment, purely by the interactive behaviour and the non-verbal emotion it spontaneously generates.

The significance of this exercise, in common with many of the other exercises, is to 'force' the actor into a direct experience of the other actor, and of their own desires in relation to the other character, and to react strongly (and playfully) to each other. This is the absolute essence of the BodyDialogue approach – the bodies are in dialogue with each other at a level of physical and sensory engagement that makes for a direct and truthful experiencing of each other, and is the foundation for subsequent scene development.

### **Silent Movie and the 'long speech'**

This exercise becomes doubly useful when the actors reach a moment where one of the characters has a sizeable speech. To perform a long speech non-verbally really forces the actors to understand exactly what is at stake, moment by moment, for both speaker and listener. A long speech in the theatre should never be a monologue. It is a dialogue between one who speaks verbally and one who speaks non-verbally. Each of those non-verbal 'speeches' or reactions must be sufficiently clear, and sufficiently 'provocative', such that they cause the speaker to move on to the next spoken thought. The mere fact for example that the listener's body language suggests that they are refusing to take seriously the accusations of the speaker will be enough to provoke the speaker to redouble their verbal attack.

**Purpose:** Silent Movie assists the actors to find and test the unbroken flow of action and reaction, and to physicalise it in the simplest and clearest way possible.

### **Silent Movie and Music**

In a development of the Silent Movie exercise we now take a piece of music that creates a heightened mood, or emotional dimension for the piece. Perhaps it expresses the character's passion, or perhaps it heightens a tragic nuance, or a comic nuance.

Then we ask the actors to perform their action to the music, and to allow the music to inspire the way in which they relate to each other. We also ask them to 'improvise' around the action sequence, either creating new actions, or changing the actions they currently have, or finding more powerful or interesting ways to fulfil the action.

These improvisations quickly take on a life of their own. The actors are encouraged to 'invest' more in their responses, and this in turn creates more stimulus and a heightened creative flow. The predesignated story line provides a sense of security, freeing the actor to react more and more impulsively, which in turn provokes their partner into fresh responses. Actors can quickly discover new actions, behaviours and emotional responses, all of which are completely gripping, because each grows organically and causally out of what went before. As the 'spectator' I find myself in that enjoyable state of making sense of what has just happened, and at the same time asking the 'what will happen next' question.

### **The Silent Movie Warm Up**

This exercise can be applied in later rehearsals, and to preparation for performance. The actors simultaneously and quite individually (i.e. they do not interact with each other) trace their physical journey through the scene, or through the entire play, improvising it as a series of private moments. This is done to music, and the actors use this opportunity to interact with the space, the furniture and the props.

For example, in one warm up, Caroline in role as Miss Julie explores her onstage journey with the bird cage. This prop is now the 'hero' of the scene and is correspondingly endowed with a symbolic intensity previously absent, that is generated by a whole subset of action, movement, attitudes and gestures created by the actor.

### **Other applications of Silent Movie and Music**

So we work through the scene in a number of similar ways. For example we might take the props that are used in the scene, and ask the actors to work through all their interactions with those props, performing those actions to the music. We can also ask them to explore the use of the space and the furniture, again inspired by the great feelings liberated by the music and by the creative engagement with the actions.

Using this technique the actors quickly generate a freedom of action, which at times can be bold, electrifying and highly theatrical. At the same time, by constantly returning to our scene's non-verbal storyline, the movement improvisation remains disciplined and focused on the task of clearly telling the characters' stories.

### **The Eye Dialogue**

This exercise can be combined with Silent Movie, or the Gestural Dialogue Exercises.



Variation 1: The actors perform the Physical Score to Music (Silent Movie & Music), but put all their attention on to their Eyes. The eyes must participate or become expressive within each separate moment, while at the same time remaining visible to the audience as much as possible. Eyes, like bodies, can be as complex in their movements. Eyes can look towards, look away or hold their gaze. Eyes can move and gesture like hands, brushing, touching, flirting. They can be an extension of thought, searching out ideas or thoughts in the spaces between the actor and the audience. Eyes can also flirt with light, absorbing it from the electric lamps and reflecting it back to the watchers.

Variation 2: The Gestural Dialogue Exercise is now explored using only the eyes as a medium of gesture. It is important to keep the flow of dialogue, the to-ing and fro-ing of action and reaction, stimulus and response. At first this is performed in silence, but once the score of gestural dialogue has been created, the actors now repeat it, improvising through it against a piece of appropriate music.

### **The Breath Dialogue**

This exercise is particularly valuable for moments of great intimacy. The actors perform the Physical Score in absolute silence, listening and being aware of their own breathing and that of their partner. It creates intense absorption and concentration and a heightened reactivity.

## **2. Framing the BodyDialogue Exercises**

In choosing physicalisation techniques to explore and develop, I have consistently had two sets of selection criteria in mind. The first of these is a Creativity requirement, and the second is a particular understanding of the Acting and Performance aesthetic to which the physicalisation is intended to contribute.

### **1. Creativity & Improvisation**

I have already suggested in the first two chapters that I believe there is a natural connection between physicalisation and the creativity of the actor, such that the right choice of physical action will act as a creative 'trigger' capable of stimulating the actor's and the ensemble's creative processes.

It is a connection that is certainly confirmed by my own experience, which suggests that when the *BodyDialogue* techniques are applied to stimulating the overall creativity, or creative "flow", of the actor, rather than on using the techniques solely as a means to

achieve the 'choreography' of a performance, there is a marked improvement not only in the physicalisation of the performer, but in the performance generally. This is the same claim that I have made in my paper *Dialoguing the Bodies* (1999). The various qualities associated with 'great acting' arise from the actor working consistently in a heightened creative "flow" state rather than from an attempt to somehow consciously manufacture those performance qualities directly. While there are many ways in which the actor's creative "flow" state can be stimulated, in my personal experience it is more likely to be stimulated when the actor feels a sense of freedom to explore and experiment, and this is usually predicated on an improvisatory approach to rehearsal that assists the actor to release the power of their theatrical imagination. The great acting teacher and Stanislavsky disciple Michael Chekhov, according to Mel Gordon, makes a somewhat similar claim:

It is the stage's ineffable, magical elements that truly bring the actor and spectator together: the field of energy, or liveliness, that radiates from the actor's creative work; his profound and startling character choices.... More than anything else, Chekhov's work became associated with the power of the imagination. (Gordon 1987:127)

Such approaches have been widely used by many of the great theatre companies over the last one hundred years. Stanislavsky increasingly used improvisation in his lifelong career, 'improv' is a feature of Method Acting training, and it has been famously used by directors such as Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, Anne Bogart and Jerzy Grotowski. Mel Gordon for example notes the significance of exercises and improvisations in the training methods developed by Stanislavsky and his successors. "Exercises, improvisations, and études (directed improvisations or scenes) were the means by which the System, in all its interpretations and reformulations, could school the modern actor and prove itself as a natural and teachable method of acting and actor training." (Gordon 1987:xiii)

The *BodyDialogue* approach described in this dissertation is absolutely grounded in the creative enhancement provided by physical improvisation techniques, but the dramatic ideas being explored through the use of such techniques naturally expand to include the psychological and the emotional dimensions. This is exactly why *BodyDialogue* is so useful, precisely because it naturally stimulates and integrates all aspects of acting. It turns out that stimulating the physical expressiveness of the actor is a very powerful means for stimulating their performance generally.

## 2. An Acting and Performance Aesthetic

The physicalisation exercises described in Section 1 have been applied within an overall framework of directorial values that has evolved over many years of directing actors in theatre productions. This section attempts to make explicit those directorial principles in order to demonstrate how they have been applied, very much in keeping with my claims that physicalisation is an acting problem rather than a movement problem. I have arranged these principles under the following headings:

- Taxonomies of Movement – MAGI, Experiential vs Rhetorical, Acculturated and Inculturated, Laban
  - The principle of Active Reaction
  - Move the Reaction
  - Clutch & Grab Theatre
  - Releasing the Full Response
  - Choreographing the Listener
  - Finding the BodyStories
- 
- **MAGI *Movement Action Gesture Image – a Movement Taxonomy***

In conversation with the actors it is necessary to use an appropriately precise vocabulary in order to articulate movement possibilities. This is not a vocabulary of choreography, but more simply a vocabulary of movement impulses as actually experienced by the actor, and which are easily visible to the director.

There are broadly four ways in which these impulses might be expressed. I have found it useful to categorise these under the acronym of **MAGI**:

**Movement** - the actor moves towards or away from other people or objects in the stage setting or holds their ground, deliberately not moving, or circles while maintaining their distance or proximity. They can also move in relation to imaginatively endowed parts of the space. For example in the Hamlet soliloquy “O what a rogue and peasant slave” the actor might imagine the departed players stage right, and the imaginary Hecuba stage left, and then move in relation to those imaginary figures or memories.

**Action** – physical tasks carried out by the actor such as entering, sitting down, taking off a coat, making a sandwich, writing, etc..

**Gesture** – Viewpoints breaks gesture into two categories

- *behavioural* gestures which are the expressive movements made by the actor to emphasise or counterpoint verbal meaning, or to express nonverbal reactions e.g. rubbing face, raising eyebrows, shrugging shoulders, touching the other person's hand, straightening a tie etc..
- *expressive* gestures, which are the more abstract and symbolic gestures that do not belong to the everyday. (Landau, 1995:22) Some of the latter might fall under the category of Image.

**Images** – the use of movement, gesture or action to create symbolic or aesthetically charged pictorial moments e.g. leaning evocatively in a doorway, kneeling in prayer, sitting in relation to another actor to express a relationship pictorially (such as mother and daughter).

These are very broad categories and can involve a degree of overlap. For example the actor may deliberately shape the carrying out of an everyday physical task into an aesthetically charged, almost abstract image.

We can further differentiate movement into two dimensions. Each category of movement can be expressed either 'experientially' or 'rhetorically'. Experiential movement is the movement arising from the actor directly experiencing and responding to the impulses he or she is connecting with. For example the actor strikes his or her forehead as if to say 'oh no' in response to something that causes disappointment or alarm. It is probably true to say that this class of movement is inherently reactive.

Rhetorical movement is when the actor shapes a movement in order to strengthen his or her connection with the audience, or with the other onstage characters. It is usually quite theatrical, and often involves conventional arm and hand gestures. However if the actor were alone, thinking through the same thoughts, he or she would probably not use such movement. In that sense they can be thought of as 'public' movement.

The significance of this distinction is important. Rhetorical movement tends to take the actors into more clichéd responses, and removes them from an imaginative connection with their deepest impulses. Experiential movement, as the name implies, plants the actors back into direct experience and tends to be more spontaneous and impulsive. However for some actors it can also be idiosyncratic and poorly shaped. Clearly the actor needs to be able to integrate both dimensions so that the originality of experiential movement can still be deeply communicative, with an appropriate aesthetic edge. There are actors who have learned a vocabulary of conventional rhetorical movements which they apply to all their roles (and often Shakespeare) which prevents them exploring more original expressive movement. Many of the *BodyDialogue* exercises, especially Tape

Technique, can be very useful in helping them to break through these learned patterns of clichéd responses.

The usefulness of classifying movement in this way is entirely practical. One can ask the actors to explore the physical dynamics of a scene from the ‘viewpoint’ of a single category – a scene can be developed using only Movement in space. It can be explored using only Gesture. It can be interpreted using only Image. As with Viewpoints, the actor’s creative response can be heightened by narrowing their focus.

Barba and Savarese make a further distinction between Acculturated Movement and Inculturated Movement (1991:189). The first refers to a consciously learned vocabulary of expressive movement such as Classical Ballet, Classical Mime, Suzuki, Butoh, Kathakali and so on. The second type of movement is the expressive movement absorbed from the culture one is within. Its acquisition is largely unconscious, and its forms and conventions mostly appear invisible to those within the culture, although they may appear quite exotic to those outside the culture. The relevance of this distinction was an important one for the performers in the project, all of whom, to varying degrees had undergone intensive training in Suzuki-based training regimes. It was a goal for all of us to try and take the physical benefits of this training and apply it to a theatre of Inculturated Movement.

While Laban’s well-known classification of Movement and Energy (Effort) would fit easily and naturally into a *BodyDialogue* approach, it was not one we used or made reference to in this project.

- **Active Reaction**

One objective of the application of the *BodyDialogue* techniques is to guide the actor into making every impulse one that is either acting upon, or reacting upon the other actors. Brant Pope comments on the importance of this quality in writing about the Meisner Technique:

The radical nature of Meisner’s work is expressed in the core principle of doing and the manner in which this alters the basic definition of acting. The emphasis on doing, or action, as opposed to the expression of emotion is the primary characteristic that differentiates Meisner work from that of the other master teachers of Method acting in the United States. **Further, a commitment to doing suggests that the central focus of the actor’s attention is now on the other actor(s) and their response to what is being “done to them”.** (My emphasis) (in Krasner 2000)

The opposite of this principle, Pope maintains, occurs when the actor is focused upon themselves rather than upon the other actor. This can happen for example, when actors are deliberately trying to directly stimulate in themselves active emotional states or

feelings, by inappropriately applying emotion memory techniques, rather than investing in their reactions to the other actors and to the given circumstances.

The principle of Active Reaction is very simple. Every single onstage moment should be visibly and believably 'caused' by the previous moment. Every single Action is itself a Reaction, whether to a verbal or a non-verbal Action preceding it. The corollary of this is that every single onstage Action must 'cause' a visible and believable Reaction. And then each of these Reactions must visibly and believably 'cause' the next Action and so on. The result of this should be that the actors, moment by moment, are acting and reacting upon each other in a complex interacting dialogue of complicity. Thus every Action is Reactive, and every Reaction is Active.

A primary objective of *BodyDialogue* is to make it impossible for the actors to do anything *but* act and react upon the other actors, in the first instance of course at a physical level. However once a scene has been established as a preliminary sequence of physical actions and reactions, then the development of an integrated emotional and verbal dialogue also built on an unbroken chain of actions and reactions becomes very much easier to explore. What is especially significant is that the actors achieve this level of interconnecting complicity and understanding primarily through **physical** improvisation, a technique that as I have already noted provokes far more imaginatively inspired (and theatrical) choices than the more cerebral means of verbal or psychological analysis, although of course these may still have a necessary place in the rehearsal process.

The realisation of the principle of Active Reaction requires a re-organisation of acting impulses into an unbroken and inter-connecting chain of actions and reactions that can be established in the physicalisation exercises.

*Example 1 – Hand of Power:* The active partner drives the improvisation, and the reactive partner of necessity actively allows him or herself to be 'moulded' by the other. In effect Newton's Law has full application – to every Action there is an opposite and equal Reaction. The more the actors play with this exercise, the more accustomed they become to the experience of manipulating and being manipulated.

*Example 2 – BodyGesture* – in Phase 2 the active partner continues to psychologically drive home the active impulse even after the physical action has been completed – e.g. the active impulse to push the partner's shoulder is followed through mentally even after the push has been completed, until the pusher is 'changed' by the subsequent reaction of the partner. Similarly the reactive partner continues psychologically and physically 'yielding' to the push

until their corresponding reactive action kicks in. The purpose of this exercise is to school the actor into enjoying the sensation of always being either in Active Reaction or in Reactive Action, and never in some kind of neutral space in between.

**The Body  
Gesture  
Triangle**

This kind of training can be extended even further when the BodyGesture exercise is expanded to incorporate Three People. In this version there is always the Active Partner, the Reactive Partner, and a third person who has at any one moment the choice of reacting in one of two ways. They can align themselves with the Active Partner, supporting and reinforcing their action, or they can align themselves with the Reactive Partner, supporting them in their reaction. Invariably as the exercise progresses the Active and Reactive pair compete to enlist the support of the Third Person, until all three are integrated into a highly fluid and changing network of shifting relationships and alliances.

These exercises train the actor to be in Active Reaction at all times even when they are not part of the main action, as in the case of the third person in the above exercise.

**The  
Long  
Speech**

Their usefulness becomes particularly obvious when actors have long speeches. Using conventional rehearsal methods it is all too easy for the actor with the long speech to draw all their motivation from internal sources rather than from the reactions of their listener. A result is that their listener is forced out of their role as Active Reactor, into Passive Audience. At that point the interconnecting chain of actions and reactions becomes stretched or even broken.

This difficulty is easily addressed using the BodyDialogue exercises, such as the Tape Technique in any of its variations, to rebuild Active Reaction. The speaking actor discovers that he or she cannot simply stand still or move aimlessly about while his or her speech is being played back over the sound system. It feels wrong. He or she understands immediately the lack of interest and creative choice in this option. Instinctively he or she moves to incorporate the listening partners into some kind of creative action. Similarly the listening partners feel acutely the lack of interest in physical passivity – quite simply they are doing nothing while the other partner speaks, and this also feels wrong. So instinctively and reactively they move in response to the words they are listening to, and then also to the moves and actions of the speaking partner. In this way the performers find a way of interconnecting with each other at the physical level even when only one of them has all the words. Gradually the ‘monologue’ dissolves into a dialogue between verbal and non-verbal characters.

The word 'moves' here is being used in a very broad sense. A move or an action can be as large as crossing the performance space from one side to the other, or as small and as subtle as a sharp intake of breath, or a turn of the head. What is important is that these moves or gestures are both expressive and designed for the audience to register and interpret. This means that when we are talking about an unbroken sequence of actions and reactions, this is literally a linear sequence woven into the attention of the audience, and allowing them to follow clearly without missing any of the links. That does not mean that there can't also be contrapuntal moves and actions that add further layers and texture, though of course they do require considerable choreographic sophistication, in order to maintain control over the audience's focus.

**Yielding to the Stimulus** A final principle of *Active Reaction* is that of 'yielding to the stimulus'. The passive actor must yield to the active actor. If for example the active actor bears down on the passive actor, moving aggressively towards them, then the passive actor must give up ground – they must absorb and yield to the stimulus before they can counter-attack.

- **Move the Reaction**

The actor is asked to express every internal reaction with an external move. If for example the first actor taps the second on the shoulder, the second actor will move sharply away from the source of the tap, travelling several paces. If they hear something the first actor says, that causes an internal response, this is immediately expressed in a move towards or away. Our objective is to retrain the actor away from purely internal responses, or from facial or gestural responses, into responses that actually move them through the performance space. As the actor becomes accustomed to this principle, their responses become more and more impulsive – the body is able to react so quickly that it cheats the brain of the time it needs to intervene with more consciously crafted responses. These impulsive moves are more likely to then flow into original spontaneous actions.

- **Clutch & Grab Theatre**

All actions and reactions (within whichever exercise is being employed) are required to be on or through the body (or clothes) of the other actor. The actors develop a vocabulary of physical contact that can vary from an arm around a shoulder, a slap on the back, a grasping of the hand, a pulling of the shirt collar, a waltz around the room, a grabbing of a sleeve, a kissing of the hem of a skirt and so on. The emotional energy can of course



vary from the quiet and the intimate to the rough and the passionate across the whole spectrum from love through to violence.

- **Releasing the Full Response**

In a number of these exercises, a common moment of exploration emerges when a physical score arising from the text has been sufficiently established, such that the actors can then explore that score, with appropriate music, away from the verbal text. This is always a very fertile stage. The actors can now be encouraged to react 'all the way' to each moment, unfettered by the considerations of words and their interpretation. The result is a more dynamic storyline, more extreme, more passionate, and certainly more gripping in its expression. The actors, framed within the disciplinary form of a pre-established physical storyline, and supported by the creative stimulus of the music, feel secure enough to make extraordinarily bold choices, which coming out of wholly reactive impulses, often create completely 'inspired' moments. By this I mean that, in coming up, these moments are completely surprising and even startlingly unpredictable, and yet in hindsight are both 'obvious' and satisfyingly appropriate.

- **Choreographing the Listener**

Choreographing the Listener is a natural extension of the principle of Active Reaction. The easiest way to explain how it works is through an example. Suppose a messenger enters a scene and announces to an onstage character 'The King is dead'. If the onstage character sits down in response to this announcement, it will read very differently to the audience than if he or she stands up, even if the announcement is absolutely identical in both instances. If the character sits down, it will most likely convey a sense of shock or dismay. If the character stands up, it will most likely convey a call to action.

What this simple example demonstrates is that the way an audience constructs the meaning of a speech or action is highly influenced by how it is received by the other actors. Even before words are spoken, the physical reaction already speaks volumes, and will continue to influence how we read any words that follow. In effect the physical reaction of the listener will powerfully convey what is often called the sub-text. This sub-text is lived and communicated through the body, and forms its own dialogues with the other onstage bodies – hence of course the term *BodyDialogue*.

Choreographing the Listener is a specific *BodyDialogue* technique that involves throwing all our attention in rehearsal on to the active reactions of the listener, the passive actor, in a deliberate attempt to explore the various meanings of a speech or action, not by having

the speaker change the way they speak or act, but by changing the way the listener physically reacts.

- **Finding the Body Stories**

Once the actors have between them developed a basic physical score for the scene consisting of an unbroken chain of actions and reactions, they are now ready to move on to a further phase – discovering the Body Stories.

At a simple level the Body Story can be defined as the non-verbal narrative that is created by the physical interaction between the actors, and which can be understood (and enjoyed) by an audience irrespective of the words being spoken. This definition is inadequate though, without adding another qualifying dimension - the Body Story is also an *archetypal* physical narrative which is instantly recognisable (and therefore captures our immediate attention) and which, precisely because of its archetypal nature, is easy for the actors to improvise and play with. Some of the more common archetypal Body Stories revolve around scenarios like Flirtation and Courtship, Hunter and Hunted, Accusation and Retribution, Performer and Audience. These scenarios are the fundamental building blocks of human behaviour. Each non-verbal story involves immediately comprehensible physical, visual and behavioural codes that use changes in movement, proximity and touch to advance the narrative, and each of the stories casts the actors into clearly defined roles, relationships and situations.

What makes an archetypal Body Story different to a simple action or event is precisely this confluence of role, relationship and situation. If for example two actors are in a scene where they are preparing a meal together, the unbroken line of actions and reactions may effectively communicate this event, but will not constitute a Body Story. This is because the action of preparing a meal does not of itself constitute an archetypal story, where the actors are clearly cast into defined roles and relationships. However if in the process of creating this event we see the characters non-verbally courting each other, or perhaps one flirting and the other rejecting, then we are seeing the playing out of a Body Story, with the familiar archetypal elements of courtship and its associated roles and relationships.

Meyerhold calls this physical expressiveness 'plasticity' and explains it thus:

Two people are discussing the weather, art, apartments. A third – given, of course, that he is reasonably sensitive and observant – can tell exactly by listening to this conversation, which has no bearing on the relationship between the two, whether they are friends, enemies or lovers. He can tell this from the way they gesticulate, stand, move their eyes. This is because they move in a way

unrelated to their words, a way which reveals their relationship. (1907) (cited in Barba and Savarese 1991:154)

*Video Extract: mj eyelash* One example of a Body Story of this kind can be seen in the video where Miss Julie removes something from Jack's eye that he claims is troubling him. The action of submitting to someone removing a rogue eyelash is only an event, but in this version the female character deliberately uses this action as a pretext to play a moment charged with physical and sexual intimacy – she holds Jack's head still against her breast – torturing him with this forbidden sexual proximity, while maintaining her power and control not only over the physical moment, but also over its interpretation. Flagrant as her act is, in its playing out of Predator and Prey, he is not allowed to react to it as anything other than in its most innocent reading as Nurse and Patient.

*Video Extract: mj you dog* In the *you think I'm afraid* example the Body Stories revolve around the love/hate theme of jealousy and revenge. The physical actions show a character torn between the desire to love and be loved, and the need to punish the other for the humiliation she feels he has caused her. While one hand threatens Jack with the knife, the other holds him close in an action of passionate sensuality.

*Video Extract: Richard* In the *Richard III* movement improvisation between Richard and Anne, the two student actors can be seen using a *BodyDialogue* exercise to explore the dynamics of Hunter and Hunted, which can later be incorporated into the scene. In fact this very difficult scene, where Queen Anne is supposed to move from violent aversion to acquiescent love in a mere couple of pages of dialogue, only makes psychological sense when it is played against a Body Story of Hunter and Hunted building in tension and violence, until it collapses suddenly into a Body Story of Courtship between Victor and Victim.

Sometimes the Body Story is directly suggested by the text, but at other times it has to be 'found' by the actors, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes with the help of a side-coaching director-teacher. One of the most effective ways I have uncovered for finding and releasing the Body Story is through the Silent Movie with Music exercise. Once a basic physical score has been established that constructs the events of the scene into a series of action-reaction moments, the actors are free to improvise the scene against a musical score. The stimulus of the music and the absence of words create the right conditions for a spontaneous emergence of interesting Body Stories. We can further sensitise the actors to the spontaneous emergence of Body Stories in the Viewpoints Warm Up.

At other times the Body Story has to be virtually 'choreographed', particularly if it involves choreographing the listener. Complex Actions and Relationships can be conveyed entirely non-verbally through reactive sequences of 'looks and glances'. Meyerhold

reminds us of the power of running the Body Story contrapuntally against the Verbal Story, exploiting the interpretive imagination of the audience:

The essence of human relationships is determined by gestures, poses, glances and silences. Words alone cannot say everything. Hence there must be a pattern of movement on the stage to transform the spectator into a vigilant observer.(...) Words catch the ear, plasticity the eye. Thus the spectator's imagination is exposed to two stimuli: the oral and the visual. The difference between the old theatre and the new is that in the new theatre, speech and plasticity are each subordinated to their own separate rhythms and the two do not necessarily coincide. (cited in Barba and Savarese 1991:154)

## **Conclusion**

If there is a key word that crops up again and again in this study, it is the word 'reactive'. By now the reader should be fully aware of where the particular prejudices of this director-teacher lie. Unquestionably the acting aesthetic that I adhere to and promote is summed up in the old theatre truism – acting is reacting - and that the physicalisation techniques that I have collected and developed here, are those which build from physical stimuli, and the physical responses that they can provoke. I doubt any of the exercises are particularly 'new' but in framing them in the way I have, I hope I have been able to show how they can be used effectively by actors to develop a heightened physical life for their characters and for their story-telling.

In the following chapter I describe how they have been applied in rehearsal.

# Chapter five

## *integrating the BodyDialogue techniques into a rehearsal process*

### **Rehearsal Process**

Workshops and rehearsals for *miss julie downunder* were conducted over three weeks on a full-time basis, and in the fourth week there was a presentation of three showings of work-in-progress to an invited audience.

It is this workshopping and rehearsal process, leading to showings that I will now describe.

The purpose of this section is to show how the *BodyDialogue* exercises and approaches were used within an otherwise 'normal' rehearsal process, and how their use was then integrated into the performances.

## Stages

## Description

## Techniques

**Stage 1:** *Round table analytical discussion of the playscript, analysing character, theme, action, intentions, emotional storylines; linking the play to historical events on the Australian frontier.*

Postcolonial,  
psychological,  
emotional,  
dramaturgical  
Analysis

### **Deep Analysis**

#### **Week 1**

The pattern of each day was set by a physical warm-up and physical improvisation class given by Graeme Watson, before moving into specific work on the play for the remainder of the day. The purpose of the warm-ups was threefold – firstly to warm up muscles and joints and to establish a heightened physical concentration and kinaesthetic awareness – secondly to develop rhythm and coordination skills – and thirdly to generate gestural vocabulary using exercises like Body Gesture.

Most of the first week for the remainder of the day, was spent around a table, reading through analysing and annotating the script - three times in total. We, the various team members, needed to come to a common understanding of how the story in all its dimensions translated to an Australian setting viewed through a postcolonial lens.

We were helped very much in this adaptation process by Sandy Greenwood, the Indigenous actor, who generously brought to the process her family's stories and experiences, as well as by Victor Hart, head of Oodgeroo, QUT's Indigenous Unit, who contributed reference material, made reading recommendations and wrote some dialogue.

I had already developed a performance adaptation of the original adaptation, but in this first week much of the script was further simplified, cut, or re-worded. Our purpose in adopting such a radical approach to the text was to give the actors more opportunities to express the story through physical action, rather than through dialogue.

### ***Evaluation***

*This stage of rehearsal was not very different to what you might see in any rehearsal room in the first week. However in retrospect I would be inclined to analyse less, and move on to the floor more quickly. Much of the analysis was time-consuming to engage in,*

*and then in rehearsal quickly became superseded by discoveries made on the floor. On the other hand it was important to bring the whole group to a unified vision of what the play could say to a contemporary audience. In truth I am undecided as to how much verbal analysis is necessary before moving to practical exploration. I feel as if I have never found a satisfactory balance between the two, or indeed a satisfactory integration. Mnouchkine throws us the challenge to abandon intellectual analysis altogether: "For us, there is never, never any work, at a desk. We read the play once and the next day we are already on the stage." (Féral 1989:94)*

**Stage 2:** *Moving the text on the floor, developing a ground plan, exploring implied physical directions, finding the 'naturalism' (the way NOT to do the play)* **Actors improvise moves via negativa**

**Week 2** The second stage took us onto the studio floor. Once there, we quickly sketched out a physical score that satisfied the most obvious physical obligations suggested by the text. For example constructing entrances and exits, organising major actions and using props stipulated by the script and so on. We did not use any specific physicalisation techniques at that point. It seemed more efficient to construct a very simple overarching physical framework. This took about a day and a half.

The actors then improvised a performance of the entire play on the second day. From one point of view, it was a discouraging moment. It looked exactly the same in its physical life as every other play one sees 90% of the time in the theatre. It was what one would call a 'naturalistic' score – natural everyday behaviour and everyday reactions used to flesh out the playwright's words. From another point of view it clearly defined our point of departure. The need for a specific physicalisation exploration was there for all to see – it was time to leave the familiar track and see where our physicalisation approaches might lead us.

**Stage 3:** *Start opening up the physical score, tapping into actors' intuitive responses to the text and the circumstances. These are FIRST responses and are regarded as the beginning of a process to generate a vocabulary of physical expressiveness. Independent exercises further open up gestural languages.* **Tape Technique**

**Exploring the physical score**

**Week 2**

Still in Week 2 we move into the third phase with the objective of developing a physical score much richer in expressive possibilities than the 'naturalistic' score we had just sketched out. We started by working through the play, using the Tape Technique to help us quickly develop a detailed and expressive physical score. However I would have to say that, while it told the story effectively, it was not yet rich with contemporary resonance, and the actors were not yet engaged in the life of their characters at the kind of depth that makes an audience really sit up and take notice.

Gesture  
Exercises

In the warm-ups we were using the Body Gesture exercise to give the actors the opportunity to develop a gestural vocabulary of touch and intimacy that could be erotic one moment and violent the next. Some of the rhythms of this vocabulary started to feed into moments of the physical score.

### **Evaluation**

*It was encouraging to see how quickly we could move the play on to the floor, both in the 'sketch-out' phase and then applying the physicalisation techniques. One advantage of the preliminary analysis in the first week was that it gave the actors a sense of knowing in which direction to move their exploration.*

**Stage 4:** *As the Physical Score starts to develop and take shape the actors now deepen their intuitive responses to the text by improvising in and through the Physical Score. The aim is to directly stimulate the invention of powerful images, behaviour and actions through a connection with Heightened Acting States expressed through Body Dialogue.*

Hand of Power,  
Silent Movie  
w/wo Music

### **Week 3**

We were by then moving into our third week of work, and we started to use the Silent Movie exercises (particularly with Music) to help us clarify the unbroken line of physical actions, and to improvise within and through this line to find both the Body Stories and the Emotional Stories inherent in the text.

Using this technique the actors quickly generated a freedom of action, which at times could be extraordinarily bold, electrifying and highly theatrical. At the same time, by constantly returning to our scene's non-verbal storyline, the movement improvisation



remains disciplined and focused on the task of clearly telling the characters' stories.

Our experience here seems very similar to that described by Ellen Lauren in her account of working with Anne Bogart and the Viewpoints technique:

**Evaluation**

In the best of rehearsals, the body's priority over the text allows a truer emotional response to surface. One is simply too busy to "act". When the body informs the psychology, the language is startlingly alive. The actor is available to a much greater range of musicality, and breathing becomes stronger, quicker. (Dixon and Smith 1995:64)

*This was a very exciting period when new staging ideas, and new ways of interpreting moments, actions, or scenes just seemed to pour out effortlessly from the actors. The physicalisation improvisation techniques, particularly when applied with music, generate truly inspired playing by the actors.*

**Reintroducing the Text**

**Stage 5:** *The Physical Score is kept dominant, but the text is gradually introduced, a few words at a time, and certainly not 'projected'. The goal is to hold on to the integrity of the physical rhythms, and not to let the innate musicality of the words displace the body's own music.*

Tape Technique with music, Words 'dropped in' with Music

**Week 3**

We now have the foundation for a physical and emotional score, and in the process we have established for the actors new benchmarks in concentration and imaginative engagement. The next stage is to 'wean' them off the music and back on to the text, and for this we use a variety of exercises to ensure that when the text returns it does not suppress or subordinate the physical expressiveness of the actors, but instead seeks to engage with it.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Naively we had supposed that the words could be spoken directly over or into this fascinating chain of physical actions. This turned out not to be the case.

The tempo-rhythms of the body are so different to those of speech that they do not instantly marry into each other, a point not dissimilar to the one made by Meyerhold in 1907:

The difference between the old theatre and the new is that in the new theatre, speech and plasticity are each subordinated to their own separate rhythms **and the two do not necessarily coincide.**'(My emphasis) (Barba and Savarese 1991:154)

In an attempt to integrate them, the actors tried whispering the text as they performed the actions to the music. Then they were asked to speak the text quietly without using the music, or with the music playing quietly in the background. While each of these exercises produced some progress it became increasingly clear that no improvisation technique could quickly solve the problem. Words and actions refused easy integration, or the words so imposed their own rhythms that the communication of the body became lost.

Again it was interesting to discover that Ellen Lauren expresses a similar finding in her Viewpoints work:

### **Evaluation**

It's only after the choreography is refined and able to be concisely repeated that the text is laid in. **The concentration needed to coordinate the juxtaposition of the lines with the movement occupies the actor.** (My emphasis) Depending on the quality of this concentration, the text begins to take on meanings one can't plan. You don't start rehearsals going for an emotion you've decided the play wants you to get at. (Dixon and Smith 1995:68)

*Lauren's comment on meanings and emotions is extraordinarily apt. So much of our careful psychological, moment-by-moment analysis that we painstakingly underwent in the first week went straight out of the window. The dynamics of the interaction between the words and the Body Stories being discovered by the actors created quite unexpected moments and ideas that could not have been predicted by analysing the text, although in retrospect they were entirely in keeping with the play's themes. Applying the BodyDialogue techniques opens up a dimension of theatricality and emotional and psychological truth that has its own life, and plays by its own rules. Theatrical 'forms' generate their own meanings, which can only be discovered and expressed within the form. This is one of the 'mysteries' of art. Meaning does not exist separately from form. Form actually creates meaning.*

*BodyDialogue is in essence an improvisation system that allows us to generate and explore different physical forms and to experiment with and exploit the meanings they release.*

**Stage 6:** *The play is now taken an ‘impulse’ at a time, each impulse choreographed into an unbroken chain of actions and reactions, some verbal, some non-verbal, weaving together ‘discovered’ imagery, and deliberately created imagery.*

**Choreographing Organic Action** Impulse choreography

#### **Week 3 & 4**

The problem of how to integrate the verbal and physical scores led us to interpose a further stage of physical development that took us from the end of week 3, into week 4, the week of the public showing. We had to return to each separate moment, literally to each impulse, and moment by moment design or choreograph the coordination of the physical and the verbal elements for the person speaking, and to a lesser extent (only because we lacked sufficient time) to choreograph the coordination of the physical response of the listener to each verbal utterance. In other words we had to solve the integration problem not at the scenic level through improvisation, but at the impulse level through an explicit problem-solving process.

I use the word choreograph to indicate that each moment was ‘designed’ or ‘composed’, but I do not mean to imply that each moment was invented from nothing, because of course we were using the rich physical text we had already created as our source of physical vocabulary. Nor do I mean to imply that the choreography was rigid, or prescriptive in the way that most Australian actors absolutely hate. Our goal was to construct a flexible sequence of actions, each one corresponding to one moment, which was capable of channelling the physical and emotional creativity of the actors, and maintaining both Verbal and Physical Dialoguing. The purpose of setting the sequence at least provisionally was to free the actors not to inhibit them.

Returning again to Ellen Lauren – she comments on the importance of ‘composition’ – which is to say the scrupulous setting of a physical score that intriguingly complements the text, rather than merely illustrating it:

A close observation of life (as Stanislavsky himself wrote)

shows our physical life is more often that not contrapuntal to our verbal life. To recreate this realism takes objectivity and meticulous craftsmanship. **Many actors.... fail to see the composition as a much greater potential playing field.** (My emphases) (Dixon and Smith 1995:68)

**Stage 7:** *In this section I analyse the actors' physicalisation as captured by the camera at one of the three showings. The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate the expressive power of the actors' movement, to suggest how it contributes to the storytelling and its dramatic meanings, and to indicate how the movement choices were generated by the rehearsal process. Each extract can be found on the 'Extracts CD' and can be viewed on a computer using Windows Media Player, QuickTime or Real Player. Without wishing to sound apologetic, I should remind the reader that this is a work-in-progress 'showing' video-recorded with a hand-held camera.*

**The Showings**

**Week 4**

### **CD 1 - Extract 1: "...how you going to work here?"**

*Video Extract:  
mj how you going  
to work*

*Christine has just discovered Jack's liaison with Miss Julie. She accuses him of betraying not her, but their people.*

The scene has been developed using a basic movement vocabulary of towards, away, circling and holding ground (T.A.C.H.).

*Towards & Away*

Christine's attacks, her stinging reproofs, are reinforced by slapping and prodding. He is thrown off balance by the unexpected direction of them, coming as they do from the cultural and political sphere rather than the personal. She moves away in order to come back in, to repeat the attack. According to Sandy Greenwood, the actor playing Christine, the slap with the back of the hand is a specifically indigenous gesture of reproof.

*Moving the  
Reaction – to  
spontaneously  
become another  
action*

When her attack turns to mocking he is goaded into physical counter-attack, striking her across the face. She is knocked to the ground. The 'shame' she has made him feel with her accusations, coupled with the additional shame of having hit her causes him to instantly displace his feelings and energies into moving away back to the washstand where he almost compulsively washes his face –

an image of a fruitless washing off of guilt that resonates with similar dramatic imagery, from Pilate to Lady Macbeth. *Towards & Away*

Christine has her blood up though, and over-riding the pain and the disorientation she is experiencing, she instantly returns to the attack, her ferocity and conviction doubled by the moral high ground Jack has inadvertently given her. Physically though the energy of her towards-away attacking starts to be drained by her growing sense of frustration and hopelessness. *Holding Ground*

There is a brief moment of stability when she utters to Jack words that sum up a lifetime of humiliation and displacement: “There’s a difference between them and us.” Then, like a shot animal, her body progressively collapses into grief and despair, forcing her to support herself on the table, while still moving away. *Move the Reaction – Falling Towards*

Reacting to this sudden mood change, Jack ‘performs’ the contrite sinner, fetching her bible and moving towards her in an attitude of sympathy and mollification. In the playing out of the emotional script it is a premature move however, worsened because he cannot give himself over fully to this emotional objective – because at any moment Miss Julie will return, and his first priority is to get Christine out of the way. *Clutch & Grab*

Christine instinctively senses the insincerity of his ‘move’ and furiously pushes him away. Then suddenly at that point they hear the dogs barking. Their quarrel is momentarily forgotten in the face of the bigger fear – the return of the Master. The defeated and exhausted Christine, giving up on her partner, exits wearily, leaving Jack stunned by this unexpected emotional complication, but also momentarily free to deal with his ‘other woman’. *Video Extract: mj you dog*

## **Extract 2: “I’d like to see your blood...”**

*Jack won’t let Miss Julie take her pet bird with her on their flight to Sydney, but she is reluctant to leave it behind.*

This is a section made famous by Miss Julie’s climactic speech and its almost universal status as an audition piece.

There are two 'scenic problems' here that director and cast must solve. The first of these is the bird. Will there be a real bird, a fake bird, or an imaginary bird? And how will it be 'killed'? The second is, how will this well-known 'long speech' be made fresh and theatrically interesting?

In keeping with our physicalisation goals we decided to evoke the presence of the bird purely by Miss Julie's physical behaviour and the relationship it could be made to suggest. The actual cage is starkly and obviously empty and at no point is there any attempt to 'mime' the bird. The meaning of the bird's death is conveyed in the contrast between a European sentimentality towards a household 'pet' and an Indigenous farm-worker's casual attitude to living food. Jack's actions are carelessly fast, practiced and deliberately provocative. The moment of 'execution' is theatrically demonstrated by a handful of feathers grabbed from an adjacent bowl and thrown into the air as the knife strikes the chopping block. He immediately walks away as if all that he had done was to step on an insect.

*Contrasting  
energies*

By contrast her movements are slowed to a crawl by delayed shock and an almost panic-stricken regret. He has no pity though and amused, he goads her, from a casual seating place on the table corner, with accusations of weakness. She is both furious and humiliated, a volatile combination – then the dogs bark again and the by now inevitable return of the Master ratchets up the pressure, further illustrated by Jack's nervous sprint to first one window and then the other. Instantly capitalising on his distraction, Miss Julie seizes the 'executioner's' knife and whips it around his throat, while she pulls him back by the head with her other hand. Matched to this violent action, the verbal imagery spills open its meanings.

*Towards  
Imaginary Object*

*Clutch & Grab  
Theatre*

"I tell you, I'd like to see your blood and your brains on that chopping block. I'd love to see your whole sex swimming in a sea of blood," she says, forcing him onto his knees. But her hand strokes through his hair, her lips caress his ear, and her whole body pulls him against her. This startling juxtaposition of violence and intimacy, the expression of a contradictory yearning for both

love and revenge underpins the playing out of this speech – the Body Story gives to the actor (and the spectator) a multiplicity of readings for the speech moving it away from the trap of playing it as one-dimensional hysteria.

Jack meanwhile is passive, almost paralysed by the suddenness of the reversal of power. This can also be read in different ways, but as soon as he pulls free he counter-attacks exploiting the advantage of her failure to act as ruthlessly as they both know she is entitled. The entry of Christine gives Miss Julie an almost welcome pretext to change tack.

Initially sketched out using Tape Technique to establish the T.A.C.H. outlines, the physical score of this scene was then explored non-verbally to music – it was in this phase that the Body Story of the yearning for both love and revenge first emerged. This was then developed in a third compositional phase that choreographed the words into the fabric of the physical story.

## **Conclusion**

In hindsight perhaps we were too timid in applying the techniques and in extracting the full benefit of them in creating the final performance score. This hindsight though comes not only from completing this project, but also from subsequent testing and developing of the techniques in classes with acting students. What this seems to indicate is the importance of investing considerable time in the 'composition' phase in order to extract the full benefit of the flow of ideas and images generated in the earlier exploratory phases of the work. In this project the challenge of this work came as a surprise to us – a delightful challenge, but one that needed more time to fully meet than we were able to give to it.

The application of the techniques fitted comfortably into a short rehearsal period that really followed the traditional three phase structure: Phase 1 – Analysis, Phase 2 – Exploration and Improvisation, Phase 3 – Blocking.

The techniques, once we moved out of the Analysis phase allowed us to work very quickly, and to achieve in a short space of time a tremendous amount of exploration and improvisation. Once we were on the floor there was little sense of struggle, or of hard work. The actors seemed to slide easily into a highly creative flow state that gave to even

the most serious and passionate confrontations a playfulness that prevented them being psychologically draining to perform.

Perhaps we could have spent less time in Analysis. It would certainly be my goal in future projects to shorten the time taken in this phase to a minimum. In describing and analysing this process I am coming to a view that we do not need to psychologically justify the behaviour of characters in a story – something that takes up much of our attention in the analysis phase. The actor cannot perform the psychology of a character. They cannot perform a character's psychological motivation. It is a useless quest. The character's behaviour is theatrically justified by finding its cause within the play itself. The meanings this will provoke for the audience may be psychological, but not necessarily. This theatrical justification can only be found in the playing, on the rehearsal room floor.



# Chapter six

## *audience reactions*

### ***An overall evaluation of the performance – audience responses***

I made the point in Chapter One that I had consciously decided to frame the exploration of physicalisation techniques within a ‘real’ rehearsal process, one that was focused on creating a piece of live theatre, rather than on developing a one dimensional performance merely to demonstrate the efficacy of the techniques. This of course split our focus in rehearsals, for besides developing our physicalisation approaches, we were developing a new adaptation, attempting to connect it with current Indigenous issues, and then self-consciously siting the visual setting in a contemporary aesthetic incorporating multi-media. This kind of split though is absolutely normal for any theatre production, and to have focused purely on physicalisation would have lent a certain artificiality to rehearsals that would have worked against the project’s aim.

Audience reactions were predictably mixed, which is probably normal for a work in progress. They were predominantly positive, but in their range varied, as one might expect, from the extremely enthusiastic to the distinctly cool. Our ‘reception study’ was very simple, involving post-show discussions, and a voluntary written response to two questions. The ‘data’ generated helped highlight some important issues relating to the play and its production as a whole, (which is all we were after) but gave us no quantifiable indicators of how ‘successful’ we were, either in the production generally, or in the physicalisation specifically. However even if such a study were methodologically possible, its usefulness to the artist (as distinct from a commercial backer) is doubtful.

### **Unpacking what they were seeing and reacting to:**

I had some difficulty in trying to understand how the audience responded, and what they were specifically responding to. This is because we were showing them a number of performative elements, interwoven together, and often interacting upon each other, making it difficult to align a given response with a given cause, or causes. These interacting performative elements can be characterised as:

1. **The adaptation** – This could be reacted to in a number of ways. For those who did not know the original Strindberg *Miss Julie*, the play was entirely

new. For those who did know the original it was possible either to put aside one's previous knowledge and surrender to a new experience of a familiar story, or to watch analytically, comparing and making meaning of the similarities and differences between the two modes of telling the story. For experienced theatre-makers this could go one step further with an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the adaptation, and what contribution it might be making to contemporary debate.

2. **The 'style'** – Regardless of how one might be receiving the story, one might also be aware of the manner or style in which the actors were telling that story. The individual performances were of course highly physicalised, but there were other aspects of style to react to. The actors were on stage the entire time, in character, within a circular playing space, that incorporated projected imagery. From the moment when we first see them we are aware of them both as an ensemble, and as three characters with a story that must be told.

The audience comes with expectations that arise from being 'invited' to a showing of work in progress. They expect to see something that engages with their personal perceptions of the problems of contemporary theatre and how they might be solved. These perceptions will of course vary widely from spectator to spectator. It was interesting that some came to the showing expecting a much more exotic physical style, one grounded in an invented vocabulary of movement and body shape. Others wanted a more confronting retelling of the story. On the other hand there were many who found the piece stylistically exciting and felt that the modernisation caused them to think profoundly about the issues the adaptation raises.

Some sections of the play were more 'stylistically' developed than others. Examining the video again, the sections exploiting the *BodyDialogue* techniques more adventurously (such as the two analysed in the previous chapter) work more successfully than those that didn't. This confirms for me at least, the value of the techniques, and the importance of exploiting them more aggressively in future work.

3. **Visual Projections** - Suspended behind the actors was a large sheet of what looks to be corrugated iron, typical of the roofing (and sometimes the walls) of any outback construction. Projected onto this sheet were images relating to the story and its geographical and historical contexts. The corrugations slightly break up and blur the imagery, which helps integrate it into the overall

visual aesthetic. These projections added an interesting visual tension. On the one hand they added a dimension of technological newness, locating the story self-consciously into a contemporary aesthetic. On the other hand the content of the images which was drawn from visual art of the period anchored the story into an unfamiliar past.

The presence of projections in a 'traditional' naturalistic play can create a variety of reactions in an audience. If the visual aesthetic is resisted by the audience then they will mentally separate the projections from the story, and regard the pictures as an unnecessary add-on. If the visual aesthetic is accepted then it 'bends' the entire reception of the story, adding a level of self-consciousness to the story-telling. We are no longer being asked to 'suspend disbelief', but rather to heighten our interpretive attention to the events, characters, pictures and symbols that are communicated and held together by the story.

Most audience members enthusiastically embraced this visual dimension, feeling that it added a richness to their overall experience. A few said they found it distracting.

What can be said is that a *BodyDialogue* approach (in my opinion at least) is eminently compatible with a design aesthetic incorporating multi-media:

1. The emphasis on action and physical behaviour makes for a heightened visual performance style that seems to be more compatible with projected visual imagery than a more verbal theatre – the strong visual performance dynamics hold the primary focus of the audience.
2. The creative process of *BodyDialogue* produces physical behaviour that is often so explicit in its own right that it can either take the place of some verbal dialogue, or can 'bridge' transitions from one scene or section to another. These non-verbal sequences provide ideal opportunities for complementary projections.
3. The 'non-naturalistic' approach to acting, that *BodyDialogue* can foster, lends itself to a form of 'rich' story-telling, capable of incorporating any number of narrative elements, including visual images.

4. **The language** – This visual tension finds its parallel in a textual tension. The story's events, and the moral dilemmas they create, locate us in the past. But the modernity of the language – its short sentences, and its heavily laden sub-text – locates us firmly in the present. It seemed to me that most of the audience had no problem with this anachronistic approach. A few though were very vocal in their resistance to it. One or two spectators questioned the veracity of Jack, as an Indigenous person being able to speak both good English and a smattering of French. They could not bring themselves to believe that even a fictional Indigenous person could have this skill.

One possible solution to this issue would be to use *BodyDialogue* techniques to develop two distinct physical vocabularies for Jack – one Indigenous, and one 'whitefella' – in order to reinforce his fluency in moving between the two cultures.

5. **The ambiguity of the ending** - In the original story the resolution is achieved by Jack/Jean giving Julie a knife with which to go outside to kill herself. In our production he gives her a gun. However when she goes 'out', although she starts to aim the gun at her own head, there is a point where her impulse clearly changes and she redirects the gun's aim so that it is now pointing at Jack. When the gunshot sounds however, it is Christine, who at this moment is running around the outside circle faster and more desperately as if trying to escape, who collapses to the ground. This is immediately followed by a sequence of projected images showing, amongst other images, Indigenous men in chains, being led away. The narrative line thus splinters at this point, and the audience is left to make sense of the multiple images and to construct their own reading of them.

Video  
Extract:  
*mj climax*

The ending was very much our response to an Indigenous version of nineteenth century history, which was one of armed resistance and race wars. We hoped to suggest that the racism inherent in the story, erupts at the end out of the personal and into the political. About half our audiences seemed to construct an interpretation of the ending along these lines. The other half were divided about what they thought it meant, with a few clearly frustrated by the ambiguity and lack of absolute resolution.

Personally I am happy with this ending, both in terms of the multiple meanings it can generate, and in its use of physical action to complete the story's narrative lines.

6. **The Indigenous argument** – Two of the play’s characters in this adaptation are Indigenous. It is a central foundation of the adaptation, and this point is of course not lost on any audience members who know anything of the play’s original. The mere fact of redirecting the story’s central action right across the racial divide demands a response from the audience. And respond they did. But it was this aspect of response that was most difficult to understand or to generalise. Some of our audience responded more strongly (in a positive sense) than I had imagined to the production’s themes. They felt shocked by the racism depicted – not only the racism of the white culture as represented by Julie’s words and actions, but also by its reflection in the black culture. They saw and responded empathically to the fear of the white ‘master’ experienced by the black characters, and to the cultural self-disgust expressed by Jack, and to the pathetic attempt by Christine to protect herself by piously adopting the religion of the conquerors. As the play’s finish drove outwardly from the particularity of one story to the general experience of a whole race, communicated through the multi-layered ending and the audio-visual sequence that followed, they instantaneously grasped the connection between a single murder and racial genocide. After each of the showings individuals came up to me and said “I had no idea that these sorts of things happened”.

At the other end of the spectrum was the criticism. This criticism came in a number of forms. Several audience members questioned the Indigenous content of the play, either arguing that aspects of Jack’s character were non-realistic (particularly that he is articulate and can use literary language), or suggesting that a relationship between a white woman and a black man, even though mixed-race, would never have happened. One person felt that such events could not have taken place at the date we had roughly suggested. Another expressed the view “I’ve seen it all before”, as if the story lost its relevance once its novelty value was exhausted.

I suspect that some of the audience doubted the authority of the story’s new meanings. Had the adaptation been created by an Indigenous director they would have felt much more secure in accepting its thesis. (Although that didn’t stop Phil Noyce directing *Rabbit Proof Fence* released just before our rehearsals commenced.) But without that credentialing authorship they felt insecure in their response and so attacked its credibility. Perhaps they were unwilling to invest in the pain of confronting their history, in case that investment turned out to be misdirected. By and large I think these were defensive reactions. I say this because they mirror my own journey into the

truth of the past, and my own evasions, fearing irrationally that I would have to accept responsibility without having the power of redress, or the willingness to pay its price.

Similar to the suggestion of a previous section, the use of *BodyDialogue* techniques to create stronger Indigenous physical vocabularies would bring greater authority to the characterisations, and this would go some way to meet the objections from some audience members.

### **Unpacking the demographics of the responses:**

Broadly speaking, the younger the audience then the more positive responses there were to the showings. They tended to like all six performative dimensions, responding strongly to the physical style of the actors, the Indigenous themes, the interweaving projected imagery, and to the ambiguity of the end. They also enjoyed the adaptation and the tension between its period piece status and its contemporaneity. This response was shared by some of the older audience members who could also be very enthusiastic, but it was individuals in this age group that expressed a more critical response to the adaptation.

Some viewed the central moral dilemma experienced by the character Julie, as being either melodramatic or uninteresting, or simply not useful in terms of the contemporary Indigenous debates.

Others were confused by the ending and frustrated by its lack of a single resolving event. Others felt that the content of the visual projections at the climax was too didactic. Some were also expecting a more visually unusual style, perhaps something more akin to the visual style of DV8. They wanted more of the non-verbal and more physically expressive moments, and less reliance on dialogue driving the story.

### **What can we say about the method of presenting work in progress to audiences?**

It is highly problematic. A select group of people is invited, and it is impossible for them to come without their own agendas. They are not a group of 'general public' hoping for a good time and willing to make some investment in that. They are by necessity coming with a highly critical attitude. That is not to say that they are hostile.

Many of them will have some idea of what the project is trying to achieve and so will arrive with certain expectations based on what they have heard. Some have sympathy

with the aims and are hoping to see a particular style, or be engaged in a particular experience. These sometimes highly formed expectations will naturally colour how they receive the showing.

It is a work in progress of course, but it is difficult for an audience to appreciate what the work might become – they can only evaluate what they observe. They do not have the benefit of having seen in rehearsal the many wonderful performance choices that cannot yet be integrated into the showing, but with more rehearsal will appear in the final product. The wine is very rough and raw, and only an experienced expert can guess how it might mature in the bottle.

Many comments may be accurate expressions of an unease with an aspect of the showing, but the diagnosis of the problem that the audience member offers may be misplaced. For example there is the case of a person who feels the climax of the story is melodramatic. Their dissatisfaction could arise from a number of causes. Yes, perhaps the story itself is unbelievable. Or it could be that the adaptation fails to maintain its modernity. Or it could be that the actor's performance choices or their emotional responses became generalised.

### **What can be learned for the project from their reactions:**

The old truism that you cannot please everyone certainly applies. Given such a multiplicity of responses and comments, the director and the actors in the end must filter these against their own responses, and their instinctive and explicit judgements. They must trust their own judgement.

In retrospect the audience reactions confirm that a number of developments now need to happen:

1. The script – needs further editing where traces of the archaic sentence patterns still remain. The symbolic dimension of the story (particularly its post-colonial resonances) need further clarification, and need to be brought more sharply into focus.
2. The striking physical imagery and behaviour generated by the application of the BodyDialogue techniques need to be more courageously incorporated into the performance score.
3. The multimedia aspects, both visual and sound, need further thought and experimentation.
4. An Indigenous actor, grounded in his own culture, needs to perform the role of Jack, to lend it greater authority.

## Conclusion

The reactions of the audience certainly sharpened my own reflections on the physicalisation process. The *BodyDialogue* techniques were extraordinarily successful in generating strong physicalisation choices quickly and appropriately. These contributed to the advanced stage of the performance given its short rehearsal period, and the time taken to achieve many of the objectives not related to this central research question.

However as I have said before I think we were too timid in our exploitation of those choices. This timidity came from locating ourselves unconsciously in a text-based poetic, rather than aggressively using the physical creativity we were unleashing to address the needs of a new poetics that derives its meaning from the startling juxtaposition of physical and verbal communications. Actually I am probably too hard on myself. We had a foot in both camps. However at the end of the day I was slowed and tempered by a feeling that every moment had to be psychologically and thematically coherent at a discursive level. Sometimes one must make bolder choices, and risk that the audience will find their own way through, much as they did with the ambiguity of the ending.



# Chapter seven

## *epilogue*

The question we began this study with was – can the ‘mainstream’ theatre, the text-based theatre, find ways to radically enhance the physical expressiveness of its actors, and can this objective be achieved by the integration of physicalisation techniques into current rehearsal processes? In other words can physicalisation be regarded as an *acting* problem first and foremost, rather than a *movement* problem?

I have suggested that the answer is yes, and that if we ground ourselves conceptually in an approach to theatre inspired by Stanislavsky’s Method of Physical Actions, and in particular his notion of the ‘physical score’ as *an unbroken line of organic actions* with the ‘active reactivity’ this implies, then we can use a range of physicalisation techniques within a rehearsal process to enhance the actor’s performance. This ‘bundling’ of techniques and conceptual approaches I have quite deliberately called *BodyDialogue* in order to emphasise the formation of the physical score as thoroughly interactive, both at the level of the creative impulses producing it, and at the level of the physical, indeed bodily, performance that the audience sees and interprets.

In describing and evaluating the application of those techniques to the rehearsal process of *miss julie downunder* , I hope I have been able to show that *BodyDialogue* not only provides a coherent, communicable, creative and systematic method for directly and quickly stimulating physical expressiveness, but that it also can create an accessible ‘portal’ into a ‘renewed’ poetics of performance, which restores the body and the physical score to the live theatre, and from there potentially to more mediated performance forms.

This poetics has a rich tradition that can be traced back to Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, is evident in the work of Brecht and Grotowski and continues in contemporary companies as diverse as those of Eugenio Barba, Ariane Mnouchkine and Anne Bogart, to name but a few. At the centre of this poetics is a recognition that the body speaks as powerfully as the voice, and that its rhythms and forms should not be subordinated to, or silenced by the voice and its texts. While some physical training systems seek mastery of these physical forms, this is not an objective of *BodyDialogue*. The purpose of the *BodyDialogue* approach is to awaken the physical imagination of the performer, and to activate his/her physical creativity. In this sense it is open-ended and multi-functional. The combination of exercises, approaches and conceptual framework creates a kind of operating software that allows text-based acting methods and physical training systems

to 'talk' to each other via the imagination of the performer. *BodyDialogue* can be used to enrich conventional mainstream theatre, or it can be used to generate and explore more innovative theatrical forms. At one end it can be used to teach 'movement skills' to conventional conservatory based student actors, at the other end it can be used to generate exciting compositional ideas for the creation of innovative performance. What each of these ends have in common is a set of performative values – that bodies 'talk' to each other in richly meaningful dialogues, that the observable responses of the 'listening bodies' influence the spectator's understanding as much as the 'talking bodies', and that the bodies themselves have their own stories and their own narrative forms that need to be released and integrated into the performance event.

An inescapable conclusion I come to in reflecting upon the *missjulie downunder* project is that this integration of physical and verbal forms remains a difficult and ongoing challenge, and demands of directors and performers a way of working that both uses and yet differs from the conventional methods used to take text based theatre into performance. For example, the demand for logical and psychological coherence, expressed in psychologically explicit characterisation may not be a necessary objective in the new poetics. The collective outputs of the Hollywoods of the world may have exhausted the 'realistic' forms that called for this coherence. As performance makers we have to teach ourselves to be bolder in our experimentation with other forms, and to be less reluctant to let go of a theatre that sees its role to 'demonstrate' an explicable vision of human psychology, to 'explain' human behaviour. That does not mean that the question 'what causes human behaviour?' will cease to interest us, but it may well be overshadowed by other questions, such as 'what are the expressive limits of human behaviour?' The first question leads us to a highly verbalised and psychologised acting, the second leads us into a more holistic direction, a poetics of acting that seeks to exploit the full potential of the relationship between the verbal and the physical, with all the emotional and symbolic expressiveness it evokes. *BodyDialogue* contributes a starting point, and only a starting point in chiselling open this potential.

I finish this study acutely aware of how little of the field I have covered, and how much more work there is to do, both at the theoretical and the practical levels. At the theoretical level I am aware of the ever increasing body of scholarship useful to this enterprise, including for example Wolford's study of Grotowski, the work of Philip Auslander and many others. At the practical level while the workshop production of *miss julie downunder* is a significant step forward, it is in no sense a definitive demonstration of *BodyDialogue* in action. Such a production has yet to take place, but in the mean time the *BodyDialogue* techniques have advanced considerably both conceptually and practically, making such a demonstration now distinctly more achievable.

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