

Training:
Observations and Analysis

In silence, the actors observe. In silence, the actors imitate. In silence, the actors use their senses. In silence, the actors learn to trust themselves using their eyes, ears and spatial awareness. In silence, the actors train their physical and spiritual body — and their mind.

This workshop aimed at unifying the body and mind and at training actors in the fundamental building blocks of the body. I participated in the workshop as an observer/scribe, making detailed notes on the type of training methods used, how they were delivered and how they were received and implemented. I am intrigued with the corporeal movements of the human body in performance. It started from training as a *Bharatanatyam* dancer. Through my undergraduate and graduate studies, I have continued to explore these ideas. My Master's thesis looks at the corporeal embodiment of circularity through space and time in India's and China's performance genre.

The training in Dr. Mroz's workshop concentrated on creating a basic individual corporeal and vocal technique as well as techniques with a partner. The week-long workshop (five seven-hour days) was only a fraction of what this type of training normally involves. The workshop was divided into different sections that focused on developing specific building blocks essential for actor training. The key concepts that were being instilled throughout the workshop were body memory, embodiment and creating and manipulating performer energy from the centre of the body. By body memory, I mean the use of the senses to train the body/mind. One of the main forms of discipline was repetition through which coordination, endurance, mobility and control were engrained.

The workshop was divided into sections working on exercises that not only built each day, but were intended to refine elements necessary for equipping the actor. Each day started out in a silent, energy-filled space. Performers would gently warm up on their own and in a group circle facing everyone. A sequence of Chinese martial arts was then taught and repeated over and over again in short and long segments. Form and mobility were stressed. Partner work followed with concentration on responding and reacting. After partner work, individual and group compositions took the better part of the afternoon.

An emphasis was placed on working in silence. This is one way actors can learn to train their mind and senses as well as their body. Space is intrinsic to effective actor training. It is not just the given space of the rehearsal hall, but the atmosphere that surrounds and fills. Keeping the spatial energy high and not diluting it with pointless conversation or unnecessary loud noises create a sacred space in which the actor's concentration and focus can thrive. Talking and playing too much between the exercises dissipate the energy in the space, making it porous. This liminal space provides the perfect environment to experiment.

I have grouped together the major focuses of the workshop into categories: the training of the individual body, collective bodies, compositions, vocal work, and geometry.

Individual Body

A count of four brings you into the 'horse riding' position. The feet are spread wide apart, half-sitting, centre of gravity low to the ground, feet solid and one with the floor, torso square, solid and not moving as the feet move. The body should maintain a balanced level. Neither the head nor the shoulders should bounce up or down. The face should be relaxed, eyes open and large, mouth closed. Breathing should take place through the nose. The legs should do all the work. The body is grounded and centered. You may begin.

The position described above is one of the basic stances in Chinese martial arts. This is the first position the actors worked with in the workshop. It allowed the actors to open up and become aware of their surroundings, without being vulnerable or unprepared. This position helps find and refine the body's natural centre as well as grounding the body to the floor. This centre works as an anchor. The goal for centering the actor at this basic stage is to give him/her a sense of balance and a place to return to after an action. The feet are rooted to the floor, as though sinking into sand. This is a common trait among Asian performance and martial art styles, where one thinks of the feet as an extension of the floor. The centre of the body is found about three inches below the navel and roughly two inches deep. This is not only where the centre of gravity is, but where this breath or energy emanates.

The goal of this exercise was to develop a basic structure that allowed control of movement, coordination, balance and strength. Having a set corporeal foundation allows the individual to execute any sequence in situation and keeps the energy in your body dynamic and flowing. It gives and maintains "presence." By having a solid physical structure, "energy" can easily flow in. This energy is like an electrical circuit. If there is a short in the circuit, then the

flow will be uneven, weak or even non-existent. If the performer has blocks due in part to poor form, the flow of energy will be interrupted and the performer becomes less dynamic on stage.

The centre is something that needs to be found through doing and sensing. In the workshop, no formal descriptions were given to the participants. They followed by watching and repeating. As I watched the actors moving, I could see some grasp this concept right away. Others were reproducing the form and the movements, yet could clearly not internalize the concept of the centre. It can take years to fully discover the centre and to master it.

Straight back, relax the knees, don't lock the joints of the body, head still, shoulders down, all the weight should be in the centre of the body and the lower limbs, keep balance while doing the movements. Pull in the foot, swing the leg around, lift the leg, kick and return to the base position. Remember your centre, your feet position, your hand position, your torso position and the sequence of movements. Movements should be precise, clean, smooth and clear.

The initial martial art training introduced actors to three phases of movement that are experienced in daily life: extension, stop, contraction. Through these phases, participants learned to develop and control energy as an extension of the centre. The repetition of simple movements and sequences emphasized a patterned learning and discipline and allowed the actors to build mobility and control.

Concentration was the biggest factor in the actor's abilities to carry out the exercises. The easier the exercise became, the more intense the focus. I noticed that the actors initially had trouble keeping the basic position. They also had trouble working from the centre. The further they moved from the centre of their body, the weaker their movements became. As participants repeated actions and movements, the easier the sequence became. They discovered that by rooting their feet to the ground and keeping their centre of gravity low, resistance was created that enabled them to bring more force and vitality to movement. Imagining that each joint in the body was attached by elastic bands helped the participants gain a sense of the degree of control they had. For many the discoveries came slowly and some never fully grasped the sensation. In others, once they had it, they had it. In very few, the form was so unnatural for them that they struggled to maintain it throughout the exercise.

The martial art training sought to emphasize the body's natural phases of movement. Although the body starts in a symmetrical position, it can be pulled, pushed and molded into

asymmetric shapes. This teaches participants to control the energy through the increase, decrease or release of tensions in the body

Collective bodies

Using the centre of the body to move, the actors do not touch each other, yet are attached by imaginary cords. One moves backwards, the other moves forward. One partner lunges forward, the other moves around him and moves in from behind. The movement becomes fluid, like a snake, moving in harmony, yet not together, always keeping a sense of energy and dynamism. The pair is learning to be responsive and aware.

Once structure and mobility were established, it was equally important to learn how to react and respond to a partner. Participants were asked to always be aware of their surrounding space as they would have to be on stage. Actors need to learn how to correspond physically and mentally. In order to be prepared on stage, the actor needs to understand his/her corporeal structure and others' structures and how they function apart and together. The exercises in this section focused on creating and keeping dynamics in the space between and around, and how to place themselves in relation to another person. Furthermore, participants learned to respond corporeally to each other while maintaining their base structure and how to reduce decision-making time.

One actor keeps his/her knees flexible, head straight and still, torso strong and open. The other actor learns to understand how the body works by touching points on the body that can bend. They continue to mold and manipulate the puppet/actor until he/she can no longer stand up. The process is repeated. The marionette exercise uses the articulation of the joints to find the weak spots on an individual to make them fall.

Without forgetting the basic corporeal structure, partners learned how to think and react with the senses and the body as opposed to just the brain. This no-thinking philosophy should create a sense of continuity, an endless flowing from one to another. Every participant used their mental senses as opposed to their physical senses at the beginning. When reaction time slowed down, the energy in the space and between partners decreased, making the body less dynamic. As they worked toward their goal (through repetition), they easily manipulated and pushed the boundaries, turning the exercise into a dynamic conversation between bodies.

Returning to the basic structure of the individual technique, the actors discovered that, by keeping the body centered and grounded helped reaction time and filled the negative space. The

actors learned how to use and engage with the space around them. It was difficult for some actors to achieve; however, by the end of the workshop they were all aware of their space (both cognitively and internally).

The goal of the partner exercises was to help participants gain knowledge not only of their own body, but of how the bodies reacted together. By the last day, almost everyone was engaging with the other in a dynamic way. When asked to do the same marionette exercise, later in the week, with eyes shut, participants showed a marked difference in the way they responded to the other person. Adding a new challenge to the familiar exercise worked well to focus the actor. They learned to implement their structure as a way of functioning without losing control of their own body and yet remaining flexible and malleable.

Vocals

The body is relaxed, the knees are bent slightly and the feet are apart. The centre of gravity is low and the upper torso is strong. The shoulders are relaxed, the head is straight and still. The face and mouth are relaxed. The actor walks across the room slowly, sinking into the floor with every step. She recites her text, emitting loud unblocked sound. Her voice resonates against the wall she is walking toward. Her next line responds to that echo, that reverberation and she corrects her projection, clarifying her voice further.

While most of the workshop concentrated on creating and using the basic corporeal form in performance, it also had a section on voice. The performer uses the voice as an instrument on stage and so it too needs to be trained. Participants first learned how to unblock the voice just as they did the body. They stood with their feet apart and their knees slight bent and a low centre of gravity. The energy that circulated through the body producing physical dynamism is the same energy need for the voice. Starting with clear strong voices, participants learned how to modulate the voice with the vocal cords without blocking the voice. After scales to warm up, the participants worked with the vowels, blocking and unblocking the voice to hear and feel the difference.

Individually, the actors took a piece of text and learned how to project using the echo in the room and resonating their voices. The exercise taught them to throw their voice to the other side without raising or lowering it, but rather by modulation. Another exercise had them elongate the vowels, letting each sound fully detach. The individual voice work was effective for all the actors.

Besides individual work, Dr. Mroz introduced group vocals through polyphonic rhythms and an ancient Greek song. This was difficult and frustrating for both the teacher and the participants. The actors did not trust that they would remember the words, causing blocks. Hitting the notes was very tough. Most of the actors had little previous vocal training. Learning how to use the voice is very tricky and needs individual attention. It proved to be very difficult to teach to a large group and very difficult to grasp. I do not think there was enough time to properly focus on vocal training.

Composition

Through the centre of the body, the actors sculpt themselves. The body imitates ancient Greek dance postures. The torso is square. The actor's limbs (legs and arms) are molded into different positions while maintaining a balance. The actor's incorporate transitions. They add resistance to their movement. They experiment with the speed and trajectory of their movements. They move steadily and within the space.

In the workshop, the purpose of the composition was to implement the basic structures of the individual and group corporeal exercises into something creative. But most importantly, the participants had to remember to make the body alive by controlling the energy. Their goal was to keep each action alive and dynamic by using the posture of least resistance and by conserving the energy within the movement of the body. When the transition movements were added to the tableau, I noticed that participants lost the tension between each gesture and dropped their energy and dynamism. The clarity and precision of their actions were muddled because focus was now divided. Asking actors to reduce their gestures to a very minimum but keep their energy at maximum resulted in ruptures of energy. The drop in energy was due partly to a relaxing of the structural base during transitions and partly to too much cognitive thinking. The more the actors used their brains, the more their bodies slowed down.

Creating a score allowed participants to learn to decompose, dilate (open) and construct actions on actions. By first working with static poses, the actors discovered how to pattern through the body as opposed to through emotion. By being constantly conscious of what the body was doing and being aware of the centre, the actor can learn how to mark their pre-movements — a moment before movement, the moment when the participants are ready for anything. It is a response to something and is always there. Even after repetition, participants still did not understand how to begin or end each of their static gestures.

Two actors stand in the same space. They repeat their scores side by side. The actors become aware of the shared space. The score is different. The audience reacts differently. The actors become aware; aware of their movement and aware of the other. The actors create a logic with which to communicate.

Performing the scores in pairs opened up the possibilities for interaction. This exercise, above all else, was to create spatial awareness in the room and to learn how to respond to it. The first few times the duos performed, there was a lack of sensitivity to the space. The actors were not feeling the other's energy or presence. There was no charge. The participants were encouraged to try using numerous tactics with their bodies in order to engage and fully charge the energy. The results of the partners working together revealed fascinating dynamics. As each individual opened up the space and became aware of the other, a dialogue instantaneously appeared. Eye contact, or lack of, was intrinsic to the acceptance of this new-found space. The actors became alive and dynamic when they shared their energy with the other. Through repetition, they discovered how to find the things that worked and manipulated them. Once again, the basic structure of the body was emphasized by repetition.

Geometry

Nine tiny masking tape marks dot the black rehearsal space. They are evenly spaced out. The actors start by playing follow the leader. Starting in the left-hand corner, they walk diagonally across the room to the second tape mark. From there they walk to the next mark. They follow this zigzag pattern across the space, only stepping on each mark once before exiting. Then they repeat it again by themselves, no help from the leader. They begin the pattern again, only this time from the right hand corner. This pattern is repeated in different permutations on the same grid until the actors can do it in their sleep.

Space is an infinite intersection of lines and angles. The introduction of this particular floor grid was important to help actors learn how to embody specific behaviours. This exercise helped instill pattern recognition, rhythm and body memory. The participants all followed the pattern on the floor and continued to repeat until it became a memory of the body. They used differing techniques such as pointing to where they would go next and clapping. Changing the starting point or the size of the grid to kept it novel without changing the repetitive nature of the exercise. This trained the actors' bodies to remember to the point that it became automatic, without cognitive thought. Although the grid and pattern on the grid was exactly the same, every

time a new element was added, the participants' focus broke. I noticed that it was not about who was better at math or geometry when it came to understanding the concept of the grid, but about who was willing to trust themselves and fully engage their mind and body. Many of the performers were not used to letting their physical "self" move and remember.

The actors performed their scores while following the pattern of the grid, allowing other actors' rhythms to affect their own. This exercise is really great for creating spatial awareness. There is sensitivity to the spatial relationship and tension in the room, and it creates different dynamics when one becomes aware.

Concentration was the main problem when time and space were manipulated. The grid continued to be a block for a few participants who struggled with it initially. Adding the new functions within the grid was difficult as concentration was divided. They were not able to trust that their body knew what to do and where to go.

At one point in the U-shaped grid where each actor took a small square, they were in unison and were completely feeding off the energy of the others. They did not need to look at another person to know which way to go or how to move; they did it automatically. It was almost like watching trained soldiers. Not one person made a mistake or hesitated. They were sharing the space and the time and the energy within.

The purpose of using the grid in the workshop was to explore the movements of the choreography. It is another way of coding the body. By repeating simple patterns like this, the ability of the actor to learn new patterns and sequences of actions becomes greater.

Amalgamation of all elements

All the actors repeated their scores. Some were instructed to repeat their individual score, some to repeat their score in the duos. One of the actors followed the pattern of the grid doing her gestures at each point of contact, half the actors also sing some of the ancient Greek song, two of the actors repeat the text, one speaks softly to herself while doing her score, one speaks loudly to others also while doing her score. Some actors are directed to move slowly, some to move quickly, some to use large spaces and some to use small spaces. They utilized all the actor tools that were given.

After a long week of learning and discovering, all parts were put into one final composition. Interweaving all elements together dramatically changed the dynamics: there was more intensity, concentration and focus. At one point, the participants no longer knew where they were going or what they were doing and energy dropped completely. The movement

became slow and tedious. Yet however much the actors struggled during the final presentation, the main components taught in the workshop were visible.

The workshop gave participants new skills. Through the individual and group corporeal technique, the actors began to build the fundamental blocks. They exhibited the basic structural form. They discovered their centre of gravity and their ability to manipulate the energy. They were all aware of themselves and others in space. And they all opened their senses and engaged their body/mind.

Although the exercises in the workshop stressed numerous elements and phases that the actor needs to incorporate, repetition was the consistent form of discipline. Repetition becomes a way to codify gestures or sequences, creating a code specific to a particular score or production. The more codified a score becomes, the more freedom there is to play with it. Once boundaries are set, possibilities within are endless.