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## The Dimension of Corporality in the Theatre Laboratory

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to put into discussion the dimension of corporality in the theatre laboratory where the actor's work represents a way of existence and reveals a *practical philosophy*. We note that the actor is both researcher and research material, that his body is considered an instrument of knowledge and self-knowledge. We also observe that the objective of the actor's training does not consist of acquiring certain skills, but of freeing himself from his own complexes and blockages in order to discover and materialize his potentialities. Thus, theatrical exercises are considered spiritual exercises and aim to eliminate the actor's inner barriers which prevent him from opening his own creative path. As in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the theatre reformers treated the actor's technique as the essence of theatre, the laboratory studies are focused on the transformations occurred in the actor's body capable of revealing *profound images*. The directors who undertook laboratory research were also concerned with the origins of theatre, myth and ritual, archetypes, and symbols, studying the mind of the primitive man, and, in this respect, the actor's unconscious – his dreams, fantasies and visions – is also object of study. Moreover, through his work in the laboratory the actor pursues to regain his *integrity* as human being.

**Keywords:** corporality, actor, laboratory, unconscious, dream, action, exercise

The theatre laboratory can be considered a space-time for investigating the deep nature of the actor's inner life. Going through a process of *unlearning*, of *forgetting* the techniques he many times put into his stage practice, the actor undertakes an act of *self-scrutinizing* meant to reveal the hidden core of his being. The purpose of experiments is not to reach new aesthetic forms. What is of real interest is for the actor to go beyond his physical, psychical and mental limits, to actually transcend his existential limits, in order to (re)discover his deep self. In this regard, the body and vocal exercises are, in fact, *spiritual exercises* and the actions he performs represents an act of knowledge. Moreover, the laboratory studies lead to questions about the changes which occur in the actor's body during the process within which he becomes a "body free of automatisms" (Schino 2009, 30). The *daily behaviour* is eventually replaced by an *extra-daily behaviour*. In a similar vein, we may say that we witness "a revolution of the human being" (Schino 2009, 30) generated by the laboratory research treated as "a way of passing from the external scene to the inner scene" (Schino 2009,

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30). In order to pass from outer to inner scenes, from *daily* to *extra-daily*, the actor voluntarily abandons the techniques he previously used in building his character, often making use of imitation as a means for transposing the life of the character into his *body-mind* or using different procedures to put into coexistence his personal life with the fictional life or to put into conflict his self with the character's self. In this context, we deal with a transfer of identity from actor to character and vice versa, with thoughts, feelings and sensations induced by the character into the actor's life, with the techniques of identification and alienation. However, in the laboratory, the mutations which usually occur in the psychic-mental structure of the actor, as a consequence of identifying/distancing with/from different characters, are no longer object of study. In fact, what the actor seeks to discover is that that already exists in himself, aiming to throw light on his past experiences, in order to realise the possibilities of his future experiences: "For, in the last resort, we are conditioned not only by the past, but by the future, which is sketched out in us long beforehand and gradually evolves out of us. This is especially the case with a creative person who does not at first see the wealth of possibilities within him, although they are all lying there ready" (Jung 1981, 110). Discovery, self-discovery can take place solely in a propitious environment.

So, laboratory research pursues to generate changes in the actor's body-mind by expanding his horizon in order to gain self-knowledge and self-awareness. Some changes in the body are connected to the mental and physical power with which he does the action in relation to its expression. The actor's body is studied, "its mechanisms, both visible and invisible" in order "to change it from the core. The core being the skeleton and the soul of the actor" (Schino 2009, 66). In the investigation of the *relationship between body and soul* (Stanislavsky) we notice that the distinction between soul and ego is operated: "How are souls different from egos? I have previously described the ego as the governing part of our personality. Ego development – the maturation of this governor – is very much related to the development of our consciousness. When people speak of someone's 'ego', what is usually referred to is someone's self-image, self-perception, and will. [...] One of the biggest differences between the soul and the ego is that the ego is closer to the surface of who we are or believe ourselves to be, whereas the soul goes deeper, to the core of our being – so deep that we may not be aware of it" (Peck 1997, 267-268). The actor, in a constant confrontation with his ego, raises questions whose possible answers are meant to contribute to overcoming his human condition. It is a confrontation with his own complexes, frustrations, blockages: "For each individual actor it must be clearly established what it is that blocks his intimate associations, thus causing his lack of decision, the chaos of his expression and his lack of discipline; what prevents him from experiencing

the feeling of his own freedom, that his organism is completely free and powerful, and that nothing is beyond his capabilities” (Grotowski 2002, 129). In fact, we deal with a rigorous work whose objective is “to make the human body *different*, enabling it to speak its language, which is the essence of the theatre” (Schino 2009, 66). As many theatre reformers consider the actor’s technique to be the essence of theatre, the laboratory studies focus on the actor’s body as “a *body in movement*, considered and accepted as a *language*. A language that could not be translated but that was perhaps best able to express profound images” (Schino 2009, 73). These *profound images* which come to surface are a result of the incursions and searches into the actor’s unconscious. The actor thinks the actions with his own body, manifests himself in actions which encapsulate countless body expressions. The actions are the working instruments on the actor’s body. And, at the same time, it is limpid that we deal with a living chain of actions generated by the actor’s *body in movement*.

The research also involves studies on the actor’s dreams and fantasies. The analysis of dreams, in which “The most heterogeneous things are brought together regardless of the actual conditions, and a world of impossibilities takes the place of reality” (Jung 1976, 45), puts the premises for articulating an *oneiric logic*; in this regard, the dimension of corporality is marked by the manifestations of the actor’s unconscious. From this perspective, we could say that in the theatre laboratory we can see “a place of intense experience, half dream, half ritual” (Biner 1972, 27), in which the actor “approaches something of a vision of self-understanding, going past the conscious to the unconscious, to an understanding of the nature of all things. And it seems to us that only the language of poetry can accomplish this; only poetry or a language laden with symbols and far removed from our daily speech can take us beyond the ignorant present toward these realms” (Biner 1972, 27). Exploring the unconscious, the dreams which “are neither mere reproductions of memories nor abstractions from experience. They are the undisguised manifestations of unconscious creative activity” (Jung 1981, 100), determines an expansion of consciousness. The fragile balance between the conscious and the unconscious concurs to the generation in the immediate reality of organic actions which are not altered by the discursiveness of the mind or excessive rationalization. Dreams, daydreams, visions are the material we “have to work in the analysis of the unconscious” as “unconscious consists not only of dreams. There are products of the unconscious which are known as fantasies. These fantasies are either a sort of day-dreaming, or else they are rather like visions and inspirations” (Jung 1981, 105). We point out here that, for example, the plastique exercises are a possible means for entering the *individual dreams*.

The *via negativa*, Jerzy Grotowski’s approach in the creative process, opens, for the actor, the possibility to reach a *total act*: “It is the act of laying

oneself bare, of tearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself. Not in order to 'show oneself off' for that would be exhibitionism. It is a serious and solemn act of revelation. The actor must be prepared to be absolutely sincere. It is like a step towards the summit of the actor's organism in which consciousness and instinct are united" (Grotowski 2002, 210). By the nature of his work, the actor accesses states of consciousness and is the absolute controller of his instincts. In this respect, we witness a process of self-analysis, a continuous introspection meant to lead to the rediscovery of his deep self. Meeting in several essential points of contact with the Artaudian prophetic vision, Grotowski's practical research provides the instruments necessary for studying the language of the actor's body. At the same time, it is pursued for the actor to accomplish an act of transgression and transillumination. The studies can be undertaken only through a total engagement of the actor in the process of self-discovery and self-becoming. *Spontaneity* and *discipline*, the two fundamental aspects which define his work, are embedded in organic actions. The body language is no longer a mirror of reality, but part of reality, and the symbiotic relationships established between the actors who share the same working space reflect a *corp-oral* communication. Through his actions, the actor pursues to harmonize his body and voice, his sensations and reason, to reach a *body of essence*. His inner life – thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories – manifests itself through his *body in action*.

During training, the actor reinvents himself through dances, songs, rhythms, physical and vocal exercises, which *aim to release the living impulses from the human being* (Grotowski). The impulses must really start from the inside of the actor in order to be alive. In other words, the organic impulses arise from the interior of the body, *which has no memory, for our body is memory*. At the same time, the actor explores shapes, colours, smells, sensations, sounds, images, revealing his own inner theatre, that of a body which speaks a *different* language. After all, "All laboratories form actors that have not only physical abilities but also a 'different' mentality. A difference that has been given a variety of new names: ethics, spirituality, a love for art. But which is the necessary consequence of a body that is not only gymnastic and well-trained but also accustomed to reacting and speaking in its own disturbing language, ever changing, mysterious and unexpectedly profound" (Schino 2009, 206).

During the rehearsals for a performance, the actor's body seems like a bridge which connects his personal life with the life of the character, the fictional world of the performance with the spectators. In the laboratory, we can see an authentic search for the depths of the actor's self that reminds us what Eugène Ionesco called the *new psychology*, namely the immersions in the interiority of the individual and the emergence to the surface of archetypal images, of actions which are no longer subject to social and cultural

conditioning. This process, which is simultaneously one of *remembering* and *self-becoming*, reveals the existence of the actor on multiple levels of reality. The actor's work tends to regain his integrity, while the *organic storms* which occur inside him cause mutations in his consciousness. Thus, we can observe that, in fact, the transformations of the actor's body are the result of certain meta-corporeal experiences. Involved and detached at the same time, during explorations, the actor has perfect control over his actions, and sometimes his "movement becomes dance, the words uttered by the voice become poetry" (Schino 2009, 107). At times, ancient texts are experienced, at other times, the physical, vocal, and mental exercises, the plastique exercises have in view an identification of the actor's body with elements of nature, air, water, fire, earth. The potentialities of the exercises are "the actor's craftsman-like work on himself or herself, and at the same time an *operatio spiritualis*" (Barba 1999, 58). During the training, the actor continuously reinvents himself.

At the same time the laboratory work aims to reveal a *reality of memory*. In this respect, the actor seems to project himself to the edge of a world of visions and fantasies in which time seems to have stopped. The initiation of the actor in the process of self-becoming implies not only a transgression of the critical moments he experiences in his laboratory work, but also a renunciation. Undeniably, in this context, the actor gives up parts of himself: "When giving up parts of ourselves entails giving up personality traits, well-established and learned patterns of behaviour, ideologies, and even whole lifestyles, the pain can be excruciating. Yet these major forms of giving up are required if one is to travel very far on the journey of life toward ever-increasing maturity and spiritual growth. As with any giving up, the biggest fear is that one will be left totally empty. This is the existential fear of nothingness, of being nothing. But while any change from one way to another represents a death of the old way, it also makes room for the birth of a new one. I cannot emphasize how important these stages of dying are to the process of unlearning and new learning" (Peck 1997, 121). This process requires the awakening of senses, the capacity of perceiving the world in a different way with the eyes of a child, as "archaic thinking is a peculiarity of children and primitives" (Jung 1976, 48). The incursions into the *reality of memory* prove to be, eventually, practical ways not only of regaining a unity of being but also of rediscovering, inside him, the state of the child: "we are simply going back to the state of the child. But not in the meaning of playing that we are children, and not in the sense that we become childish. When I talk about return to the state of the child, I have in the background of my mind some indefinable memory: plunging into the world full of colours, sounds, the dazzling world, unknown, amazing, the world in which we are carried by curiosity, by enchantment, experience of the mysterious, of the secret. We are drifting then in the stream of reality,

but our movement, even if full of energy, is in point of fact a repose. We forgot about this state through the years of taming our body and with it our mind. It is necessary to refind this hypothetical child” (Grotowski 2001, 260). The actions aiming to access a reality of memory require maximum concentration. It is the concentration an actor is capable of when working in a space that he perceives as being his true home. Only in such an atmosphere of trust and sincerity, it is possible for a living process of self-becoming to take place. During this process, many a time, it seems that the actor is between two worlds, the world of dreams/ day-dreams, that is the world of his visions, and the concrete world of the laboratory. He is fully immersed in the depths of his being and, at the same time, perfectly controlling himself, his mind, and his body. The unity, the harmony, the wholeness of his being are continually pursued during the experiments made on himself.

The unconscious, which “consists, among other things, of remnants of the undifferentiated archaic psyche, including its animal stages” (Jung 1976, 166), also represents an object of study. In a brief retrospective, we note that the theatre directors who undertook laboratory research were highly interested in the origins of theatre, myth and ritual, paying attention to archetypes and symbols, to the mind of the primitive man, studying the human body as the keeper of ancestral memories, revealing through their research “how much the products of the unconscious have in common with mythology” (Jung 1976, 51), taking into consideration that “investigation of the products of the unconscious yields recognizable traces of archetypal structures which coincide with the myth-motifs, among them certain types which deserve the name of dominants. These are archetypes like the anima, animus, wise old man, witch, shadow, earth-mother, etc., and the organizing dominants, the self, the circle, and the quaternity, i.e., the four functions or aspects of the self or of consciousness. It is evident that knowledge of these types makes myth interpretation considerably easier and at the same time puts it where it belongs, that is, on a psychic basis” (Jung 1976, 418). Thus, the actor, through his body, carrier of a multitude of potentialities, explores the alphabet of symbols and archetypes. From this perspective, in the Grotowskian vision, “One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation [...]. Starting from details you can discover in you somebody other – your grandfather, your mother. A photo, a memory of wrinkles, the distant echo of a color of the voice enable to reconstruct a corporality. First, the corporality of somebody known, and then more and more distant, the corporality of the unknown one, the ancestor. [...] You can arrive very far back, as if your memory awakes. That is a phenomenon of reminiscence, as if you recall *Performer* of the primal ritual. Each time I discover something, I have the feeling it is what I recall. Discoveries are

behind us and we must journey back to reach them. With the breakthrough [...] can one touch something which is no longer linked to beginnings but – if I dare say – *to the beginning?* I believe so” (Grotowski 2001, 378-379). So, in a sense, the actual individual is not devoid of archaic substance. The inheritance of the ancestors is inscribed in his genetic code. These investigations require an isolated and protective environment. Discoveries can be made only in a climate in which discipline, self-discipline and sincerity are the basis of any experiment. Only in this context the actor becomes capable of creating actions which no longer *address the spectator's perception, but his own perception* (Grotowski).

In conclusion, we note that the dimension of corporality has been thoroughly investigated in the theatre laboratory. Through his training, the actor rediscovers the spontaneity and natural discipline of his own body. In fact, we witness a tremendous work on the actor's self and body which is treated as a keeper of genetic memory. Thus, the actor's body reveals to be a source of knowledge and an instrument for transcending his mental, physical, and psychical limits.

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