

University of Theatre and Film Arts, Doctoral School

**THE BODY OF THE ACTOR –
PHYSICAL METHODS OF ACTOR TRAINING**

Theses of the doctoral dissertation

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Purpose of the thesis

Through the years I have spent working as a movement and dance teacher for acting students, I have become gradually aware of the need for a bridge to connect actor studies with movement classes. This led me to start experimenting with movement improvisation and stylized movement within a dramatic context.

It was a lucky coincidence that during this very same period I had the opportunity to study the Suzuki Method of Actor Training for a short time. I met a method of actor training in which movement, or in a broader sense, the body of the actor, worked as a catalyst and tool for learning acting and a field for experiencing acting emotions. The encounter proved to be determinative: all the principles and mechanisms which were but slowly taking shape in my classes, were present in the Suzuki Method as part of a clear, transparent, logical system, due to several decades worth of experimentation.

I started, therefore, to search for approaches which were consonant with both my experiments and what I knew about the Suzuki Method. I found a wide range of similar methods, which eventually drew me to the idea of carrying out a more extensive and comprehensive doctoral research in the field.

The purpose of this dissertation is threefold: first of all, my aim is to introduce *the physical methods of actor training*, a segment of the methodology of actor training which, even though among its practitioners we can find such influential personalities of 20th century theatre as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Michael Chekhov and Anne Bogart, may well be considered unknown in Hungary. I believe these methods could become an important addition to the canon of actor training currently in use.

The physical methods of actor training, which, in Barba's terms, deal with the *pre-performative* level of acting, are tools for forming and learning what we call *presence of the actor*. Consequently, my thesis asserts that this element of acting, commonly regarded as one of the indefinable expressions of talent, no less than skills such as movement, voice, speech, or dramaturgical sense, as a matter of fact can be methodically developed and *taught*.

My doctoral research, which concerned both the theory of acting, its psychological – or, to use a current and more universal term, cognitive scientific – background, and a personal immersion in the praxis of some of these methods, had an inevitable impact on my experiments and on my way of thinking, both in a theatrical and pedagogical sense. Thus, apart from a general

introduction of the physical methods of actor training, the purpose of my dissertation is to follow a thrilling open process full of discoveries and questions yet to be answered, the result of which is my own, evolving approach, the *Method of Motivated Improvisation*.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of an *Introduction*, an *Epilogue*, and two major units, the first of which is titled *Theory* while the second is *Practice*.

The title of the first subchapter of the *Introduction* is *Can acting be taught?*, a question paramount to this dissertation, which takes us to one of the most exciting, yet most obscure phenomenon related to acting, the presence of the actor. Whether presence can be taught or not is still one of the most debated topics of acting theory. Here I introduce the concept of *physical methods of actor training*: a term used for pedagogical methods that regard the body and movement of the actor as a space of experience.

In this subject, I outline briefly the structure of the dissertation, and point out the three methods to be discussed: the *Suzuki Method of Actor Training*, Stephen Wangh's *Acrobatics of the Heart*, based on the work of Jerzy Grotowski, and my own developing training, the *Method of Motivated Movement Improvisation*.

The second subchapter is *Body and Mind or Body-mind*. Its focus are the roots and differences of Cartesian dichotomy, a philosophical trend that interprets body and mind as two mutually independent entities, and the holistic view which proclaims the unity of these two.

The third and last subchapter is titled *Dichotomic Actor Training and the Physical Methods*. This subchapter places holistic philosophy as discussed in the previous section into the context of academic actor training and puts forward the introduction of physical methods, as a possible way to achieve this goal.

Introduction is followed up by *Theory*. The first chapter of this unit is *The Thinking Body*. It contains a description of a series of current theories and terms coming from cognitive science (i.e. psychology, neurobiology, philosophy) such as *the recessive body*, *embodiment*, *the mirror neuron system*, etc., in order to make more accessible for the reader not only the emotional and psychological functioning of the actor, but also the intertwining relationship that exists between the body and the mind, which in my opinion confirms the validity of the physical methods.

The second chapter of this unit is *The “Readable” Body of the Actor*. Even though the body in this dissertation is not a goal in itself but rather a catalyzer for learning, I considered it important to gain a deeper perspective of the biological background. Hence, a description of the functional anatomy of two of the body parts most involved in movement, the spine and legs, is discussed in detail in this chapter. Next, I take a short detour to address the responsibility of the pedagogue working with bodies and movement.

To make it possible for movement of the actor to serve as a reliable starting point for the work with physical methods, I attempt to standardize aesthetic perception of movement into a universal model independent of any sort of cultural background, but based upon physiological movement (i.e. based on the anatomical structure of the human body).

The second unit of the dissertation, titled *Practice*, consists of three chapters, each describing in detail one of the three methods mentioned above: the *Suzuki Method of Actor Training*, *Acrobatics of the Heart*, and the *Method of Motivated Movement Improvisation*. Description of both meeting points and technical differences is the basis of a comparative analysis of these three methods.

The thesis ends with an *Epilogue*. The first chapter, *Education or training?* poses a question that arises inevitably when discussing the physical methods of actor training. In Hungarian, the word *training* (“tréning”) does not bear the two different meanings that it does in English, as Hungarian uses a different expression for transmission of knowledge and expertise, while *training* in the case of the umbrella term we use for these methods refers to both meanings of the word. In particular, the *Suzuki Method of Actor Training* and *Acrobatics of the Heart* go beyond academic studies as the exercises these two methods are compiled of aim to provide actors a routine for life-long, regular work on the professional self, according to principles articulated by Stanislavski, among others. In the case of my own method, this is precisely what I see as a long-term goal for further experimentation and development. In this chapter, I point out the importance of practicing on a regular basis, a most natural part of the life of performing arts professionals like musicians and dancers; I also examine the possibilities of inclusion of such practices to the rehearsal process in professional theatre.

The second chapter of the *Epilogue*, namely *University, as a Workshop for Methodological Experiments* expresses the requirement of practical experimentation regarding technique, expression of acting and actor training methodology to be part of official academic activities.

It argues that art universities are, in all respects, the most suitable institutions for such practical research.

Finally, in the third and last chapter of the *Epilogue*, the *Summary*, I review the structure, results and conclusions of the thesis.

Results of the research

As it may be deducible or inferred from the structure described above, the two distinct or diverse directions of my research led me to closely interrelated results. Theoretical and scientific research shed new light on the inner processes that determine the creative work of the actor, role of the body in the emergence of emotions, relationship between actors and between actor and audience, and last but not least the wonderful, elusive phenomenon of presence of the actor. The novelty of my research relies on the fact that it does not examine the mechanisms of the effect of the actor *on the audience*, but it rather investigates what happens *within the actor*, something of utmost importance for the pedagogue working in the field of actor training.

My practical research, on the other hand, endeavors to find an effective way to transpose these theoretical statements and assumptions into a practical process – in other words, to create a bridge between the laboratory and the rehearsal room. The three methods described in this thesis follow different paths in terms of technique, but their aims and results are remarkably similar. I do believe that this dissertation offers up enough proof to the fact that physical methods of actor training deserve a place within the curriculum of academic actor training, independently of the cultural background of the methods or the predominant style and aesthetic norms of current theatre trends.

Furthermore, the result of the research is *the method itself* as presented in the last chapter of *Practice*, for, as I have already pointed out, theoretical research and practical encounter with the methods continuously transformed and shaped my own, movement-based approach. This process has not yet come to an end, as my practical experimentations will certainly go on, enriched as they are by the experiences of my doctoral studies, well after I have finished this dissertation.

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