

Perform “the space”, not “in the space”: Incorporating place, environment and imagination in integrative practices

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Abstract

Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney at Charles Sturt University are developing integrative practices and experimentation in the undergraduate acting program. They draw on a wide range of practical and theoretical experiences including Lecoq, Butoh, Suzuki Actor Training Method and Laban Movement Analysis. In this article they discuss how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space – body and voice – with place and architecture. The interactive approach to actor training is designed to extend imaginations through identification beyond the constricts of the human body. Actors explore shape, colour, animals, elements, substances, poetry and the great themes of existence. This is related to the local environment. Their actor-training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere. Technology and performance practice change constantly. Places too are temporal with changes in landscape over time. Where we are here and now in this moment is the constant. That is what we are compelled to share. This awareness is developed through careful and detailed observation of place. Original actor training gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place.

Keywords

Acting; Voice; Movement; Land; Place; Environment; Space

Introduction

Since the latter part of the 20th Century, original Australian actor training methods have surfaced in institutions and independent theatre companies. However, the traditional forms such as the Stanislavski Method, amongst many others, maintain a stronghold. The shackles of American and European staples still have a grip on the industry. Even private institutions are capturing aspiring young actors' interests by importing teachers from the US or Europe, declaring their methods as being superior and highly regarded, sometimes overlooking the original methods developed in

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Australia. Of course, there is no such thing as a method being completely original, as every method has influences that have been tried and tested for centuries.

The catalytic points of new media and technology in performance and ever-increasing intercultural influences of new theatrical works have caused a shift in actor training methods and aesthetics. Currently, there is an unbalance between Australian actor-training research is located in the place and space which has instilled history and infused atmosphere. Technology and narratives reflecting societal change alter constantly based on the era. Places are also temporal with changes in landscape over time. Our bodies are the only constant.

As a result, we are in the process of developing integrative practices and experimentation in the undergraduate acting program of Charles Sturt University's Bachelor of Creative Industries (Acting and Performance) program. We currently draw on a wide range of practical and theoretical experiences including Lecoq, Butoh, Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (a variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training) and Laban Movement Analysis to create a hybrid, integrated approach. In this article we discuss how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space, body and voice, with place and architecture. Integrated 'acting' exercises designed to extend imaginations through identification beyond the constraints of the human body through the exploration of shape, colour, animals, elements, substances and poetry. This is related to the local environment. Our actor training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere. Technology and performance practice change constantly and places too are temporal with changes in landscape over time. Where we are here and now in this moment is the constant. That is what we are compelled to share. This awareness is developed through careful and detailed observation of place. Original actor training gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place.

Robert Lewis: An integrative approach

As predominantly a voice and movement teacher, having studied and reiterated methods and practices some of which were over a century old, I wondered, over the course of a decade teaching in tertiary institutions, why we were not practicing methods that were developed or created in Australia to facilitate the needs of Australian actors. Although most physical and vocal issues that performers encounter are universal, for example, tensions that inhibit communication, clarity of speech and vocal projection, what differs are the content, the cultural landscape and the attitudes of performers.

The interest in developing new exercises happened in my 3rd year of undergraduate study where we were encouraged to share to the rest of the cohort an original exercise that we have developed based on a problem that we had encountered during our directing projects. That original 10 min exercise revealed to me the creativity behind exercise development and the necessity to adapt, personalise and develop already existing exercises. It highlighted the fact that the development of actor training is a science in itself. The importance of integrative practice was highlighted during my studies at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA).

What we were taught in voice class throughout our Voice Studies postgraduate degree at times contradicted the practice that we were experiencing in movement class, particularly in relation to muscular activity and overall anatomy. The enlightening aspect, however, was that students were encouraged to find their own way and make sense of connections themselves which encouraged self-driven learning. I quickly came to realise that if a practice is safe and not physically and vocally damaging, then it should be safe to practice and creativity in terms of exercise development and integration of diverse methods should be encouraged. Although for the most part, the training was creative in nature, scientific and anatomical lectures were a strong component of the overall program. Physiological insights into how and why muscles in the body work (specifically the abdominal region) alongside safe physical practices allowed me to realise that exercises such as Suzuki's Sitting Statues (Allain 2004, pp.111-112) can be practiced safely if the performer has an awareness of what is happening inside their bodies. Keith Bain, who encouraged students to explore dynamics, energies and physical attributes with the voice, made the realisation that movement and vocal language is intertwined evident.

It was in a recent workshop at the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio conducted by Yoshito Ohno that the significance of place and space in performance training should be a priority. Upon realising that I was from Australia, Ohno commented on the fact that Australia had vast amounts of space and that Australians are physically freer than the Japanese. He also encouraged participants to experience the practical Butoh training conducted at the workshop and to adapt it in order to fit the participants' environment in their own country. If it is one aspect of actor training that is necessary in contemporary performance, it's the ability to be highly flexible, agile and responsive to the performance environment.

With the rise and popularity of site-specific, immersive and non-theatrical space-oriented performances over the past several decades, this awareness of place and space in actor training will attest to the fact that performers need to have a deeper understanding of not only their own instrument, but also the performance space they occupy. Patrice Pavis, professor of Theatre Studies at Kent University, stated that:

[a] large part of the work has to do with researching a place ... an airplane hanger, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment ... This new context provides a new situation or enunciation...and gives the performance an unusual setting of great charm and power. (Pavis 1998, pp.337-338)

Pavis's observations, albeit relating to theatre specifically, clearly focuses on the histographic and architectural aspects of the performance spaces. What is lacking to the most part is the connection between the performer and the architecture; the link being specifically tailored performance-training methods designed to assist the performer in connecting site to body and voice.

It is important for the performer to initially observe the space with a specific frame of mind. Butoh dancer and Bodyweather founder Min Tanaka claimed that he does 'not dance in the place; but [he is] the place' (Messon-Sekine & Viala 1988, p.158). This

psychological attitude is imperative to achieve a total embodiment between the performer and the surrounding architecture. Performers may focus their attention to the space itself creating and action/reaction with the body, voice and the materials that constitute the space, however, the 'living architecture' which are essentially the body and its movements, work in a continuum with the physical architecture.

The Nobbs Suzuki praxis: An Australian variant of the Suzuki method of actor training

One of the original aesthetics that have been developed and has continually been evolving since 1992 is the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP), created by John Nobbs of Ozfrank Theatre, Brisbane. The NSP is an Australian variant of the Suzuki Actor Training Method (SATM), an actor training system developed by Japanese theatre director, Tadashi Suzuki. Nobbs, through first hand experiences with Suzuki as an actor and student, developed the unique, Western variant of the original alongside co-director of Ozfrank Theatre, Jacqui Carroll.

When asked in an interview to clarify how the NSP contributes to the Australian actor training landscape, Nobbs replied:

There's very little – there's no physical, very little physical legacy [Australians] can look at. No physical geniality ... and it's ironic I suppose that us as Australians, because Australian's about space and Japan's about time. We don't have very much sensitivity to time, and the Japanese don't really understand space. Australians have always understood space, that's why we make such great sportsmen and such great dancers, because they're spatial, they eat space in a way that most other cultures wont. In a sense we can probably offer an anti-aesthetical vision of Suzuki because we're on the other side of the coin in terms of the spatial vision versus a temporal vision. And I guess that's why we can come up with the match so to speak, the revelations, the core values of Suzuki because we're actually about space. (J Nobbs 2018, pers. comm., 20 June)

Nobbs explained during a masterclass in June 2018 that one of the core principles of the NSP is the duality of knowledge and mystery. Dualities are present in every facet of performance and performance training practice: the more prevalent the duality, the more apparent the space between, the 'Ma', which means the space between things and 'is the moment just at the end of a movement and before the beginning of the next one' (Tadashi Endo 2006). One could also describe the 'Ma' as the subtext, more conventionally speaking. In a 'Stanislvasian' sense, the actor achieves their objectives in very much a linear trajectory. I am referring to the most common interpretation and practice of Stanislavski's work, the earlier psychological training that was practiced early in his career before the implementation of Active Analysis, which has had resurgence in recent times. However, even in Active Analysis, even though it's a very physical interpretation of a psychological action, is bound by the linear and logical progression of an expressed internal, psychological action. Each psychological action is a building block for the character to reach their super objective.

Knowledge and mystery

By looking at the disparate methods of Stanislavski and Suzuki (who are culturally and artistically poles apart), similarities can be made by observing and comprehending the notions of knowledge and mystery, which are both happening at the same time all at once. In a sense, these elements can be described as: Knowledge is *understanding who you are*; mystery is *not knowing who you are*. This refers to the actor knowing that they are ‘acting’, not yielding completely to the character without ‘becoming’ it, rather, embodying it. On one hand the actor knows who they are and at the same time, understands what character they are playing. The mystery surrounds the unknown world they are entering while playing that character. This concept can also extend to the idea that knowledge is *being yourself*; mystery is *being someone else*. Knowledge is also the *Ego*; mystery is the *Id* which could also translate to ‘knowledge is the *conscious*; mystery is the *subconscious*’. Finally, the concept that is true to every character written, as well as a reflection of our daily lives: ‘knowledge is to *hunt*; mystery is to be the *hunted*’. This is by far the most crucial knowledge/mystery concept for actors. Knowledge is the psychological and verbal actions that the character uses to achieve their objectives. This is no doubt in the forefront of their psychology. It is clear, pragmatic and quantifiable. In a sense, the actor is ‘hunting’ their objective by logical and practical steps. The ‘hunted’, on the other hand is far more complex; it is the subtext, the space between themselves and other actors, and above all (in a rational sense), the other characters that want to take your place (and will do whatever it takes to take it) within the context of the play.

There is no doubt that mystery surrounds aspects of the performance training, but overall, it could be seen as how clever the actor is in developing a certain character, both psychologically and physically. Once actors have an understanding of the dualities in practice, they essentially fill the void with the ‘mystery’ rather than pragmatic psychological actions.

Duality and pragmatism in the Teddy Bear Exercise

Both the NSP and the SMAT deal with performative/quintessence training. I will discuss the original NSP exercise designed by Nobbs and Carroll, called the Teddy Bear exercise. In order to interrogate Suzuki’s original exercises, the company embarked on their own initiative and interrogation of the original aesthetic, probing deeper into the core of what Suzuki was attempting to achieve in his original exercises. This in turn enabled Nobbs and Carroll to develop and create their own extensions and unique and contemporary take on the exercises. Suzuki’s training is universal in the sense that it interrogates the human spirit. Although Japanese performance training, which is steeped in history, inspired the SMAT, it is a testament that the human spirit transcends culture. The universal value of Suzuki’s training would be forgotten and in a sense be distilled in time of practitioners do not develop the work by incorporating their own cultural stamp on it.

In the *Frank Suzuki Actor Knowhow* [the former title of the NSP] *Training Manual* published in 2010 alongside the *Self Discovery in a Silver Room* DVD, Nobbs describes the exercise:

This version begins with the actors facing the back wall. One hand must be placed on the wall and both feet and the hand must remain still for the introduction to the song during which the face and body turn gradually to face fully front to be still on a certain chord just before the song proper starts.

(Meanwhile the Teddys, facing upstage, have been sitting patiently down the front in the corridor of their respective actor).

As the song proper starts [Slim Whitman's *Rose Marie*], the actors start to focus on and move towards the teddys in a freeform improvisation and, on a certain guitar slide (which occurs at approximately 1 minute and 31 seconds into the song), they must pick the teddys up, in whatever manner they feel. Mostly, performers think that they need to both grab and pick up the teddy on the first sliding note, but in fact they can place hands on the bear at any time throughout the piece; it is on the beginning of the sliding note when they must pick the bear up. They then retreat back upstage to the spot on the wall where they first started, with the teddys facing the audience, to finish in a position similar to the start. After the music's over they say a speech three times in three different ways.

1. Standard way.
2. As if they were a teddy bear.
3. A compound of teddy and their first speech (Nobbs 2010, pp.18-19).

In an impromptu addition in a workshop conducted on Monday June 17, 2018, Nobbs asked participants to speak the training speech into the teddy bears ear as they walked back to the wall facing the audience. Experiencing this felt as though you were actually teaching the object the art of language, the skill of listening and embedding a human quality to the object. This instilling of language and meaning increases the level of complexity and mystery when placing the bear on the wall and letting it speak the speech in its own 'voice'. It is now an autonomous object that has a life of its own. The 'knowledge' was the intention and meaning behind the words themselves, while the 'mystery' was the unknown and unchangeable reaction the inanimate object would, or may have had if it were alive and able to respond. The mystery is far more complex and multi-faceted than the knowledge.

The exercise is essentially all about journeys: where the performer has been, where the performer is at that point in time, and where the performer going. It is about feeling the actors' way through time and space and transforming their whole being as they move through that space in a linear track-like manner. It is very important for an actor to feel this change, and to also express it. If they are truthful to that change, and experience that journey, then the audience will go on a journey with them. If the mystery is at the forefront of the exercise and subsequent performance, then the audience will draw more out of it and implant their image to the work.

There is a certain connection that we all have when looking into the eyes of the teddy bear. In fact, this connection can somewhat be mythical – for a start, there is a certain knowledge that you have as a performer that this is an inanimate anthropomorphised object, but the mystery lies in the subconscious connection you have when advancing towards the bear and the resultant sound that is produced when asked to ‘speak as the teddy, and speak as both the teddy and yourself’. How can the Teddy Bear transgress from being a powerful pre-acting training exercise to include physical and psychological actions, text and others?

One such way is to introduce psychological verbal actions to the exercise; here lies the duality in practice, and in action. At the end of the exercise after you have spoken the text as a mix of the bears and your own, slowly turn to face the audience with the bear in hand and then turn the bear to face you. The instructor would call out a psychological/verbal action, for example: ‘to berate’, ‘to educate’, ‘to explode’ and ‘to seduce’. The verbs are limitless and not restricted to a certain few or necessary aligned with a certain context or character. Proceed by walking downstage on your designated line and repeat the verbal actions (only one at a time – don’t change them) to the teddy until you reach the downstage line. Repeat while walking back. In order to engage the body and to use the entire space, the psychological verbal actions are coupled with Action Drives from the Laban Movement System. For example, the performer would speak ‘I seduce you’ to the bear while physicalising the ‘Press’ Action Drive on the bear throughout the entire space. The physical and psychological/verbal actions are replaced by texts, dialogue or monologues. The knowledge is the expression of the actions, however, the mystery lies in the actions of the unresponsive teddy bear.

The next step would be replacing the bear with another performer: the performer who is the recipient of the action. The partner is to kneel on the ground facing upstage exactly like the bear; they should remain still, focused and relaxed, but not ‘dead’- they are very much an alive being. They should feel ‘empty’ with no preconceived notions or states of being and must not react whatsoever to their partners. Again, at a certain point in the music, the performer moving forward lifts the other actor by their shoulders (they obviously don’t physically lift them up, it is more of a guide to assist them up on the floor) and either from their shoulders or hips, they move backwards while their former sitting partner moves forwards upstage. When they reach the wall, the lifter (the performer who lifted their partner), gently places their partner on the upstage wall facing the audience, who still remain in neutral. The lifter then faces the wall and then a) speaking the text in full neutral voice; b) speaking the text expressing the voice of their partner (who is facing the audience in neutral) by feeling their energy; and c) combining their voice and your voice together.

The physical and psychological actions exercised with the teddy bear is repeated with the partners, however, when you have two performers in the exercise, the other partner (the one who was lifted up), will respond using their own psychological action and Action Drive. For example: Performer A: the actor who walked down the line towards the kneeling partner while Performer B: the kneeling partner – is in a neutral state. The exercise continues, and when the time comes to express the psychological/verbal actions and the Action Drives, it could look like this: Performer A: ‘I seduce you’

(physicalising a ‘Slash’), Performer B: ‘I defy you’ (physicalising a ‘Dab’), and so on. Depending on the workshop leader or objective of the task, the performers may express one set of specific psychological/physical actions, or alternate.

The overall important elements to be conscious about (or in fact not consciously think about) are initial impulses, vulnerability, openness and connectedness, which are all necessary elements of performance. Impulses are necessary to not only demonstrate truth in any action but to trust first instincts. Openness and vulnerability are one and the same, which is essential for creativity – to unlock an ‘inner self’, to be open, sensitive and empathic. Vulnerability is a frightening thing; once performers start to be conscious of this vulnerability, the self-consciousness is evident to the audience. This vulnerability, however, allows performers to experience (and expose) the truthful body and voice, which can be empowering. Connectedness in terms of the performer and teddy bear, the performer and the space, and the performer and others who share that same space are also crucial. These elements compel the performer to strip away all intellectualisations, preconceptions and all the peripheries of acting. They have no ‘bag of tricks’ to fall back on.

On commenting on the concept of knowledge and mystery in a comprehendum on Suzuki, Nobbs, in an email, described it as such:

One is that it is the play (Dionysius) that most defines the deep function of theatre, and by extension, Art itself: The conflict between spiritual and temporal (worldly) power, or put another way the dichotomy between mystery and knowledge. By that I mean that in our apprehension of the cosmos, there are things we understand (factual knowledge), and things we don't understand but only feel (mystery), and our ability to function within a cosmos is a disruptive ‘conversation’ between these two sides of our ‘stance’. Art is the portrait of this ‘conversation’, and theatre specifically is the display of actors undergoing the ferment of this knowledge and mystery interaction as witnessed by the public as a form of psychic completion. (J Nobbs 2018, pers. comm., 10 July)

Dominique Sweeney: Place-based practice

In the development of an integrative practice (which has many definitions) one aspect is definable: that is place-based practice. When Lewis described Yoshito Ohno’s encouragement to experience the training and to adapt it for the Australian environment, I hear the same words echoed by Jacques Lecoq. Lecoq said a number of times while I attended his school that the vastness of Australia is in me and must emanate through me as the actor. Together, Lewis and I are developing an integrative Australian Actor Training pedagogy that takes up this call to recognise and foster actors’ artistic sensibility to place, our place.

My proposition is that contemporary traditional Aboriginal theatre performance practices offer a different way forward to the postdramatic contemporary actor representation issues that Hans-Thies Lehmann poses (Lehmann). The starting point

for me is a call to study what Aboriginal actors do. For example, on stage and screen, David Gulpilil is an artist who draws on his profound knowledge of place for inspiration. The emu performed by Gulpilil in the film *3 Dances* is not just expert imitation, it is the relationship of the chosen dramatic form in that place that shapes our perception of what he is performing (Gulpilil, Roberts and Film Australia). What is this mask, puppetry, object manipulation that Gulpilil executes with precision in relation to the ecology? The use of a hand to animate an emu's head beside his face effortlessly tells the story through this very simple double image manipulation in a clear style we can easily appreciate. There are a multitude of styles and forms in Australian Aboriginal performance traditions that require an awareness of the aesthetics and relationship to country. Aboriginal actors across Australia provide portals of awareness to audiences using signposts which arts curator Hetti Perkins explains show that:

the past, present and future are seamless and often chronologically non-linear – which is, of course, at odds with conventional storytelling! They show an idiosyncratic worldview where a contemporary event like a catastrophic weather event and tragic death is understood within the context of the spirit world. (Perkins and Kataoka)

Perkins describes traditions that antedate Edward Gordon Craig's über-marionette, the ultimate actor, by millennia (Craig). The fluidity of acting styles in Aboriginal cultures embraced these greater connections between death, spirit and country. Gordon Craig surmised that "the beginning of all drama is movement". Jacques Lecoq's theatrical pedagogy is that 'tout bouge', developed from Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing, where everything moves and if not, is dead. But death and stillness have their place too. The world of the not-moving, the other world or domain of the dead, to which we are connected yet physically separate is the theatrical sphere where country, environment and history stir our perceptions. To begin developing an Australian pedagogy is to find these voices here and now that are emplaced in this country.

Under the skin and out of the skin

If we look back to early 20th century actor training alongside Stanislavsky, Gordon Craig said that instead of an actor getting under the skin of the part they should be getting out of the skin of the part altogether. "[T]he preposterous absurdity of this delusion ... the belief that [the actor] should aim to make an actual copy, a reproduction" is contrary to the art and so we must "do away with the real tree, do away with the reality of delivery, do away with the reality of action" (Craig). Gulpilil's emu example demonstrates an accuracy of representation that shows little resemblance to 'realistic' acting. In his screen roles in films from *Walkabout* to *Charlie's Country* his characters live a 'truthfulness' that comes from the way he provides a certain distance similar to portraying the emu somewhere between his hand and face.

Between 1917-1919 the French Vieux-Colombier theatre company went to New York where Suzanne Bing encountered and worked with Margaret Naumberg developing children's nature play as the heart of creative acting. In the world of child's play Bing found process over product with joyful learning as mainstays in a world of unimpeded

creativity. This play is never confined to reproducing the ‘real’. From observations of child play Bing developed vocal exercises consisting of recreating the sounds of wind, rain and animal noises and movement exercises based on the portrayal of animals. These are theatrical observations not attempts to recreate reality. The corner stones to the approach are “simplicity, spontaneity, trust, experiential learning and discovery, and being less dominated by purely intellectually and analytically refined approaches” (Fleming, p.109).

Neutral mask

From these basic principles passed on through Jean Daste to Lecoq, the development of the ‘neutral mask’ as primary to actor training emerged. In 1991 at the International Workshop Festival in Adelaide I was first introduced to Jacques Lecoq and the following week to the voice teaching of Frankie Armstrong. These two seminal workshops have left me with lifelong impressions. Armstrong’s inspiring gift to students is to open up voices “the most intimate expression of ourselves... to discover the wondrous variety of expression, colour and range that we are capable of”(Armstrong). So too with ‘neutral mask’ the idea is one of opening up each actor’s creative being. But while profound, something is missing in Lecoq’s ‘neutral mask’ pedagogy. The first six months of the Lecoq training is a silent world of movement and gesture. In an integrative approach to actor training ‘neutral mask’ exercises that include voice simultaneously open up the vocal possibilities Armstrong explores.

My central proposition in developing this integrative approach is not to prescribe one kind of actor training but to take useful acting exercises created in specific places and test and adapt them for where they are now located. This foundation work prepares actors with an in-depth awareness of who and where they are in this place and - provides the basis to then explore beyond. For research into characters from other places and times that include accents and different physicalities, the ‘neutral’ starting point provides a ready position to enable the possibility of learning and developing the portrayal of ‘others’.

Anne Marshall describes the rigidity in non-Aboriginal acting students attempting to learn stylised movements from Mimili people. The issues are because, as Marshall describes:

Aboriginal performances carry with them a vast range of kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences. Apart from human interaction, this variety is connected with seasonal changes; location changes; particular vegetation; topography of the surrounding countryside; altitude; fire and wood smoke; food; animals, birds and insects; the scent of rain on dry dust; pollen carried by the wind and the tang of seasonal flowers and fruits. (Marshall, pp.311-312)

What we have to discover and learn through appreciating these connections to country is the way to an emplaced actor training.

Conclusion

Place-based practice is necessary, and in Wagga Wagga we are in Wiradjuri country. Our task is to discuss how these ideas can be applied with the support of Wiradjuri elders. Traditional Aboriginal theatre practices in the broader continent are core to what we can learn to be closer to country and attuned to 'kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences'. Emplaced approaches to acting in undergraduate courses are the start to developing an Australian Actor training pedagogy. Opening pathways to post graduate research through the appreciation of Aboriginal languages, translation and studying the richness and variety of styles, forms and stories is for our future development.

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