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The Place of Action from David Mamet's Concept for Performer Training

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Abstract

This thesis explores the place and role of a performer's action from a perspective of a director and playwright David Mamet's concept for performer training. This thesis takes inspiration from the idea of Mamet's simple and practical investigation specifically in text-based approach with a performer's bodily function on stage. For Mamet, the writings and practices of many different body-centered training are not rooted in the principle and nature of acting/performance. Reconsidering complicated approaches particularly psychological-oriented theory, practice, and assumption draw on several practitioners takes us beyond the field of visible and/or outer appearance of a performer which in turn leads the performer's body to be as abstract therefore not to being in the moment on stage. Arming the points, we argue that whatever disciplines and/or methods necessarily need to meet the principles and demands of acting/performance/theatre to connect to the materials, an action/objective given by a specific playwright which the performer must inhabit through his/her body. Out of the context, any 'method' serves no purpose. That is, the mechanics of an action is an extension of addressing what a performer's specific needs which shifts his/her body to respond appropriately to the theatrical demands. Taking this argument further, we claim that the purpose of performer training should not be understood as learning and improving techniques or skills for his/her self-perfection. The research finding shows that this resembles to the phenomenon that the visible very often precedes the invisible where the performer's body lose a clarity with no more chance to happen and/or change the event(s). Rather, it is a process of learning what/how to learn which in turn brings us back to the central question of why we do training for what purpose in this contemporary era. Exploring and answering these questions is not only a way to employ the key materials applicable to the theatrical demands but also to achieve the identify as a professional performer/doer on stage.

Keywords: *The Meaning of Action, Performer Training, Passivity, a Qualitative Bodily Shift, David Mamet*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is reconsidering and articulating the term, 'action' to provide an additional perspective through which the principles of acting and disciplines can be explored within a performer training context. Here, it should be noted that the practical assumptions with the practices of task-based acting is not familiar among many student-actors in this contemporary era. Since the systemic incorporation of such approaches and disciplines were heavily based on one's psychology and/or emotional perspective, forms of performer training with the process of its transmission and aim is also hard to trace.

Accordingly, this research exams a director and playwright David Mamet's concept with his approach to working on a text. From a perspective of performer training and acting, Mamet's central concept highlights how a performer can live on stage by rejecting specific outcomes which many student-actors tend to pursue

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through his/her studio work and performance. Unlike a predominance of psychological-based approaches and/or related methods, such as the earlier Stanislavsky's concept and Strasberg's 'Method Acting,' Mamet's concept and approach for performer training is simple and clear. Therefore, it is acceptable in compared to varied academic sources and philosophies which as Philip Zarrilli appropriately notes "dismembered our physical faculties from our essential selves" [1].

In this manner, Mamet argues that "there is no arc of the character. Those are terms invented by scholars. They do not exist" [2]. In other words, a performer's central task for Mamet is choosing a simple action then saying and/or delivering the lines on a page to obtain the 'objective' suggested by a playwright. According to Mamet, the psychological aspects of the performer cannot be clearly clarified. As a result, he denies subtle approaches including those of Stanislavski, Strasberg, Artaud, and others.

Rather he argues that the actions of a performer/actor are of greatest significance and says, "never ask the actor or the student to do anything more complicated than opening a window" [3]. For Mamet, complicated approaches block the performer's actions because the psychological aspects of acting are nonsense. As an extension of these assumptions, Mamet even rejects analyzing the character, saying, "acting is action and objective, not behavior ... behavior comes out of what you're doing" and the goal is that "people leave the theatre talking about the story and not the performance" [4].

According to Mamet's concept and practical assumptions, this thesis argues that any performer training and its approaches essentially need to meet the demands of the principle of acting/performance which enhances to articulate the meaning of what a specific playwright would provide and/or deliver a specific meaning, thought and imagination to the spectator.

From Mamet's idea, the spectator cannot see the character, but they only 'listen' to the actor/performer's lines and then 'follow' it. Thus, acting is to tell a story to the spectator by means of answering the question of 'what is the action of the moment' and 'how the performer's body activate, live, and survive between substance and movement of the body in terms of its 'function' on stage.

This reflects the importance of comprehended understanding of an actor/performer's body and the relationship between text (scene) and bodily sensations (shift). In other words, as we have discussed earlier, specifically working on task-based acting, a performer's bodily experience/sensation through his/her studio work and/or rehearsal is unfamiliar among many student-actors. Here, the meaning of bodily training having been thought by them is regarded as 'physical training' to be as 'technical body.' In this process, the performer can only achieve mechanical outward physical actions while rejecting his/her internal readiness or substance.

In this regard, this research looked up the fundamental cause of this tendency from lack of complementary relation between the training and rehearsal process. In addition to this, we have also frequently witnessed the results, mostly 'pretending to do' for example that the performer's 'personality,' the visible is preceded rather than the one of depths, the invisible when the performers adapt psycho-physical approaches to the text. Arming the issues mentioned above, this thesis explores how the concepts and principles centered on Mamet's approach facilitate and enhance a performer's inner/outer action as organic response which can be merged into a specific text and contemporary theatrical code.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A PERFORMER'S BODILY EXPERIENCE /SHIFT AND A TEXT

One of the reasons a performer become to 'act' as inappropriate psycho-physical order is derived from unilateral understanding on the term, realistic acting not recognizing on the real and fiction. That is, the boundary between daily life and fictional world, and ignorance of forms or styles of play is another reason. This phenomenon is come out from common instinct of many performers/student-actors specifically the

responsibility of ‘doing’ in front of camera or on stage along with his/her ‘desires’ to express.

This process is comparable with a situation when one needs to do presentation in front of public. Particularly, in case of beginners and even experienced presenters become to feel psycho-physical oppression when own turn impends soon. Anyone has experienced relevant psycho-physiological phenomena such as the chest was trembling, hand and foot became numb, stomach was sick and thirsting and so on. That is, when an actor/performer/presenter is insufficient in ‘preparation as oneself’ as to do a specific role, the above tensions will be added.

Here, the spectator will not only be difficult to grasp the core of what an actor/performer/presenter attempt to deliver as a part of his/her textual analysis but also experience segmented disorder by means of a lack of confidence or a series of self-doubt. Throughout the moment, we as one of the participants or audiences naturally confront with incoherent, inarticulate, and even illogical body. Consequently, the doer’s body (actor/performer/presenter) is unproductive and at the same time isolated from a text/presentation/performance, therefore, failing to change anyone.

Then, what is the practical meaning of the term, ‘preparation’ for those actors/performers before s/he enter on stage and confront with his/her spectator? And, why these performers inevitably experience or meet such ‘segmented disorder’ regardless of his/her training sessions that s/he has investigated before.

If we agree with the hypothesis that the final goal of a specific performance is encountering and communicating with ‘unspecified majority,’ the spectator, the decisive aim of training, approach, method, and/or whatever ‘system’ must be a process of exploring and experiencing a performer’s organic responses and instantaneous action in the integration of body and mind as oneness.

Being in such moments, we can evidently observe that the performer’s body begins to sift, transforms, therefore moves in a manner of spontaneity rather than the performer tries to concretize all the assumptions which formerly sketched as a part of his/her text analysis. Here, the performer knows and ‘acknowledges’ what his/her body would want to do/achieve based on the text given by a specific playwright rather than ‘looking for’ similarities between himself/herself and the character/role.

Let us reconsider what Mamet argues:

After you finish one scene, you will encounter another one, with its own task; the total of them is play. If you play each scene, the play will be served. If you try to drag your knowledge of the play through each scene, you are ruining whatever the worth is of the playwright’s design, and you are destroying your chances to succeed scene by scene [5].

Above all, Mamet defines the term ‘playing’ which specifically underlies answering the question of ‘what a performer needs at the moment’ and how to choose/manipulate a simple action, the ‘needs’ through which the performer’s invisible inner readiness precedes the visible (form or style). For example, the performer who adhere to the daily expression in an intellectual manner or more specifically ‘dragging his/her knowledge’ do not pursue ‘present’ and ‘here.’

Considering in a very simple and fundamental level, a performer’s (bodily) training should not be regarded as a casual supplement to improve his/her physical skill nor be confused with a classroom activity. Certainly, it is not the goal of a performer’s training. That is, what any exercise, discipline, and approach must address within a specific context/performance. In other words, there should be no mystery.

Therefore, it is important to note that it is not enough just to think. Rather, any training process with a specific approach necessarily need to allow the performer’s bodily experience to fulfil both the demands of the text and more significantly corresponding to the moment. This process is exactly opposed to such conjectural

and/or head-based approach. As we have seen that this process barely touches on training/acting, preventing the performer from losing him/herself in its *function* on stage.

This remind us that regardless of several disciplines the performer's body does not correspond to being in the moment. More specifically, as Mamet argues above, the performer 'ruins' his/her body or that of value by him/herself due to the performer is not to be 'innocent.' In other words, a performer necessarily needs to forget what s/he already knows in which his/her 'chance' is revealed by confronting with new event(s).

The term 'success' from Mamet's notion therefore connotes identifying the fact that how to acknowledge the action then how to connect to the material through moment by moment rather than intensifying and maintaining a personal expediency or externalizing his/her willfulness. That is, what makes the performer's body alive as oneness. It is very evident that such performers very often reject various possibilities in the moment because they cannot easily accept 'other moment(s)' which might be unexpected, different from their plans or prejudgment, namely, his/her 'knowledge.'

Through the moment, the performer's body fall into the level of passivity or illogicality, and eventually cannot communicate with other performers and the spectator. The performer's identity as a doer with the 'value' provided by a playwright is completely ruined and/or destroyed because of the performer's mindfulness from getting involved in an attentive ordinariness. This reminds us of the significance of eliminating a performer's daily habits and the superfluous elements, aiming to "break the fixed habits of actors and to develop acting as a creative art" for example [6].

These causes are due to the performers' intelligence or mannerism having been intervened too much. Determining or measuring what comes in the next obstructs discovery of new stimulus and impulse, and make own actions be previously planned and predict its results. This is displayed as too much exposing forms of personality or ordinariness, namely the visible of a performer. As a result, a process of performer training and its approach/purpose does not correspond with each other. And more importantly, the performer's mind is occupied his/her willfulness, not to meet the given environment.

3. THE PURPOSE AND ROLE OF TRAINING: TOWARDS THE ATTUNEMENT OF A PERFORMER'S BODY

Now, it is clearer that the primary goal of training/discipline for a performer is to reveal or find out a series of 'opportunities' in order to change and/or happen the action of another partner(s). Here, the performer's action is revealed by the process of being in a state of spontaneity, that is central to the discourse of practice and training for adapting and applying disciplines working in the studio. It contains the possibility of changing the other performer(s).

The emphasis here is on the term 'change.' Notice that the word, 'change' from Mamet's notion signifies the "commitment to achieving a single goal" of a character [7]. According to Mamet, through a progression of a performer's challenge and/or accomplishment for the goal, each performer's action would 'change' as each performer's action tries various ways to obtain what s/he wants from another like a table tennis for example. Here, the performers' central job is answering the question of 'what must be done' and 'how to act/react to the smallest moment' on stage. Therefore, it is a way to working beyond the words or text within which the performer could explore and inhabit the key elements through his/her bodily experiences. In other words, there is no room for each performer to think in an intellectual level.

In this sense, the performer does not need to pretend to be as a character or role nor does s/he need portrayal. Rather, the sincerity of a performer is depended upon how the performer's body initiate in every tiny moment where his/her body becomes "more active" and "stronger." For Mamet, that is, an action, as he calls the "punchline" which the "author intended" by means of the essential element for acting [8].

In accord with this, Mamet notes the concept of ‘self-respect’ by means of subordinating a performer’s self to the moment which “no one can take that from you” [9]. His point returns us to the fundamental question of ‘why we do training?’ and ‘how does a performer bring and/or open his/her bodily instrument in order to attune and function on stage?’

In this manner, Victoria Worsley provides a simple and clear example:

That baby didn’t have a goal of hitting the toy: he didn’t even know the goal existed as he’d never experienced it before. But once he did something he recognized was useful and interesting, he started to organize himself bit by bit to do it again. And again. Better and better. Many trials, much error, until the pathway become clearer, the irrelevant efforts fell away and it became simpler, easier and more effective [10].

Above all, Worsley’s concept underlies the significance of a performer’s (a baby’s) bodily experiences in which his/her body begin to learn what a personal need and how to obtain it by means of a result of and respond to the ‘need.’ Finding the essential elements (the need) involves the ‘pathway’ which is triggered then achieved by a numerous number of ‘trials’ and ‘error.’ That is, as Worsley notes above, the clarity of a performer’s body depends on precise objective and action, namely the purpose and role of training.

This suggestion is ‘being active’ in order to invest beyond a complex chain of mental events. Like the notion of Mamet, for Worsley, finding and inhabiting the right action through the performer’s body is a matter of being active and respond to what is in front of him/her. Here, the appropriate purpose and role of training can bridge the gap between a performer’s (a baby’s) own understanding of a character/text/role in a specific moment and its process to connect and inhabit a character’s (a baby’s) objective/action. For example, a musician or player is only freeing from when the performer fully knows his/her interpretation of a piece, *plus* s/he also necessarily need to acknowledge how the materials can emerge spontaneously.

As discussed earlier, for Mamet answering these two questions (the purpose with its target) enables the performer to work on a “good, fun, physical objective” that the performer must bring/inhabit to rehearsal and performance [11]. Naturally, the former question, ‘purpose’ in this context is struggling and understanding what/how to practice in order to meet new experience(s) within which the performer like the baby as Worsley mentioned above can explore to learning how to learn, namely what s/he has a greater range of possibilities and/or abilities underneath his/her unknowable territories, habits or ordinariness.

Rejecting pragmatic idealism founded from Mamet’s concept and approach implies a way to develop and acknowledge the possibilities of a performer’s body as unity which in turn requires the performer’s endless challenge (many trials/much error) with his/her passion and enthusiasm. Experiencing a clear pathway encompasses the fact that a performer’s body is *eventually* freeing from the ‘irrelevant efforts’ derived from maintaining his/her intellectual knowledge. Here, the ‘irrelevant’ is an antonym of (the event) ‘happen’ by means of not conducting/performing/obtaining the objective or needs. Thus, it is unnecessary trait or gesticulation, and naturally the following are no changes, nothing happened between each performer.

It is important to note that this process is apart from mutuality and reciprocity where the story/text is *not* told. Consequently, for Mamet, the performer’s body is to be carried away by involvement in the ‘efforts’ which he defines as the “difference between possession and non-possession of a skill” [12]. (sic) On the basis of the ‘possession’ as a key pathway to aside from being in a stets of psycho-physical pressure, the performer/presenter/baby keeps attention capacity for all task-demands and unexpected territories with clarity no matter what the environmental/theatrical demand.

In relation to Mamet’s notion, Grotowski defines the vital quality of a performer’s bodily discipline and

demystify the principle/purpose of acting/training:

Why am I against exercises as a way to self-perfection, self-improvement? Those who take self-improvement are, in reality, delaying the Act. [...] if we think in categories of perfection, improvement, self-development, etc., we reaffirm today's indifference. And what does that signify? The desire to avoid the Act, to escape from what should be accomplished now, today [13]. (sic)

Regarding Mamet's concept and approach, Grotowski's notion is mainly focused on a process of 'self-revelation' which he aims to achieve a performer's 'total act' for 'human contact' [14]. Grotowski's research reminds us of the significance of preparatory process to be as mature personality in which a performer sincerely confronts with himself/herself from practice to performance. To be more precise, the innermost core of one's personality is a touchstone to interact with the spectator within which the performer discovers and meets the 'truth' about himself/herself [15].

In this context, we find that his central point is not a performer's investigation of technical proficiency nor does he stress learning or improving those 'visible appearances' that as Grotowski notes (self-) perfection, improvement, and development above. The 'appearance' means not looking for 'efficiency' to achieve a specific outcome(s) in a 'correct' way, method, and/or system. Since an actor/performer/presenter/baby's invisible, the internal readiness precedes and grounds his/her performance/presentation, learning and obtaining skillful techniques or equivalent methods is not the foundation and the principle of acting, the 'Act.'

In terms of a performer's action, similar to that of Grotowski, Stella Adler focuses on creating a performance towards "stage-worthy and not minimized by a slavish adherence to verisimilitude" in contrast to one of her Group colleagues, Lee Strasberg's affective memory which tend to privilege a performer's emotional recall [16].

Here, the problematic term, 'emotional recall' indicates "remembering in meticulous detail a situation" which refers to the performer's tendency of maintaining his/her intellectual knowledge and/or self-justification [17]. It is important to note that this process forces a performer's sense of responsibility paying more attention to the next or future rather than being in a state of authentic moment.

As we have found that there is no time for conscious thought since we as human being are living in the world where endless implicit rhythms present. We move anywhere without preparation as we are standing in the right rhythm and knowing the space around us. In this sense, Adler argues that Strasberg misinterpreted Stanislavski's system and Maria Shevtsova even calls Strasberg's Method as the "'incomplete' Stanislavsky" [18] so that it is "unhealthy" for the performers [18] [19].

Adler's pedagogy therefore is centered on articulating and creating a "vocabulary of action" as "doable verbs" in order to obtain an 'objective' in the moment [20]. The basis for Adler's understanding of acting with the key principle echoes to that of Grotowski and Mamet's concept as these practitioners/directors criticize habitual mannerism of a performer and privileging a verisimilitude that is unreliable source and approach for creating a performance.

4. CONCLUSION

We have explored the role and meaning of a performer's action in reconsidering and articulating David Mamet's concept for performer training. By exploring the meaning of a performer's vitality/action, specifically focused on a performer's bodily function on stage, this research examined the way in which a performer's body is facilitated by a process of acknowledging what the performer's body would want to achieve in the here

and now.

This process allows the performer to free him/herself from his/her intellectual engagement and/or responsibility where the performer's body exploits as a form of the unbalanced relationship between his/her body and the given text. Here, we have argued that the intensity of a performer's action should be understood and embodied by answering the following questions: why we do exercise and what purpose.

Interrogating these questions suggest that the term 'action' signifies the process and result of each performer to 'change' each other. The word 'change' here is the principle of action as well as the art of acting. It is an appropriate use and activation of a performer's body which in turn leads the body as to be shift, live, and/or function on stage. Therefore, the following event(s) would be happened. The investigation of the qualitative bodily shift or function centered on the place of action informs the foundation of the disciplines and/or exercises within which the performer's body must fit into the given text and circumstance.

As we have seen that this research finding shows a way to discern a new insight into the possibilities of performer training with a process of text-based approach in contrast to the predominance of complicated approaches and psychological aspects mostly pursuing the performer's emotional truth. The performer's irrelevant efforts defined as maintaining his/her ordinariness or intellectual knowledge is what this thesis referred to as unnecessary trait or gesticulation.

This thesis argues that the most important point here is that any training/discipline should not compel the performers to learn within a single way. Such a notion cannot account for how performer training works and/or how the performer's body functions on stage. But instead, each session, practice or whatever approach necessarily need to ask for the performer's ethical attitude in a positive sense. The place of a performer's action ought to be the way of working in the here and now in which the performers will enable to respond to an appropriate direction(s) in any style or form of dramatic literature.

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