

An Exploration of a Way for Contemporary Actor Training/Acting: A Perspective from Denis Diderot and Tadashi Suzuki's Concepts

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Abstract

This research aims to reconsider the necessity of an alternative way(s) for contemporary actor training and acting in discussing and articulating Diderot and Suzuki's concepts and approaches for acting/training. First of all, the physical body, assumed and conceptualized by Diderot is beyond our control by means of a type of radical body/mind dualism, and is based on the concept that body and mind are separate. In contrast, Suzuki's notion of acting/training is raised by his concern about the role of an actor's body in the constitution of an actor's bodily experience against the imitation of the West-oriented theatre/acting/training. The descriptions of the two theatre artists' notion of acting/training gives us insight into the place and role of contemporary theatre as a practical root to encounter and communicate between a doer and a spectator where an actor's body must appropriately be attuned and cultivated towards the cultivation of bodily attributes which are foundation but usually neglected by actors/directors/practitioners particularly in Korea. Especially, misunderstanding of a specific training sources/approaches, namely 'scientific system' and the 'method' have taken us away from the potential possibilities of the lived oneness. Here, the 'possibility' refers to the primary bodily functions within a specific context or being in the here and now rather than attempting to copying, imitating and/or adapting a specific cultural source(s)/approaches/techniques as we have faced with through the previous century. We reconsider and argue that a potential way to correspond the nature of theatre/acting/training is that how to meet the demand of contemporary spectators which in turn intensifies an actor's stability, sustainability and hopefully professional identity in this contemporary era.

Keywords: Contemporary Actor Training, Acting, Body/Mind Integration, Diderot, Suzuki, an Actor's Body.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general term, theatre is a communal tradition, providing and representing theatrical signs and meanings that are acknowledged as propagating ideas and norms in the given society. Theatre conveys the society in which a full range of cultural and historical systems function to shape the fundamental ways of being in its cultural contexts. This symbiotic relationship between theatre and a society reflects the realm of human nature as indigenous general aesthetic principles. These are derived from culturally and historically determined contexts in which the human 'body' is also instructed its needs, purposes, and functions.

Arming this point of view, the research question of 'contemporary actor training' came from the dominance of the acting/training process for the large part of the twentieth century, namely naturalistic and/or realistic methodology/approach. In this sense, the term 'contemporary actor training' through this research is derived from my personal aims for discussing and examining practical knowledge in

reconsidering an alternative way(s) rather than finding or defining a single 'right' way.

In the globalized world, the growth of modernization of theatre through interacts with other cultures enriched the process of modification, adaptation and development of techniques or sources for actor training as well as for the embodiment of performances. In the borderless world, on the one hand, an individual artist or practitioner can be exposed to inspiring in another way of concept and working, and reforming the styles and knowledge of scenic vocabularies of a specific culture for audiences of another culture. Such a process, for instance, 'intercultural theatre,'¹ the adaptation and/or transition of a source culture to the target culture has been largely permeated among eastern and western theatre practitioners/directors mainly since in the mid-twentieth century [1]. Particularly, most of the non-representational theatre practitioners/directors including Grotowski, Barba, Brook, Mnouchkine and Suzuki have engaged in the roots or nature of human in order to encounter and/or communicate with their spectators.

On the other hand, since nineteenth century up to contemporary era, the predominated language and practice of acting, the 'scientific system' has developed the assumption that the self of an actor and the self of a character have a direct one to one relationship. The concept of realistic and/or naturalistic acting with its practice of representing an individual feeling intensified 'psychological' perspective of acting/training in the large part of previous century especially in Korea [2]. Consequently, there are dominating tendency for acting/training in drama schools and theatre productions toward focusing on text approaches. This caused of remnants one's personal feeling is the element of 'truth' or 'touchstone' for the embodiment of text-based approach² and/or realism theatre [3]. In other words, anything that seemed not to be consistent with this approach is artificial and therefore dishonest.

Such presumption whether the process is based on interrogating one's emotional perspective or mimicking someone else have led not only the misunderstanding of Stanislavski's 'system'³ but also, more importantly, not to perceive the necessary of systemic or practical approaches for the art of acting/actor training through theatre productions and acting institutions. This phenomenon implies a specific approach and model for realistic/naturalistic acting has not been appropriately settled in contemporary Korean theatre and institutions, and as responsible movement for the previous era is not seemed to correspond with comprehending in a depth and practical perspective.

Therefore, in this sense, the term training 'contemporary actor' for this research implies not to examine 'universal' method or knowledge of the process of acting. Rather my assumption is in the direction of exploring 'what is urgently required' for those who have great difficulty either fluctuating against their will to integrate his/her body and mind or to be in a state of 'ready' for action. That is, as Barba clearly notes a process of the transition from an actor's inner action to be visible corporeality or an actor's embodied mind in context of what s/he needs in the here and now [4].

Based on the issues above, this research examines those two theatre artists' concepts and approaches for acting/actor training including Diderot and Suzuki, and to explore an alternative way(s) which aims to facilitate and develop an actor's energy, stability and concentration in a modular manner. This research would then suggest to overcome duality of acting and its adaptability for contemporary actor training.

2. A PERSPECTIVE FROM DENIS DIDEROT'S CONCEPT

The history of body/mind acting can be traced back to Plato who adhered to Idea and Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who believed firmly in human logos (reason). Denis Diderot (1713-1784), the philosopher of

¹ One specific example of this is the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), founded in 1979 by a director/practitioner Eugenio Barba. The ISTA has mainly focused on how an actor "shape" his/her energy/presence in combining and developing the master performers' exploratory workshop, research and experiments. Barba and his colleagues' research with practice has devoted and developed the 'common principles' which Barba calls 'pre-expressive' underlying the use of an actor's body. This concept with his practical approach is derived from the premise that "biologically all human being are essentially the same" (Ian Watson 1996: 223-228). For the details of this, see *The Paper Canoe* (1995) and *A dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (1991).

² Those text-based approach is requiring to an actor well-analytic emotion that causes 'conscious thought' by the 'head work' so this restricts different possibilities to create, enact their character (Zarrilli 2013: 11).

³ Strasberg's 'method acting' especially emphasis on the "creation of true emotion" (Cole and Chinoy 1970: 622), and had been mistakenly assumed as a technique was directly predicated on Stanislavski.

the nineteenth century, and Coquelin, the actor of the same area solidified the dual nature of acting. They all believed logos (reason) controls body and emotion. In addition to this, entering twentieth century, the 'method' of Lee Strasberg,⁴ which intensified the psychological aspect of Stanislavski's system, also consolidated body/mind duality of acting [5].

The basis of eighteenth century acting/training is demonstrated by the theatre historian Dene Barnett: "... a vocabulary of basic movements, each with its own meaning which is known by all." Here, the idea of 'a set of conventional gestures' was a kind of universal alphabet in the time: actors made use of "established 'sign language' with its accompanying declamatory style to transmit the meaning of a sentence" that made actors visually expressive and interesting to audiences [6]. In other words, as Harrop argues that what the eighteenth century scribes is the "tradition of acting they inherited" 'the pervasive idea of necessity of benevolent feelings' which obtained in the period of sentimentality" [7].

Diderot's controversial 'Paradox of acting,' published in 1773, in which he notes that an actor "must be devoid of sensibility" [8]. His argument for 'no emotional involvement' in the part of the actor raises important question. Diderot asserts that an actor's full of feeling could not possibly repeat a performance night after night; "the actor must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker" [9]. To be precise, the actor's task is "to exactly render the outward signs of feeling and emotions so that the audience feels what the play is communicating" In other words, 'communication' for Diderot was a matter of 'rendering so exactly the outwards signs of feeling' that the audience was affected by the impact upon their emotions of the recognizable sign of passion. Therefore, a good actor should "feel nothing at all and can therefore evoke the strongest feeling in the audience" [10].

"Although great spasmodic bursts of sensible emotion can occasionally account for inspired moments," for Diderot these are thoroughly "unreliable, varying violently from performance to performance" [11]. Thus, according to Diderot, they are useless adding that "extreme sensibility makes middling actors; ... in complete absence of sensibility is the possibility of a sublime actor" [12]. For Diderot, the power of a truly moving performance derives from a perfect imitation of the exterior manifestations of feeling: the vocal intonations, facial expression, and bodily posture of emotion rather than the actual experience of that emotion by the actor. In brief, Diderot's image of the human body as a virtually soulless machine dictated that no sensibility actor could be regarded as a great actor. The Cartesian dualism⁵ of body and mind, controlling soul and subdued body, pervades Diderot's theory of acting.

Therefore, the actor's task for Diderot was not concerning the gesture with the passion, but refining the representation of the gesture so that it would have the most direct impact on the spectator. Based on the notion that body and mind are each separate and discrete, Diderot believed that the finest example of his prescription for acting was presented by the English actor, David Garrick who advocated the adoption of a style based on direct observation of life. In his acting, observers noted 'sudden and noticeable shifts from one passion to another' due to the understanding of the nature of passions at the time which was 'a mental state, not necessarily an emotional motive: it is a state recognized and controlled by the mind' [13]. In other words, Diderot's ideal actor possesses the highly developed ability to observe and imitate nature, and consequently create a coherent role.

3. A PERSPECTIVE FROM TADASHI SUZUKI'S CONCEPT

Tadashi Suzuki's concept and approach for acting/actor training is derived from against the "the West-oriented modern Japanese theatre, to imitate the Western and European forms since the Meiji period in 1868." In other words, Suzuki has attempted to find/develop the uniqueness of Japanese identity by focusing

⁴ David Krasner argues that Strasberg's American 'Method' acting has had its programmatic attackers these are including: "too heavily invested in emotion," the emphasis on "psychology as destructive," a "violation of the true teachings of Stanislavski," and "narrow in its version, encouraging sloppy speech habits, poor diction, and avoiding movement training" (Krasner 2000: 148).

⁵ Rene Descartes (1596-1650), French philosopher, argues that reason is the only means of producing reliable knowledge: 'I think, therefore I am.' For Descartes the body was a machine, following the laws of physics. Without the reference to an actor's body, the dualistic view of the human being was intensified and continued by the American practitioner, Strasberg in adapting only the earlier phases of Stanislavski's concepts and approaches which is considered as a valuable way for analyzing and creating a specific character specifically in contemporary acting/actor training in Korea.

on the harmonization between the sense (rhythm) of body and spoken words. Suzuki argues that “there can be no words spoken that are not intimately connected to bodily sensations and rhythms” [14].

This implies that the most potent forces through his assumptions with practical approaches are to facilitate and create an actor’s capacity, specifically his/her inner potentials within which an actor’s subtle movement initiate and move his/her body as oneness. In other words, “every part of each single movement is imbued with a degree of significance which is generally totally unknown in the West” [15]. In particular, Suzuki developed a physical grammar, called ‘the grammar of the feet’ in order to integrate physical and mental systems, to create a body-mind which was adapted by the principles of Kabuki and Noh theatre tradition.

Suzuki argues that “one reason the modern theatre is so tedious to watch because it has no feet”; an actor “can still perform without arms and hands, but to perform without feet would be inconceivable”: for Suzuki, realism in the theatre led to the simplest forms of naturalistic movement [16]. In this sense, Shinobu Origuchi, a prominent Japanese anthropologist, adds that “Suzuki is equally aware that in the contemporary world, its usage is simply to ‘eradicate the ordinary, everyday sense of the body’ in order to build a powerfully expressive stage presence” [17]. In brief, Suzuki’s goal is to create an actor, who, for instance like ‘Grotowski’s actors’: to facilitate and lead “the whole body speak with the ability of physical expression and to nourish a tenacity of concentration” [18].

Specifically, the connection between an actor’s feet and floor is through the control of muscular, ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ breathing to conceal the effort required, and by moving from the ‘centre’ (the psycho-physical centre between the hips), learning to avoid feeling, and instead searching the detail of the movement and technique by oneself with internal monologue and silence. Thus, ‘struggling’ of the actor toward the ground is what encourages ‘emotional equilibrium’ against obstacles and attack: this allows the actor’s great freedom: working on him/herself with his/her own fictional context and presupposed audience with repeatable question: ‘how far am I prepared to go.’ In other words, Suzuki maintains that the “power of persuasion from the stage is determined by breath, by how well (or badly) the actor catches his breath ... the ‘pivot’ on which a word, a tension, a rhythm comes alive” [19]. As Zarrilli appropriately notes that the significance through such training is “engaging and exploring embodied consciousness, attending to, perception, imagining, in detail as one learns what it is like to listen, and to touch ‘the untouchable’” [20].

In this way, actors are aware of the physicality within rhythmic patterns, and the relationship between the body and space, simultaneously revealing their ability of response, strength and weakness. The notion of ‘stillness’ through this training is that ‘small outside movement means big inside movement’ or as Allain defines this process as to be ‘outside stop, inside no stop’ to make the whole body speak, even when an actor is silent [21]. In this sense, Zeami also claims “the less done the better” of Noh theatre in order to achieve the stillness: “even when the actor has stopped all exterior movement of his body, the well-disciplined dynamism of the body itself can move the audience”, so that for Zeami, the ideal of acting is ‘perfect balance’ between internal tension (stillness) and articulated movement, which he calls ‘mutuality in balance’ [22].

Therefore, the purpose of Suzuki’s training is to develop concentration on body by controlling the breathing with the centre, and to learn the subconscious ability of the body. Consequently, an actor is aware of the relationship between the upper and lower halves of body with the resistance-energy: “the upper body pulling up and the lower half pushing down into the ground that is found in Noh” as a total psycho-physiological engagement of body and mind in order to build energy, solidity, resistance [23].

4. CONCLUSION: SUGGESTIONS TO OVERCOME DUALITY OF ACTING/TRAINING

To conclude, we have attempted to examine how a balance between an actor’s body and mind can be achieved in retracing and articulating a perspective from Diderot’s concept in compare to Suzuki’s approaches and assumptions for the body/mind integration of an actor.

Although it is not the face value through this research, it is hard to judge whether Suzuki’s technique is, as he said, ‘a universal physical movement’ in regards to a pedagogical and an intercultural concept as we all live in, and function as separate individuals living in a pluralistic global community. Blacking, a British anthropologist, argues that there is “no such thing as the human body, there are many kinds of body, which

are fashioned by the different environments and expectations that societies have of their members' bodies" [24]. Moreover, Allain also concludes that Suzuki's training is not "for every individual or for every culture, but it can work" and "at least not yet satisfactorily articulated in theory or practice for a non-Japanese context" [25].

This research would argue that in terms of understanding and adapting any training sources with its practical approaches, it is important to note that Suzuki's and even other codified training sources/techniques maintain a complementary, harmonization between body and mind or impulse and action based on myths, archetype, or its unique identity. Here, we necessarily need to acknowledge the fact that the unification of these seemingly "oppositional but complementary" elements which is regarded as the "central task of acting" [26].

If we agree with the above, the central issue is whether the actor should concentrate on the artifice of the theatre or whether the actor should attempt to portray 'real' people as Koreans we have engaged and faced through the last decades. It is important to understand that acting styles deserving the description of 'natural' in earlier centuries differ greatly from what we today (traditionally) associate with the concepts of 'realistic' and/or 'naturalistic' with the movement of realism/naturalism in the last part of nineteenth century. Thus, the question of "is a great actor nowadays the same as a great actor was in the times of Diderot?" is also worthless or not an appropriate one [27].

Rather, it is significant to note that an actor would have to understand and inhabit such codified/traditional modes of acting based on indigenous paradigms of the body including voicing, the body-mind relationship, awareness and principles such as innate rhythm and/or beat of body.⁶ It means that any performing arts represent a cultural collective unconsciousness and is reflected as a unique rhythm⁷ including energy, level of rhythm, tempo, intensity, duration of action and so on. In such performances, therefore, an actor has to inhabit key principles with selected skills and reach the deepest integration level through his/her bodily experience. By this process, both the actors and the spectators can arrive at what is known as collective experience, which is the same as Grotowski's concept: toward 'total act': 'translumination': 'moving toward a radiant', 'lucid', 'inspiring state of being' [28].

Barba suggests that in order to achieve integration actors must find and repeat exercises, as learning a foreign language. This would then, they will become 'absorbed' into the actor's muscle memory and become instantaneous and reflexive. In addition, those exercises can be repeated in a different order with different rhythms, directions, and even in an extroverted or introverted manner [29]. However, Barba argues that once an actor has mastered particular principles, it is also necessary to explore new principles because mastered principles will produce 'mechanical actions.' Barba notes:

A theatre can [...] open itself to experiences of other theatres [...] in order to seek out the basic principles which it has in common with other theatres, and to transmit these principles through its own experience. [...] opening diversity does not necessarily mean falling into syncretism and into a confusion of languages [...] which might explain why they resemble each other, but their possible uses. In doing so, it will render a service both to the person of the Occidental and Oriental theatre, to he who has a tradition as well as to he who suffer from the lack of one [30].

This research would suggest that a specific culture is a specific memory of one's unconsciousness. It means that culture is based on 'habitual and mechanical behavior.' To internalize such cultural sources, like Suzuki's technique, actors can obtain "through repeated, thorough training and rehearsals for integrating his/her mind and body so that dramatic effects appear almost 'automatically' or 'spontaneously'" [31]. For

⁶ "Inner organic rhythm initiated by central body impulse, breath, pulse, and muscular action, the actor, dancer, moving person is brought vividly to the fore" (Goodridge: 124). Goodridge argues that the subject of rhythm was largely neglected in Britain, and suggests attention to movement-rhythm and timing in the theatre.

⁷ Energy and rhythm were evident in the patterning of accents and changing tensions in bodily movement, in muscular action, in repetition: in gestures and in transference of weight in steps of various kinds. This weight transference led to other rhythmic movement, the swing of arms as people walked and the swinging plaits of the child. A rhythm may describe one particular pattern of movement (ibid: 26).

example, as Zeami maintains, that is the ideal of acting: 'perfect balance' between internal tension (stillness) and articulated movement, and what Suzuki argues that 'culture is the body' [32]. As we have examined and seen that it could be an important way to overcome the historical phenomenon of duality of mind/body acting particularly in contemporary Korea, and be a point of departure for acting/training for the psychophysical engagement of the actor.

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