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## Introduction

‘Neither here nor there... a heart blown open’. My title is inspired by a poem by Seamus Heaney about driving on a road in the west of Ireland. The driver sees the wild silver sea on one side of the road and a slate-grey lake on the other. It is, for me, a poem of awakening. The poet is secure in his car as nature unfolds in all its energy and passion around him, and from time to time a blast of wind catches the car and buffets it, reminding him how alive and vulnerable he is. Keeping a steady path is not always easy, or desirable. It is essential to be surprised sometimes, to be awake and open to whatever the road brings, and to keep going. The road is the still centre of existence to which he must always refer.

I am apt to be ahead of myself on the road, or caught up in high energies and veering off it. This has been evident in my struggles to develop as a performing artist. I can find several stories from classes and rehearsals that highlight my impatience and inefficient use of energy. Yet I know exactly what I want to achieve.

I know it when I see it in others. I remember watching Ralph Fiennes as Frank in ‘Faith Healer’, many years ago in the Gate theatre in Dublin<sup>1</sup>. He spoke his final monologue in almost complete stillness. In it he seemed to become a ghost, the light played on his body and his outline merged with the air around him. It was mesmerising and so simple and I have never forgotten it. And I have since learnt how special it is, and not simple at all to achieve.

I know it when I read about it in the biographies and treatises of several artists I will refer to in this thesis.

And I am lucky to know it in myself sometimes and to be able to reflect constructively on artistic attempts that are not so successful.

It is partly the courage to fulfil potential; it is several other lessons learnt and yet to be learnt; it is knowing that the job will never be complete; and that this is the joy, not tragedy, of it; it is an acceptance of self and a consequent empathy with others, even the greatest.

John Gielgud writes a beautiful reflection on his career: ‘nothing can compare with the magic of ...the living actor appearing before the living audience... The thrill of success, the dread of monotony...the sense of eternal imperfection, with its occasional reward in a moment or two

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<sup>1</sup> *Faith Healer*. By Brian Friel, directed by Jonathan Kent, performances by Ralph Fiennes, Ingrid Craigie and Ian Mc Diarmuid. Gate theatre company, 9 Feb. 2006, The Gate Theatre, Dublin.

of thrilling contact... This is the actor's unique personal achievement, rewarding him, for just a few short minutes, for all the experiments and labours and disappointments of many years'.<sup>2</sup> If one of our consummate greats can write like this, what hope there is for every artist, to keep driving on. Because it definitely is not about success in the worldly sense. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In this thesis I will document the search for my path as a performing artist; look at aspects of how several artists found their paths, and how these informed, and inspired, the search for mine, both in process and reflection. I will tell stories from my life, studies, and performance projects. Many of the stories come from my third year of training. I have found that it is only lately, and in the writing of them, that a lot of earlier lessons are being embody/mind-ed. I will draw on experiences from all of these elements with some reference to the first two years training, and relate them to my reading from sources such as Chekhov, Barba, Zarilli and others.

My title is also, of course, an aspiration. For who would not want to have her heart blown open.

It is a challenge, a promise to myself, to discover something.

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis supervisor Martin Psenicka for facilitating this process with such openness and encouragement; and him along with every one of my teachers in DAMU and HAMU for facilitating the journey that inspired it.

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<sup>2</sup> John Gielgud, *Stage Directions* (London: Sceptre, 1963) 119.

## *Postscript*

By Seamus Heaney

And some time make the time to drive out west  
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,  
In September or October, when the wind  
And the light are working off each other  
So that the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,  
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,  
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads  
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.  
Useless to think you'll park and capture it  
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

From time to time I quote directly from my own reflections on classes or rehearsals. These sections are in italics. In referring to Dialogické jednání ((Inter)acting with the Inner Partner) classes I use the acronym DJ. Where books are referenced more than once in footnotes I use the short book title.

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis O Driscoll, "Seamus Heaney on writing 'Postscript': a 'sidelong glimpse of something flying past'," *Irish times*: Culture, 7 Sept. 2013, 20 Dec. 2017  
<<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/seamus-heaney-on-writing-postscript-a-sidelong-glimpse-of-something-flying-past-1.1517558>>

## Liminalality

My current reality is what Victor Turner would term liminoid. I am interested in liminality. Turner is quoted by Richard Schechner in a book on performance studies; ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there.’<sup>4</sup> I am now neither here nor there, in the sense that I am a student, in between states. When I am no longer a student I will be an actor, in roles or in-between again. Life is a succession of liminoid states. As a performer I experience liminality in a more specific sense. In performance I am not me and not ‘not me’. The actor performs in a highly charged in-between space-time, a liminal space-time’.<sup>5</sup> This is a fascinating concept. And I have several experiences of how subjective this liminal space-time is.

*I am at clown class. My task is to come onstage and do nothing. I am wearing my red nose. I come on. I do nothing and I leave.*

*‘What do we say about Margaret?’*

*‘She really, really wanted to do something.’*

*‘Was she there a long time or a short time?’*

*‘A short time.’*

*I was confused. I felt like I was there too long if anything. I fulfilled my brief though it was not easy for me. I did nothing. I did not move. So how could everyone see that I really, really wanted to move? I did. But how was it so obvious? And how could anyone think I was there for too short a time? I realised in a very concrete way that audiences need time and they tolerate ‘nothing’ for far longer than I assumed, because of course, nothing is always something. And has the potential to be more than something. And as a performer my concept of time is unrelated to the objective reality. And even in a class of six, there are several objective realities.*

And from a reflection on a workshop I co-facilitated during an Erasmus internship in Newcastle Upon Tyne in the summer of 2017, an objective viewpoint;

*Because I am interested in stillness in performance I wrote in the promotion that the workshop will explore this theme among many others. The workshop is just 3 hours long. There are several items we want to cover. We hardly touch stillness. Except once when the group are doing an exercise called ‘shoal of fish’. They move in unison, like a shoal would, around the space, after several turns I ask them to find an end and come to stillness. I let them breathe in stillness for several moments. It is*

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: an Introduction*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge 2006) 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Performance Studies: an Introduction*, 72.

*electrifying. After the workshop people commented that though they enjoyed the time, we didn't deal with stillness. But for me that moment was enough. I saw a group of performers poised for God knows what, they carried within their bodies all the energy of the exercise and yet they did 'nothing'. There was an epic quality to their stillness, like a great statue or photograph that seems at any moment might come to life, but how and what next?! When I discussed this with one dancer it was clear that his feelings inside the stillness did not echo mine as observer. I realised that performance requires faith and patience. And sometimes the audience is right!*

**“It is in the nothing that people stand.”**

I am very inspired by other art forms. There was a wonderful televised arts show called ‘The Works’ on Irish television last year. It dealt with different artists each episode. One week it looked at the work of two architects. They won a commission to design a faculty building in Lima, Peru. One of the architects made a statement that I remember very well. She quoted La Soto; ‘Architects should make as much nothing as possible, because it is in the nothing that people stand’<sup>6</sup>. It is in stillness that the imagination can breathe and take flight. Action comes from stillness and ends in it. Listening can only happen in stillness of some kind. You have to stop, to go on. Liminality is stopping. Then we build and try to make sense of nothing.

I sometimes walk to school via Hadovka Park. There is a sculpture trail there with seven sculptures, all beautiful, but one is exquisite. It is of a man taut and prone, his arms elongated in two loops that eventually connect to his feet, so he is prone inside a double circle. On very cold mornings dew clings to his body and drops from him to the ground. He is in suspended full animation, still yet bursting with life, profusely ‘sweating’. When I look at him I understand what fulfilled stillness means and why it is harder, and more exhausting, to be still in potential than to move.

Mike Alfreds writes of similar feelings in Vigeland Sculpture Park in Oslo.<sup>7</sup> He is reminded there of Michael Chekhov’s psychological gestures. The statues are of figures in archetypal, heightened and in extremis poses....He writes later that ‘one purpose of art is to give some form to the shapelessness of life, some coherence to the chaos- not merely to echo it’.<sup>8</sup> I went to Vigeland Park in February 2018. There are several heart stoppingly beautiful sculptures and one in particular that stilled me to the core. An elderly couple are in an embrace. He holds her as in a pieta; she looks on the cusp of death. But not yet. There is life yet. It is in

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<sup>6</sup> *The Works Presents: Grafton Architects*, RTE 1, Dublin 4 Nov. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Different Every Night: Freeing the Actor* (London: NHB, 2014) 238.

<sup>8</sup> *Different Every Night*, 248.

active stillness, what Philip Zarilli terms ‘still but not still’<sup>9</sup>, that this forming art can be most poetically achieved. There are many methods of achieving this stillness, such as the physical embodiment of sculptures, an exercise we explored in an early movement class. Through taking on qualities we saw in sculptures personally chosen from the several dotted around Prague, we found a way with bodies not brains, to be in active stillness.

Alfreds describes the Laban movement method as another potential pathway. The ‘elements’ of Laban movement (light, strong; direct, flexible; sustained, broken) are combined into ‘efforts’. For example a combination of light, flexible and sustained elements combine into a ‘floating’ effort. Or if I think of my statue in Hadovka, strong, direct and sustained elements combine into a ‘pressing’ effort. There are different scales of efforts and different applications, but one potentially fascinating one is in change without physicalisation, i.e. stillness.<sup>10</sup>

David Zinder writes very entertainingly about a ‘still’ moment in cinema, when Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, is on a rope bridge over a crocodile infested river between two sets of bad guys. ‘(He stops and) says “Oh shit!” But there is a devilish gleam in his eye... I have a clear sense that his mind is racing, but that it all begins in that moment of relaxation- a kind of Zen-oriented Soft Focus- when he frees up his grey matter in order to allow it to concentrate on *nothing*, and by so doing opens up the possibility of concentrating on *everything*.’<sup>11</sup>

He can see all that in a moment when nothing is happening and that ‘nothing’ is more full than what happens next (he cuts the rope bridge and there is the predictable cinematic mayhem where the bad guys fall into the river and get eaten by the crocodiles) because it is *happening* in the observer as well as the actor.

It sounds like Harrison Ford did a Laban effort switch doesn’t it, from ‘gliding’ to ‘slashing’?

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<sup>9</sup> Philip B. Zarilli, *Psychophysical Acting: an intercultural approach after Stanislavski* (New York: Routledge, 2009) Quoted severally.

<sup>10</sup> *Different every Night* 229-237. Other ‘efforts’ are Flicking (light.flexible,broken); Gliding (light.direct.sustained); Dabbing (light.direct.broken); Wringing (strong.flexible.sustained); Slashing (strong.flexible.broken); Thrusting/Punching (strong.direct.broken). We had a practical introduction to Laban in a workshop given in year 1 by Mirka Eliasova.

<sup>11</sup> David Zinder, *Image Work Training and the Chekhov Technique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2009) 10.

Or he might have been inspired by Michael Chekhov's concept of tempo, and his distinguishing of them into 'inner and outer varieties... Whatever slow tempo you use on the stage, your self as an artist must always be active'.<sup>12</sup>

In was in Chekhov's book, 'To the Actor' I first read that to be a great actor there must be complete harmony between body and psychology in performance. And 'every actor, to a greater or lesser degree, suffers from some of his body's resistance.'<sup>13</sup> Chekhov's exercises are designed to help overcome these resistances and to enable the elements that he terms crucial to great pieces of art, 'ease, form, beauty and entirety'. The artist's body must become 'a piece of art'<sup>14</sup>. He does not mean beauty in the external sense. An ugly event or countenance can be, must be beautiful, or else it will merely repel. He cites Lear's excoriating speeches to his ungrateful daughters as an example. (I am reminded of Paul Scofield as Lear in Peter Brook's 'King Lear'<sup>15</sup>). Schechner quotes Susanne K Langer on beauty; 'Every good work of art is beautiful; as soon as we find it so, we have grasped its expressiveness, and until we do we have not seen it as good art, though we may have ample intellectual reason to believe it is so. Beautiful works may contain elements that, taken in isolation, are hideous... Beauty is not identical with the normal, and certainly not with charm and sense appeal, though all such properties may go to the making of it. Beauty is expressive form'.<sup>16</sup>

In the quest for beauty Chekhov cautions against a 'suppressed inferiority complex or megalomania... egotistical desires, fear of making mistakes, unrecognised fear of the audience (... even hatred), nervousness... jealousy... finding fault with others'. In short the 'accumulation of psychological garbage'. He encourages the objective methods and techniques of radiating and receiving; inner and outer tempos; psychological gestures (that concretise and inform core character). One must have 'an invisible director'.<sup>17</sup> I notice that his cures for aberrant psychology are rooted in the physical body.

I have some experience of an inner/outer contrast exercise at an audition I did with a company in London called 'Told by an Idiot'. As auditions go it was pretty special. They are

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: on the technique of acting* (Mansfield CT: Martino Publishing, 2014) 83.

<sup>13</sup> *To the actor*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *To the actor*, Chapter 1 Body and Psychology 1-20.

<sup>15</sup> *King Lear*, prod. Athena Film, dir. Peter Brook, 1971. Lear (Paul Scofield) was cruel, ugly in his contempt for Goneril, his cursing of her, and utterly compelling. It came from a conviction that he was in the right. Likewise Goneril's self contempt leading to her viscerally enacted suicide. And several other scenes in this relentlessly dark and beautiful movie.

<sup>16</sup> *Performance Studies: an Introduction*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> *To the actor*, 173-174.



a renowned physical theatre company and their workshops are highly prized and priced. This audition was in the form of a 90 minute workshop for free. One of our tasks was what the facilitator, artistic director and cofounder of the company, Paul Hunter, called the 'yes/no' exercise. In this exercise we were desperate to sit in an environment where sitting was forbidden, and had to make this clear to the observer without moving. He kept encouraging 'Do less, do less, do even less'. Eventually I felt a 'shift' in my body without changing my position. Another similar exercise was called the 'perfect shoes 2 sizes too small'. There was to be no outward manifestation of pain, but the distress had to be evident somewhere, maybe in the eyes; the objective, to 'give the audience a double take'. I realised the power of the still body and active mind and I am determined to cultivate it.

I am likewise inspired by the writings of Yoshi Oida, who says more or less the same thing as Chekhov that interior and exterior of the performer should ideally be contradictory and quotes Zeami 'the body moves 7/10, the heart moves 10/10'<sup>18</sup>.

Oida later relates performing onstage to a duel. 'You can only win when you are ready to die'<sup>19</sup> Which to me is the ultimate metaphor, ready for nothingness, ready for the ultimate nothing.

I have recently worked on a performance piece based on the idea of extremes. I enact a personal story where I felt the most intense emotions and was unable to move. I prepared this piece in a class, 'Basic Training for Actors' given by Roman Horak in HAMU (from now on referred to as Roman's class). Horak works with several influences, one of which I can see most clearly is Eugenio Barba, (but also Chaikin, Copeau, Brook, Grotowski, Staniewski and so on. The more I read the more I feel that all performance ideas interrelate and develop on each other, and in any case all practitioners have the same ultimate aim, that of reaching sincerity and truth on stage, and there is something to be learnt from each one. And of course Grotowski acknowledged his debt to Stanislavski from the beginning. Like Stanislavski his primary aim was to help the actor 'live more truthfully' on stage. 'The experience of life is the question, and the response is simply through true creation. It begins from the effort not to hide oneself and not to lie'.<sup>20</sup>) We are focused in class on what Barba terms the pre-expressive level of work. 'Before representing anything at all the performer must *be*, as a

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<sup>18</sup> Yoshi Oida and L Marshall, *The Invisible Actor* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> *The Invisible Actor*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Hodge ed., *Twentieth century actor training* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 193 -195

performer.’<sup>21</sup> We aim to explore, know and exploit our full physical and vocal reserves. The warm up exercises are focused on waking the body, making it ready, alive and fully present. In Barba’s dictionary of theatre anthropology there is an early page which can be called the A to Z. It sets out the stall for the whole book. A is for Artaud. He is quoted. ‘The theatre is the state...where one can apprehend the human anatomy; with the human anatomy, one can heal and direct life’. Z is for Zeami. There follows a long quote dealing with the three basic elements of Noh theatre according to Zeami: skin, flesh and bone. Tantalisingly he goes on to say that the three are almost never found in the same actor. ‘Bone represents the exceptional artistic strength that a gifted actor shows naturally in his performance...through his inborn ability. Flesh... arises from the power of the actor’s skill that he has obtained by his mastering of ... chant and dance. Skin, on the other hand, may be explained as a manner of ease and beauty... that can be obtained when the other two elements are thoroughly perfected’.<sup>22</sup> Many masters have since echoed that true virtuosity in performance is not without great effort, commitment and even sacrifice. It may be that Zeami’s three elements can be found for moments at a time within an actor. It is impossible to see how they could be consistently all present. Kenneth Tynan, the great and positively influential, theatre critic, writes very entertaining, and sometimes scathingly about ‘masters’ of their craft in one paragraph ‘who have much to learn’ in another<sup>23</sup>. In any case perfection is uninteresting.

‘Bone’ is my natural ability. It is the material I was born with and I have no control over it. I can only work on the ‘flesh’. For me, voice is an accessible skill. I am naturally good at it, have almost perfect pitch and a good range and quality to my voice. Movement, on the other hand, is more of a challenge. Yes, I know they are connected and without one, the other is inevitably compromised. However, I believe I could hold my own more readily in an opera than in a ballet. So I make myself go to dance lessons and I attend physical theatre classes and workshops regularly.

I love to dance unless I have to learn steps. When I was a child my mother enrolled me in an Irish step dancing class. I was delighted. But I had limited natural ability and despite all my efforts my teacher refused to allow me to progress with my classmates. I had to stay with the beginners doing the same simple side step- 1,2,3,4,5,6,7. **1,2,3. 1,2,3.** 1,2,3,4,5,6,7. **1,2,3. 1,2,3-** for several semesters. Eventually I was a good foot taller than my class mates, progress

<sup>21</sup> *Twentieth century actor training*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Eugenio Barba and N. Savarese, *A dictionary of Theatre anthropology: The secret art of the Performer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2006) 21.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, ed. D. Shellard (London: NHB, 2007) 98.

seemed further away than ever, and I begged my mother to let me leave. Looking back I don't believe I can have been as bad as all that. I think the teacher might have had a mean streak! However I have always believed that choreographed dance is beyond me, and for the most part it is. But I also believe that as a performer, knowing how to move, knowing my body as a dancer knows her body is essential. I have been inspired by a book called 'The Wise body'. It is a series of interviews with aging dancers on their work as older performers with aging bodies. Finally I feel that maybe I can start again. I will quote two that have particularly reassured and cemented my desire to be a great mover. Firstly from the flamenco dancer La Tati; 'It's not how high you lift your leg, it's how you lift it'<sup>24</sup>, and Jackie Lansley, 'the best actors in my opinion have usually been very physically aware people who dance *at some level* (my italics); and the most interesting dance... has usually a sense of total theatre about it. Age is part of this'.<sup>25</sup>

So on the first day I work on my piece based on the idea of extremes I learn something very interesting. I am so focused on stillness that I hardly move. And it is inevitably commented on.

-You can move more

-But I want to work with stillness

-Ok. You can work with stillness. Stillness is one thing. Stasis is another.

I realise that I need some contrasts, or even a localised betrayal of calamity, a jerking finger even in a body otherwise still, or some latent movement betrayed only by breath or eyes.

I am also wondering if my story is too overwrought. There is an American book inspired by David Mamet's direction called 'A Practical Handbook for the Actor.'<sup>26</sup> One of the tips in that is to have an 'as if' when playing a particularly tragic or high stakes scene. The 'as if' is more mundane, but relates to the dilemma in a way that is true but not likely to inflame the situation. So in my extreme situation where I experience debilitating rage when a loved one betrays me, it can be 'as if' I am playing football with some friends and one of them kicks the ball onto the road and it gets run over and punctured by a truck. I delight in how in terms of performance wisdom can come from so many disparate sources. Father and one might say,

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<sup>24</sup> Jackie Lansley and F. Early *The Wise Body: Conversations with experienced dancers* ( Bristol: Intellect, 2011) 53.

<sup>25</sup> *The Wise Body*, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Melissa Bruder et al, *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986) 31-32.

Fuhrer of 'The Method', Lee Strasberg writes beautifully of the importance of body relaxation preceding all training of internal skills<sup>27</sup>. Everyone recognises the importance of the body at some level. Even it is just to keep it out of the way!

As I work on this etude though I find the joy in my work lessening. The personal situation is not so interesting anymore. I wonder why I allowed an indifferent friend to take my serenity so easily. I no longer feel a commitment to the extremes of feeling. I merely want to let it go. One night as I go through my journal from this most recent summer I read a passage that really stops me. I know now that I want to work on that.

*Yesterday morning was really bright and blue. All the cows were ranged over the bigger of the two hills. They were relaxed in the heat. Some stopped chewing long enough to stare at me. But they didn't startle or move away.*

*Everyone I met was smiling. One man in a motorised wheelchair was singing at the top of his lungs. He cocked his head and winked at me.*

*Love was in the air. I was so happy. And then for some unaccountable reason I remembered us all standing around Dan's bed when he was dying. (Dan is my uncle, my father's oldest brother. He died in 1997, aged 68 of disseminated prostate cancer.)*

*I remember telling him I loved him, leaning close to him because they say that hearing is the last sense to go and at this stage he wasn't responding. I wanted to be the last voice he heard. Then suddenly he got very agitated. He was calling out 'Who will milk the last of the cows?!'*

*He got more and more anguished and no one knew what to do. I said 'I will Dan'. And he immediately relaxed. 'You will?' 'Yes. 'That's good so.' And those were his last words.*

I have often wondered about the significance of this offer. It moves me still and I remember every dying breath of my uncle, a dear man who worked most of his life teaching English literature in Malaysia. He was also an enthusiastic amateur actor and singer and he had beautiful silver hair. Dying was the last thing he wanted to do. There was always something left to finish right up until the last weeks, the last moments! What was the meaning of this handing over to me?

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<sup>27</sup> Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion: The development of the method*, ed. E. Morphos (New York: PLUME, 1988) 124-130.

It was suddenly clear to me that this was an important event worthy of exploration. It has the extremes of life and death, vocations, promises and limited time; personal yet widely applicable themes.

So I brought it to class and worked at physicalising it. At first I treated it as a narrative. I mimed walking through the hills on a hot day; I lowered myself to the ground and embodied a chewing cow. I stood up again, undulated a bit to symbolise time melting and did a mini backbend to become a person in a bed cheyne-stoking and 'milking cows', then a person forward bent, confused and ministering, again a dying 'milker' ever more desperately alternating between personas. Eventually I got to the part where the 'milker' was reassured and relaxed and died. Stillness at last. The whole class was laughing.

Roman reminded me that the idea was not to mime a narrative but to pick points, moments in the narrative, embody them and take time in those moments. I will quote him; 'It is about finding another way to move'.

With his help I narrowed the story down to points. My walk became a cow on her haunches within one step, I rolled on my back to become the milker, rolled back to the cow, became the insistent milker and oblivious cow again and once more, at last the calmness of the cow claimed the milker and she lay back exhausted and drained and still. This time no one laughed. The story did not make logical sense but it somehow had more meaning. I lay there for some moments.

Roman asked me how I felt.

I didn't know how to express this and I intellectualised about it being a haiku rather than a short story. He smiled and said nothing.

On reflection it came to me that what I had felt was not in my head. I was more relaxed in the cow moments and certainly at the end. I felt more anguished in the milking. It was a feeling that came from the body, from escalating extremities of movement and stillness. I felt uncertain at times, but stayed with it and ultimately I was completely 'in my body' perhaps for the first time.

And it started with a personally meaningful story.

In the preface to his book, Psychophysical acting, Philip Zarilli relates an anecdote from his training when a teacher shouted at him to use his whole body. He recounts how the huge

effort and he was making, and intention behind it, while causing him holistic exhaustion was belying a lack of ‘a more complex understanding of the body-mind relationship’. ‘A story is told as much by silence as by speech... humiliation can be an actor’s greatest friend’.<sup>28</sup>

His objective has been to find a way for actors to access this understanding. He explains that the psych part of psychophysical is not psychological persay but refers to the ‘actor’s complete engagement of her energy, sensory awareness and perception-in-action in the moment’. Inspired by the thoughts of dramatists such as Michal Chekhov, Growtowski and David Zinder he sees the body as the primary medium of the imagination and emotions, and the breath, or ‘prana’ as a stepping off point for exploration and discovery.<sup>29</sup> This seems to make more sense than looking to the mind first and foremost, for how many of us know and can articulate our emotions accurately, they are ephemeral and change like the wind, and any attempt at materialising them is often clichéd. Amy Weston writes about the tendency of some directors to look for results (e.g. ‘Be more angry!’ ‘Be bigger!’ ‘Take it down!’) rather than allowing a genuine organic process to unfold<sup>30</sup>. I have been guilty of directing myself in this way. I wonder why I have up to now always sought to stimulate and pin ideas down intellectually first. On the intellectual level of course I have some idea, but the purpose of this thesis is not to get trapped in old ways.

The body → patience.

The body → heart

I have often heard the exhortation to act with the heart more than the head. But what does this practically mean? It sounds like one of those desirable states that should be easy if only I were enlightened enough, but ask the exhorter to elaborate, facilitate such a state with words and he will shrug his shoulders and have no answer, except maybe a further even more maddening statement such as ‘it is for you to find it’. Find what?! It is a stock phrase almost, a provocation that sounds meaningful but is in reality meaningless, from an intellectual point of view. I had an inkling of an insight recently at an ‘(inter)acting with the inner partner’ (DJ) class. I came into the space alone as usual and decided to wait until inspiration hit. I racked my brains to come up with an idea. Nothing. Except a profound sense of emptiness and sorrow. Consequent on my lack of inspiration or a resting state? I don’t know. But anyway

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<sup>28</sup> Zarilli, 1-4

<sup>29</sup> Zarilli, 20-21

<sup>30</sup> Judith Weston, *Directing Actors* (Studio City CA: M Wiese Productions, 1996).

that was all that was there and that became the theme of my attempt. I sat down dejected and thoroughly frustrated. My head failed me in an artistic sense but it was a great teacher. I saw that looking to my mind for answers in the moment is not functional if I want to inspire myself and others, if I want to be truly alive I must start with something else. The body? The heart? Is this what those maddening professors mean? Is this the source of ‘the heart’?

Of course the body as source of ‘heart’ is all very well, but it takes patience. The body cannot be rushed, and if it is forced it is always painfully obvious to self and onlooker. It is amazing how the stage magnifies artifice. So another purpose for stillness, searching.

There is a beautiful story told by the Japanese dancer, Yoshito Ohno, in the book ‘Wise Body’. He recounts a time when during a performance he didn’t move, because ‘he couldn’t’. There was a disgruntled discomfort in the audience. But he stayed still, truthful to his state at the time, that of being immobilised, unable. The piece was performed in the context of huge social unrest at the time and stillness seemed the most eloquent response in the moment, even though he had prepared a piece more dynamic. His decision was vindicated by a reviewer. He quotes the reviewer directly; ‘he didn’t move when he couldn’t move, he didn’t do what other people do.’ Ohno goes on to say ‘He was praising my honesty in the moment’<sup>31</sup>. Mindful stillness is full of a decision. It can be an intensely personal revelation in relation to an inner or outer set of circumstances. In Mr Ohno’s story it required great honesty and courage to see it through. It requires an open minded audience too; and perhaps a level of known skill in the performer.

### **Where there’s no will there’s a way.**

The body moves with or without a will. I can consciously move a wrist or an elbow, or I can allow my joints to be moved, as if I were in a mountain stream. I am consistently looking for ways around fear and blocks in movement. I think it was Grotowski that lamented once that the greatest tragedy for an actor is to be afraid of his body. His path through acrobatics and repeated movements sought to transcend this dictatorship of the body by fearful mind. ‘Here begins the discovery of trust in your own self’.<sup>32</sup> (I sometimes find that if my attention is shifted to some person or sound outside of myself, obstacles dissolve. I have done somersaults and back rolled on my weak side in contact improvisation class and even one moderately successful handstand because a phrase of music inspired me. I wonder if this is

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<sup>31</sup>*The Wise body*, 77-78.

<sup>32</sup>*Twentieth Century actor training*, 201.

enough or do I need to be able to do these manoeuvres at will. Otherwise the knowledge is untappable, asleep.) There were no shortcuts, a lot of hard work and sacrifice in Grotowski's transcendence. I can appreciate how a foray into acrobatics might increase my body's range of expression. I am exploring this and feel a certain power within, a potential untapped, but this potential is limited. And I prefer to ease myself into unsuspecting agility. I have found none better than taking the will out of the way. I am blessed with an agile imagination. If my pelvis 'ball' is bobbing around in a turbulent stream it will be the most natural thing in the world for it to carry the rest of me onto the floor, or into a leap. If I try to will my pelvis down, everything gets in the way, knees lock, I anticipate the pain of landing, there is no flow but an intermittent jerking and awkwardness of protecting arms. I have come to realise that by leaving it alone, the body will find a way. I have also wondered if this is the source of the elusive 'heart' in performing. I know that when my body is moving without will my mind is free and often a situation or story will arise. Can I also impose a known story or structure, in the case of my 'extreme' situation from Horák's class for instance? I have my map of movements, my story measured in points, words. How can I take the will out of a known structure? It is like a storm drain into which my 'ball' (pelvis) falls and is flushed through. And so it falls without will into a set piece of choreography. The mind is still free. I have realised this in the writing of it. The mind in retrospect and reflection is a useful tool. In the stillness after an exercise sincerely performed insights can surface freely, a bubbling up and pop of- so that is what it means! This can never be taken away. There are so many kinds of stillness, so many applications.

I walked in a forest one clear autumn day. Nothing stirred. The setting sun shone golden on the trunks of trees, their leaves; pools of golden light were on the ground. It was all still. And then I saw a leaf fall, then another, then another. The sky was full of falling leaves. It had always been thus. In my stillness I saw that the world is never ever still. I can only surmise that it is the same for my 'stillness'. Tick Tock Tick. The leaves were surprising. Such is it that I can be surprising as an actor. To be surprising is to be oneself, not copying anyone or being predictable in the sense, that I do what people generally do. I react in my own way which is unique to me. In a clown class my teacher said that one of the rules of clownery is that the clown always has a secret. The secret can be verbal, or physical. It can be some tick or skill or anomaly that only I have. No one else in the history of the world has this feature. It is a way to find my individuality. On first hearing this instruction I gave up immediately. I



have nothing that no one else has. I sang a high note. So what?! A lot of people can sing high notes. I envied a co student for her double jointed thumbs! So much of acting is about attitude and brazenness in the face of doubt. After all there is a uniqueness in the way Kiri Te Kanawa and Maria Callas sing; both opera singers, singing the same notes, and I would know them apart from a recording. So too there is uniqueness in my sound, or a possibility of uniqueness as long as I am free in my body and not copying anyone. It is simply a matter of belief. Robert Cohen says there is little point in striving to be a very good actor. One must strive to be a 'great' one<sup>33</sup>. The only possibility of achieving greatness as a performer is in finding what is unique about oneself, in being surprising. There is a great article on what makes a great actor<sup>34</sup>. If only reading articles were enough! I believe that the qualities of truthfulness, vulnerability, courage are all achievable by anyone. Very good performers all have them. Being surprising is something else. It is a feature of finding something no one else has, or in simply recognising and using that something when one has it.

One of my most powerful experiences in DAMU was in a workshop convened by Professor Andrei Malaev-Babel, proponent of the Nikolai Demidov method. (The workshop was part of an international symposium called "the S Word: merging methodologies" which explored the influence of Stanislavski on contemporary theatre and was held in Prague in March 2017.) The professor asked us to divide into pairs and present a very simple text which we were to know by rote. My opening line was 'Have you been here before?' My partner replied 'no'.

We repeated this several times in a neutral way to fix the dialogue and then the professor asked me to 'empty my mind' and when it was empty to say my line. He advised a small shake of the head as a method of 'emptying'. I was dubious yet curious. I shook every thought out of my head and I said 'have you been here before?' And the result astounded me. It suddenly became a story. My voice was automatically deeper and full of portent and fear. And even the room seemed to shiver. My partner looked very worried and said 'no'. The professor asked 'what happened?' and I did not know. I only knew that I was suddenly afraid. I imagined a courtroom, waiting to give evidence that might incriminate someone I loved and yet I wanted to save my own skin. I was probably influenced by Demidov's own story. He was a victim of the Stalinist era. But I had no conscious awareness of this. I realised how

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Cohen, *Acting Power* (Palo Alto CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1978) ix.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Hooton, "How to tell good acting from bad acting according to a Shakespearean director", *Independent*, 24 Feb. 2016, 2 Mar 2016 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/how-to-tell-good-acting-from-bad-acting-according-to-a-shakespearean-director-a6892731.html>>.

something so simple as a shaking and emptying of the mind towards complete blankness, stillness, can leave the door open to fascinating possibilities.

This emptiness relates to the clear mind advocated by Yoshi Oida in his book, 'The Invisible Actor', already referenced. It is not an inert mind but the blank canvas mind of a child.

### **The hobo doesn't care that he has dirty shoes.**

In my pursuit of perfection I am hyperaware of every flaw. I have a habit of moving too much when I am nervous. I take a casual comment on this as devastating. 'I have been told this repeatedly for the two years plus I have been in training. Why haven't I kicked the habit yet? Maybe I am just not good enough. Maybe I don't have 'it' in me'. The most recent time this happened was at a clown class. I was showing an idea I had for an exercise. I wasn't completely certain of my idea. It would be an exploration. I came out and presented my colleague, a chair, to the audience. I was enacting some kind of frivolous jittery character. And the comment was that it was unclear and that I was moving too much. Crushing!

Luckily I shared my feelings with the teacher after the class. 'I don't think I will ever get rid of this habit. I am always moving too much!' I was almost in tears. The teacher looked at me in amazement. 'It is normal. When one does not know what to do, one moves too much. Me too!'

Then he told me a story about a hobo, who works in the fields. He does a hard day's work and when he comes home he has dirty shoes. 'He doesn't care that he has dirty shoes'.

In my striving for perfection all I can see are the dirty shoes. I am like the nagging house mate, the meticulous housekeeper.

I have often been told that if I want to change something, some negative habit for example, that it will change. What I have just realised is that it may not do so in the way I expect. Maybe it is the nagging house mate that needs to, or can, change. Then the hobo might just slip out of the dirty shoes by himself.

When a teacher of DJ told me I was 'indulging in tension' once, I was furious. If I was, I wasn't aware of it, and how dare he be so blunt and even cruel etc. I imagined how far a clinical psychologist would get with such an analysis and as I waited for my next turn I composed all sorts of justifications and rebuttals. By the time I got up again the sting has numbed a little. I began to interact. And once again I found that I was babbling, tense and self

conscious. I called on my ‘accomplished sister’ inner partner to rescue me. I waited, and she came. And she was so calm it surprised even me. My teacher asked me after the session what had happened. I told him that I had been upset about being so tense in the first round and ‘I decided not to’, and I made myself say it, ‘indulge in tension anymore’. It was an active decision and a breakthrough moment. I found the still centre of the tornado. I know she is there and I know where she is.

### **‘Small acts of repair’, Goat Island Performance Group**

Sometimes you find a book at exactly the right moment, when you doubt yourself and your right to go anywhere near an audience with your pitiful story. Such was the case with this book, essentially a documentation of mission, works and processes, of a Chicago based company, operating from 1987- 2009, committed to honest interaction within the group, their audiences, and the world.

‘...commitment establishes a sympathetic vibration that eradicates the distinction, even if only for a moment, between the performer and the audience, it destabilizes the us/them difference, and falsifies the question, “what if we just suck?”’

This commitment more than anything else requires courage... (This) does not mean that you have no fear, or that if you feel fear or anxiety or doubt you are doing something wrong. I only mean that if you experience fear, anxiety or doubt, you allow those feelings to occupy a lesser place of lesser importance. Those feelings are normal and common, and less important than the uncommonness of the performance.

What if this is not what I had hoped for? What if it’s not the performance I had wanted to make?

The answer to this also requires courage... to accept doing less than what you are capable of as if it is not less; to accept doing something different than what you had hoped to do as if it were not different; to accept the task of doing something you think you are not good at as if it were your speciality.<sup>35</sup>

My final authorial presentation was based on personal yet relatable stories. This did not make process any easier or feel less self absorbed. There were questions for me as to ‘why’ I wanted to tell my story that were only answered after the event and were not always reassuring as to motive. In short I told about wanting to be an actor of great roles, of trying

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Bottoms and M. Goulish, eds., *Small acts of repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 209.

out for these roles and generally failing to get auditions; and of parallel trials in real life. This platform was my way of exorcising the ghosts of these wished for parts and of understanding some of my life events through them. And I got to play them all, finally.

I did an earlier authorial presentation on the themes of aging, death and dementia. It was well received and I got a B grade. I was not happy. B is good, but it is not as good as A. What was my presentation missing? I had prepared well; it had a good dramaturgy. People were hooked and attentive. They laughed in all the right places and I got through it without a hitch. So where did I lose marks? I was very interested to find out and asked my supervisor. She understood my question was not about satisfying my ego, at least in the obvious sense. I will always appreciate the answer she gave me. She said that everything I did was ok. She knew I could do it. There was no risk. The answer made sense as soon as I heard it. I determined that I would do something that threatened me for the next presentation, my final. I would try and step over some boundaries and whether I succeeded or not would not matter as much as the process of challenging myself.

‘The great actor will make the audience think they have seen things they never before new about the actor himself... great acting is a revelation of what is “in you”, rather than an elaborate depiction of what is in somebody else’. It requires courage and willingness to let this *‘image of themselves that has hardened around an inner emptiness’*<sup>36</sup> go.

As well as satisfying this desire to play the roles I didn’t get, I knew I needed to face the challenge of showing something real, and potentially awkward and off-putting, of myself. Even though it was awkward for me I portrayed myself as a sexual being, briefly but definitely, and that is what I am most happy about in that performance. I also recognised that much of the presentation was about the satisfaction of a denied ego. Therefore I have not repeated it, yet.

There is a value in repairing past faulty images of self. Then there is a necessity to move away from the mirror. Again I found an answer in the Goat Island manifesto:

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<sup>36</sup> *Acting Power*, 233-235. (Italicised (my italics) quote is from Peter Brook, p.233)

‘I feel it is important to be an activist in life in order to stay active in ones work... It is a matter of internalizing concerns beyond one’s own social sphere’... (this) creates an art that is grounded in the personal and speaks out in the world’.<sup>37</sup>

## View Points

Since being introduced to Anne Bogart and Tina Landaus’ ‘Viewpoints’ by Howard Lotker, I look around me on the street and see grand performances everywhere, where every rhythm is absolutely right. People walking, intersecting, running, stopping, cars, trams, sirens, sound systems, flashing by, barks, waves, hugs, kisses. A panorama. Like the opening of a great opera. A group of pre schoolers in high visibility vests cross the road two by two. Harrassed teachers running along their length. They are oblivious, composed, safe; a single spine. Briefcases swing like metronomes; People with places to go, people to see, deals to do. Homeless people hunched over heads between knees. How do they not fall and tumble head over heels. I am reminded of what Kenneth Tynan loved about the Peking opera. ‘I cannot call superficial an art which explores, with entranced and exquisite love, the very well springs of physical movement, speaking the language of the body so ardently that a flexed arm becomes a simile and a simple somersault a metaphor’.<sup>38</sup>

I love watching these scenes of un self conscious perfection in and among people. What is it about enacting them that seems to merely highlight the artificial? A stillness becomes a grand gesture, when it simply and eloquently just happened before. I would like to find this simple quality in my performance. For instance if I am in Stanislavski’s well known notion of ‘public solitude’, I am being watched, what I do has the quality of being alone, yet somewhere I am still aware of being seen. It is actually impossible, a complete contradiction. Maybe the only way around it is by acknowledging its impossibility, making the gestures, walking, consciously different; maybe bigger, more intense, stage-loud. The difficulty is compounded in ensemble acting. Now several ‘public solitudes’ come together and have to relate to each other as though they are not being watched, while being aware that they are, unless they deliberately interact with the audience as well! Extremes have an even more powerful potential here. A ‘baboon’ ambles through, the homeless woman does a somersault, a teacher screams her frustrations at the top of her lungs, a briefcase windmills through the air from office worker to office worker as they intersect the sinewy line of preschoolers, a man

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<sup>37</sup> *Small acts of repair*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> *Theatre Writings*, 66.

becomes a selfie taking statue on Charles Bridge. His family turn back to call him and turn into pillars of salt.

The best way around coping with group scenes is to let instinct take over, as I do on the street when I am rushing for a tram, or dodging the hordes on Charles Bridge. I am reminded of Barrault, who in the following, acknowledges a debt to Artaud. '(Like him) I don't intellectualise, I act'.<sup>39</sup> Barrault explored actor as character and environment interchangeably. He realised the full poetic potential of the actor's body. In one of his plays, "Christopher Columbus" actors played boat, drowning sailors, and sea simultaneously and interchangeably.<sup>40</sup> How inspiring this is, to be corruptible body and universe at the same time? This is the also the challenge and potential of Viewpoints.

We are all linked by a common destiny, as the great observer and writer of humanity Helen Hanff has said 'People oughtn't to breeze into your life and out again in ten seconds, without leaving even a name behind. As Mr Dickens once pointed out, we're all on our way to the grave together.'<sup>41</sup>

And from Grotowski, '(we need) to find a place where communion is possible'<sup>42</sup>. This is why I want to act.

Part of coming to a general communion requires that I know and accept myself exactly as I am. Stella Adler, doyenne of American theatre after-Strasberg, after-Stanislawski, said 'be yourself! You cannot be anyone until you know yourself first.'<sup>43</sup> And Hermann Hesse writes in his coming of age novel 'Demien', 'If we were not something more than unique human beings... there would be no more point in relating stories at all. But every man is not only himself; he is also the unique, particular, always significant and remarkable point where the phenomena of the world intersect once and for all and never again'.

This is all well and good and true, but how do I know and find this unique and particular self? So often I have the impression that I am one of several, many of whom can perform skills better than I can. But if it is true that there is no one else in the world with my particular combination of skills then it is worth the effort to find it. Movement classes can help, when I

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993) 96.

<sup>40</sup> *Avant Garde Theatre*, 103-4.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Hanff, *The Duchess of Bloomsbury St* (London: Futura, 1982) 202.

<sup>42</sup> *Avant Garde Theatre*, 150.

<sup>43</sup> *Acting Power*, 3.

am not crippled by self consciousness, comparing myself to more nimble class mates, I can let go and find the particularities of how I move.

I sometimes attend a dance improvisation class. I went through a spell of avoiding it. I had the feeling of being exposed; Unable to assert myself bodily, or mentally, with the dancers; Fed up with it. It started when I felt harassed about not being unable to find my 'centre' in a half improvised, half set routine with an impossibly lithe and tiny blonde fairy of a dancer. We were using each other's frames in turn to lower ourselves to the floor and stand up again. I could have said that I had placed my centre in her, which would have been valid<sup>44</sup>, But my whole being froze in her candid gaze and seemingly simple advice to 'use your centre, no, your centre' and all of a sudden I did not know down from up and I wondered if I couldn't find the 'centre' at this stage in my development that I may as well forget about it. And I burst into tears. After that class I missed four classes in a row. I knew I needed to break the cycle or forever live with the knowledge that I had given up. As I entered the room I noticed that everyone there was either stretching, or prowling around the floor space, beautifully; like a clowder of cats. There were no other refugees from non dance. Usually there would be a few of us. I had intended to align myself with one of them, but no. An inauspicious start. I felt a familiar unease. Very funky music was playing making the room look like an advert for Calvin Klein, and then there was me, struggling to take off my socks. I was tempted to turn tail and leave but a few familiar and flawless faces, foremost my fairy, had already smiled 'hi!', so I took a few deep breaths and stayed. That was the hardest part over. The teacher began with the breath, she had us close our eyes and stand in a circle with our hands on each others' shoulders, breathing together, lowering ourselves to the floor without losing contact and standing again, she encouraged us to take it very slow, as slow as the slowest member, she didn't say that but that was how it felt. I felt taken care of and with my eyes closed, safe. The regular teacher was not there. It was someone new. So this was not for me. It was for everyone. I realised that I have been comparing my inside with other people's outsides again. For the rest of the class our eyes were open. There was a very slow process of individual to duo then group improvisation and with my eyes open and breath flowing, I could keep the focus on myself in a healthy way, I did not compare while staying open to the possibility of contact.

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<sup>44</sup> *Different Every Night*, 239.

It will never be easy for me to enter a roomful of dancers but I can remember that entering is the hardest part. I am reminded of a story about Harry H Corbet, an actor from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in London, told by a fellow actor. 'He said to me once that his ambition was to give one performance in which he had only one motivation, the one which took him out of the wings and on to the stage. From that point, he wanted to play off of his reaction to the other actors.'<sup>45</sup> Amen to that.

### **'Self and Imitation'**

I attended this enlightening and provocative workshop, organised by Alice Koubova and co facilitated by her and Kent Sjöström, in the second year of my masters. One of the exercises was to work on a piece of dialogue from 'Antigone' between the sisters Ismene and Antigone, when Antigone is determined to bury her brother despite the king's orders not to. Ismene is scared and attempting to dissuade her. I was assigned the part of Antigone. My co actor is a beautiful young powerful and passionate woman who could play Antigone in her sleep. I felt I was playing against type and so was she, and I felt self conscious about the whole exercise. Nevertheless we played with what we had been given and presented the scene. I will never forget what was said to me after we had finished. 'I could say you were a very good actor... I could also say that you are replaceable.' It was not said to hurt. It was a dispassionate observation. Yet it hit me like I'd been punched, despite my initial dismissal of myself in the role. I reflected on the incident after the workshop ended and I wrote this reflection.

*My brain was in turmoil all evening after the workshop! I learnt more about myself. No one is any the worse for being wiser about oneself. I think the dangers of imitation are linked to comparing oneself with the other. Fighting with the undifferentiated tools of the other, however admirable they are, is what will make me replaceable by him.*

*How much of my self is my own, untainted by outside influences?*

*I believe everyone is unique, where is that uniqueness hidden?*

*Today in a dance improvisation class I played with the fact that I am not a dancer, and even though I probably do this most weeks, this time I was very conscious of it and really enjoyed my differences. Maybe this is the start of a shift towards being irreplaceable in art? Because there really is no point otherwise.*

*I know one thing, after yesterday, no more comparing!!*

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<sup>45</sup>Twentieth Century actor training, 123.



The workshop addressed many topics that I had not considered before. To meticulously copy someone else might be a very respectful and artistic act, maybe even more so than to express myself. And there are pitfalls in identifying too much with either Echo or Narcissus. The balance between is what is important.

I have been considering what this means. I think the motive of copying is important. So one does not imitate because one thinks someone is better or more beautiful, but simply because one thinks someone is beautiful. And of course how and what one copies is unique to the copier.

Etienne Decroux the mime artist elaborates on this idea and is referenced in Barba's book of theatre anthropology. Decroux speaks of flowers in a vase, beautiful in themselves, 'but beautiful as they might be, they have one shortcoming... they are like the actor of whom (he) has spoken: a man condemned to resemble just a man, a man imitating a body... In order to be considered art... the idea of the thing needs to be represented by another thing.' So if one sees a flower, what is it that one sees? Beauty, fragility, resilience, time, hidden depths, roots? And how does one represent it?<sup>46</sup> What one sees, and how one makes this seen, makes the idea of the flower unique and seen again and potentially reinterpreted ad infinitum. And that is the potential of art.

**Did you never observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become second nature, affecting body voice and mind?** (from Plato's 'Republic')<sup>47</sup>

Patsy Rodenburg writes of habits and blocks in her book 'The right to speak'. Carrying the metaphorical weight of the world on our shoulders can make an actual shelf at the base of the neck, a misalignment directly related to carrying worries and responsibilities resulting in a block of free release of sound, Fear can make us close in, hunch over, self protect, all resulting in similar tensions and blocks, habits of holding the body, blocking what she terms, the soul's release. 'The voice is the instrument that echoes the soul and it is the soul's energy that makes every sound unique'<sup>48</sup>. Think of all the wasted energy that goes into hiding. It could make me weep! We start to release by learning to breathe and stand in correct alignment, as simple as that; like preparing a blank canvas, without kinks or holes or frayed

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<sup>46</sup> *A Dictionary of Theatre anthropology*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Toby Cole and H.K. Chinoy, eds., *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978) 9.

<sup>48</sup> Patsy Rodenburg, *The right to speak: working with the voice* (London: Methuen, 1992) 118.

edges. (This approach of course echoes all the great physical teachers from Artaud to Zarilli, most striking for me is how Grotowski 'via negativa' is recalled, 'not a collection of skills, but an eradication of blocks... (The actor) resigns from not doing it'.<sup>49</sup>) Then we can apply the media in whatever glorious way we like. Following on this, Cicely Berry decries our attitude to words. 'We are curiously unaware of their physical nature... after words are spoken, nothing is quite the same again... (They) change the situation, the speaker and the listener'. This, she exhorts, comes from their physical root as well as their active force and combine to make all words strongly political.<sup>50</sup>

I was very excited to work with a Beckett text in the 'Speech as Active Communication' (SAAC) class. This class affords the opportunity to pay equal attention to the physical root as well as political power of words. The text I chose from 'A Piece of Monologue' was initially written for an older man, but apart from that there are no directions as to how to say or perform it and it was written in English. In these two ways it differs from most of Beckett's dramatic works. So it was immediately attractive. The first time I read it I found my breath catching. There was 'a real mood in it, an atmosphere.' (This seduced me at first and we had long discussions in class about atmosphere becoming just general fog, and about it being better to concentrate on the specific text so atmosphere comes out of concrete logical situations.) I also see Beckett as a pinnacle for actors, the rhythm and repetition, silences, one-word sentences and I wanted to 'get it' in the same way that I have seen great actors I admire inhabit his words e.g. Olwen Fouere, Barry Mc Govern, Jack Mac Gowran, Billie Whitelaw. As I was reminded by the class teacher, Irena Pulicarova, in SAAC the emphasis is on my 'personal engagement. It is I who tries to understand, imagine, communicate the text as though it were mine. I cooperate with the words as much as possible, transmit them, explore the oral gesture, the speech act, on words that are touchably present in imagination and mouth.'

I reflected after the classes that

*'In time I found I could move in and out of the narrator/me/speaker roles in the text quite naturally. I wrote myself into an understanding of this isolated old man and why he needed to be heard. For instance in exploring the 'born dead of night' sentence and how/why to say it; 'he is cynical, he has*

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<sup>49</sup> Jerzy Grotowski et al., *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1975) 17.

<sup>50</sup> Cicely Berry, *The actor and the text* (London: Virgin Books, 1997) 21.

*given up? But he longs to be heard. Why? Why does anyone? I am becoming moved now. Unseeing- can you hear me? Is anyone there? Hopeless and ever hopeful.'*

*Eventually 'Born' became his hopeful voice, and 'dead' the cynical commentating one. I am not sure if this came across but it helped me to find a concrete way of saying it and this is the start of owning a text. And as Christopher Walken said once 'You don't have to know what an actor is talking about. You just have to know that he knows.'*

*I wanted a challenge and I got it! And when my faith was waning you kept up the support and didn't let me give up, reminding me always of the basic principles of communication, imagination, logic and full presence (breath, body, voice).'*

In performing Beckett's text it was necessary to fulfil several moments of stillness and silence. I am often most inspired by how other actors achieve this.

### **Review of a play that epitomised the beauty and dramatic potential of fulfilled stillness**

#### *Fragile*<sup>51</sup>

*Nothing much happens for several moments in 'Fragile'. A woman sits and polishes glass objects, lovingly looks at each of them and places them with infinite care on a revolving surface where they reflect light. She is completely absorbed in her own world, hardly moving, mute. And we are completely absorbed in her. In a spare set there is a glass carafe perched precariously on the edge of a flimsy looking table downstage. It is the image of a state we don't want to see shattered but somehow know it is inevitably to be.*

*In Krepsco's 'Fragile Party', playing in Alfred Ve Dvore theatre on the night of their mutual 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I saw what I see as the pinnacle of performance achievements; The quality of fulfilled stillness, what Philip Zarilli terms 'still, not still'-ness. It is present in Linnea Happonen's sublime presence; in the set that is simultaneously still but implosive, empty but full; in the theatrical conventions that are subverted by her co-actor Jiri Zeman's bull-in-a-china-shop's act.*

*The programme notes state that 'Fragile' explores the 'character Laura from Tennessee William's play Glass Menagerie'. It is a magnification of some pivotal moments in the play, Laura is the still centre around which everything else in the story/play revolves. She is the essence of everything, and the pure beauty which cannot survive in a world that resents and mistrusts stillness, 'mute yet joyful loneliness.*

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<sup>51</sup> *Fragile*. Directed by Linnea Happonen. Krepsco, 2003, Alfred ve Dvore theatre.

And of course I am also inspired by reading of the great actors I will never see such as Helene Weigel. As the Governor's wife in the Berliner Ensemble's production of 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' 'Weigel chose a calm and even tone...instead of flying around the stage, she assumed a very still position. In nearly all the scenes, she remained seated in one place and from there dominated the entire stage'. There is an image of her sitting on her servant in the book from which I quote.<sup>52</sup> I borrowed/stole the image for a scene I was rehearsing. In this, a tin soldier is professing his love for my character, a sociopathic doll. We were wondering about a way to show his complete submission. I remembered the image from the Barba book. Helene Wiegel sitting on the man's back. He is completely subject, on his hands and knees, head folded into himself. She is so dominant as to be not even seemingly aware of sitting on a person. It is a chair or a bench. We decided that this was an image that could work. Another inspiration from Helene Wiegel was the iconic silent scream, from *Mother Courage*;

'George Steiner, who saw Weigel at the Berliner Ensemble, relates: She turned her head the other way and stretched her mouth wide open, just like the screaming horse in Picasso's *Guernica*. A harsh and terrifying, indescribable sound issued from her mouth. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. It was the sound of absolute silence. A silence which screamed and screamed throughout the theatre, making the audience bow their heads as if they had been hit by a blast of wind.'<sup>53</sup>

This style of writing, which has been itself inspired by sublime art, never fails to excite me as to the power of simplicity and presence. I am determined to cultivate it in my acting, even as a million nerves are jangling and jumping. Be still!

### **Autobiography as art**

'(Tracy Emin's) art is one of disclosure... (she) reveals her hopes, humiliations, failures and successes in candid, and at times, excoriating work... both tragic and humorous... (her) work resonates with the feminist tenets of the 'personal as political'<sup>54</sup>

Why do I put what I do on the stage? I need to know the answer to this question. It is one that troubled me as I prepared the final presentation. I have always wanted to be an actor. I am middle aged now and finally training. I started working as a doctor when I was 23. One of the

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<sup>52</sup> *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> *A Dictionary of theatre anthropology*, 266.

<sup>54</sup> Petr Nadona, *Flaesh Exhibition Catalogue*, trans. Stuart Hoskins (Prague: Galerie Rudolfinum, 2015) 36.

reasons I passed my final exams was because of a text book written in the form of scenes from a play, or vignettes. A firm but kind consultant took a group of students on ward rounds with him and asked questions. The patient in the bed was a character too. There was some humour and a lot of sneaky medical facts and that was how I learnt the bulk of my medicine, at least initially. I was drawn to Medicine as a potential career after reading an article in Time magazine about pig heart transplants for humans. It seemed so fantastic and exciting. I wanted to be part of that world. I was 14. There was no career guidance in our school and I was fairly bright with an excellent short term memory so I did well in exams and got into medicine. And it was ok for awhile, though I was never very happy. I moved from department to department never settling anywhere, always longing to be somewhere else. There wasn't a sign of a pig heart. When people say I am brave to have left and begun again, I remember that it took me 25 years to leave and I put that comment in perspective! But at last I am doing what I think it is I have been put on the world to do. The thing is, I want it yesterday. So much time has been lost and I want to be working, ready, finished. Now.

I am learning that there is no finish; I will always be in process, neither here nor there. This awareness is one thing. Its acceptance is another process entirely. The learning of patience must be a fundamental part of my, or any performer's training. I know 23 year olds who are bursting to get out of the gates, who lament every moment devoted to the basics of breath and centre. It is easy sometimes to look for shortcuts and imitate an idea of breath and centre that has nothing to do with real personal awareness. That takes time; more time than most of us think we have, certainly more time than I think I have. And yet, if I don't take this time, my performance will never be optimal. I am reminded of a quote from a book read many years ago by Julia Cameron, 'The artist's Way'. She was referring to adults who, given their age, ask what the point is in even beginning? What age will we be by the time we'll be able to play/ act/ dance etc? Her answer; 'the same age you will be if you don't. So let's start'<sup>55</sup>.

I started this section asking myself why I put what I do on the stage. My authorial work has always been from or inspired by real life experience. Sometimes it seems too personal and thereby not generalisable or useful for anyone but myself. These are the gremlins talking. One of my favourite plays is 'Long Day's Journey into Night' by Eugene O'Neill. In this play Mr O'Neill tells the story of his family. It is relentlessly tragic and personal. It was a story he

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<sup>55</sup> Julia Cameron, "Quotes". 4 Apr. 2018 <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/739632-but-do-you-know-how-old-i-will-be-by>>

‘had to write’, towards the end of his career. It was ‘told in tears and blood’<sup>56</sup>. He did not want it published after his death. But his wife Carlotta went against this wish<sup>57</sup>. And now we have a story of *every* family, a wake up call to stymie the spiral of regret and resentments in our own families, through the story of a family that desperately wanted to but couldn’t.

There is value in telling one’s story as truthfully as possible. It can be applicable to other lives, and generally is. It can sometimes even reflect on the world. Eugene O Neill’s play was set in the era just before WW1, and written while WW2 was imminent. I know that there are outstanding performing arts groups that focus on the outside world when telling a story but this is not my way, so far.

My final authorial presentation was based on my desire to be an actor. I went through the decades from my 20s to my soon to be 50s, and fit pivotal roles into my life narrative. Up to now I’d only fantasised about playing these parts. And this was my chance! It was as much about finally getting the opportunity to embody a character such as Medea, as about dramatising my decades long yearning to be an actor, or living as though I were in a play. The risk was in really going for the beauty, youth and innocence of Juliet; or the desperate brazenness of Portia Coughlan; or the sexuality of Medea; or the aging, and doped out lost potential of Mary from ‘Long Day’s Journey into Night’.

I am in the third year of my training. I have made progress. I know my body better, I am aware of my shoulder blades. I still remember the heady moment when I felt them slide along the back rib cage. It was towards the end of my first year. It was a totally new experience I had never consciously moved from the shoulder blades before. I had no back awareness. And I often thought that actors who presented their backs to the audience were far too pretentious for their own good. And I may have been right in this, because it takes training to make one’s back speak anything, let alone volumes. The first time I saw this was on film. The great actor Philip Seymour Hoffman played an American agent with a conscience in the movie ‘A most wanted man’. He believed in the innocence of a young Muslim man he was sent to track down. He believed his superior when she said that nothing bad would happen to the young man. That he was to deliver him to safety. And yet, past experience told him that she was untrustworthy, that he might be delivering the young man to the wolves. On the night before

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<sup>56</sup>Eugene O Neill, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (New York: Yale University, 1989) Dedication page.

<sup>57</sup> American Experience, “Eugene O Neill Documentary”. 06/06/2017  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADtcMi2Wwg0>>.

the manoeuvre he sits on the bed in his hotel room. His back is facing the camera. There is a glass of whiskey on his bedside locker and he drinks from it from time to time and smokes a cigarette. The camera never shows his front, just the back of a very tired, defeated and soddenly drunk man, who knows in his heart and soul that what he will do tomorrow will result in betrayal, and yet there is a denial of this intuition also, with every defiant sip and deep inhalation of smoke. It is mesmerising. His body, his back, carries the whole scene.<sup>58</sup>

I have made progress here. I am inhabiting the full surface of my body better, so it is with dismay that I received the feedback that I am still ‘too much brain’ in a class recently. ‘Too much brain’ is a hard habit to kick. I enjoy the machinations of my brain, my imagination; it flies ahead of my body. There is a duality there that has been fostered by a lifetime in schools and colleges and I know how to minimise it, even get rid of it sometimes, but it comes back. I am having a great time on the stage, but the only one having a great time is me.

I love Philip Zarilli’s book ‘Psychophysical acting’, already referenced. His own search for the integrated body/mind was far from smooth initially. He spent years in India training with Martial arts and dance masters, getting over the body of an all American male athlete. I believed that this path may have been easier for him because of his innate physical prowess. But I don’t know that this is fully valid. It really does not matter how one’s natural ability is, lithe or leaden, it is the body awareness that matters and that precision, that naturally follows from awareness. Look at Philip Seymour Hoffman. Zarilli’s aim was to find a quicker path for actors than the one he took. I am not sure if this can be possible, but it is marketable, and we cannot all go to Asia for years at a time.

He begins with the breath. And I find that when I do breathing exercises at the beginning of a performance, rehearsal or class, the session always goes better. I do not always have the patience for this. Patience again! Yet when I devote 20 minutes or so to breathing exercises, I actually remember to use my breath in performance, and to integrate body, breath and voice in a very full and natural way.

For Zarilli it is something more than breath which is powering the performer. ‘It is the breath “plus” something more... (it is an) inner energy ‘which animates and activates...(that is) constantly available and flows’. He calls it ‘prana/qi/ki’. <sup>59</sup> And indeed there is a sense of a course being run inside when I focus solely on my breath. This is nothing new of course, but

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<sup>58</sup> *A most wanted man*, prod. Lionsgate, dir. Anton Corbijn, 2014, 1hour 14min.

<sup>59</sup> *Psychophysical Acting*, 19.

it is for everyone to experience for themselves, and it is wonderful because it is accessible to everyone. Acrobatics has a certain tyranny for many actors, despite the fact that it gives any number of possibilities to body expression; breath has no such bars to experiencing benefit.

In a recent DJ class 14/11/2017, I experienced interacting in a new sense. I have high energy generally. And often when I experiment, the feedback from my teachers is that it is 'too much', 'too quick'. I have deliberately tried to slow down my body, going against my natural grain, not understanding that it is not the body that is too fast but the mind. I am following too many impulses and running from one to the other, not fully exploring any. Yesterday my body was more hyper than usual and I threw caution to the wind, danced, talked, jumped, threw arms out at odd angles, stopped for breath and was off again. I enjoyed it. No one else did. A familiar pattern. Too fast. Too much to follow. My teacher suggested that I at least stop commenting when I dance. I can vocalise in other ways, in accordance with my body.

I wrote in my notes, 'Can I actually *be* still?!'

Luckily I had a second opportunity to work on my teacher's suggestion. I entered the space and immediately flung my right arm off at an odd angle. I laughed at myself, then became firm; 'this is not what I wanted to happen, it happened, now move on!' They say we must be kind to ourselves in DJ. In this instance I needed to be kindly strict. I continued like a child, 'I want to dance again', 'So dance'. I started to dance and immediately as I was jumping began to comment 'this is great! I wanted to, and now I am etc'. Habits die hard. I needed to be strict again. 'SHUT UP and dance!' And that's what I did. Wild at first and then I found my voice and it made a rhythm and the dance had some kind of form. Then it was over and I clapped with joy. I was breathless. I just managed to thank the dancer before my time was up.

I understood that it was mostly self consciousness that made me rabbit on generally. This time I didn't follow that route. It was still fast but in a different way. There was a logical followed sequence of events. I could keep up. And the onlookers could too. My supervisor said that 'you will always be quick. It is not about being slower than you are; it is about finding a level you can follow. This time you did it'.

I felt so much validation of my core self that I walked away from the session on air. It is not about being different to how I am. It is about 'finding a level I can follow'. This makes complete sense to me. I am delighted that I have this energy. How much more interesting stillness can be in a hyperactive presence like mine. There is drama in that alone. Robert



Cohen writes that it is the ‘mind’ that is most important in acting/performing. I do not agree fully but I do think he is right when he says that you have to focus your thoughts. ‘The problems of acting do not require that actors stop thinking, but that they find out what to think about’<sup>60</sup>. For me, who is often accused of having too much brain, too much ‘thinking’, this is better advice than ‘your body knows’, whatever that means. It probably all boils down to much the same thing. The errant mind must be controlled, and then the body can *be*.

This brings us full circle back to the breath. All methods of meditation that I have been introduced to, both still and in movement, use the breath to bring the subject to awareness.

This is not to say that the use of breath is not without its challenges. I have noticed a bracing between in and out breaths particularly when I sing. I know I need to use the moment to prepare and launch as it were, but instead I freeze, like being captured on an upswing. I reflected ‘For some reason I find it hard to breathe between phrases; related to stop times? A moment of instability? (Openness/vulnerability/letting go); the moment of preparing, gathering and leaping not by panic reflex but by design. It never seems long enough, or it seems too long. I want to deny and suppress the feeling of instability; but I need to own it so as to have better overall stability’. I could have added creativity, for I believe it is in uncertainty that it thrives.

Zarilli calls this space between breaths ‘that place where the potential for impulse and action reside: therefore, it is the space where acting begins.’<sup>61</sup>

I feel after several diversions that I have come to rest on a topic that may make me a better artist. Mastery of the breath!

I am involved in a project for which I feel profoundly unsuited<sup>62</sup>. I am playing the role of a ballerina, admittedly an antique, porcelain, ballerina doll; but nonetheless she has to have the recognisable qualities of a thing once beautiful with the imprint of ballet in her body. I have never danced in any style in an accomplished way in my life (I refer you to my ill fated childhood experiences with folk dance), let alone ballet. I favour the formless letting go in a party or night club and I certainly don’t want to be appraised for doing that.

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<sup>60</sup> *Acting Power*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> *Psychophysical Acting*, 26.

<sup>62</sup> *Play with me*. Directed by Nhung Dangova and Olga Mikulska. AMU students, 16 Dec. 2017, Studio Retisek.

I warned my colleagues of this when I was being cast and they accepted it. Now I realise that if I do not want to look like a complete idiot, I have to at least try to get it right. The director, a co student, herself an accomplished physical actor, says it is not about being a good ballet dancer. I can be bad. I just have to be precise.

So I am going to use my breath as I have never used it and see how I go.

There is an exercise I have some experience with, the unbendable arm exercise. It is described in Zarilli's book<sup>63</sup>. Through breath there is a key to physical transcendence. It requires no faith, even a sceptic like me found that my arm was unbendable when I focused my breath into it to make it unmovable, not stiff.

The following is an excerpt from a journal entry in the early days of my training. It seems I 'knew' about breath from the beginning. Oh the difference between 'knowing' and knowing.

*2/12/15. I connected well to the stretching and vocalising/commenting exercise, connecting voice to body, it didn't come immediately but it did come. I breathed through my bum, and H said when standing, I could breathe through my feet and I tried that and I exhaled through my fingertips. I felt inhabited in my body. Zarilli's book is really hitting home. The breath is the way in!*

*Robert Wilson, speaking of Arvo Part's ability to write silences, says he is like a good actor being 'aware of inner movement that's in stillness, and when you move outwardly the line continues'. Sublime, and someday.*

Indeed.

I suffer from success. My spirit level is out of line. I jump into the next task and make a hames of it. I am like the child that everyone enjoys and indulges initially, who then becomes tiresome with repeated and ever inflated high jinks. The brakes are not on, they have been tampered with, I am careering down the perilous road to certain wipe out. Or I get very anxious about repeating the impression, because it was just a fluke you know, and I feel my heart palpitating and the tingles in my fingers. As a doctor I know that this is the beginning of hyperventilation tetany; the blowing off of carbon dioxide through hyperventilation, which results in paraesthesia and cramps in the extremities and general panicky feelings. The brakes are on. The car is jerking forward, cutting out. I turn the key in the ignition, to what end? A further hopping, and out again.

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<sup>63</sup> *Psychophysical Acting*, 27.

I need to exhale now. And hold. Let the Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) build up again. Equilibrate. It is as simple and technical as that. I do not have to psychologise it. The Body knows. In this instance it is ok to say this. If I didn't consciously stop breathing, my body would stop for me. I would collapse, stop breathing for awhile and start again when my CO<sub>2</sub> levels rose. The body knows.

If the body knows in this instance, maybe it knows in others too?

I remember being chased by a dog when I was eleven. Up to that point I couldn't, or wouldn't, run the length of myself. When that dog chased my body took off like Usain Bolt's, I leapt over obstacles and outpaced the dog to safety, bellowing out 'Mammy! Mammy!' so the whole country heard me. I was aware of a neighbour laughing at me. I remember the colours in the yard where I ran. There is a generally untapped resource in my body. Adrenalin helps to realise it; the optimal stress level, which enables rather than disables. Perhaps I am being too sceptical of those knowing nods from physical instructors. Maybe the body does know. Even mine.

### **Reflection on 'Play with Me' rehearsals**

*Breathing settles me before I begin, brings me back to myself. Filling the lungs, sides and back. Slow exhale. Gives energy to movement, a reminder to be precise, explore extremes, a placement of the voice.*

*'Breathing controls everything' For Copeau it is the 'primum mobile in his quest for gestural sincerity and vocal concord'.<sup>64</sup> Stanislavski's 'rays of energy', inhaled through body, exhaled to distant corners of a room, can anyone else feel a transmission?; visualisation of breath as 'warm yellow sunlight'<sup>65</sup>*

*For the initial 20 minutes we did some yogic breathing followed by some short relaxation and trust exercises. Then our director set four chairs. Beside each chair she wrote an emotional state. They were 'anger', 'grief', 'excitement' and 'peace'. Then we were asked to sit on a chair each and rotate through the 'emotions'. To access the emotions we were not to make something happen. We were instructed to simply 'breathe it in'. I was dubious, but in an open mood, and I found that breathing in an emotion caused it to surface in an unforced way. I found an immense self containment and serenity, for example, when breathing in 'peace' and an immense intolerance when breathing in 'anger'. It came to me that I can choose to feel anyway I like and that the result does not feel fake. It*

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<sup>64</sup> Twentieth Century Actor Training, 66.

<sup>65</sup> Twentieth Century Actor Training, 22.

*is something like the application of a loving-kindness meditation to acting. The next exercise was an extension of this idea. We were asked to choose five scenes from our play that we found the most dramatic. Quickly we agreed on these. Then we were each to come up with individual gestures evoked by the scenes. Then we walked and eventually ran up and down the space and the director would call out the scenes 1 through 5 and each time we would stop, make the gesture, being mindful to keep breathing whatever emotion we associated with it. In some takes we were mindful of each other, in others we worked in our own bubbles. We were encouraged to use our voices if that felt natural. After several goes I found a huge range of vocalisations within the exercise. Hitherto I had mostly voiced the doll in a high register. Now I was swooping from the depths of my range to higher still. I was surprised and moved by these discoveries. I could hear and respond to my fellow actors making similar discoveries. I know that the earlier yogic breathing had primed me, and I am sure, my fellows too, for a full body, mind and breath connection. Our breathing flowed constantly, our minds were free and fully awake, and our bodies fully inhabited. My gestures stretched into my fingertips and feet in a way I am rarely so conscious of. I did not have to worry about being inspired. It was happening naturally. If I could apply this to the play it could be very special... I asked the director where she learnt the exercises; her answer, 'at a Stanislavski workshop'.*

*Towards the end of the rehearsal we applied the exercises to the problem of the end of our play. Heretofore it has seemed somewhat aimless and relentlessly dark. The proof of exercises is in their application to performance. I was again uncertain because of the structure of the end that we had already worked out and I didn't know how this new breathing approach was going to fit, or how it would make a difference. I reminded myself to simply breathe and forget how things were **supposed** to go. The frustration, rage, pain and despair we are brought to at the play's end were suddenly evoked in surprising ways. My colleagues were laughing hysterically. I felt confused. Then I laughed too. And it was entirely real, acceptable and appropriate.*

*If I was ever in any doubt about how important 'warming up' is to rehearsal and performance it is now gone. We spent about 20 minutes of a 3 hour rehearsal on the substance of the play and it was the best rehearsal we had so far.*

It used to be that rehearsals were where I failed. I came into my own in performance. Latterly I seem to blow myself away in rehearsal; I am capable of great moments, yet in performance I rarely live up to that promise. I think that potential for real and perceived failure grows in parallel with positive potential. And of course 'great moments' cannot be replicated. These are two of the greatest challenges I feel as a performer. I could have stayed in stasis, blissfully believing that but for circumstance I could be a Tony award winning actor. Instead I am only too aware of my shortcomings. And yet I am delighted!

Breathing is opening, inspiring, letting go.

Getting back to Roman's exercise- It seems that my errant friend is not off the hook. Roman wants us to prepare two extreme situations.

This is the story:

*In my mid thirties I fell in love with an Australian man. I followed him to Australia. We travelled together briefly. I felt sure he was lying to me about being separated from his wife. His story just did not add up. One day as he drove he asked if I would like to meet his wife, that they were still friends and he would like to introduce me. I said 'Yes, I would love to'. I thought to myself 'he was telling the truth' and I was very happy. He brought me to his wife's home in a town 200km east of Melbourne. She was a very attractive inscrutable woman. She had roasted a chicken for our dinner. I complimented her cooking. She said it wasn't free range. It was corn fed. I didn't know what this meant. I said 'well it was very nice'. Over dinner there were some phone calls to the house. She took them at the table. I could hear upset or angry voices on the other end. She was conciliatory. 'I know darling, I know, It's alright. Yes I'll call you later'. After dinner she sent him out for cigarettes. He had hardly said a word. He was unrecognisable to me, very meek. I think he might have commented on the chicken too; 'Ah corn fed' with some nodding. When he was gone she asked 'so what has he told you?' I said 'well that you are separated'. 'You know that's not true don't you?' I didn't say anything. 'We are still, very much, together'.*

*He came back with the cigarettes. 'So, T\_, Margaret and I have had a chat.' 'Oh Yeah?' he muttered, eyes hooded like a dog about to get a slap. 'Yeah' she said as though challenging him. 'Look at her, T\_, she's very upset. Of course it's my fault too. You're punishing me.' She was dry as a bone. I was shaking. I had pins and needles all over, hyperventilating. But when she said this I got very angry. I detested him in that moment, I hated her more. What kind of lunatics were these people?! I screamed at her- 'why don't ye just split up?!' and ran out of the kitchen to the bedroom she had shown me into when I arrived, where my bags were. It was pouring rain, I didn't know where I was but I knew I could not stay in this house. Once in the room I started stuffing things into a bag. And then I just stood there, still, boiling inside. The room was spinning. Then I heard footsteps approaching from behind, meek footsteps. I spun around. It was him, cap in hand. I screamed at him to 'Get away from me!' and he turned around immediately and left me to myself. Then they were screaming at each other. She told him to 'Get out!' And then she turfed us both out, in the street, in the pouring rain.*

*I suppose it is one of the most extreme things that has happened in my life.*

*I got into his truck. He drove me to his office. I slept in the truck. He slept on the floor of his office. The next morning he drove me to Melbourne and dropped me off outside a hotel we had stayed at,*

*clasped my hands, looked into my eyes and said 'I am so sorry'. I had been cold, but then I nodded at him, and almost cried. Damn it! He left. I got a bus to another hotel I knew, booked in and slept for 24 hours straight. I never saw him again, but he did ring once. He was 'back with his wife', he laughed when he said it, he'd been drinking.*

*I felt no rage with him. I never did.*

That is what was misplaced the last time round. It was never about rage with him. Maybe some with her certainly, but that did not stay long with me. It was more in the moment. I knew I was lucky to be away from these people, let them to their crazy lives.

But I had travelled to Australia to follow a dream of living with this man, I remember fantasising about us running a BnB together in the outback! It was from myself and my life in Ireland I was running; single, unhappy, unfulfilled in my work. And I was enraged that it was all such a complete lie and I had told it to myself. The worst betrayals are self initiated.

So I went into the exercise, searching for embodiment of this story, distilled to these words;

Love; Liar; Still, Boiling; Run; Turn; F\*\*K!

And in the searching I found my arms in an empty cradling posture; an invisible, empty baby. I stretched it to its limits, and then I turned and embodied a scream, growing, growing, growing.

And in the end I was so surprised that I forgot to breathe. I almost collapsed before remembering. But I am amazed at what was found; a new insight into an old story and a means to self communicate something very personal and pivotal without exposing myself gratuitously. Keeping it about movement seems to be a way. The body decided. There was a structure, my story words; and then free rein to move. The body found stillness, dynamism, opposition, balance, all gestated in a previous improvisation exercise with Roman; all that was missing at the end was breath.

The breath is the distance; the reminder that *this* is happening *now*. It keeps the actor focussed. And of course it allows the audience to breathe and see too! They saw 'something',

maybe not a missing baby, but because I saw something very clearly, so did they. That is how it works.<sup>66</sup>

I recall the conversation with a teacher after DJ class. The ideal: I am pursuing an idea that arises in the moment onstage *and* mindful of the realities; my breath, body, the environment (people watching, room, sounds etc). The idea does not take over and it is organic, not fixed; otherwise I am trying to retain what is already past, and that brings panic. In a DJ attempt I had an idea, became enchanted with it, pursued it and then found I was out of breath and had a lump in my throat. Something was evidently out of kilter. The idea had run off on my centred self.

DJ is wonderful training yet performance cannot be just about self communication. There is an audience. What does including the audience bring? This question is for another day. For now I can keep my eyes open and include them; look at them, or not; merely keep my eyes and posture open to them, so they have the opportunity to see something too. If I am decided, if I can stand behind what I do, then they will see something. Barba has a very interesting interpretation of what it means to be decided in body, he goes to the root of the word- Decided- cut away- ‘one’s availability to create also includes cutting oneself off from daily practices’<sup>67</sup>. He also talks of a ‘vigour covered by softness’.<sup>68</sup> This softness is made possible through remembering to breathe. Otherwise the vigour is as in a closed vessel boiling about to burst, an erupting volcano with a giant plug in the crater.

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<sup>66</sup> I have been induced into telling life stories because I have read autobiographies of great artists, Chekhov’s ‘Path of the actor’, the composer R Murray Schafer’s ‘My life on earth and elsewhere’, and seen autobiographical performances like Sarah Miley’s ‘Smiles’; all written in such a frank and sometimes shocking way. And I know that there must be something in this openness and naked honesty that helps make great artists great. I am not interested in being a great theatre academic, though I am interested in this area too, and am in awe of artists that combine both, such as Irish actor Olwen Fouere. (I remember her saying something very interesting, ‘It’s when I find myself thinking, ‘this is going well’, then I am lost!’ Being great is no longer great when one knows it!) But to get back to my point, what I am merely interested in is how to be a great artist. I saw Sarah Miley perform ‘Smiles’ in a small pub theatre in Islington, London in the 90s, and I will always remember her simultaneous personability and presence (theatricality) on stage. It was her final performance of the run and at the end, as a surprise, her stage manager, clearly besotted with her (as we all were), ushered her beloved dogs on stage. And you know what? Even the dogs were in thrall of her. She owned the stage. She owned the room, even while she threw herself in the midst of those delighted dogs. She was her best, most open, vulnerable, brave and surprising, public-private self. (I am reminded of Uta Hagen’s wry comment on the effortless presence of animals onstage ‘I refuse to let a cat win’ on page 28 of her book ‘Respect for acting’ (see bibliography). They are effortlessly present and compelling, and great, because they know, accept and show themselves as they are in every moment.)

<sup>67</sup> *A Dictionary of theatre anthropology*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> *A Dictionary of theatre anthropology*, 17.

I am writing all these things so as I do not forget again. It is clear to me when other students forget to breathe, as it is to them when I forget. But for me a lesson learnt in retrospect or vicariously is cognitive only. I know it. But I don't know it so well that it doesn't happen to me again. In other words I don't know it at all. And it is so simple.

So I write about erupting volcanoes plugged with stoppers. Not a great metaphor. When flowing freely a volcano is also pretty devastating. However people can evacuate.

In 'Play with me' one of the characters is played by a dancer. He is accomplished, funny, and in charge of his body. I put my breathing theories to the test. In an early session with this new actor we warm up using the dreaded sun salutations. I use breath. And I find they go easier. And more surprisingly I find that I am keeping the focus on myself. I am not watching to see how far his heels go in 'downward facing dog'. I am not comparing at all. It is a good start. Later in the session it is time to display the ballerina's pirouettes. I breathe. Spin. He says as scripted 'Wow, impressive'. The director laughs. It is funny. I am not self conscious, crushed. It is part of the game. Can breathing alone be responsible for this change in my focus; no longer so cripplingly egocentric? Nothing has changed except the conscious attention to my breath so in this limited experiment I think, yes, it must be that breath is a primary factor.

If it will be replicated, if it will work in the performance in front of an audience, then I have a blueprint for my life as an artist.

My first lesson in power of breath outside of mere oxygenation, staying nominally alive etc was in running. My first forays into running were in adulthood. I was a sedentary child. I loved to sequester myself in a corner and read. In early adulthood I qualified as a medical doctor. The working hours were long, confined and demanding. I needed an escape, by myself, beholden to no one. I began by walking long distances at weekends. Then I walked to and from work. In my early thirties I took up running. It suited my impatient personality. The early runs were not easy, and with ragged uncoordinated breath, and tell-tale stitches in my sides, they were short too. Then I read somewhere about the need to coordinate strides with breath. I began and never looked back. The pinnacle of my achievements was the marathon I ran in 2013. I no longer push myself to such long distances but I still like to run 3 or 4 times a week. I time my breath to less or more strides depending on how energetic I am feeling. My runs can be as short as 20 minutes or as long as an hour. I love to discover new trails and routes. I generally energise as I go along; lost in my own rhythm; it seems effortless. It is often blissful. Inspirations will pop in and develop themselves; I have often burst out



laughing while on a run. Everything I create, including this thesis, is peopled by running thoughts. I wonder why I have been so slow about applying the conscious breath principle to my performing. I used running as a means to get exercise done quickly, to get quality time when I didn't have much in the way of quantity. Maybe it was somehow putting it in this box initially that kept what I learnt about breath and effort so confined for so long.

I know now that the artist is not a de-cided persona, she is one and the same as the runner, the ex-doctor etc., etc. What I learn or apply in one area of my existence forms part of the performer and vice versa.

### **Experiments with entirety.**

Chekhov gives an exercise related to his concept of entirety in his book, 'To the Actor'.<sup>69</sup> He instructs that the rehearsal space be divided into onstage and off. Once you enter the 'stage' you perform, once you exit you become your everyday self again. You are very aware of the change. You do not forget what you were before you traversed. It is all part of the whole, entirety, that he says must form one of the qualities of great art.

I have written of my difficulties in keeping this quality in DJ for example. I can pursue an idea to the detriment of the overall situation and my overall command of myself and it.

I thought I would see if simply delineating the on and off spaces in class would help. This reminds me of a story about the dancer Martha Graham at the curtain, 'I'm here God!' she says just before entering the performance space and 'walking on with all the drive of a prophet'.<sup>70</sup>

This is not what happened in my DJ class, but I love this Martha Graham story!

What happened in the class was this. It was my turn. I stood up, took a step, inhaled and on the exhale entered the 'stage' space. It was planned, and that was the only part of it that was. And I never forgot where I was for those 3 minutes. I was very conscious no matter what I was saying or doing or what idea I had, that I was now 'onstage', I had come from the still present 'offstage', and I would return there. And there was a sense of this elusive holistic quality of performance that I don't remember noticing as clearly before. I was also able to observe and distance myself from the anxiety I often experience in DJ, even play with it as a

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<sup>69</sup> *To the actor*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> *The Wise body*, 137.

topic. DJ is ideally playful<sup>71</sup>. Why is so often traumatic or exacting for me must be related to my ego. It is a step too far into the unknown for it. Uta Hagen says ‘Don’t replace the joy of playing with the nerves which result from a personal ambition for success.’<sup>72</sup> This resonates strongly for me. I found that breathing into the initial step, marking the threshold or limen, calmed the fretful ego, or maybe side stepped it. Breath- a demarcation.

## **Handstands**

I want to be able to do one at will. I have done a few in the past, driven by passion or panic I hurled my legs up in the air. There was nothing repeatable about my attempts. Someone, a class mate or teacher had been shouting words of encouragement, boot camp style, or holding on to one or another part of me. At home in Ireland during the summer, I had a burning desire to try again. I asked my father to hold my hips and stand steady while I kicked off, suspended for a bare second, then collapsed in a heap at his feet. Another time I asked my brother to catch my first leg and hold it, while the second one sailed into place. In my latest attempts a teacher is always by my side doing his bit to support the process.

But put me in a room by myself, with a wall, and I cannot do it.

There is a fear of being inverted certainly. But that is not the whole story. I can do a headstand against a wall and that does not frighten me, hardly at all.

It is more the feeling of completely letting go that I hate. And when I am aligned in it, hips above shoulders, it just feels *wrong*.

I have this feeling that once I can do it, a code will be cracked in my physical development. Jana Pilatova has said that you know by the way an actor moves, whether he can do a hand stand or not. I think I know what she means. There is a mastery there, an animal like belonging to the body.

Stevo Capko, one of my clown teachers, says that it is the basis for all clown acrobacy. I have no interest in acrobacy except in how it adds to the expressive potential of the body, and in how its facility belies this un-belonging in the body that I sometimes feel.

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<sup>71</sup>Ivan Vyskocil, *(Inter)acting with the inner partner authorisation code*, trans. A. Komlosi (Prague: DAMU typescript, 2012).

<sup>72</sup>Uta Hagen with H Frankel, *Respect for acting* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2008) 202.

I feel certain that once I can do a handstand my body will be mine. It may be just the beginning. But that does not matter to me now. I just want to do one, and be able to repeat it, without turning a hair.

Stevo says- “1. Eat fishes, 2. Practise facing the wall so that legs are at right angles to the body, hips are directly above shoulders, if it feels wrong, stop, go to the boundary. 3. Do push ups. By Christmas you will do a handstand.”

It is November 30<sup>th</sup>. I am 49 years old. I have had these yearnings on and off for several years. I watched an American woman do her first handstand at a yoga retreat in Italy several years ago, she burst into tears. Her heart was burst open. I wanted it then but I was afraid. The retreat promised plenty ‘inversions’. Somehow I did not see that part. I shut down immediately. Pretended I had wrist problems or something, anything, to get out of doing them. Another part of the retreat was to commemorate someone we wanted to remember. The American woman was the only one in the group who picked up on this. She brought a photograph of a young man for our ‘altar’; a friend of hers who had died the previous year. So he was there all the time. Perhaps he ‘helped’ her up the wall. And perhaps that inversion unlocked her tears. I did believe that this could happen. But I did not believe I could ever do it. And I was cynical about secular spirituality. I was in Italy for a nice relaxing week, a bit of yoga, plenty wine, pizza and pasta.

I will do the unthreatening exercises that Stevo prescribes, remembering to breathe of course, and perhaps, combined, these paths will lead me to mastery of the handstand. And a little part of my heart will be blown open.

Body = Heart

Artaud calls the actor to be ‘an athlete of the heart’. Stanislavski bemoans the ‘stuffed head...empty heart’ that he saw as a result of too much cognition. Staniewski idealises the actor’s thought process as an ‘intelligence of the heart’. Across the board theatre practitioners advocate the exploration of physical potential, including acrobatics, not for its own sake, but toward the development of an optimally articulate body, and as a means to rescue performance from what Artaud called ‘psychological prostration’ and to open these gates of perception.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>*Twentieth Century Actor Training*. Quotes from Artaud page 6, Stanislavski 32, and Staniewski 242.

And here is a further qualification from Peter Brook.

The rational mind is not nearly as potent an instrument of discovery as the more secret faculties of intuition. The possibility of intuitive understanding through the body is stimulated and developed in many different ways. If this happens, within the same day there can be moments of repose when the mind can peacefully play its true role.<sup>74</sup>

Heart = Body minus *too much* mind.

### **A pitfall with breath: Mindfulness that excludes audience.**

So far it is helping me when performing physically, a mode I am not 100% comfortable with, to stay focused on my breath. In and out; easy does it. I discovered recently however that while performing an exercise in Roman Horak's class, my focus was primarily inward, my vision unfocused. The next step must be to look at the audience when I am doing something I am not comfortable with, and see how breath impacts then. There is a basic belief that I am not that interesting as a physical performer, a fear too. This can seem to be confirmed when I do look out and notice that no one is looking at me. Maybe one follows the other. I look out and they look at me. I see them and they see me. I am not saying that one should always look at the audience. I am saying that I should always be aware of them, somehow see them, and let them see me. It is, for me, a reciprocal relationship and cannot be ignored.

Growtowski said 'The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the *decision* in physical arrangements'<sup>75</sup>

I don't have this fear if I am alone in stage. I reason that if there is no one else onstage they have only me to look at. The competition factor is at least out of the equation. Sometimes there seems to be too many hang ups to sort out. One at a time. Breath. Focus. Belief. If the body knows many things maybe it will sort out the psychology too.

Robert Cohen's book 'Acting Power' has helped me immeasurably in my preparation for playing the ballerina doll character in 'Play with Me'. He does not separate actor from character. I am the actor/character always. And I operate at 3 levels. The life level, (playing intention in a situation); the dramatisation level, where considerations of characterisation (traits or obstacles particular to the character) and style (particular to the ensemble/play) are

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<sup>74</sup> *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, 179.

<sup>75</sup> *Performance studies: An introduction*, 256.

factored in; and finally the theatrical level; where the audience is invited to the world of the play, the play is not an external thing in the world of the audience. Every level is acknowledged and exploited as a means to enable the actor/character achieve her goal<sup>76</sup>. I make a precondition, that the 'real audience' is my 'character's private audience. (Then) the actor becomes the ultimate creator of (her) own performance. (She) becomes an artist'.<sup>77</sup> So playing to the audience as actor, or exhibiting embarrassment as actor because one after all is not a dancer, has no place. Not being a dancer is an obstacle to be faced and triumphed over if I am to gain my ultimate victory as actor/character. Of course the threat of failure is simultaneously present and very real. This will bring immediacy and danger, more of Cohen's prerequisites for great acting and linked at a very real level to the chasm that threatens us all, death!<sup>78</sup> I have to believe that my very best effort is more than enough to escape this inevitability, for now. This is where the drama lies, and the affirmation. But it has to be my absolute best effort. In terms of style, it is merely a transformation from the everyday. 'There is nothing unreal about behaviour that is thus transformed, it is only different'.<sup>79</sup> It is as real to my character to move as a ballerina china-doll, as it is for a cockney pearl king to wear suits emblazoned with mother of pearl buttons and speak in rhyming slang.

Which brings me to the truth; what is it? It seems to me that there are several truths, not alone in the world, but in me as an individual. In this thesis I have aimed to express myself truthfully. The truth of one day may be the embarrassment of the next. Yet nothing is invented. So, to paraphrase George Braque; nothing is a lie.

A programme on Stanislavski aired recently on BBC world service. One of the contributors clarified a very interesting point. Stanislavski was not about being oneself on stage. He was about telling the truth (and I would add *a* truth, through imagination, body, mind and art).<sup>80</sup>

'Progress in art does not consist in reducing limitations, but in knowing them better.'<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Acting Power*, 179-185.

<sup>77</sup> *Acting Power*, 203. From the same book Cohen gives an interesting interpretation on Brecht pages 207-208. Cohen writes that in Brechtian theatre the real audience and private audience are the same. The actor's performance is 'alienated not from the audience and not from the plays ideas, but from anything extraneous to their coming together'. It seems to me that many theatre theorists are saying the same thing, just through different lenses (with different emphases).

<sup>78</sup> *Acting Power*, 220-230.

<sup>79</sup> *Acting Power*, 174.

<sup>80</sup> *Stanislavski: Founder of modern acting: The Forum*, BBC World Service, London, 2 Dec. 2017.

## Insights from Practice

I am giving rhythmic impulses to my moving partner through the sounds my body can consciously make. It is an exercise right up my alley. I like to stomp and clap. I love to make vocal noises. We are encouraged to go to extremes and I need no further encouragement. There is a chase, a battle, a scolding mother, a crying child, gun shots, explosions, screams, guffaws, running feet, collisions. Whatever comes next gets an airing without censorship. I am enjoying it so much I am hardly aware of my partner and yet it works because she is aware. I am her soundtrack. Next step we are to apply this exercise to a structure. This is where I run into difficulties. How do I use the rhythmic freedom I discovered to enhance my structure? I realised that the freedom I had was used somewhat aimlessly. It was fun but there was too much in it to be aware of all of it. I realised that the freedom has to be consciously used. Then something may be discovered. If I had been fully aware of what my body was doing at all times, then the structure may have fitted to a similar over the top rhythm, because the manifestations do not have to be big or even seen. They can be inside, as I have talked about much earlier, when referring to the Laban minimalisations. This may mean slowing down the impulses for now or even, God forbid, censoring them? No. It is more like in the case of a mindful meditation; I acknowledge a new impulse, and then let it go while I optimally explore what I am doing already. There may even be an inner conflict apparent, a drama which is more interesting than just dropping the held toy and grabbing the next, endlessly. This can be my reward. And this may be the difference between the way a child plays and an adult.

An elaboration on this lesson can be found in DJ. This is the discipline that challenges my defences most grievously. I have nothing but myself, no role, no costume, no props, no idea even until I enter the space. It can, and often does, lead to a melange of conflicting impulses. And it can be intensely confusing and frustrating to watch and do, despite feeling like it should be the simplest thing in the world. We all have had inner monologues, duologues. DJ is, at its simplest, the vocal and bodily publishing of these. The problem with me is that I may not hear/notice what I am saying/doing. I had a powerful insight on this recently. I realised after two ‘failed’ attempts at interacting, with some gentle prompting to ‘listen to what I am saying’ by the supervisor, that what may be frustrating me most is the non-listening. I am a person that hates to be ignored. If I perceive it I can get irrationally angry or even depressed.

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<sup>81</sup>Georges Braque: Paintings, biography and quotes, 3 Apr. 2018 <<http://www.georgesbraque.org/georges-braque-quotes.jsp>>.

Was I ignoring myself? Anyway it was worth an exploration. So in the next short attempt I structured my DJ. I declared that I wanted to try listening to myself. I spoke loudly and clearly. I gave it sometime while my words sank in. It initially felt manufactured. But then a tentative dialogue ensued, where I promised myself to do my best to listen, ‘even when you think you are saying something silly’, And I put my hand out towards my imaginary vulnerable partner and ‘she’ grabbed it and put it on my heart. And then I burst out laughing. It was a heady moment. I really felt listened to, because I had listened to myself. And the feedback from a classmate was that it was compelling, and I thanked him and said that I enjoyed it too, and I learnt something; one of the many potential rewards in this exercise, if the ego is parked outside, and defences are dropped.

### **Applying freedom to structure**

I have my movement score for two extreme situations from Roman’s class. I go through the structure several times. Slowly. Noticing every millimetre. I find stop times, that are not stop times at all because there is this motor inside running on the verge of moving again. I do not have to think because I know what comes next. In keeping the engine humming I replace thinking with being/doing. There is a freedom in not thinking. That is one thing. But it is not this freedom that impacted mostly on me this day. We were set to work in small groups, repeating our structures, slowly for ourselves, noticing our inner impulses, then our fellow performers, the space, and the audience. We were invited to ‘play’ with our structures and encouraged to remain open to the possibilities of relationship at all levels, inner and outer. Brook’s notion of transparency is what I am reminded of here. He highlights the priority of developing and exercising total ‘respons-ability’, incorporating a ‘tripartite attentiveness: to inner impulses, to fellow performers and to the space.’<sup>82</sup> The freedom I felt lay in the opportunity to engage on these different levels while the security of a known structure underpinned everything. As I noticed and reacted to my fellow performers and they to me, stories naturally asserted themselves, there were three separate stories, simultaneously connected. In moving I came up against a pillar in the room and this became part of another story. As I leant against it, my set movements became new and as the audience reacted I engaged with them; all the while never straying from the basic structure of my movement score. I found for the first time what freedom in structure can mean.

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<sup>82</sup> *Twentieth Century Actor training*, 179.

Growtowski compares structure to the banks of a river, the river a ‘cycle of living impulses’.<sup>83</sup> I love this.

### **“Play with Me”**

*‘Play with me’ is somehow easy for me. In some aspects I am merely channelling my self in all its complexity; its ultimate positivity and defiance; its behaviours, good and bad, in relationship with friends, family, partners, self. I see my character, Jane, as a validation and acceptance of all my best and worst bits, I glory in them all. The end is not a silent scream, it is a silent roar.*

I wrote this in the lead up to the premiere. The premiere was a disaster.

*Very tense. Overacted. Technical issues. These were worked on for second night. And we played more. It was tighter, funnier, better.*

*I realised that sitting in tense position as the audience entered did not serve me. On second night I let my body relax, regardless of the porcelain quality I was charged to maintain. I breathed normally. I let my arms relax on my thighs, let my ankles fall to the sides. I was after all covered with a sheet. No one would know and I wouldn’t be in a mechanical ball of nerves, ever intensifying as we waited for the audience to settle.*

But this was not the main difference. On the morning after the premiere my spirits were low. I had got some damning criticism from a friend that had confirmed all my worst fears about the performance; that it was boring, predictable and repetitive. I know, with friends like these etc. However I had to find a way to believe in better possibilities for night two.

It was a Sunday. I went to mass in St Vitus cathedral. Sunlight streamed through the stained glass windows, casting multicoloured and golden light throughout the vaulted ceilings, Clouds of incense drifted into obsolescence. The choir sang ethereally, like the smoke. The mass was in Czech so for the homily I chose to journal. At the end of the homily, perfectly timed, I wrote ‘I don’t think I’m a great artist’. Initially I was troubled that this should be my last line and I willed the bishop to go on talking so I could find a positive spin, but he didn’t. He turned and made his way to his seat so we could ponder his words for a moment before continuing the mass. All I was left to ponder were my own words. And suddenly I realised what a blessing they were. I am not a great artist. I can relax.

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<sup>83</sup> *Twentieth Century Actor training*, 205.



Why do I want to perform? Some young students, it is clear that they are doing what they are made for. What am I made for? I am almost 50, beginning again. I do not think I am made for world stage domination. Why do I do what I do? Write my self-absorbed pieces? Because I think they are widely applicable? Because if I tell the truth about myself in as far as I am able, if I am truthful, then it may ring bells for others and the world might be a better place?

Why do I agree to almost everything I am asked to do? I want to work. That one is easy. But should I be more discerning and in what direction and why?

I need to figure this out.

Why did I do 'Play with me' for instance? The challenge? I was flattered to be asked. I admire my fellow students involved. I was interested to devise. Yes, I am happy I did it, am doing it.

The second night *was* better. I can be more relaxed in stylised structure. The freedom in imposed structure extends latitude to relax and still keep the fire inside. I lost some intensity in voice according to director. So it is obviously a balance between relaxing too much and retaining power. It is very testing. My instinct? I might hit it once in the blue moon and it cannot be predicted. And I am mightily consoled by the well known adage about Laurence Olivier, raging after a definitive performance as Hamlet, because he didn't know how he did it and so had no hope of repeating it!

I need to retain the ability to hear myself. If I get lost I can slow down. Listen. Never lose self. Beware of identifying with nerves or any high emotion. It is a battle sometimes, but a compelling one if fought. Above all I am always learning. Never 'done'.

**'I listen, I respect, but I don't lock anything. That works for computer programming-not acting.'**<sup>84</sup>

Openness - > vulnerability in art and relationships, risk -> surprise (if lucky)

My third year winter semester Clown exam did not go well. I froze. I told a teacher that I don't get clowning. How it works. 'There is nothing to get. It is in finding your weak spot and enjoying it'. The authentic struggle is funny. I will take the class again. Keep it simple.

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<sup>84</sup> Bryan Cranston, *A life in Parts* (London: Orion, 2016) 263.

No need to be funny, just simply need to be myself, open, heart, honest, brave, naive like a child, spontaneous. Everything and nothing simple about it.

Greatness in performance looks effortless. In some ways it is. It is the letting go of blocks and tensions that precedes this effortlessness that is the hard bit. First you have to be aware that they are there. Then you have to accept them. And then you have to work to remove them, while accepting that they may always be there at some level. Everything worth having has a cost.

From 'Beyond boredom and Anxiety' by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, quoted in Schecher's Performance studies book already referenced; 'In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and the environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future.'<sup>85</sup>

And certain things are happening too late for me. 'Training in realist performances (including Brecht) is focused on gaining conscious control over what one already knows how to do. But to master a codified form, one must begin very young when both mind and body are flexible.'<sup>86</sup> So I can accept this too. No big deal.

I was surprised by some of the audience reaction to ballerina in 'Play with me'- they hated her, or were at best confused- sweet/scary/ fragile/cruel, they wanted her broken/ dead. She was not understood. She alienated their sympathies totally. Albert Finney playing a genocidal maniac had audience 'with' him or at least conflicted, and it was chiefly this that gave the production its charge.<sup>87</sup> Ditto Olivier as Richard III in his movie<sup>88</sup>; charming/witty/ funny in his malevolence- he confided in the viewer, he was certain of his position, assumed we would agree with him, otherwise beneath consideration, stupid. Ballerina is not so sure of herself. And she does not confront audience or court their good opinion. She has a certain wounded righteousness. She is me at my potential worst. And I don't know if *I* like her. I don't like how she behaves. I feel sorry for her. Maybe that is the difference. Maybe accepting this dark side of *me* is an answer, because I believe the audience deserves to be torn, to hate what a character does but to understand it somehow and think 'well I could do that', or is this asking

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<sup>85</sup> *Performance studies*, 98.

<sup>86</sup> *Performance studies*, 186.

<sup>87</sup> *Acting Power*, 187.

<sup>88</sup> *Richard III*, London Films, dir. Laurence Olivier, 1955.

too much? Often we are apt to unconsciously project our worst aspects onto others, but shouldn't theatre at its best rupture some of this, wake us up or at least show that we always have a choice to behave one way or another, Brecht's 'not... but'<sup>89</sup>! Fr William Faix, an Augustinian priest based in Prague, says 'when one accepts oneself one is radiant and until we accept ourselves we cannot accept others'. He talks of conversions of the heart. He means from a spiritual point of view. I apply this to my training which at this stage is enmeshed in my whole personal, and spiritual, process anyway. Fr Faix says we are never 'there'. We start again all the time. But the struggle means we have hope and we believe. 'Do not get discouraged!'

### **Recurring conversions**

I am never there. I will never be there. There. The end point. Physically I start from zero, stiff as a poker, every day it seems. There are small victories within the day if I am lucky. Then back to zero the next day. Yesterday I almost did a handstand. The left leg kicked off strongly, the right followed. I thought- 'Aargh, I am doing it, aaargh!' My left arm buckled and I fell; the first time ever alone in a space that I did it actually. When I say 'almost', I mean that it was not sustained, but I did it. I tried to repeat it but I was too aware and while there were some 'almost' attempts, I did not come close to the wall. I was censoring, staying safe, because I knew what could happen. I might succeed. It is not our capacity for failure, but our capacity for success that terrifies us.<sup>90</sup> Nuts.

There has been a lot of affirmation for my physicality as the ballerina. This is wonderful considering where I came from. Progress is undoubtedly slow, glacial almost. But it is measurable enough to keep me going as long as I keep going. If I stop it is a short fall back to where I started.

**Ego Vs Self belief- In order to give, you have to believe you have something worth giving.**

### **Stories on ego**

*Dance class. Who would want to dance with me, older and stiffer than anyone in the room? That's what was going through my head. I told it to back off. That part was good. But the ego is insidious, it*

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<sup>89</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "The Alienation effect", *Actors on Acting*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978) 309.

<sup>90</sup> Paraphrase of oft quoted Marianne Williamson saying; "our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate... (but) powerful beyond measure".

*keeps finding a way in. Maybe because of the element of truth in it? There is a part about being middle aged that I am determined not to accept! That is the problem.*

I saw a wonderful performance of ‘Loch na hEala’, an Irish take on ‘Swan Lake’, revived in Dublin’s Abbey theatre in February 2018<sup>91</sup>. The final raucous scene included Elizabeth Cameron Dalman a dancer in her 80’s, she looked less nimble than the others, and she stood out. She threw her heart and soul into it, giving what she had. She did not pretend to be 20. And it was something!

*My teachers assure me that ‘DJ is fun!’ It doesn’t feel like fun today. New class, new people, new pressure to seem more advanced because I have been doing it longer.*

Jack Mac Gowran was apparently plagued by uncertainty and nerves. He was Beckett’s favourite actor. They found a mutual sympathy, a symbiosis so that through Mac Gowran, Beckett shone, and through Beckett, Mac Gowran likewise.<sup>92</sup> Even though his biographer makes certain regularly that we know how insecure Mac Gowran was, he must have been able to distance himself from this ball of nerves in performance. So actors can stop worrying that being nervous is all about ambition and ego. It is, but so what. The best actors have it. The trick is to be able to hover above it, find the still centre, whatever image works. And my DJ teacher Vaclav Trojan adds, ‘The skill is in keeping the passion and bringing the volume down to 60%’. Put it in the body expression. ‘Then maybe, you will understand the emotion better, not deafen yourself’.

I am preparing another authorial piece. I have strong political views on the subject. Yet If I am too strident on these, too righteous, I shut myself down and the audience out. It is a tough question for me. I want to be courageous in my convictions yet not rigid. I want to stand for something yet say it in such a way that the space is open for people to make up their own minds. They need to listen first. They won’t if I stamp my foot.

The artist has to want to communicate with everyone. It was said about Mac Gowran that his great skill was in unearthing the human being in others. There is no judgement in that. Sometimes I go to exhibitions of artists and I feel totally excluded or turned off, because of blatant statements they make. These are exhibitions that have no interest in engaging anyone

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<sup>91</sup> *Loch na hEala*. Directed by Michael Keegan Dolan. Teac Damsa, 29 Sept. 2016, O Reilly Theatre, Belvedere, Dublin.

<sup>92</sup> Jordan R.Young, *The Beckett Actor: Jack Mac Gowran, Beginning to End* (Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press, 1987).

outside of their viewpoint. They don't make me think again. They confirm acolytes in their views. They do nothing. So it is a question for me. How do I stay true to myself and let others in? How do I hold certain views and remain open?

One way I am working with is borrowed from Roman's class. It involves putting different rhythms in the body simultaneously. The arms and voice follow a  $\frac{3}{4}$  lullaby in a waltz rhythm. The legs follow a  $\frac{4}{4}$  march. I am telling a family story of a baby who died; and a related story about a pro-life march I went on with my parents where we were confronted by a group of pro-choice (pro abortion on demand) protestors. I am trying to encapsulate the story, something like the medieval prologue, before actually telling it. I don't know if it will make literal sense to others. But I know there will be a discord there that will provoke something as long as it is precise.

I do not want to exploit a family tragedy either. So I codify it and make it very simple. I am inspired by the work of several minimalist composers whose music I greatly admire; Part, Glass, Gorecki and so on. Arvo Part welcomes conferences on his work but does not participate in the dialogue himself. His work is his contribution. 'I cannot say in a few thousand sentences what I can say in a few notes... I have discovered that it is enough when I single note is beautifully played'.<sup>93</sup> And Paul Hillier wrote of Part's silences in composition, and in life, as being under a crescendo sign<sup>94</sup>. Isn't this wonderful?! I think I can learn a lot more from music. Previously I was heavily influenced by what I know of Brecht and used Music as a distancing device. In telling the tragic story of Mary Tyrone in my final Authorial presentation I played a very simple two chord tune and half sang, half spoke the lines.

*This is Mary's song*

*She had two dreams when she was young*

*To be a nun, that was the most beautiful one*

*To be a concert pianist, that was the other*

*But it didn't work out ... etc.*

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<sup>93</sup>Andrew Shenton, "Arvo Part: in his own words", *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Part*, ed. Andrew Shenton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 111-127.

<sup>94</sup>Paul Hillier, *Oxford Studies of Composers: Arvo Part* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 66.

I now feel more drawn to using music as a partner, not as something reductive, which I think is a pitfall of distancing used the wrong way; and which Brecht himself cautioned against<sup>95</sup>.

I saw the following lines on a wall of the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne. ‘What art is... it is nothing more than rhythm... Every art form throughout history has had to fulfil this primary requirement’.<sup>96</sup> Music, poetry, dance, (and I would add theatre) are all part of what Cage terms the ‘time arts... and the manner in which (time) is divided... is the work’s very life structure’<sup>97</sup>. And the composer Steve Reich talks of speech as melody<sup>98</sup> and has used the music of normal speech in many of his compositions, so I think the line is very fine between all art forms but especially between music and theatre. And what I am willing to accept from music; silence, abstraction, lyricism, dissonance, off-beats, polyrhythms, ‘walls of sound’, all manners of extremes and in-betweens; can be an ongoing inspiration for my work.

## Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have been trying to clarify for myself what I am doing and why. I have had the profound privilege of being able to begin again. A poem captured what I felt about being in this liminal phase. I knew I wanted to explore what I was learning in DAMU fully and concretely. I needed to learn how to be still and wait. I realised how fundamental breathing is in connecting mind and body, and I learnt what a bane the ego can be. It is only by detaching from the criticisms, positive and negative, of others (including mine) that I have any hope of cultivating my own voice. I wrote out of myself and through the process of writing I was more open to the lessons I was being taught every day.

It is difficult to finally finish something that can never be finished. The last paragraph is on a topic that is only half explored because there is still so much to learn and there are new daily insights in almost everything else and some delightful discoveries, when I am available to them. Often these discoveries are in rehearsal. I want to capture them and put them in aspic. I cannot. But I can console myself that I am no longer a ‘drone who profits by the work and

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<sup>95</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Letter to an Actor”, *Actors on Acting*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978) 312-3.

<sup>96</sup> Artist Kurt Schwitters quoted

<sup>97</sup> Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 72.

<sup>98</sup> *Writings on Music 1965-2000*, 181.

creativity of others'<sup>99</sup> in rehearsal and it is very fulfilling to be constantly in a process, whether working on or off stage.

Sometimes I fear that I may be becoming too calm, contained and trained. My too much is TOO much. And I have learnt to be afraid of it and this is a pitfall for me in DJ. I want to enjoy my energy. Clown classes are key, because after a while even genius incontinent energy is tiresome; it becomes as predictable as costume drama. In clown I perform for others and they 'tell' me very clearly whether I need to tone down or not. The lessons in 'listening' from clownery are invaluable. The secret is in not caring whether I am great or not, it is rather that I revel in my weak spots. I have not a set way to do anything. I discover through dialogue with self, environment and audience. There are no mistakes.

I will say it again. The secret lies in not caring whether I am great or not. I think Robert Cohen got it wrong. Being great is not what is important. Being your self is. As my clown teacher said, 'It is difficult, and very easy.'

Finally I have written about myself enough. It is time to locate the centre of attention where it belongs, in the world, the audience<sup>100</sup>. I read a beautiful quote recently by a woman called Cynthia Placha who coordinated an Improvisation seminar in Prague. She said '(we) have a mission to cultivate the ethics of empathy... (to) nurture the art of listening.'<sup>101</sup>

'That's it!' I thought immediately. 'That is what I want to do.'

Heart whispered open.

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<sup>99</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's handbook: an alphabetical arrangement of concise statements on aspects of acting*, ed. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen Drama, 1990) 117.

<sup>100</sup> Erwin Piscator, "Objective acting", *Actors on Acting*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978) 302-3.

<sup>101</sup> Cynthia Placha, "Preface", vs. *Interpretation: An anthology on Improvisation, Vol. 1*, ed. David Rothenberg (Prague: Nagace Agosto Foundation, 2015) 3.

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