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Culture, Memory, and American Performer Training

In today's technologically complex and racially hybrid society, what is the meaning of 'cultural memory'? Like performance, Ian Watson argues, culture 'exists only in the doing' – yet if our formative experiences are in that sense 'rehearsals' for life, the subsequent 'performance' is in a constant state of flux and renewal. Here, Ian Watson looks at the interface between theatrical and cultural training in American society, from the old apprenticeship system of the stock companies, through the Delsarte-based approach of the earliest conservatoires and the pervasiveness of Americanized Stanislavsky in the post-war period, towards a renewed concern with the techniques of voice and movement to meet the demands of both the classical and the contemporary experimental repertoires. In contrast to the deep cultural roots of much eastern theatrical training, perceptions of actor training in America are, he argues, as eclectic and diffuse as American society itself, and so (using Eugenio Barba's distinction) lean strongly towards creating a 'professional' rather than a 'personal' identity for the performer – one which 'bears the signature of the hybrid narrative it springs from'. Ian Watson, who is an Advisory Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*, teaches at Rutgers University–Newark, where he is the Acting Chair of the Department of Visual and Performing Arts. He is author of *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret* (Routledge, 1993) and of *Negotiating Cultures: Eugenio Barba and the Intercultural Debate* (Manchester University Press, 2002). He edited *Performer Training across Cultures* (Routledge, 2001), and has also published numerous articles on theatre in scholarly journals.

MEMORY implies a temporal binary: a past of primary experience and a present of recollection. Cultural memory highlights the complexity of this seemingly simple relationship. Culture is an intricate tapestry that is difficult, if not impossible, to define. It is a weave of community, civil, social, economic, and political organization embedded in a world view and a plethora of symbolic values that give meaning to the real and mythical dimensions of each citizen's being. Culture encompasses at the very least the socio-familial, the civil-political, the economic, the scientific and technological, the intellectual, religious, psycho-behavioural, the ludic, the artistic; and it often implies a shared language.

Most cultures are a product of centuries of living shaped by roots lost in time. Promised advances in the science of ageing aside, the human life span ensures that primary experience has little meaning in such a setting. The complexity and scale of contemporary society means we simply cannot experience every aspect of our cultures and we rarely have direct access to what shaped the cultures we live in. So, what do we mean when we talk of recollection in relation to culture? What are we remembering when we talk of cultural memory?

Culture shares much with performance because it is a living entity embedded in enactment. Cultures certainly produce. They manufacture tangible goods such as clothes, weapons, dwellings, books, works of art, and so much more, all predicated upon function, economics, and/or aesthetics. They also conceive the less tangible phenomenology of ideas, beliefs, myths, hypotheses, and readings of the world, including monuments to human ingenuity such as scientific method, monotheism, empiricism, and mathematical concepts – all of which, some would argue, are more significant than three-dimensional artefacts.

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Many of these products, as cultural critics, historians, and archaeologists attest, provide insight into the cultures which produce them. They are each culture's signature; they are not, however, its writing.

As the distinction between living and dead cultures implies, culture is ephemeral. Like its performative counterpart, it exists only in the doing. Yet the doing is shaped, guided by the culture it springs from. This shaping is a consequence of enculturation. We 'learn' our culture, its mores, its values, its history through our contact with it. We are 'rehearsed' for life in a particular society by our exposure to it in the form of parents, teachers, peers, television, reading, etc.

We do not 'remember' our cultures in the conventional way one thinks of remembering. It is not a contemplative act of recollection. It is a doing shaped by an unconscious rehearsal process. Those who guide us through this rehearsal process have been, in turn, rehearsed by those before them, and their 'directors' by those before them. It is a genealogy of culture reaching back into the past.

Cultures, being living entities, change over time. Extending the theatrical metaphor, cultures permit improvisation. They provide a framework for life's script, but this script allows for adaptation, as well as absorption of new behaviours and values. Many of these 'improvisations' become part of the culture's text and are passed on to future generations. The change in the role of women in North America and Europe during the second half of the twentieth century is a good example of such a development. There are many others: the empowerment of minorities in the United States following the Civil Rights movement, for instance, or the explosion of youth culture in America and Europe following the social unrest of the 1960s and the leading role many young people took in opposing the war in Vietnam.

Despite these changes, each generation carries something of the culture's past in its bones, a past that can be as old as the culture itself or as recent as the generation before it. This past, this 'rehearsed' script, has the primary experience of the culture embedded in it and it is this primary experience that gives meaning to the term 'cultural memory'. We do not generally recall something that happened to us in our personal lives, culturally speaking, we are rather calling upon a learned set of behaviours, societal organization, and beliefs that have the past embedded in them. Unlike more conventional understandings of memory, which suggest conscious recollection, cultural memory directs behaviour through an unconscious evocation. We do not so much recall the past: it comes into play without our knowledge.

The Past of American Performer Training

Actor training in the United States presents an interesting challenge to this notion of cultural memory because it is unclear which culture(s) is/are evoked in the training.[1]

From the beginnings of theatre in the colonies, British theatre practice was the model for the American stage. This was as true for training as it was for other aspects of performance. The early resident companies followed their British counterparts' system of training in which neophyte actors basically learned 'on the job'. Young actors played small parts, copied their more experienced colleagues, and eventually moved on to the more important roles. If they were talented and lucky enough, they, like their European colleagues, graduated to the 'lines of business' casting arrangement which dominated senior positions in the companies of the day. In this arrangement, the leading actors of a particular troupe were assigned a set of character types they were to play in the company throughout most of their careers. In doing so, they in turn became teachers to their juniors.

With the demise of resident stock companies in the second half of the nineteenth century, training opportunities grew fewer until the apprenticeship system was abandoned altogether with the founding of the first actor training conservatories in the mid-1870s. All of these conservatories taught the Delsarte method of acting and/or were heavily influenced by the local neophyte schools of forensic speech and etiquette, such as Emerson College of Oratory and the

School of the Spoken Word, which were based on European models.

Even though one of the conservatories, the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, survived and remains a leading acting school to this day, most of the early schools suffered a similar fate to the training practice that preceded them. This was primarily due to the highly successful North American tours by the Moscow Arts Theatre (M.A.T.) in 1923 and 1924. The quality of acting in the M.A.T. productions and the Stanislavsky acting system they were based on took the United States by storm, the aftermath of which continues to exert considerable influence on actor training in the country.

Following the M.A.T.'s tours, two actors from the company, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, were encouraged to remain in the United States to head a new conservatory, the American Laboratory Theatre. This school, which remained open until 1930, was the first in the Americas to teach the system of acting developed by Stanislavsky. Significantly, among its approximately 500 students were Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman, all of whom went on to play leading roles not only in North American theatre but also in the country's development of actor training. Another M.A.T.-trained actress, Vera Soloviova, also taught in America in the mid-1930s, and was followed by another Russian destined to become a major teacher in America, Michael Chekhov.

These Russian expatriates were the vanguard of what was to become the gradual 'Stanislavsky-ization' of American actor training. Lee Strasberg travelled to Moscow in 1934 to observe Stanislavsky's work first hand, and Stella Adler studied with the master himself in Paris the same year. These direct contacts with Stanislavsky, and the indirect exposure to his techniques through the Russian teachers in the United States, were supplemented by a number of publications by Stanislavsky himself and by Russian colleagues who had worked with him. Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art* was published in the United States in 1924, followed by *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Creating a Role* (1936), and *Building a Character* (1949). Boleslavsky's *Acting: the First Six Lessons*, based on what he and Ouspenskaya taught at the American Laboratory Theatre, was published in 1933, and Michael Chekhov's *To the Actor* in 1953.

Books and Russian teachers aside, the most significant step towards an American technique of acting with its roots in Stanislavsky's ideas lies in the formation of the Group Theatre in 1931. Its brief ten-year history notwithstanding, the Group's preoccupation with realism and Stanislavsky, the influence of former members such as Strasberg, Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Robert Lewis as teachers after the company disbanded, as well as the success of those who studied with them, did much to popularize what eventually became an Americanized version of the Stanislavsky system. This Americanized Stanislavsky, with its emphasis on the psychological and emotional life of the character, justified motivations, and the subtext rather than the text itself, came to dominate post-war American film, theatre, and, in consequence, actor training.

Shortcomings of America's Stanislavsky

Regardless of its pre-eminence, there was a gradual realization of the limitations of the Stanislavsky system during the late 1950s and 1960s, which, coupled with the emergence of the regional theatres, prompted a reappraisal of the Russian masters' ubiquity. Regional theatres, with their repertory programming of plays that included material by Shakespeare, Shaw, Ford, Molière and the like, revived an interest in the classics – classics that, many argued, a Stanislavsky training did little to prepare actors for. This, coupled with the emergence of playwrights such as Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, Albee, and Shepard highlighted the need for a training that included developing a sensibility for material beyond the realist canon that most associated with Americanized Stanislavsky techniques.

As regional theatres established themselves, and conservatories such as the Yale School of Drama and Juilliard, among others,

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developed training programmes sensitive to emerging trends and influenced by the more classically oriented British models, an avant-garde movement evolved, committed to exploring alternatives to psychologically based theatrical realism. Since much of this vocal, corporal, and psycho-physical research called for skills that were outside the domain of conventional teaching at the time, training played no small role in the leading companies of the 1960s and 1970s movement, such as Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre and Richard Schechner's Performance Group.

Performance Training Today

Even though there has been an influx of various training methodologies in recent years, mainstream actor training in the United States remains, to generalize, a combination of Americanized Stanislavsky and British-influenced classical instruction filtered through the legacy of the Group Theatre and the experiments with alternative techniques in the 1960s and 1970s. This training invariably combines technique classes with vocal and movement instruction.

Acting curricula vary from one training institution to another but, excluding various introductory classes, which emphasize sensitivity training and owe a debt to the work of Chaikin, Schechner, and their contemporaries, most are dominated by technique classes. These classes encompass areas such as text analysis, character, and work on subtext and emotions, as well as improvisation. They also usually include 'Scene Study' and/or 'Styles' classes, which allow students to experiment with their newly acquired technique on plays ranging from the Ancient Greeks to modern realism.

Vocal training has undergone something of a resurgence since the late 1950s. As one might expect of a skill inherited from nineteenth-century declamation, with its links to schools of oratory, speech was always an important part of an actor's preparation prior to the Americanization of Stanislavsky. The Group Theatre and the teaching that grew out of it moved the emphasis away from the mechanics of speech and onto the inner justification for how one's character spoke. But with the rekindled interest in the classics and the experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s, voice classes that attend to the vocal instrument as much as to how a particular character speaks have again become a required element of the curriculum.

This renewed concern with the voice has been accompanied by a similar realization of the importance of movement training for actors. The shift away from a training focused almost exclusively on the inner life of a role to one which embraces the classics and the performer's body as an instrument of communication as much as the embodiment of character has led to an interest in the physicality of the actor. This shift has been so dramatic that, whereas there were few to no conservatories offering movement training in the 1950s, today movement classes have become a standard part of the curriculum in all training academies of any note. These classes are essentially of two types, those geared to a general preparation of the actor's body for performance, and speciality skills classes such as dance, combat techniques, and mask work.

Determining the Priorities

Identifying the historical legacy embedded in this contemporary training goes a long way to understanding the role cultural memory plays in it. Interestingly, regardless of the intervening years, much of that legacy has its roots in the first conservatories.

For instance, in what is arguably the best history of actor training in the United States during this period, James McTeague's *Before Stanislavsky: American Professional Acting Schools and Acting Theory, 1875–1925*, the author identifies several factors that the first conservatories had in common that still play a significant role in shaping the philosophy of teaching and the acting theory underlying it. The most commonly shared belief of the early conservatories was that there is a body of knowledge and experience to be gained about acting prior to entering the profession (McTeague, 1993, p. 241). The knowledge was in turn systematized, and this 'system of

acting' – which, granted, did vary somewhat from school to school – was then conveyed through a curricular model of teaching rooted in a single theory of acting (p. x-xi).

The conceptualization of Stanislavsky's ideas on acting into a system (which, it is worth noting, he was dubious about) only served to reinforce an understanding of training that had gone before it and continues to influence mainstream actor training. Many of today's schools advertise themselves as providing training rooted in approaches to acting such as the Method, the Adler, or the Meisner techniques. Similarly, most conservatories and university theatre departments in the United States offer incremental learning in various areas of specialization taught by different instructors whose classes reflect the institution's philosophy of acting.

This curricular method of teaching was first adopted in 1892 with Franklin Sargent's founding of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. The approach to training, like that of systematizing acting, was not entirely his own, however, but was based upon the ideas of his former partner, Steele MacKaye, who had studied with François Delsarte in France and who had been greatly influenced by the latter's dual emphases on codification and bodily expression.

The pre-eminent role of the playwright is the mainstay of conventional theatre in the United States. It is the writer who provides the blueprint for any production and whom many champion as the one indisputable creative artist in any theatrical enterprise. In this conception of theatre, actors, directors, and designers are interpretive artists whose task it is to serve the playwright. Most historians of American theatre trace this creative-interpretive binary back to Stanislavsky, but its origins are older by at least some thirty years. Charles Jehlinger, a member of the first graduating class from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and a faculty member for nearly forty years after that, taught the importance of the play text as the major source of information during rehearsals for the actor with regard to character and situation (McTeague, p. 52). Jehlinger laid the groundwork in American actor training for Stanislavsky's much more systematic and influential ideas.

For the contemporary mainstream performer, as for Stanislavsky, and Jehlinger before him, the actor's primary task is to obey the 'author's instructions', faithfully to transform the playwright's words into actions and interpret characters as they understand the latter conceives them. A large part of an American actor's training still involves learning how to do this.

Questioning the Playwright's Pre-eminence

Such reverence for the playwright was not the only way in which the early American training academies anticipated Stanislavsky. The majority also shared much in common with Stanislavsky's psycho-physical concepts. Most, for example, believed that relaxation was essential to both training and performance. Also, in the vein of Stanislavsky's 'circle of attention' they taught that the actor must accept the circumstances of the play as completely as possible; they believed that the actor must identify with the role by thinking and feeling 'as if' he was the character in the situations of the play; and, in anticipation of 'affective memory', at least three of the schools taught actors to use their own life as a source for the emotional experiences of their characters (McTeague, p. 242–4). All these elements continue to play an important role in most American actor training programmes.

Despite the rise of regional theatre and the post-Group Theatre reaction to what were seen as the weaknesses of the Stanislavsky system, the Russian genius continues to influence current American performer training. The Americanization of his ideas on text analysis, the inner life of the character, the importance of subtext, psychological action, motivation, and emotion are as pertinent today as they were fifty years ago.

This is due to several factors. First and foremost, generations of actors, many of whom, like Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, and Joanne Woodward, became international stars that fledgling actors wanted to emulate, were identified with

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teachers who claimed Stanislavsky as their mentor. Secondly, his system is flexible, allowing for the interpretive variations of it made by the likes of Strasberg and others without losing its integrity. His system is also accessible, reasonably adaptable to different types of theatre, and lends itself to a systematized linear curricular format which is easily taught.

Such Americanized versions of Stanislavsky were so successful that from the early 1950s into the early 1970s it was virtually the only type of training available in the United States. It is graduates of this period who still dominate the teaching of technique today. Leading college teachers like Robert Benedetti (who taught at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, was chair of the Acting Program at Yale University, and has been Dean of the California Institute of the Arts), William Esper (head of the Acting Program at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School), Michael Kahn (who heads Juilliard's Drama Division), and Dale Moffit (the head of theatre at Southern Methodist University for many years) have, for example, all studied, and in some instances even taught with, the Group Theatre teachers (Mekler, 1988).

Similarly, leading private acting teachers, such as Michael Howard, Michael Schulman, Terry Schreiber, and Ed Kovens, have all been influenced by years of study and/or teaching with either Strasberg, Meisner, Lewis, or Adler (Mekler, 1988). And the Actors Studio and the New School for Social Research in New York currently offer a degree programme that includes classes taught by luminaries of the Actors Studio such as Paul Newman, Al Pacino, and Alec Baldwin. All of these schools and teachers produce, in turn, the actors and teachers of tomorrow.

This is not to say that these and other fine acting teachers have ignored the growth of repertory theatre across the country. They would do so at their own peril, since the growth of the regional theatres has not only meant a shift in artistic compass from a profession centred solely on New York, it has also meant a shift in employment demographics. Put simply, a great deal of work for actors is in regional theatre. Sensitive to this, most quality acting schools offer classes in voice, speech, and movement tailored to playing the classical repertoire. This training, with its emphasis on the text rather than the subtext, on diction rather than motivation, and on physical action rather than the inner life of the character, harks back in many ways to the repertory training of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This is not to say that the apprenticeship model of training, learning technique by imitating one's mentor, or developing skills in accordance with the formulaic 'lines of business' casting practices have been revived. What has happened, however, is that declamatory skills and the ability to project physical presence that were so highly prized in the early days of American theatre have once more become of concern to teachers and actors alike.

Cultural Memory in Performer Training

The echo of long-forgotten repertory training in today's acting schools is typical of the role cultural memory plays in performer training in the United States. What is taught in the majority of conservatories has origins of which most beyond their immediate teachers remain unaware. A general recognition of Stanislavsky's influence is pervasive, but confusion is rife about what exactly has been handed down intact from the Russian master and which of his ideas have been adapted over the years. Yet there is little doubt that whatever is evoked in the bodies and voices of American-trained performers, its history is brief and in most instances derivative.

The deep cultural roots of Asian theatres such as Noh and Kathakali make instructive comparisons. The origins of Noh lie in medieval Japan with the performances mounted in Buddhist temples following religious services, performances which were gradually transformed into the Noh of today, particularly during the mid-fourteenth century with the emergence of the great actor Kan'ami and most especially his son, Zeami,

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who together helped secularize and consolidate the form.[2]

Kathakali evolved during the seventeenth century in Kerala, India, but, like Noh, has even older origins. Its beginnings lie in a variety of sources which include the classical Sanskrit form of Kutiyattam, dating from at least the ninth century AD; the folk and ritual traditions of the Kerala region, such as Teyyam and Mudiettu; the ancient Indian text devoted to dramatic theory and aesthetics, the *Natyashastra* (reputedly written between 200 BC and 200 AD); and the Kerala's martial art tradition, Kalarippayatt.[3]

Noh and Kathakali are oral performance traditions. Actors learn their art from performers who preceded them. These master actors teach their students the repertoire of their particular genres by having them copy what they do. There is a concern with physical and vocal technique in both forms, but the bulk of an actor's training is spent in reproducing characters, situations, dances, songs, etc., as their teacher did before them. It is only later, when they themselves are master actors with many years of experience, that they allow individual interpretation to creep into their performances.

This is diametrically opposed to mainstream American training, which is predicated upon individual interpretation. Instead of attempting to reproduce what their predecessors have done, most actors in the United States are taught how to work on plays and roles they are unfamiliar with. Rather than drawing upon a legacy that is transmitted from one body to another in a non-linear fashion, their entire training is based upon learning a set of skills incrementally from those concerned with teaching a craft rather than a repertory. Much as a carpenter is taught how to hammer a nail and work with wood so that he can apply those skills to building any wooden structure, an American actor is taught a set of skills that she applies to whatever role or play she is presented with.

Noh and Kathakali actors carry their performance cultures in their bodies. Historically speaking, both have deep roots in the cultures that spawned them and, because of their training methods, that culture is 're-membered' in those who perform on the Noh and Kathakali stages of today. The American reality is somewhat less clear. The transmission of ideas rather than body-knowledge, combined with personal exploration and skill acquisition, are at the heart of a training regime that shuns copying what went before it. In addition, its beginnings are relatively recent, given that the systematic training of performers only began in earnest in the past century, not to mention that much of it has European origins. Clearly, cultural memory in American performer training evokes something quite different from its counterpart in Noh or Kathakali. This evocation is at the heart of what cultural memory means in an American context.

So What is Being Remembered?

In discussing cultures, generally speaking, one thinks of socio-historical groupings of peoples (e.g., the Serbs or the Kosovars), ethno-familial heritage (e.g., Scottish Highlanders, or the displaced Hmong people of Vietnam now living in the United States), possibly even history, behaviour, and values delineated by geography, national boundaries, and/or language (e.g., German culture or Egyptian culture). All of these to a greater or lesser extent are founded upon birth, familial relations, and/or identity politics.

But actor training in the United States suggests yet another type of cultural affiliation – one based on what Eugenio Barba refers to as professional identity rather than bloodlines or borders. As Barba argues in his paper 'Anthropological Theatre' (distributed among participants at the 1987 International Gathering of Group Theatres in Bahía Blanca, Argentina), there is a case to be made for distinguishing between personal and professional identities with respect to performer training.

One's personal identity is rooted in a web of relations that most often includes variables such as family, race, national origins, social class, and native language. An actor's professional identity, on the other hand, can be, and today often is, drawn from many sources that have little to do with a student's

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personal biography. As Barba points out, actors can and do study any number of different techniques with teachers from a range of countries and performance genres.

The success of the Stanislavsky system confirmed the foundation of a professional identity in an American setting. If a Russian can provide a model for this identity, why not an Asian, a Latin American, or an Israeli? Jewel Walker, one of the United States' leading movement teachers, is typical of today's America when he cites the sources of his training method as including, at the very least, Indian yoga, the Pilates Method originated in Germany by Joseph Pilates, Delsarte and Etienne Decroux from France, the Russian Michael Chekhov, the Hungarian-born, German-based Rudolph Laban, the Rolfing form of body massage developed in the United States by Ida Rolf, Japan's Tadashi Suzuki, and various types of gymnastic jumps using a mini-trampoline or the Reuther board invented in Germany (in Hobgood, p. 114–15).

As I write this in New York in the early spring of 2002, an actor can study any number of techniques and approaches to theatre in the city, ranging from home-grown variations on Stanislavsky to the Suzuki Method, from Balinese dance drama to the mask work of France's Jacques Lecoq, from classical British vocal technique to Roy Hart's muli-national eclectic experiments with the voice, or from Chinese Tai-Chi to the Israeli Moshe Feldenkrais's take on movement. There are many more.

Actor training in the United States, which was shaped for over a century by influences beyond its own borders, is a paradigmatic model of professional identity – an identity formed by the professional genealogy of those with whom one studies, not by the country in which one lives or by the ethnic group to which one belongs.

The understanding of the relationship between cultural memory and training in the USA is predicated upon this notion of identity. This is because the past embedded in the actor through training, and which is unconsciously evoked in the studio, in the workshop, or during performance, is that of a professional rather than national culture. American actors do not consciously or unconsciously 're-member' a body- knowledge rooted in a national culture and an unbroken performance tradition intimately connected to that culture's long history. They engage a culture with a lower case 'c', if you will – a culture constructed from multifarious influences which owes little allegiance to any one country; a living culture shaped by the fusion of tradition and negotiations with professional identities which privilege utility over history; but a culture which nevertheless bears the signature of the hybrid narrative it springs from.

Notes

1. For a more detailed overview of the history of actor training in the United States, see Watson, 2001.
2. For a fuller discussion of the origins and early history of Noh, see Inoura and Kawatake, 1981, p. 46–106.
3. For a more thorough discussion of the origins and early history of Kathakali, see Zarrilli, 1984, p. 39–63.

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