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The Performative Self: Improvisation for Self and Other

This paper was prepared for the 'Postmodernism and Spirituality' conference held at the University of Central Lancashire in April this year, and Ruth Quinn has now reworked the piece in the light of Clive Barker's article in NTQ 69, 'In Search of the Lost Mode: Improvisation and All that Jazz'. Ruth Quinn first studied Theology at Oxford, but has been teaching Drama and Theatre Studies for eleven years, currently at the University of Central Lancashire within the Contemporary Performing Arts Department. Here she outlines some of the key elements of improvisation and how the dynamic between self and other develops in an actor's training.

CLIVE BARKER'S article in NTQ 69, 'In Search of the Lost Mode: Improvisation and All that Jazz', proposed a 'next step' in actor training and rehearsal techniques, extending his work within the area of kinaesthetics and kinescenics. His belief that 'the stage ought to be alive with small but significant shifts in the balance of bodies'¹ is one (to continue his musical analogy) that strikes a chord for me (or should that be a mode). I want rehearsal rooms and performance spaces to be alive with physical poetry. Which is why I, like many others, have grown more and more interested in improvisation techniques and the use of our whole bodies in both play and performance.

As a practitioner encouraging others to play and perform, I am constantly aware of and to some extent negotiating the relationships within the group. This might be supporting a group who are struggling to work successfully together, or encouraging a performer to develop and extend his/her range of activities. It is this negotiation that leads me to explore the dynamic between self and other. I cannot ignore my own role as a facilitator of work, but neither can I ignore all the various and complex relationships that happen within groups. In theatre and performance we are constantly in various ways and forms exploring the gap between self and other and looking to find ways to

bridge the gulf and create some kind of communion. In ensemble work, unless we have understood our communal function, the group will never perform effectively, whether or not it hits the right note.

A Sense of Self

In a strange society obsessed by self-help manuals and personal affirmations that will guide towards empowerment, we appear to have little understanding of the self. As an educationalist I am aware of the effect low self-esteem has upon the learning capacity of an individual. Students who cannot distinguish between criticism of their work and criticism of themselves will tend to give up on the task sooner. More significant, however, is the impression that developing one's sense of self and articulating one's own voice is becoming a thing of the past. The educational changes that have occurred in the last fifteen years may have gone some way to improve standards, but we may have paid an extravagant and dangerous price. The political debate about 'spin' and whether or not we can ever ascertain the truth in a given situation belies the fact that institutions and corporations see us all as 'the masses', there to be manipulated. I am reminded of the words of that great spiritual writer Thomas Merton:

One of the characteristics of 'mass society' is precisely that it tends to keep man [*sic*] from fully achieving his identity, from operating fully as an autonomous person, from growing up and becoming spiritually and emotionally adult.²

Though some actors could be accused of having enormous egos, we might also suggest that great actors have a strong sense of their 'many selves' and that this enables them to manage and build a truthful relationship with their true adult self. The irony of course that actors and performers have discovered is that through playfulness and their child-like approach they can develop this sense of self. Moreover, in order to improve our self-image we must, as Feldenkrais asserts, value ourselves as individuals and not judge ourselves by our achievements.³ This lack of judgement is what constitutes a truly performative approach to our rehearsal and performance work.

Encountering the Other

To work well collaboratively we must have some understanding about how we perceive and relate to 'the other'. This specifically pertains to the work of actors and performers, but is also essential in any learning environment in which we want all participants to benefit. 'The other' is of course nothing more than 'a self' seen from a different perspective: we truly only know ourselves through the other. However, in a developed world culturally moulded by individualism, the myth that we can know ourselves through examining ourselves continues to hold sway. There seems to have been a quiet societal acceptance that 'self' is all. And here lies the crux: we are always tempted to define 'the other' in relation to 'the self' and the coding, constructs, and values that we have developed for our own sense of self and the world. We want others to grant us a freedom in which we can grow and change, and yet often forget to offer this privilege to others.

Clive Barker has always been aware of this in his emphasis upon trying to find the spontaneous and not placing something (an activity or judgement) in front of one's natural creativity.⁴ If we allow a real spontaneity in

our relationships we walk into an uncharted space where we all live, yet which we rarely inhabit. To inhabit the space suggests a fuller, more developed awareness of body and place. This is a place that actors and performers have discovered through using spontaneity and forgetfulness within their devising techniques.

I was seeking to inhabit the space of becoming, to use Berger's terms: the space between experience and expression, reality and representation, existence and essence: the concrete fertile pre-thematic and an-archaic space where we actually live. I was seeking that is to establish relationships with others in 'excess' of the categories which render us knowable and/or already known.⁵

In her paper 'The Politics of Spirituality: the Spirituality of Politics', Finn is here discussing the way in which we relate and determine 'the other'. New relationships formed 'in excess' of the categories which render us knowable invite new possibilities and new dynamics. This is the place where learning and development of one's voice can also happen. It is also the true site of *per*-formance (through-form) as opposed to *pre*-forming (before-form) relationships, thoughts, characters, and scenarios. An exciting performance constantly finds its expression through a second-by-second alive interpretation of form: real performance as opposed to one that is too prescribed and pre-formed. To achieve heightened performance is to be constantly working with improvisation technique at an advanced level. If we work towards this kind of performance (that Barker has clearly witnessed through his development of improvisation games/performances) and not pre-formation we can hopefully develop a deeper ontological connection with others that will enable better ensemble work to happen.

However, this is not just about actors but also about how we operate communally in a society that encourages us to focus on our individual desires and overlook our corporate needs. This is also a way in which any group of learners can have a stronger sense of how they can work together to effect change.

So many of the moments throughout our lives are destroyed by our determination to live somewhere else. We live so much of our

lives in previous past moments or in potential possible places and projects. It is the dead moments which are the dangerous ones. In Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Mrs Alving comments:

I'm haunted by ghosts. . . . It's not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort. . . . And we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light.⁶

Return to the Real

All the emotions attached to past places and future-flights distort our vision. The internal and external image machine becomes confused and we lose all sense of awake-ness and attention and presence in the moment, which is the only place that exists. The 'image machine' impacts upon all our lives. The power of television, adverts, bill-boards, and magazines all present us with images that live on within us.

The internal 'image machine' also responds to these images and often absorbs them into our sense of self. A return to the real is often a simple acknowledgement of the reality of a given situation as opposed to the assumption that the dominant cultural image is normative.

This is what I mean by a return to the real. All performers know that this is the place of the absurd, not in the etymological sense of 'not listening' but in the sense that this is the place of relaxation and concentration to a point of forgetting. This is seen in the work of the great comic performers whose sense of 'timing' is faultless.

This is performing the comedy and the joy of life as well as ritualizing the pain and agony of existence in the long dark nights. This is the place where the knocking of reality on the door of any given moment enables us to surprise ourselves with actions and performances we didn't expect. This is what happens when we leave our dead selves and our pre-judgements behind, and take a step forward with our awake selves to perform the moment. There are many techniques that can be used to stay in the present but most of them are bodily, visceral and mundane.

Back to Body Basics

It is through our bodies that we are able to understand the relationship of the self and other. Through our bodies we learn the relationships of power and resistance and how energy moves. It is through our bodies that we can find this uncharted space of performance, as opposed to pre-formance. Through form, through forming, we begin to negotiate meaning.

Meaning is the currency that enables us to create and communicate effectively. Our bodies fumble or dance their way through life as powerhouses of making and meaning. Unfortunately, we seem to be living in a time that values less and less the beauty of real human contact and idolizes the 'virtual' relationship. I was recently surprised when a friend, with whom I'd been at a meeting, persuaded me to continue the encounter and go for a coffee with others. Finally, despite other commitments, I agreed – only to be disappointed when she produced her mobile phone and occupied the next ten minutes 'texting' people. It appeared that the excitement had been in the negotiating for my attendance, but when the game was won I became less interesting.

Actors and performers know only too well the value of their bodies and the way in which they stand or fall by the impact that their physical presence can make. Teachers and educationalists generally seem to be less aware of the absolute significance of the human body in how we build and grow in our own self-awareness and also in our relations with others. Our current models of teaching have become rigid and product-focused. Not only do we have young people struggling to develop their own voices (both literally and metaphorically) but we also have some schools that pay little attention to the needs of the human body, thereby creating a culture that fails to respect the physical bodies of others.

The place of drama and the arts within the curriculum cannot be overstated, as they not only enable our students to learn through 'doing' but also if taught well give young people an opportunity to experience that

uncharted/unplanned space and so develop the skills of improvisation. These are not just the domains of those of us within the theatrical world: maybe it is time we worked with others to encourage them to experience the real value of these tools.

Meeting My Many Selves

Emphasis has traditionally been placed on the integration of the self. Our fear of mental illness and, in particular, of schizophrenia means that we are wary of acknowledging our different faces and personae. However, this dull rigidity is destroying the creativity of many, unable to discover the enormous breadth of their personality. We stay limited within our conformity often largely because our friends and family, who have also grown to love and care for certain aspects of our personality, may be less enamoured by new or disturbing personae.

Julia Cameron comments: 'Contacting the jostling crowd of inner selves, giving them a chance to speak and to act, can greatly enrich our lives.'⁷ So simple techniques of acknowledging some of the different personae that live and thrive within us can enable us to liberate our deeper sense of self. But it is the way in which we can determine and organize these many selves in order to enhance our performances and our general proclivity to learning that interests me most. Here I am indebted to the work of Timothy Gallwey and his wonderful book *The Inner Game of Tennis*.⁸ I would, however, like to propose a different scheme of personae that may enable performers to work more to the uncharted place and also all learners to be more courageous in their learning journeys.

If we assume that we live in a performative state, performing but in truth mostly pre-forming our given moments, we can call this the 'performative self'. The performative self is accompanied by two less than desirable acquaintances who radically impact upon the ability of the performative self. These are the 'dead self' and the 'judgement self'. The dead self is the persona who constantly holds all those past moments and past experiences that we fail to let go of, and

that influence and determine how we act in the present. The judgement self works hand in hand with the dead self to make judgements of others with regards to our current world view, our current information, and also the influences of the dead self upon the judgement self – peer pressure in its ugliest form. Together these three prevent and stifle huge amounts of creativity.

The way forward is for the performative/performing self to place emphasis upon an old, close friend with archetypal form but also real personal significance. This is Death, death as a persona who may come visiting at any time, but also the image of my own death, and me no longer having life energy and life spirit. Maintaining a constant attachment to death lessens the noise of the other selves who strive to prevent the self from growing and renewing. A strong umbilical attachment to death means that we can move forwards into a new 'awake self', an alive self who is prepared to work with the unknown and court true spontaneity and improvisation.

This may seem a depressing or uncomfortable place to be, but, rather, it is a place where real communication and honesty can happen. A strong commitment to seeing and hearing each other's truths as opposed to the pre-judgements we tend to make may sit a little uncomfortably at first. But this is a place of new language and new hope, where divine comedy and tragedy are juxtaposed and the relationship between the other and myself can develop. Through developing a non-judgemental space and also a free spontaneous place, new communication and new form can grow. We need to be constantly open to surprising others and ourselves with the newness of who we are and who we can become. We are organic shifting beings, growing into becoming, and ever able to do something new and to experiment further.

Barker's exposition of exercises/improvisation with no talking, no violence, no Marcel Marceau is pure 'physical poetry',⁹ and he is so right to suggest that this approach needs to be developed. Surely it is time to start building these techniques into the stage work we do in Britain today and also to

experiment more, as Barker suggests, with a form of improvised dance/drama possibly combined with voice and sounding work, too.

This is a new area of physical theatre waiting to be explored. I believe it would take us forward in our understanding of dance and drama, and enable us to develop a new form of performance which will be a 'thoroughly disciplined and free theatre'.¹⁰ To ensure that we sow the right seeds for growth we need to enable actors and performers to have a strong understanding of themselves and the others with whom they work and also to work intensively on the underlying techniques of listening, seeing, spontaneity, and not pre-forming.

There is also, I believe, a further mission to others – generously to share the insights from the drama and dance world with those in education generally to enable them to support students in their ability to learn by

doing and by being with others in a wholesome group situation.

Note and References

1. Clive Barker, 'In Search of the Lost Mode: Improvisation and All that Jazz', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVIII, No. 69 (2002), p. 14.
2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Redwood Press, 1971), p. 59.
3. See Moshe Feldenkrais, *Awareness through Movement* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 19.
4. Clive Barker, *Theatre Games* (London: Methuen, 1977).
5. Geraldine Finn, 'The Politics of Spirituality', in Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, ed., *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 112.
6. Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), Act II, p. 61.
7. Julia Cameron, *The Vein of Gold* (New York: Putman, 1996), p. 87.
8. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (London: Cape, 1975).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.