

Using the Method to be Myself: Adapting and Appropriating Historical Training Approaches for Interactive Performance

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Abstract

This article examines how notions of artistic truth and authenticity articulated by Konstantin Stanislavski and his followers might be adapted for use within interactive and immersive performance. Making connections between Stanislavski's aesthetics and the kinds of spectatorial relationships established within contemporary participatory performance, the article asserts that Stanislavskian techniques used for training actors to behave truthfully in imaginary circumstances can also be used productively when training for performances that reject the fourth wall conventionally associated with Stanislavskian theatre.

The article draws on the author's experience of practising and teaching techniques developed by Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner, as well as his experiences of creating and performing within intimate, interactive performances. The discussion of these practices is framed by a critical discussion of how issues in contemporary performance aesthetics relates to the field of performance training, making specific reference to Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics.

Keywords: Konstantin Stanislavski; Interactive Theatre; Immersive Theatre; Relational Aesthetics; Performance Training.

Introduction

In this article, I will examine my own experiences of developing training for interactive and immersive performance, making specific reference to the application of techniques and exercises from the Stanislavskian tradition of acting. At the centre of this discussion is a desire to communicate the results of practice-based research from my work as a theatre-maker. However, in the process of considering my use of practices developed by Stanislavski and his followers, I have come to realise that some of the more significant (and unexpected) results of my research relate to the development of a way of thinking about the adaptation, appropriation and translation of historical knowledge from the field of performer training. I believe these secondary results to be interesting because of their potential value to practitioners working outside the disciplinary boundaries of my performance practice. It is, therefore, along two parallel tracks that I intend to proceed. One path will focus on examining case-studies of training from my own practice. The other will concentrate on the broader methodological and contextual question of how approaches developed with specific, and historically contingent, aesthetic ends in mind might be adapted to function within very different kinds of contemporary practice. I have organised the structure of this article in such a way that these micro and macro levels of analysis are left separate - speaking to each other from a position of contiguity rather than integration. This choice has been made in order to leave interstices for the reader's thinking. It is my hope that readers will weave their own ideas and questions across the divide that separates the two parts of my argument.

The Death of Performance Training

In her excellent book, *The Death of Character*, the critic Elinor Fuchs draws on the thinking of Jacques Derrida to argue that some of the most significant developments in dramatic form during the Twentieth Century emerged in relation to the perceived tension between the authenticity of the performing body's corporeal presence and the predetermined, artifice of the text (1996, p. 73). In her analysis, Fuchs uses the recognition of the performer's dialectical status as both spontaneous, authentic subject and predetermined, aesthetic object to think through the complexities involved in articulating the differences between character, actor and text. Fuchs is not alone in noting that the innovations of many Twentieth Century theatre-makers were found in the process of interrogating this apparent space between body and text. Her analysis echoes the work of Stanton Garner (1994) and Bert States (1987), both of whom brought phenomenological perspectives to bear on the work of modernist dramatists. It also connects to Alan Read's account of theatre as a medium that plays on the boundaries separating 'the natural' and 'the social' (2009, p.15).

I draw the reader's attention to these critical examinations of modernist and post-modernist performance, because their analysis of theatre aesthetics can be understood to have repercussions within the field of performance training which I believe reverberate in ways that have yet to be analysed fully in discussions of contemporary performance-making. If, as Fuchs suggests, contemporary theatre aesthetics can be seen to depend on the opposition between the performing body's authenticity and the text's artifice, it seems useful to analyse the potential role of performance training in mediating the complex aesthetic relationships between character, actor, text and meaning.

However, the process of mediating these relationships is more frequently discussed as an issue of dramaturgy. To a certain extent, this is understandable. If dominant critical perspectives suggest that the meaning of contemporary performance is realised in the opposition between the performer's corporeal reality and the constructedness of the performance score or text, it makes sense to consider the performer's body as a fixed quantity within the dramaturgical schema, rather than the subject of an aesthetic process of change and transformation. And if the performer's job is ultimately to be herself, carrying out predetermined tasks, while meaning is made through a process of creative juxtaposition that is completed in the spectator's interpretation of events, it becomes apparent why issues of training have become subservient to issues of dramaturgy in the analysis of contemporary performance practice.

This shift away from discussions of training can also be related to the ways in which the aesthetic tensions articulated by Fuchs have had an impact upon our sense of disciplinary boundaries in performance. In aesthetic contexts where the performer is valued for the fact of her presence, the process of drawing consistent boundaries to separate and connect contemporary practices from the fields of live art, dance, theatre and performance is fraught with complexity. In 1968, Peter Brook claimed that all that was needed for an act of theatre to be engaged was someone walking across an empty space while someone else watched (1990, p. 11). In 2018, it seems pertinent to question whether the same event could also be recognised as an act of live art, dance or performance art. The crosspollination of previously distinct artistic disciplines has become commonplace in post-millennial artistic

practice - to the extent that the blurring of form once associated with the experimental work discussed by Fuchs, Read, States and Garner is now commonplace in commercial and mainstream art. This development has allowed for the evolution of a diverse and fascinating performance ecology; however, it also raises questions about how the contemporary performance practitioner negotiates her relationship to bodies of knowledge that were developed when disciplinary boundaries were more fixed. It stands to reason that, if we cannot be sure of the distinctions that separate dance from performance art or theatre, the question of what should be contained within the performer's training can no longer be answered with certainty – especially when considering performance contexts in which the performer's role is indistinguishable from her self.

Beyond the difficulty of establishing coherent definitions of the various formal disciplines associated with performance, I believe that prioritizing the performer's reality as an embodied subject can itself be understood as a barrier to discussions of training. In the run up to *The Artist is Present*, Marina Abramović's 2010 exhibit at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the artist was asked to articulate the difference between theatre and performance art. She said:

To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake...
The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. (in O'Hagan 2010)

It seems almost unnecessary to point out the naivety and (considering her professional association with Robert Wilson) possibly calculated nature of Abramović's remarks. Nevertheless, I do so in order to show how the uncritical use of arbitrary disciplinary boundaries can undermine discussions of training. Abramović's statement can be read as an attempt to frame the aesthetic preoccupations of a branch of art that is deeply concerned with the ways in which performance might be used to facilitate moments of authentic experience. However, to define performance as rooted in reality, while placing it in strict opposition to the apparent artifice of theatre, is to limit discussion of the ways in which the aesthetics of both theatre and performance art manipulate and guide the spectator's perception of the performing body's status as a living subject for symbolic or narrative effect.

While we should not, perhaps, spend too much time analysing remarks made to a journalist on a promotional junket, I think that Abramović's use of problematic disciplinary binaries illustrates the ways in which critical discussions that highlight the performing body's dialectical status as material reality and artificial construct tend to negate the impact of performance training when working outside the context of dramatic representation. It would not be unreasonable to think that, because the body's reality is a fact, training should only be required to achieve the fakeness Abramović associates with theatre. However, while the performing body's materiality may be an inescapable and creatively potent fact for the spectator, critic and dramaturg, this does not free the performer from the need to think about, and prepare for, the act of performance.

It is interesting to note that the act of training is hardly discussed in key texts on the aesthetics of contemporary performance (including the ones I have cited in this article). Indeed, the Twentieth Century's emphasis on juxtaposition over synthesis might even be read as the beginning of the end of performance training – a historical moment in which the importance of training is superseded by other activities associated with the performer's shift in status from creative interpreter to author and subject. However, even in contexts where the performer is valued primarily for her material presence, she is not experientially free from the ways in which theatrical space renders her presence and subjectivity into form. With this fact in mind, it seems relevant to consider the ways in which critical shifts in performance aesthetics can be understood to recast the act of training, instead of prompting its negation. We can note, for example, that although Marina Abramović prioritizes the perceived reality of her actions, she has also written extensively about the process of preparing for her performances, often framing her lived experience as a form of preparation (Abramović 2014, 2016). However, even after reading anecdotal accounts of training from across the fractured landscape of contemporary performance, it remains extremely difficult to anatomize the act of performance within the ostensive contexts of presentation associated with non-mimetic or non-narrative work. Personal accounts of training cannot answer broad critical questions about what it means to train to be oneself in the act of performance. They certainly cannot suggest generic skills for a world in which genres and disciplines are so ill defined.

In order to circumvent the problem of only being able to discuss skill-development in terms of its relationship to unique working practices, I believe

that we can benefit from analysing contemporary performance trainings not as processes of acquiring skills but as means of facilitating ontological engagement. On one level, the discipline is primed for such a discussion. The previous century is littered by artist-gurus using art as a vehicle for self-discovery. And yet, it is also the case that scholars working in the field of performance training have struggled with the question of its relevance to the broader field of studies in contemporary performance. Analysis of training from the last hundred years has been marked by a focus on the specificity of its origins and authors. Anyone who has taught the work of Brook, Grotowski, Chaikin or Lecoq within the academy will know the difficulty of answering the question of how such approaches can speak to the needs of young theatre makers with aspirations to work in diverse performance contexts. However, through framing training as a mode of self-enquiry, as opposed to a means of collecting skills for, as yet, undefined projects, we can create space to revive the role of performance training within discussions of contemporary performance aesthetics.

Perhaps ironically, it is through prioritizing questions about the performer's self-experience during training that we might find ways of recognising the contributions and foresight of those icons of performance training that have recently spent time locked in back waters of performance history associated with the idiosyncratic, the old-fashioned and the strange. Indeed, I believe that such a shift will allow us to recognise the ways in which the founders of training methodologies associated with self-inquiry were helping to shape the shifting tide of aesthetics analysed by Fuchs and others.

Training to be Myself

I want to feel like myself in the act of performance. No more. No less. When I am on stage I want to avoid feeling like I'm trying to be something that I am not. This desire comes not from any particular aversion to theatricality or artifice, but from the pragmatic understanding that such self-consciousness tends to prevent me from connecting with the sense of shared presence that I value in live performance. Although much of my work involves storytelling, I am most interested in theatre's potential as a space for dialogue and empathetic engagement. This interest has encouraged me to conceptualise my role on stage in my work as being closest to the presenter of a documentary or the host of a talk show. Even when engaging in moments of autobiographical storytelling during a solo performance, I never think of myself as the subject of the piece. Although I know that I am not neutral within the scheme of performance, I want to be seen by the audience as a facilitator rather than a point of focus.

Despite my desire to be received as sincere, the tacit and explicit reception of my work as an act of performance tends to impose layers of symbolism and artifice upon my presence. This is especially the case in moments of interactivity and dialogue. In *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, Nicholas Ridout has analysed what he calls 'the unease of face-to-face encounters between producer and consumers' within performance (2006, p. 28). In the book, Ridout argues that the actor's 'predicament' during the act of performance is shaped by the experiential tension created by her dual status as living subject and object of consumption (2006, p. 38). The 'predicament' of the actor, in turn, creates 'the predicament of audience': the feeling of embarrassment (2006, p. 70-95). According to Ridout, direct eye-

contact with the performer can sometimes lead the spectator to experience shame, because it is during such moments that the reality of performance's labour relations becomes apparent. The actor's gaze draws attention to the fact that the spectator is consuming her presence and subjectivity, casting light on the conditions of production that shape actor and audience relations in contemporary performance. Ridout notes:

Modern theatrical spectatorship is a relationship to set up and to generate a particular set of pleasures, and it is in the confusion generated by action that departs from those that sustain this relationship, that the embarrassment occurs. (2006, p. 76-77)

By rejecting the conventional relations that enable the audience's consumption (for example, dimming the lights of the auditorium or setting up an imaginary fourth wall), direct address or eye-contact forces a self-consciousness that undermines the audience's capacity to sustain the suspension of disbelief necessary for enjoyment.

My experience as both a producer and consumer of interactive theatre has provided me with many experiences of the unease described by Ridout. I have argued in my own writing that interactive and immersive performance is often undermined by a sort of corporeal, self-alienation, in which the spectator is touched or looked at without understanding clearly her role in the performance, or her relationship to the performer (Edinburgh 2016 p,127-129). Indeed, even in contexts where the spectator is conceptually clear about the producer's expectations surrounding her participation in the performance, it is not always the case that she can accede in comfort to the

performers' demands. Recently, for example, I participated in a performance in which the dramaturgy framed me (without much prior warning) as a political prisoner - lining up to be shouted at by performers acting as angry Korean police officers. The audience's response to this circumstance was a mixture of polite standing, averted gazing and stifled giggling. My experience of that particular moment was marked by feelings of mild embarrassment and a desire for the scene to finish, so that we could all move on.

With such experiences and analysis in mind, the complexity of the performer's task in interactive or immersive performance becomes clear. Indeed, I would argue that the conventions Ridout exposes through his analysis of their subversion are so strong that even in performances that eschew dramatic representation, the performer faces difficulty in being received as sincere - because the spectator is always tacitly aware that to participate in dialogue with the performer is to be folded into the aesthetics of the performance, with the possible result of becoming an object of consumption herself. So what modes of training exist to facilitate the performer's successful self-presentation as herself? How should the performer train in order that she might be experienced as sincere during moments of spontaneous dialogue with the audience? How might the performer help the audience resist the predicament that Ridout has associated with leaving the lights on (2006, p. 70)?

These questions emerged in my practice during the development of two pieces that I made in 2013 that integrated improvised conversations with the audience into the dramaturgy:

Punctum - an autobiographical solo performance that interwove stories about the death of my father with reflections on Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1993) and an interview with an audience member. The piece was first presented at Hull Truck Theatre and later adapted for Resonance 104.4FM).

The History of Water – a site-specific performance created for swimming audiences in two of Hull's Edwardian swimming pools. The piece connected stories about the pool's social history, with improvised conversations and swimming.

As I think is often the case in the creation of interactive theatre, training was a subsidiary part of the process of making the piece – a process that was almost indistinguishable from the act of devising and rehearsal. In this way, I would not claim to have outlined a specific process of training prior to the act of creating the pieces. However, when I came to reflect on experiences of success and failure in 'just being myself', the mode of performance that I found myself connecting with echoed strongly with my experiences working with and researching the Stanislavskian tradition of acting.

At first this connection seemed ironic. Stanislavski's approach is, in part, associated with the practice of manifesting a sort of public privacy during performance. We can note, for example, that the fourth wall was conceptualised as a pragmatic means of overcoming the predicaments of fear and embarrassment later theorised by Ridout. Indeed, Stanislavski's suggested use of 'circles of attention' (2008, p. 98) can be read both as a tool of concentration and as a technique for avoiding the self-consciousness that

arises when we feel ourselves being watched. These facts would suggest that Stanislavski's approach would be of little value in the context of performances structured around conversations with the audience. However, the connections made across my experiences of working with both interactive and Stanislavskian performance aesthetics, encouraged me to question whether it was possible to separate the idea of fourth wall from the proscenium.

In experiencing moments of apparent sincere engagement with spectators/participants that echoed moments of participating in improvisations related to Stanislavski's approach, I was encouraged to wonder if the performer could work to capture the spectator within a circle of attention. I was encouraged to wonder if the fourth wall might be used to contain an audience member within a moment of theatricality, rather than being used to set him apart from scenic space and frame him as an observer.

This idea is unconventional; however, it should be noted that Stanislavski's aesthetics have been analysed in relation to theories of dialogic engagement. Dick McCaw has made connections between Stanislavski's approach and the dialogical literary analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, exploring the ways in which character is established in the spectator's mediation of the relationship between text and actor through a process of 'empathetic projection' (McCaw 2016, p. 127-146). In parallel to McCaw's analysis, I have argued that the spectator in Stanislavskian theatre acts as a co-creator of the characters presented onstage - responding affectively to the actor's physical behaviour in order to build a sense of her emotions and internal world (Edinburgh 2016, p. 59-78). Indeed, in my analysis, I argued that Stanislavski's demand for the

actor to live truthfully on stage is less a philosophical idea, than a practical attempt to facilitate the spectator's affective response to the actor's body (2016, p. 65). This argument is based on the fact that there are fewer cognitive or perceptual obstacles to empathising with a seemingly real situation than a seemingly artificial one.

Stanislavski claimed that the actor gave 'life physical embodiment in an aesthetic, theatrical form' (2008, p. 36). The fourth wall is most often understood as the device used to facilitate the spectator's empathetic and affective identification with the reality of the actor's material presence on stage - acting as a sort of one-way glass that enables this act of voyeuristic consumption. However, this analysis doesn't explain how this imaginary wall is constructed in the first place. It is easy to argue that the presence of the proscenium arch and the dimming of the auditorium lights are the most commonly used tools for setting up the boundary between theatre space and scenic space; but this does not account for how the fourth wall is experienced in processes of rehearsal, or in traverse or in-the-round performance. The scenographic account of the fourth wall also undermines the agency and importance of the actor, suggesting that the actor's work simply happens in isolation from pre-existing conventions of spectatorship. Careful reading of Stanislavski's accounts of his process suggest that it is the actor's ability to live truthfully in the given circumstances of the play that create the true stability of the fourth wall. On reading about the practices associated with 'given circumstances' in *An Actor's Work* (2008, p. 37-59), it seems clear that Stanislavski believes the actor's ability to become unselfconsciously consumed by a task to be the means by which the spectator can begin to

identify with her actions. It is the perceived reality of the actor's concentrated behaviour that ultimately allows for the co-creation of the boundary between stage and auditorium.

By conceptualising the fourth wall as a mutually created phenomenon, rather than a scenographic imposition or convention, it becomes clearer how we might find ways to appropriate its use in interactive or immersive contexts. Indeed, on developing this understanding, I was able to see that one way of training to be myself in performance, and thus, perhaps, encouraging the audience to recognise their own potential for sincerity during a performance, was to think about the process of living truthfully in the non-representational given circumstances of the performances I was making. My thinking was that if I could live truthfully in conversations with the spectators/participants, they would be less inclined to think or worry about the artifice of our situation. The fourth wall would thus become a surrounding container for our shared attention, rather than a window into another world.

Concepts of truth and authenticity are, of course, extremely problematic in performance. And the monological truth we might associate with Stanislavski's rationalist thinking has also come under attack in the post-war period. However, I believe that the best way of thinking about the idea of truth in Stanislavski's approach is through the interrogation of self-experience. In other words, it can be described as a feeling found in unselfconscious doing – a form of tacit knowledge. Perhaps the best example in Stanislavski's own descriptions of his approach comes from *An Actor's Work* when Kostya describes his peer Marya performing an exercise with the teacher, Tortsov. In

the account, Kostya recalls Marya waiting patiently to start while Tortsov looks for a note in his diary (Stanislavski 2008, p. 39-40):

...Marya gradually settled down and finally stopped moving completely, fixing her gaze attentively on Tortsov. She was afraid of disturbing him and patiently waited for further instructions from her teacher. Her pose became natural.

Eventually, Tortsov brings the exercise to a close only for Marya to ask:

‘Were we acting then? ...I thought I was just sitting and waiting until you found what you wanted in your notebook and told me what you wanted me to do. I didn’t act at all.’

Tortsov replies:

‘That’s just what was good about it, that you were sitting there for a reason and weren’t playacting.’

The reality or truth of Marya’s performance in this context is literal. She didn’t even know she was acting. Tortsov created a circumstance in which the actor could commit to the act of waiting without any artifice. Of course, the problem that we might point out in relation to Marya’s performance is that one can only play this sort of trick once. The difficulty for the student of Stanislavski (or Tortsov) is that she is required to know that she was acting, while simultaneously not letting that fact impact upon her ability to live spontaneously within the fiction of a play’s given circumstances.

To relate this to the experience of taking part in spontaneous conversations within my own work, I can note that while it was imperative for me to have

genuine conversations with my audience, providing moments of sincere communication, I also had to work carefully to time and guide the conversations to end in an appropriate place, ready for the next section/scene of the performance. In *The History of Water* this guiding was both thematic and spatial. I had to make it feel like we were just swimming and chatting, while bringing them to specific parts in the pool – capturing the spectator/participants in a bubble of sincerity by committing fully (and yet lightly) to the moment at hand. In order to do this, I tried to project my own lack of self-consciousness onto the people whom I was talking with in order that I might resist the self-consciousness or embarrassment that Ridout described. All of which is easier said than done. Consistently finding the feeling of not play-acting that Tortsov praised in Marya's performance of waiting required some practice.

Performance Training and Relational Aesthetics

While I hope that my reasons for appropriating Stanislavski's aesthetics and training within my work are becoming clear, I am also concerned that I am describing a very specific context, created with reference to some very personal artistic aims. I wouldn't blame anyone for asking why it matters that I drew on Stanislavski's thinking to develop the mode of performance for two little-publicised pieces. It is for this reason that I think it worth returning to the macroscopic strand of my analysis.

I have noted that one of the ways in which we might successfully make links between historically distanced techniques and contemporary practice is to recognise the importance of self-enquiry in the process of performance

training. For example, we can consider truth or authenticity in Stanislavski's work as heuristics, rather than clearly articulated, abstract concepts¹.

Through this shift in understanding, exercises can be reframed as devices to investigate states and feelings, as well as routes towards predetermined skills. Such a change in perception does more than simply provide a way to uncouple training methods from their original aesthetic contexts. Prioritizing training as an end rather than a means can also be understood to highlight performance's status as an event or phenomenon rather than a fixed object of reflection/appreciation. Conceptualising training as an open-ended, heuristic process, creates a pragmatic space for the performers to consider states of being during the act of performance. This in turn opens up room to explore the ways in which the performance event establishes experiential contexts for both performer and spectator. Indeed, through reflecting on the development of training for both *Punctum* and *The History of Water*, I have realised that I only began to fully recognise the potential value of Stanislavski's thinking for my work when I began to consider the kinds of experiential relationships I wanted to establish with the audience in my work.

In the opening section of this article, I described some of the problems with establishing clear definitions of form and discipline in contemporary performance and contemporary performance training, noting that it is not always clear what to include within the content of training. However, thinking about the possible use of Stanislavskian approaches within immersive and interactive performance has encouraged me to recognise that such problems

¹ Although I would argue that the rigour of Stanislavski's conceptual discussion of artistic truth deserves more credit than he is often given in critiques of his system.

might be overcome by analysing performance training with specific reference to the understanding of performance as a phenomenal and relational context.

This view is informed by my reading of the paradigm of artistic practice described by Nicholas Bourriaud in his influential work, *Relational Aesthetics* (2002). The book argues that the key to understanding much contemporary art lies in recognising it as means of establishing and facilitating relationships. In a move that echoes Victor Turner's anthropological theory of performance as a form of threshold experience (1985), Bourriaud's articulation of relational aesthetics frames art as a structure, existing in time and/or space, that destabilizes habitual practices of social engagement.

In asserting this idea, Bourriaud also establishes a highly specific account of artistic form:

Form is most often defined as an outline contrasting with a content. But modernist aesthetics talks about 'formal beauty' by referring to a sort of (con)fusion between style and content, and an inventive compatibility of the former with the latter. The most common criticism to do with new artistic practices consists, moreover, in denying them any 'formal effectiveness', or in singling out their shortcomings in 'formal resolution'. In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk about 'formations' rather than 'forms'. Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise. (2002, p. 21)

This assessment of form as means of mediation is particularly useful in addressing the problem of disciplinary indiscipline in contemporary performance, because it allows for us to sidestep the kinds of problems that emerge when attempting to define, as Abramović did, the form of one discipline in opposition to another (O'Hagan 2010). Through considering the artwork as a way to open up 'social interstices' (Bourriaud 2002, p. 14-18), rather than the sum of certain, identifiable material qualities, Bourriaud's analysis allows for abstract notions of a performance's reality or artifice to be pared away from our discussion of the event. Instead of conceptualising the work of art as a permanent object, or futilely attempting to trap it within porous disciplinary boundaries, the idea of relational aesthetics situates the work of art (or the act of performance) in the dialogue between producer and consumer. This means that notions of fakeness or reality need not be understood as inherent in the work of art, or the mode of practice; they can, instead, be understood as emergent qualities in the relationship between performer and spectator/participant. Training can be assessed in relation to required qualities of formation, rather than looking at them as paths to achieving the techniques necessary for fulfilling a form.

While this might seem like a subtle distinction, its value is significant for those of us attempting to establish connections between historical and contemporary approaches to training for performance. Abramović's stated hatred of theatre may not bear close analysis, but her words do provide an insight into the qualities she holds dear in her work. Indeed, considering the enormous popularity of her residency at MOMA, as well as her status as the so-called 'queen of performance art' (Wescott 2010), it strikes me that the

binary she describes can be understood to helpfully encapsulate the aesthetic preoccupations of a flourishing branch of art that is deeply concerned with the ways in which performance might be used to facilitate moments of authentic experience. However, through recognising that the reality or authenticity of a performance is a perceived quality, manifested in dialogue with the audience, it becomes possible to make rational connections across disciplines and history.

With reference to my own interest in both the work of Stanislavski and Abramović, I can state that I have an intuitive sense that Abramović's practice of reality is intimately connected to Stanislavski's demand for the actor to live truthfully on stage. I would argue that although there are significant differences in the frames that they used to create relationships with spectators, the social interstices they were interested in opening up share similar values. Such a claim probably deserves and requires further unpacking; however, I am less interested here in proving the potential connections between realist theatre and performance art than I am in suggesting that contemporary performance-makers can benefit from evaluating processes and contents of training with reference to the desired relationships between consumer and producer. Such an approach makes the process of selecting training material a relatively simple affair, because instead of becoming locked within (often falsely defined) disciplinary boundaries, makers of contemporary performance can, instead, concentrate on the qualities of engagement and experience they want their work to facilitate.

Finding Formations and Adapting Exercises

The qualities of engagement and experience that I was interested in exploring in my conversation-based performances are perhaps best captured by terms such as openness and sincerity. Indeed, as I have discussed, I was interested in developing a quality of openness that would alleviate the tension that participants sometimes feel within intimate and interactive theatre. To put this in terms that can be connected to Bourriaud's analysis, I was interested in creating structures of interaction that provided opportunities for sincere conversation about specific topics. In *Punctum*, for example, I interviewed an audience member about their relationship with their father, while in *The History of Water*, my co-performers and I discussed experiences of swimming and bathing in public baths with the audience/participants.

The technical difficulty that emerged when entering into such conversations was found in establishing a balance between spontaneity and genuine conversation while maintaining a grasp on the thematic and structural elements of the performances. I attempted to solve this difficulty by connecting my process to Stanislavski's demand for the actor to live truthfully on stage - establishing the themes and dramaturgical structures of each piece as a set of given circumstances to live through. However, in terms of selecting training exercises that might facilitate my preparation for the performances, I found Stanislavski's (understandable) practical emphasis on text and narrative to be problematic. While Stanislavski's aesthetics inspired me to think about a possible formation for establishing sincere relationships with the audience/participants, my practical engagement with the task of adapting Stanislavski's aesthetics was ultimately guided by exercises developed by Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg.

This shift in influence is, in part, related to the emphasis on truthful behaviour within the work of Stanislavski's American devotees. Perhaps one of the key differences between the teachings of Stanislavski and the teachings Meisner and Strasberg is a transition in focus from the play-text to the actor as the centre of the performance. While this claim is difficult to evidence in concrete terms, it is my always my feeling when reading Meisner or Strasberg that theatre starts with the actor rather than the play. This is, I believe, in direct opposition to Stanislavski, whose interest in the actor's creativity was always intimately linked to his desire to illuminate the 'inner life of the character and of the whole play (Stanislavski 2008, p. 19). I find this shift in aesthetic focus to be helpful for the non-diegetic and non-representational context of my work. Meisner's adage that 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (1987, p. 16) makes the distance between the given circumstances of a play and the given circumstances of a non-representational performance score very small indeed. Thinking about his training as a way to engage spontaneously in the process of 'doing', allowed for me to find ways of training for entering into a relationship as myself in such a way that I hoped the audience would find it almost possible to perceive or attend to the further aesthetic layers of our conversations.

In *Theatrical Reality*, I analysed Meisner's work with repetition as a means of exploring and sensitising the actor to the qualities of the present moment (Edinburgh 2016, p. 75-76). Repetition starts with one actor making an observation about her partner, saying it out loud ('You have green eyes'), and having their partner repeat it ('I have green eyes'). These words are repeated again and again as a sort of 'ping pong game' (Meisner 1987, p. 22). The

exercise promotes an engaged quality of listening, inviting the performer to respond spontaneously and un-intellectually to her partner's behaviour, forming 'the basis of what eventually becomes an emotional dialogue' (Meisner 1987, p. 22) that gives form to the temporal liveness of performance.

Perhaps most relevant to the discussion of non-representational, interactive and immersive performance is the way in which the exercise requests the performer to live unselfconsciously in the moment of dialogue – starting with the premise that the best way to be truthful is to work from a place of impulsive response. Indeed, it was the use of Meisner's repetition exercise during rehearsal that helped to develop my ability to create a space of openness that I could share with my audience/participants. The exercise encourages one to practise and understand the feeling of entering into dialogue. Through exploring this feeling in training, I became more able to replicate or re-find that state of engagement found within the conversations I had with spectators/participants. And in the process of connecting with this state during the interactive and immersive contexts of my performance, I found that a clearer sense of my co-presence with the spectator, a co-presence that, I believe, contained their attention in such a way as to limit their self-consciousness - extending the fourth wall to encompass our relationship.

I am, of course, describing particular moments of success. However, these moments can be evidenced with reference to audience feedback from *The History of Water*, which expressed the 'humanity' of the event. One audience member wrote that she felt as though she had had a massage after the performance; another expressed impressed confusion about how she had

been guided around the pool 'as if [she was] being pulled by a magnet' (Anonymous 2013).

Beyond Meisner's training, another, simpler, adapted application of the Method was found in the use of affective memory - particularly as described by Lee Strasberg in *A Dream of Passion* (1987, p.111). My engagement with affective memory was very basic. I simply reflected on the sensations and feelings I associated with memories of open and intimate conversations. This process of reflection allowed me to establish experiential connections between my sense memory and the process of talking with the audience. This was particularly useful in the context of *Punctum*, where I was required to talk with a guest or volunteer in front of the rest of the audience. By actively connecting the process of discussion with heuristic sensory reference points, I became better able to maintain a certain physical state in the conversation, rooting myself in a specific quality of interaction. Interestingly, with regard to my discussion of a containing fourth wall, I eventually felt myself becoming more adept at directing this feeling towards my guest, in the best examples, creating a sense of intimacy within the more widely shared space of the auditorium. While this is, again, difficult to evidence rigorously, I was interested to note that after the show both guests and audiences expressed surprise about the feeling of intimacy and the experiences the guests were happy to share with the rest of the audience.

Micro-Conclusions

In both *Punctum* and *The History of Water*, I attempted to use my experiences with Meisner's and Strasberg's techniques as heuristic devices for negotiating

the tension between spontaneous conversation and a pre-determined performance structure. I used their techniques to find ways of feeling like myself in the multi-layered context of performance. This appropriation of Stanislavskian training techniques was enabled by the recognition of the centrality of interpersonal relationships within the performances. By considering my training as a means to reflect on qualities of sensation and self-experience during the conversations I had during the performances, it became possible to connect Stanislavskian aesthetics to contemporary relational forms. There is a significant distance between the Stanislavskian tradition of theatre and the field of non-representational, non-diegetic performance; however, by recognising that both seek to build affective relationships between performer and spectator, I found myself able to forge experiential paths between them.

Macro-Conclusions

It is worth noting that the once vital training of the post-war period has been cast adrift from much of contemporary performance practice. Once upon a time, every drama student in the academy would have been introduced to the training of Grotowski, Brook and Lecoq. Now, it seems we are in a situation where courses related to training are being replaced by those with a focus on theatre-making - where blurred disciplinary boundaries make it difficult to define the content of training or its distinction from rehearsal or devising. I don't think you would have to look very far to find a theatre-maker, scholar or post-graduate student who thought Grotowski, Brook or Lecoq to be rather old-fashioned. However, through understanding that all forms of training provide reflective experiences for the performer, we can begin to find ways to

revive training practices for use in contemporary performance practices that reject historical disciplinary boundaries. By avoiding categorizations that reference form or style, the experiential training methods promoted by practitioners from the avant garde of the 1960s and 1970s can be usefully reincorporated into discussions of contemporary performance.

Grotowski, who interestingly thought of himself as a logical heir to Stanislavski's legacy, chose to leave behind the theatre of productions in the late 1960s. For a long time this choice has been discussed as a move towards spiritualism and away from performance. However, the paradigm of relational aesthetics can be used to re-elevate figures like Grotowski to prominence in discussions of contemporary practice. One might argue that theatre-makers like Grotowski (or Barba or Chaikin or even Stanislavski) replaced form with formation well before the advent of 1990s art, emphasizing performance as both a relational event and a mode of enquiry far in advance of the contemporary practitioners we cast as innovators in this area of practice. Perhaps it is time we recognized that performance training is not dead or out of date, it has just been waiting for contemporary practice and aesthetics to catch up to some of its insights.

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