

Dr. James A. McLaughlin

TaPRA 2019 – Interim – University of South Wales, 24 April

Performer Training Working Group

Reinscribing the Self: Performer Training as Cultural Pentimento

Trainings are often expressed in terms of ideals that that trainee seeks to attain. These may be pure forms, desirable states of awareness, or ideal bodies that the trainee seeks to emulate. By engaging voluntarily in a training, the trainee strives towards these ideals.

I will be examining three of the major trainings that I have undertaken over the past twenty years, improv comedy, the Meisner Technique, and Phillip Zarrilli's psychophysical approach, seeking to identify the context of those trainings and the way these have been translated to my own body, in all of its cultural and personal particularity. I will conclude by assessing how these trainings currently animate my body, how my lived experience interacts with these, and how it affects my training of others.

In my early twenties I sought to overcome a certain crippling shyness by joining the comedy and improv club at Auckland University. Our regular tutor was Michael Robinson, one of Keith Johnstone's key improv trainers from The Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Canada. Over the ten week introductory course, and subsequent regular workshops over the following eight years I constantly drilled Johnstone's exercises towards inhabiting a spontaneous creativity that I reveled in.

Johnstone himself developed his impro system in rejection of English conservatism, something that he employed to great effect in the Writer's Group of the Royal Court Theatre. He fought directly against stage censorship and was part of the movement that led to the abolishment of The Lord Chamberlain's powers in 1969 (McLaughlin, 2018).

This was something of a revelation for a young Kiwi boy, growing up in a society that celebrated the mainstream, eliminated difference and knocked down anyone who stood out too much, something that we call The Tall Poppy Syndrome. I found in the improv exercises a way to step outside conventional, predictable responses on stage.

One aspect of the way that I took this training into my body was a tendency to lead with my brain. While Johnstone's improv may not be overly cerebral in its pure form, when I took it in I was focused on a way to think myself outside of convention, to liberate my spontaneous creativity through imagination and thought. Prolonged training in this discipline, with my own particular emphasis led me to literally lead with my head... always leaning forward, looking for what I could add to a scene, ready to leap into action when my mind was tickled in a certain way. This put me in my upper body, tensed my neck and shoulders, and led me to constantly anticipate and analyze what was in front of me.

While working in New Zealand, I realized that this approach, while of enormous benefit to me in many ways, was limiting my ability to perform in other contexts. While it enabled me to deliver high energy, spontaneous performances, there was an emotional truth that was lacking. I was fully engaged intellectually, but my body was left behind. I could follow a scene

moment to moment, with clever, appropriate performances, but what was missing was filling those moments with a deeper meaning.

My first attempt at reinscribing my performing self was my enrollment in Michael Saccante's training in The Meisner Technique. Michael, a New Yorker himself, had trained with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City. The training that Michael offered was a direct transmission of the technique taught there. This was a form of Method Acting that came out of the Group Theatre in 1930s New York. Lee Strasberg famously misinterpreted Stanislavski – or at least interpreted his early work with painful narrowness. Meisner moved his technique away from the Emotional Memory exercise that overshadowed much of Strasberg's work, to one based on improvisation and responding impulsively to one's acting partner. His key exercise, on which the rest of the technique is built is the Repetition exercise (Meisner, 1987).

This acting technique, despite being seen as mainstream for much of the Twentieth Century, is incredibly culturally specific. Coming out of the Jewish community in early Twentieth Century New York, with its roots deeply embedded in the Yiddish Theatre immigrant European Jews brought from their European homelands, it encouraged a fiery, impulsive, argumentative style of acting (McLaughlin, 2012).

Over two years I trained in Michael Robinson's version of Meisner's Technique, engaging in countless repetition exercises, independent activities, emotional preparations, improvisations and scenes. For a, still young, New Zealand male, having learnt to bury my emotional reactions deep, to deaden my impulses in order to fit in, the cultural gap between

my own body and that taken for granted by Meisner's technique sometimes seemed an unbridgeable chasm. However, through sheer relentless repetition, I was able to break through the physical blocks that I had imposed on myself. These blocks had been reinforced by my early improv training where my emotional responses were rigorously policed by my thinking. I found the process of breaking through these barriers exhausting and while they did yield the desired emotional responsiveness, my own body and history never fully embraced this mode of performance. The Technique became for me a technique that I could use, but one that always remained foreign to who I saw as myself. I was able to paint this new training over my existing performance body, but the preexisting experience and training were always visible, just under the surface, shaping the way I embodied the new training.

In following years I once again realized that my performance body had become too narrow and inflexible for some of the work that I wanted to create. I had attained a cerebral creativity from Johnstone's improv, and a deeper emotional availability from the Meisner Technique, but I was stuck in a Western, realist tradition. Some of the performance that my cerebral creativity was seeking was beyond the ability of my current body to realize. In my experiments to step away from realist drama I was left floundering with a body that was geared to pursue certain trajectories, but that lacked the ability to fill the space with presence, with energy.

The quest to find a way out of this pattern led me to enroll in the MA in Theatre Practice at the University of Exeter under Phillip Zarrilli. His psychophysical approach draws on the traditions of yoga, t'ai chi chuan and kalarippayattu. Influenced by A.C. Scott, Eugenio Barba and others, Zarrilli engaged in a prolonged and sustained training in kalarippayattu (the martial

art that underpins kathakali performance training) in Kerala, India. He has written, and spoken extensively about this experience and the psychophysical approach to acting that he has developed from it. One thing that I would note from this is his recognition of the difficulty in overcoming his cultural perspective, to stop trying to physically force his body to reshape itself into the kalarippayattu body, and to attune himself to the subtle body necessary for the full realization of the discipline (Zarrilli, 2002).

As a, now mature, student, my one year of physical training under Zarrilli in the university context is a long distance from Phillip's own hugely more rigorous and sustained training. However, over the course of the year and subsequent individual practice based on what I learnt there, I have been reinscribing my performance body with another layer of training. Based on what I have already said about my personal history, and the shaping of my body through the improv training and the Meisner Technique, this new psychophysical training too was layered over my previously shaped performance body. I lost count of the times that Phillip would correct me, especially with, 'Stop anticipating!' What I believe he was sensing in me was my tendency to lead with my head, to think through the next step before allowing my body to follow.

As I continue to practice aspects of this psychophysical training, I have come to embrace this tension between the trainings that I have engaged in. As I go through the opening breathing and salutes to the sun from Zarrilli, I can feel part of me analyzing my form, thinking through the next step, remembering which leg is to go next and so on. But at the same time I have found the ability to step outside my cerebral patterns, to let the thoughts go, to feel the flow of the movement and open my awareness to the space around me. For me the value of

this is not in a direct replication of the processes that Zarrilli has developed so carefully over the years, but in a reclaiming of my own body, acknowledging my past experience and training, and finding myself as I am in the moment of the practice.

This celebration of the particularity of my own body has been especially valuable in recent years as accumulated experience has caught up with me and life's ebbs and flows have shaped my body to assume responsibility and to endure hardship. I no longer seek the perfect bodies that I first desired in each of my trainings. I know that no one of those states of embodiment fits me entirely. However, each of them has added something to my current body, each has allowed me to reshape myself under their influence.

As I now find myself charged with the responsibility of training others in some of the practices that I have learnt over the years, it is with this understanding firmly in the foreground. I do not teach improv as Keith Johnstone envisaged, but as myself and with the purpose that I have found in it. I do not train actors in The Meisner Technique in a way that would suit the cultural context of 1930s New York, but as someone battling their own cultural repression to attain greater emotional responsiveness. I do not train intercultural performers in Zarrilli's psychophysical system, but I do introduce them to his work and demonstrate through our shared practice the glimpses of insight that it has offered me.

As trainings are embodied, they are copied, translated, and layered upon the body of the trainee. That body is never a blank canvas for directly replicating the training they engage with. It is already a contested site; a collection of cultural identities, inheritances, routines,

habits and paradigms. Each of these aspects of the trainee's experience has marked their body and inscribed it with particular qualities, tendencies, and physical shapes.

When the ideals of the training are translated into the reality of the trainee's body, it is not as a fresh inscribing of the original training, but instead a *pentimento* – as a painting is corrected by painting over a previously finished section. The fresh layer is affected by the traces of the previous brush strokes and hardened paint. Just so, the new training inscribed on the body of the trainee is accented and shaped by the traces of the underlying, pre-inscribed body.

When the transmission of training is intercultural, the distance across which it must be transmitted is amplified. The trainee's remoulded body falls further from the ideal body the training is predicated on and so it is not an achievement of an ideal, but the construction of a hybrid body, a body between paradigms, a body mired in reality. It is an act of cultural reassignment, not from one paradigm to another, but from one unique body to a transformed body between ideals. It is an act of defiance against purity, a deliberate contamination of oneself with the world, and of a perfect body with particularity.

Bibliography

McLaughlin, J. (2012). *Meisner Across Paradigms: The Phenomenal Dynamic of Sanford Meisner's Technique of Acting and its Resonances with Postmodern Performance*.
Exeter: [unpublished PhD thesis].

McLaughlin, J. (2018). Phantom scripts: The censor's archive and the phantom scripts of improvisation. *Performance Research*, 23(2). 105-109.

Meisner, S. &. (1987). *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York City: Vintage Books.

Zarrilli, P. (2002). *Introduction (Part I)*, in *Acting (Re)Considered, 2nd edition*. New York: Routledge.