



Immersive Awareness

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6 **Immersive Awareness**
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Abstract:

This paper explores an approach to training for immersive theatre performance which addresses the need for an expanded and multi-focal awareness. Drawing on The Movements from Grotowski's Theatre of Sources period, Núñez's training process for *El Ensueño de los Árboles* (2017) is discussed in terms of meditation-in-movement and deconditioning of perception. This training is considered as a training in the capacity for immersion.

Keywords: Immersion, meditation, perception, awareness, Theatre of Sources.

Introduction

This paper describes and explores the training process developed for *El Ensueño de los Árboles* (Dir. Nicolás Núñez, 2017), a contemplative, participatory forest performance which was written and devised in the indigenous Guna Yala comarca of Panama in June 2017¹. The performance is designed to function as a forest meditation, inviting audiences into close contact with the woodland in which the performance is shared. As such, it entails immersion in the natural environment and facilitates access to an active state of contemplative absorption. **Our training for this performance involved cultivation of our own capacity for immersion, through the development of a mode of extended awareness.**

Immersive Theatre: Participation and Performance

Contemplative and immersive theatre experiences, such as *El Ensueño*, depend, for their effectiveness, upon the ability of the performers to facilitate a deep and uninhibited engagement on the part of the audience. The guided meditation which is at the heart of *El Ensueño* invites participants into a state of active contemplation. This constitutes a significant shift away from daily consciousness and habitual social behaviours. In this respect, the intention of *El Ensueño* might be said to exemplify one defining feature of Immersive Theatre, as identified by Josephine Machon:

¹ The performance was written and devised, and the training process described here was carried out, during a three-week residency in the autonomous, indigenous territory of Guna Yala, Panama. Núñez led the training and devising process; Middleton wrote the performance text. The creative team in Panama included Domingo Adame and Caroline Clay. The team were joined in Mexico City by Helena Guardia.

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8 Immersion as absorption. The theatre event is able to engage the
9 participant fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and
10 interest; a total engagement in an activity that engrosses (and may
11 equally entertain) the participant within its very form. (Machon 2009, p.
12 62)

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19 For immersive theatre to fulfil this potential, Machon's research suggests that
20 a number of conditions must be met: the participant must understand the
21 'contract' that determines their engagement (Machon 2009, p. 99); a 'safe
22 space' must be established (Machon 2009, p. 41), and 'mutual trust'
23 generated (Machon 2009, p. 84).

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29 In addition to their artistic roles, performers in work such as *E/*
30 *Ensueño*² are also what we call 'monitors'; their role is to guide audiences
31 through the participatory actions, and establish (both silently and explicitly)
32 what Machon calls the contract for engagement. They are charged with
33 safeguarding the audience-participants - both physically and through creating
34 an emotionally safe space in which they can move and interact freely and
35 spontaneously. The monitors must be attentive to each individual member of
36 the audience, anticipating their needs and interacting with them accordingly.
37 This requires a level of careful vigilance. We must be *two steps ahead, in*
38 *every direction* (NN)³.

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51 ² Núñez has created several immersive forest performances. See, for example, *Cura*
52 *de Espantos* (1998) described in Middleton 2001, pp. 56 - 60.

53 ³ This paper is co-authored but where an individual voice is inserted, the text is given
54 in italics and the speaker is identified by initials in parentheses.

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Comment [D1]: This and the following paragraphs have been re-organised to clarify the steps of the discussion.

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6 Beyond this fundamental groundwork, the participant must be brought
7 into an 'all-encompassing' experience (Machon 2009, p. 40), in which they
8 can 'experience more fully' (Machon 2009, 26), 'let down their boundaries'
9 (Machon 2009, p. 42), be 'in the moment' and 'receptive' (Machon 2009, p.
10 84) to the imaginative and sensory stimuli available to them.
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15 In *El Ensueño*, our purpose was to address these challenges through
16 the presence of the performer.⁴ Bringing the participant into a full and deep
17 experience is, for us, about leading through example. The performer-monitors
18 model how the audience-participants might listen, look, move, and interact
19 with, and in, the natural environment (Figure 1). At its simplest, this entails
20 maintaining silence; cessation of normal, non-verbal social contact; paying
21 attention to the environment; moving softly and unobtrusively; and making
22 contact with others in extra-daily ways.
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31 Machon also notes that immersive theatre carries the possibility of
32 'emotional or existential transformation' (Machon 2009, p. 63)⁵ but that for this
33 to occur a significant shift must be facilitated - from a daily mode of being to a
34 deepened or heightened mode (Machon 2009, p. 42). In our work, the
35 performer-monitors demonstrate, by way of an invitation to the audience-
36 participants, a heightened mode of experiencing.
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42 Drawing on the terminology of meditation⁶, we might describe this
43 mode as a form of 'mindfulness'. Varela, Thompson and Rosch write,
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48 ⁴ They are also addressed structurally and textually.

49 ⁵ See Machon 2009, pp. 60 to 62 for her notion of 'transportation'.

50 ⁶ Tibetan Buddhist meditation is a key influence on both authors. See Núñez 1996,
51 pp. 1 - 17, and Middleton, D. & M. Adkins., 2016. 'Borderlands: An Exploration of
52 Contemplation in Creative Practice' in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*.
53 Vol. 12, No. 2, 2016.
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Comment [D2]: This section is intended to introduce and define the meditational language used throughout.

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8 To get a sense of what mindfulness meditation is, one must first realize
9 the extent to which people are normally not mindful. [...] In fact, body
10 and mind are not coordinated. In the Buddhist sense, we are not
11 present. (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1993, p. 24)
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17 Over time, meditation practices counter the habitual, daily 'dissociation of
18 mind and body, of awareness from experience' (Varela, Thompson and
19 Rosch 1993, p. 25) thus increasing the meditator's capacity to enter into
20 states of heightened - mindful - awareness and presence. In *El Ensueño*, the
21 performer-monitors seek to model mindfulness in action.
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27 In crude terms, then, this means that the performer-monitors
28 have two major points of focus and realms of responsibility: the external world
29 of the environment and audience, and the internal world of their own
30 embodied, **mindful** process. The ideal performer-monitor in this work would be
31 in a state simultaneously of deep inner **meditation** and full outer attention;
32 (although perhaps this is an optimal state for acting in any theatrical context?).
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34 Central to the actor's ability to perform these functions simultaneously is the
35 capacity for an expanded and multi-focal awareness.
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42 Here, we explore an approach to the training of performer-monitors
43 which entails the cultivation of an extended awareness in the actor. Further,
44 we propose that such an approach actually **represents a training in the**
45 **capacity for immersion**. It is this embodied capacity in the performer-monitors
46 which enables the audience-participants to fully immerse themselves in the
47 performance and to access non-daily depths of experience.
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From Theatre of Sources to *El Ensueño*

In establishing the historical trajectories that led to the emergence of immersive theatres, Machon notes the role of Grotowski's work in Paratheatre, Theatre of Sources, and *Art as Vehicle* (2009, p. 38). In *El Ensueño*, that lineage is very consciously mined. Whilst Grotowski himself did not create immersive theatre, the experiences in 'active culture' (Kolankiewicz, 1979) that he developed in the post-production years were focused precisely on techniques for intense immersion in direct experience. Paratheatre and Theatre of Sources sought to offer to participants what Grotowski described as 'experiences of direct perception, with the whole self, literally' (Kolankiewicz 1979, p. 30). Kolankiewicz writes that such experiences,

...would then enable man to find himself in the situation where existence itself would look at him; where his sense would not be walled up; where he would be immersed in existence. Where - as Grotowski puts it - he would enter the world as a bird enters the air. (Kolankiewicz 1979, p.13)

Nicolás Núñez, who led the training process for *El Ensueño*, and Helena Guardia who was part of the performance team in Mexico City, both worked with Grotowski in Theatre of Sources during the period 1980 to 1981⁷. Whilst Núñez and Guardia's work in the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* bears many hallmarks of Grotowski's influence, the training for *El Ensueño*, as we shall

⁷ Other periods of work with Grotowski included an Objective Drama project in Mexico, in 1985. See Núñez 1996, 51 - 64.

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6 see, directly recalled, in both technique and intention, The Movements from
7 Theatre of Sources.
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10 Although the work in Theatre of Sources was not framed as a training
11 for actors, it was, nevertheless, an activity aimed at actors⁸, and focused on
12 cultivation techniques. For Núñez and Guardia, the work was tacitly a training
13 for both the leaders and the participants. Guardia recalls,
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18 We re-learned to see, to listen, to smell and to touch, to open our mind
19 beyond the dominance of the limiting left brain. We trained the
20 attention and the body; our mental, emotional and physical resilience,
21 in order to deconstruct our conditioned selves, changing our
22 perspectives and accessing, if only for a glimpse, the reality of
23 interconnectedness, a new way of being. (Guardia 2017a)
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31 Additionally, Núñez and Guardia learned, in Theatre of Sources, how to lead
32 others through short, intensive experiences of the practices they themselves
33 were engaged in extensively over many months. In training for our roles as
34 performer-monitors in *El Ensueño*, we drew directly on Núñez and Guardia's
35 experiences in Theatre of Sources. As we describe below, The Movements
36 provided us with a vehicle through which to cultivate our capacity for
37 immersion, and to develop the expanded awareness required to model that
38 capacity whilst guiding others.
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48 The Training

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52 ⁸ Unlike some versions of the earlier paratheatre explorations, Theatre of Sources
53 was not for the general public; visiting participants were required to have a theatre
54 background (NN).
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6 The training undertaken in Guna Yala can be divided into two phases: 1)
7 introductory work, designed to sensibilise the performers, and to facilitate
8 initial contact with, and attunement to, the environment; 2) daily training in a
9 precisely repeated structure, designed to cultivate awareness, and to facilitate
10 deep immersion in the environment. Here, we shall focus on three examples
11 of practice: Beach Action and Sea Action from the sensibilization work, and
12 our central training form, River Action, which utilised a section from The
13 Movements.
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25 **Sea Action: Sensibilisation**

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27 Eyes closed, the performer walks slowly into the sea, feeling the movement of
28 the waves and currents. A monitor walks with her, without disturbing her
29 experience. With eyes closed, her exteroceptive sense and her sense of
30 hearing become more acute. Proprioception is challenged as she steadies
31 herself in the unbalancing push and shove of the waves.
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38 *Feel how the waves arrive to the beach, notice the never-ending*
39 *movement... we are working with mind and body... feel the massage of*
40 *the waves, feel the flow of the waves... (NN)*
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46 The performer notices what arises for her in this sensory bath. With eyes
47 closed, the complexity of the wave forms, the trajectories of the currents, and
48 the interplay of warm and cool streams are more discernible. We notice our
49 hesitancy or joy, our resistance or our excitement. We notice whether we feel
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6 an affinity with the sea's motion or a sense of awkwardness, separateness.
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8 Can we *dissolve* into that flow? Can we relax and be like seaweed, moved
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10 and moving freely in the water? The sensory overload provided by the
11
12 experience of the sea, in the absence of orientating vision, encourages the
13
14 cessation of habitual mind movements, and awakens the sensitivity of the
15
16 body. The capacity to feel this, or any, experience - what we might think of as
17
18 embodied or somatic awareness - cuts across the habitual dislocation from
19
20 direct experience which is a result of the predominance of discursive
21
22 thinking⁹.

23 Even as thinking is disrupted, Núñez's instructions frame our
24
25 experience and modulate our engagement in key ways;

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29 *...feel the flow of the waves... we are learning to be with the flow of the*
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31 *universe... Be here with consciousness, and go with the flow... (NN)*
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33
34 Núñez's theatre practice has long explored psychophysical training at the
35
36 interface of the human and cosmic dimensions. In his introduction to
37
38 *Anthropocosmic Theatre: Rite in the dynamics of theatre*, he notes that 'When
39
40 we study our body; we are also studying part of the cosmos' (Núñez 1996, p.
41
42 xviii). This vast ecological perspective, when deployed in the training sphere,
43
44 is not intended to instigate cognitive reflections, but rather to guide awareness
45
46 outward, through and beyond the sensory surface of the body. The dissolution
47
48 of muscular armouring that accompanies relaxation into somatic sensation is
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52 ⁹ For a discussion of the neurological basis of embodied awareness, see Alan Fogel
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54 (2009) *Body Sense: The Science and Practice of Embodied Self-Awareness*. New
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56 York, London: W. W. Norton.
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6 in service of a more intensified experience of the reality in which we find
7 ourselves. What Will Johnson writes about the effects of meditation posture
8 might hold equally true for a somatic 'meditation' such as Sea Action -
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13 The relaxation of tension also enables us to hear and see with greater
14 clarity, and the internal monologue of the mind naturally begins to
15 subside. As we learn to experience the components of reality (our
16 sensations, sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and thoughts) with greater
17 ease and precision, we naturally begin penetrating to an awareness of
18 even deeper levels of that reality. (Johnson 1996, p. 41-42)
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27 At a certain moment in Sea Action, after some time entering and experiencing
28 the sea's motion, the performer is instructed to open her eyes. *The world*
29 *appears*. Keeping her gaze open, eyes level and directed straight ahead, she
30 turns slowly in a 360 degree circle, three times. The whole panoramic scope
31 is received: *the sea horizon, the sea, the jungle where it edges the sea, the*
32 *village, the river, the beach beyond the river, the big expanse of the sea, the*
33 *sea horizon...* (DM).
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40 If moving from closed eyes to open eyes heightens one's sense of
41 visual input, the panoramic gaze exercise prolongs and deepens that impact;
42 suspending the performer in the intensified act of seeing. This work with
43 panoramic gaze was continued in Beach Action.
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52 **Beach Action: Working with the Gaze**

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6 Single-file - 'in serpent' - the performers make a long contemplative run¹⁰ on
7 the beach, with gaze open. We stop, and turn slowly through a series of 360
8 degree turns, again maintaining the disciplined use of vision described above.
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11 In her journal, performer Caroline Clay noted:
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15 I can see ocean, forest, sand and sky all at once and a few times I feel
16 like this is a lot to be seeing or perceiving in one moment... the
17 sensation is intense.... I'm playing with the boundaries of my vision and
18 making an attempt to see in a way that is not everyday seeing... almost
19 as soon as we began to turn, I felt quite overwhelmed (physically and
20 emotionally). The enormity of the world (and beyond) and my place in
21 it... Since the turning, I feel more like I 'belong' in this landscape. (Clay
22 2017a)
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33 The use of an open gaze with diffuse attention and extended peripheral vision
34 is common in Núñez's training dynamics, but this practice was also influenced
35 by Middleton's training, led by Lee Worley, in Mudra Space Awareness
36 (MSA)¹¹. MSA was developed by the Buddhist master, Chogyam Trungpa
37 Rinpoche as a practice for theatre artists. In Trungpa's exercise, The
38 Presence of Being, participants stand silently in a circle, then, one at a time,
39 weave through the circle, focusing 'on maintaining a broad and constant
40 awareness... attention should be paid to the eye gaze, letting it rest openly on
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51 ¹⁰ For a discussion of Núñez's contemplative running, see Middleton 2001, pp. 51 -
52 53.

53 ¹¹ Middleton studied Mudra Space Awareness with Lee Worley during a Visiting
54 Scholar sabbatical at Naropa University (August to December, 2010).
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6 a low horizon and taking care on turnings that the eyes neither dart ahead nor
7 lag behind' (Worley 2010, p. 69).

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9 It is common for participants in these exercises to find that the habitual
10 movement of the eyes is quite disconnected from the movement of the body,
11 and that there is a strong tendency for the eyes to move ahead, governed
12 perhaps by impulsive - Trungpa might say 'neurotic' (Trungpa 1994, p. 75) -
13 mental movements. Preventing the eyes from darting to particular points in
14 the view generates a much more mindful and consciously receptive mode of
15 perception.
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19 In meditation practice, it is said that the eyes are the first windows to
20 the mind; hence, stilling the movement of the eyes is considered to be a
21 helpful technique for settling the mind. In meditation, this is done through
22 closing or half-closing the eyes; in yoga asanas, a *dristi* point enables the
23 gaze to be stabilized. Training the gaze can, however, have additional
24 challenges and additional functions.
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27 Grotowski tells us that when,

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29 ...daily, habitual techniques of the body... are suspended... what first
30 appears is deconditioning of perception. Habitually, an incredible
31 quantity of stimuli are flowing into us, from outside something is
32 "speaking" to us all the time, but we are programmed in such a way
33 that our attention records exclusively those stimuli that are in
34 agreement with our learned image of the world... (1997a, p. 259)
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6 Working with the gaze directly targets the 'deconditioning of perception' in
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8 order that we are able to receive sensory inputs in a more immediate, and
9
10 less mediated manner. The non-habitual mode of seeing that is adopted in the
11
12 360 degree vision of Sea Action and Beach Action results in an increased
13
14 sense of stimuli flowing into us; we become more attuned to arising visual
15
16 sense perceptions, and more receptive to direct experience.

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19 *Closed eyes cleansed in the sea air, sea bath. And then eyes open -*
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21 *letting the whole scope swim in. Turning circles, filling eyes with sea*
22
23 *and sky... (DM)*

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25 The intentionality and discipline, with regard to the gaze, that were developed
26
27 in these preparatory, sensibilising actions were central to our core training
28
29 form, River Action.

30 31 32 33 34 **RIVER ACTION: Expanded Awareness**¹²

35
36 In serpent, the performers walk silently on a rough path from the village into
37
38 the jungle. The walk takes approximately 15 minutes and covers terrain which
39
40 is often muddy and slippery. We cross a stream, forded by stones which are
41
42 also wet and slippery. Maintaining a consistent distance to the person in front,
43
44 or maintaining a steady pace if one is leading, requires a certain vigilance
45
46 under these conditions; an effort to meet the mud and the river and the rocks

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50 ¹² Video of the sequence described here can be found at:
51 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeEYL5xZmQg>. The core training sequence
52 begins at 1.53. With Nicolás Núñez, Deborah Middleton, Caroline Clay, Domingo
53 Adame. Video: Sofie Iversen.

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6 and the over-hanging tree branches smoothly, steadily. Dropping behind or
7 making sudden movements is discouraged. Gaze is, as much as possible,
8 levelled directly ahead and open.
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13 *It's a contemplative walking, it's not an ordinary walking... the main*
14 *intention... is to make this contemplative walking, warming up our*
15 *situation, in order that when we reach [the river] we prepare ourselves*
16 *to go deep; to open the perception with more intention - physical and*
17 *mental - to take the deepest layers of reality that we can... (NN)*
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25 As this is a 'contemplative walk' we treat it as a meditation, stepping mindfully
26 so as not to disturb the environment nor impose ourselves upon it, and
27 watching our minds. We are in a remote and beautiful jungle, and even here
28 the tendency for the mind to wander and get lost in thought is ever-present.
29 *We are quite committed to dispersions, to distractions... (NN).*
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34 Arriving at our chosen point on the river, we make our way to river
35 rocks with flattish surfaces that are not too slippery, or stand on the shingly
36 river bed. The river has come down from the mountain, and it is cold; at first
37 refreshing, and then sometimes numbing (Figure 2).
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42 We stand, aware of alignment, gaze open; slowly, the arms are raised
43 up, level with the body laterally, elbows bent, hands pointing up, palms facing
44 forward (Figure 3). The hands frame the vista directly in front of the eyes.
45 Bending at knees and hips, the practitioner angles forward through the frame
46 of the hands, as though looking through a window, or portal; as though
47 penetrating into the view framed by the hands (Figure 4). The legs and trunk
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6 are in a position similar to a mild version of the yoga asana, *Utkatasana*. Care
7 is taken not to jut the head forward of the body to achieve this position, but
8 rather to angle the whole head-body forward from the hips. There is a sense
9 of the sternum lifting, creating external rotation of the scapula. The position is
10 sustained for some moments, gaze open; the practitioner works with
11 awareness of breath and energy, imbuing the action with a sense of goalless
12 intentionality. Awareness is continually focused on the sensory present
13 moment.
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23 *You have to watch your mind, it's like a meditation in movement, you*
24 *have to be alert. (NN)*
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29 After several minutes, using peripheral vision to enable us to move together,
30 we slowly return to the starting position. After a small pause, the hands are
31 again raised. This time, the upper body and head and the arms in their
32 framing position are lifted and dropped back in a slight backbend so that the
33 gaze is now directed up towards the sky (Figure 5). As before, the position is
34 maintained for some moments, during which time the practitioner again
35 anchors awareness in the global experience of body, breath, mind movement,
36 and environment. Mind wandering and discursive thought are avoided. After
37 some minutes, the practitioner returns smoothly to the starting position,
38 without losing attention or disrupting the openness of the gaze.
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48 This sequence is repeated three times. Then, the group, together,
49 make a quarter turn to the left. The complete action involves performing the
50 sequence in each of the four directions. At the end of the final sequence, the
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6 group silently retake their positions in the serpent on the river bank, and return
7 to the village by the path on which we came. As on the outward journey, the
8 walk is made meditatively; sometimes, the leader will initiate contemplative
9 running in the final stretch of the journey home.
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13 Our work in the river was couched in terms of '*catching the perfume*' of
14 the jungle (we were also tasked, in other exercises, with catching the perfume
15 of the sea, the village, and the people of the community as they gathered in
16 the evening *Congreso* rituals). This meant entering so receptively into the
17 experience that the sense memory of it would be deeply imprinted in each of
18 us. 'Perfume' did not, of course, mean only the scent of the place, but its
19 multi-sensory essence.
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29 *When I say to you to catch the perfume of the jungle, it is for you to*
30 *become the jungle. In that river, I open my inner situation to become*
31 *the jungle. The jungle comes to me and maybe something appears. I*
32 *become with the jungle, and it is in me. If I am blessed, I've been*
33 *touched. And if I am willing.... [later], I put myself here and something*
34 *of the jungle might come again. (NN)*
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42 Our stated reason was catching and retaining the perfume related to our
43 performance roles. If, as good Actors, we could internally recover that
44 'perfume' when we performed *El Ensueño* in other places, then - perhaps -
45 something of the jungle would be made present for our audiences elsewhere.
46 Our outer performance would be imbued with a quality arising directly from
47 the vivid inner score of sensory memory, with all of its personal and cultural
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6 associations and resonances. Whether or not we were successful in evoking
7 the perfume of Guna Yala in our subsequent performances, the intention to
8 catch and hold something of our jungle experience served an important
9 training function. The instruction to capture the 'perfume' carried us beyond a
10 passive construal of the receptive nature of the disciplined bodymind, and
11 instigated an active and relational state of presence.
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19 Sources

20
21 The central movement sequence in River Action was recalled from The
22 Movements, an action developed in Theatre of Sources, some forty years
23 earlier. The structure of Theatre of Sources involved specially selected
24 practitioners developing particular 'source techniques' over many months,
25 then sharing them with public groups in specially organised events. From late
26 1980 until the end of 1981, Núñez and his long-term collaborator, Helena
27 Guardia, were part of the Theatre of Sources team in Poland. Whilst Núñez
28 developed the form of contemplative running that would later be a keystone of
29 his anthropocosmic theatre dynamics, Helena Guardia worked alongside
30 Denis Le Turcq on The Movements.
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40 The Movements were a flowing sequence of yoga asanas, performed
41 slowly, with open visual awareness in a multi-directional pattern. Later, in
42 Objective Drama, this sequence was refined into what Lisa Wolford has
43 described as 'an extremely precise exercise', (1997, p. 287) known as The
44 Motions¹³. During Le Turcq and Guardia's early phase of exploration,
45 however, the Movements were explored with more freedom, seeking an inner
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53 ¹³ Thomas Richards notes that the Motions was developed and refined between
54 1979 and 1987, at which point it was finalized (Richards 1995, p. 52).
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6 sense of energetic alignment, rather than referring to detailed outer-form
7 instructions. Guardia notes that, in *The Movements*, 'The emphasis was on
8 focusing, even if the pose was not perfect' (2017). *River Action* was also
9 introduced and explored in this spirit.
10
11

12
13 In Poland, *The Movements* and the other Theatre of Sources actions
14 were practised in the forest, and were both meditative and outwardly
15 orientated. The 'sources' to which Grotowski's Theatre of Sources referred
16 were traditional psychophysical techniques such as those found in Yoga,
17 Sufism, Buddhism and other 'spiritual' traditions. In particular, he explored
18 techniques that were 'active', as opposed to, for example, sitting meditation
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24
25 (Kumiega 1987, 232) and 'ecological' -
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28

29 Ecological in the human way means that they are linked to the forces of
30 life, to what we can call the living world... (Grotowski 1997a, p. 259)
31
32

33
34 Grotowski's intention in mining these cultural sources was to connect with
35 'sources' in another sense; 'to bring us back to the sources of life, to direct, so
36 we say, primeval perception, to organic primary experience of life.' (Grotowski
37 in Schechner 1997, p. 214).
38
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42 Technically, *The Movements* were an adaptation of Hatha Yoga¹⁴, with
43 the addition of elements designed to further emphasise the active and
44 ecological functions; for example, the sequencing of the 'asanas' in an
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52 ¹⁴ For a discussion of Grotowski's work with yoga, see Kapsali, M., 2010. "I don't
53 attack it but it's not for actors': the use of yoga by Jerzy Grotowski". *Theatre, Dance*
54 *and Performance Training*. Vol. 1(2), 2010, 185 - 198.
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6 extremely slow flow, the turning to the four directions, the framing of vision
7
8 with the hands, and the adoption of an open and moving gaze.

9
10 Writing about his experiences in Theatre of Sources, Ronald Grimes
11 notes that,
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13
14
15 Diffuse attention was always paid to vistas provided by one's posture...
16
17 The movements oriented us to the surrounding horizon - to the sky and
18
19 the earth. Vision was always to be outward, mobile, and flowing - not
20
21 introverted, static, or choppy. (Grimes 1995, p. 181).
22
23
24

25 River Action involved this 'diffuse' form of panoramic gaze, projected outward
26
27 in a particularly penetrating way through the frame of the hands. Keeping
28
29 ones eyes trained to the edges of peripheral vision, sight is extended laterally
30
31 whilst also reaching into the depths of the view framed by the window of the
32
33 hands.

34
35 I Wayan Lendra's record of The Motions from 1983 to 1986 is
36
37 significantly different from Guardia's memory of the Movements; by this time,
38
39 it seems that the framing hand position was no longer included. The
40
41 panoramic gaze, however, continued to be a key element. Lendra writes,
42
43

44
45 To really see with panoramic vision is difficult. When you are able to
46
47 see in a panoramic view, your perception cannot be as focused as
48
49 when you see only one thing. This is difficult because in daily life we
50
51 constantly focus... But the requirement of the Motions is that you must
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53 not react to any one thing but must fully perceive all that there is to see
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6 and hear. To see and hear and not to react... is a contradiction. This
7 contradiction creates "life" and self-awareness. (Lendra 1997, p. 127)
8
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10
11 Thomas Richards similarly notes that in his work with *The Motions*, the
12 instruction was to 'see as if through a big open window' (Richards 1995, 54).
13

14
15 In *The Motions*, and in *The Movements* before it, we have a psychophysical
16 structure designed to alter consciousness, in part through altering perception.
17 Attention to the energetic alignment of the 'asanas'¹⁵, coupled with the
18 disciplining and dilation of perception, creates a form in which the mind is
19 trained into new, non-daily patterns. The non-reactive mode which Lendra
20 notes is characteristic of meditation training, and has the effect of inducing a
21 more receptive mode of engagement in reality. The habitual tendency for
22 discriminative thought to act as a barrier to direct experience is diminished,
23 and the sensory world swims in close.
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37 **Altering Awareness**

38 The experience of this shift away from daily thought patterns is described by
39 both Lendra (speaking of *The Motions*) and Guardia (speaking of *The*
40 *Movements*):
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46 Lendra:
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53 ¹⁵ See Richards 1995, pp. 52 - 55, and Grotowski 1997b, pp. 297 - 298.
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6 I become highly aware of my body; it absorbs what I see and hear. The
7
8 surroundings become one with my body, and I feel as if my body is
9
10 hollow and is being lifted. (1997, p. 127)

11
12
13 Guardia:

14
15 It was a completely altered state of consciousness. You entered
16
17 another time and space... it was like a long, long meditation... You were
18
19 absorbed by the action - and that state of focus, for me, is a kind of
20
21 mindfulness. Just being there, doing that, opened a very acute
22
23 perception of the environment... It was a kind of communion with the
24
25 forest. (2017b)

26
27
28
29 In both accounts, the heightening of sensory experience is associated with an
30
31 enhanced relationship to the surrounding environment. In *River Action*,
32
33 precisely such a state of altered consciousness was intended as a means by
34
35 which to draw closer to our jungle environment, to immerse ourselves deeply
36
37 in the present moment experience. *Communion* with the forest was precisely
38
39 our intention; not only because the text we were planning to share with
40
41 audiences was an ecological meditation, but - more importantly here -
42
43 because learning to access such a state of meditative immersion would
44
45 enable us to guide audiences into a similar state.

46
47 Middleton's personal experience of working within *River Action* sheds
48
49 some light on the nature of the meditation at the heart of the practice,
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6 *The slight backbend in the second position brings me up against my*
7 *habitual patterns of tightening the muscles around my thoracic spine. I*
8 *am continually working with the mind's natural tendency to be drawn to*
9 *the site of discomfort. Compulsively, I find myself 'grabbing' to the*
10 *counting of my breath as a strategy for sustaining myself in the*
11 *practice. But any such strategy dominates my attention. (DM)*
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19 Whilst many meditation practices, particularly in their beginning stages,
20 involve counting or watching the breath as an exercise in concentration, the
21 meditational task in River Action is to let the mind rest in open awareness,
22 receptive to the whole sensory field. This is closer to a later stage of
23 meditation practice; Varela, Thompson and Rosch write,
24
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28 *Eventually meditators report periods of a more panoramic*
29 *perspective... Experience of panoramic awareness and of space are*
30 *natural outgrowths of mindfulness/awareness meditation... (26)*
31
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36 Resting in an open, panoramic awareness of the rich sensory field of the
37 jungle is the central meditational gesture of River Action. It is one that is both
38 challenged (as above) and supported by the particularities of the physical
39 positions.
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46 *We are there with a will to go into deep layers of reality. To make the*
47 *entrance [through] the door, you need a key.... and the key is the action*
48 *in itself. Put this [key] in the precise place. Don't put it [just] anywhere*
49 *because [that way] it will not open [anything]. (NN)*
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8 The 'precise placing' of the key has less to do with adherence to precise
9 formal instructions, and more to do with each practitioner exploring within
10 themselves the synthesis of physical action - the positions and movements -
11 disciplined perception, open awareness, and intention. When we speak of
12 action as the key, 'action' implies a multi-layered score of both inner and outer
13 gestures. The coordination of these elements, in concert with the particular
14 environment and context, is the 'precise placing' of the key.
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20

21 Posturally, there are, of course, many 'keys', supposed to create
22 particular energetic effects in the doer¹⁶. Guardia noted that in the years
23 since their work in Theatre of Sources, she and Núñez had frequently
24 experienced the inspiration to return to one or another part of The
25 Movements,
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32 Over the years, certain movements appear [for] certain works and are
33 efficient; not necessarily the whole sequence of the Movements,
34 maybe just one or two are the ones that appear that are necessary for
35 that specific action... If we were working with the earth, other asanas
36 would have appeared. (Guardia 2017b)
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44 From this perspective, The Movements might be seen as a kind of anthology
45 of asana-like postures, or psychophysical 'gestures', that enable a particular
46 mode of relationship with the surrounding environment.
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50 ¹⁶ See, for example, Dana R. Carney, Amy J. C. Cuddy & Andy J. Yap (2010) Power
51 Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance.
52 *Psychological Science* Vol. 21, Issue 10, 2010. pp. 1363 - 1368
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6 The framing action with the hands had a particular potency for our work
7 on immersive experience; a somatic 'meaning' was conveyed by the very act
8 of positioning oneself, as it were, on a perceptual threshold; penetrating the
9 view, we were partly in one world and, feet grounded, partly in another.
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15 *If you go deep, I get the feeling that the movement in itself is eloquent.*

16
17 (NN)
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21 The act of angling through the portal of the hands is a relational act, replete
22 with the somatic meaning-resonance of entering, accessing, uniting with. If
23 our daily experience of the world is as though seen through distancing filters
24 of conceptualisation, the essential gesture of River Action is one of piercing
25 through that veil.
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31 Crucially, this work on immersion is neither a chaotic plunging into raw
32 experiencing, nor is it a process of entering into a withdrawn introspection;
33 rather, it is a state of aligned inner and outer wakefulness. Over time, we must
34 learn to hold in an expansive awareness, the sensing body, the attentive and
35 receptive mind, the whole perceptual field of the world in which we find
36 ourselves. So that, when we come to perform our work with audiences we
37 can be wholly present with them and attentive to their needs, at the same time
38 that we inhabit roles, speak texts, and make our own sensitised encounter
39 with the forests in which we perform.
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48 *The repeated practice of River Action serves as an actor-training*
49 *insofar as it cultivates this state of awake and expansive awareness, and*
50 *prepares the performer to re-establish that state in the context of a*
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6 participatory performance. The outer simplicity of the form allows the
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8 participant to become deeply familiar with the attentional gestures that form its
9
10 inner score, and that will later be employed in the more complex and dynamic
11
12 field of awareness of the performance. It is, however, training in the sense of
13
14 an 'untaming' (Grotowski in Kumiega 1987, p. 230), a deconditioning of the
15
16 habitual patterns of perception and mentation that divide us from our own
17
18 experience¹⁷.

19 Grotowski has described such a strategy of 'untaming' as 'heavy work'
20
21 (Kumiega 1987, p. 230), and it should perhaps be noted that the training
22
23 described here, whilst neither so intense nor extensive as the work explored
24
25 in Theatre of Sources, should not be undertaken lightly. Without experienced
26
27 guidance, participants may find themselves destabilized by the very forces of
28
29 'untaming' and deconditioning that the practices are designed to engage. At
30
31 the same time, Grotowski noted that the paratheatrical work required 'very
32
33 delicate conditions' (Kumiega 1987, p. 223) and Thomas Richards has
34
35 warned against a superficial engagement in *The Motions* (1995, pp. 52 - 55).
36
37 Without skilful handling of instructions, and duration, and without the essential
38
39 attentional strategies (see Richards 1995, p. 55), a practice such as River
40
41 Action might amount to little more than a physical exercise.

42 43 44 **In Chapultepec: Monitoring**

45
46 At 7 am, on a cold, wet, still-dark Mexican morning, we wait to perform *El*
47
48 *Ensueño de los Árboles* in Chapultepec Park. Audience members gather in a
49
50 circle to hear the opening instructions. Adame and Clay are already waiting in

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53 ¹⁷ Richards notes the error involved in attempting to apply the open vision strategy
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55 directly in performance (1995, p. 54).
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6 their starting positions in the nearby forest; Núñez, Guardia and Middleton will
7 guide the audience through what amounts to an induction: first, spoken
8 guidelines for participation; then a symbolic and playful divesting of their
9 mobile phones, egos, mental habits, etc. (Figure 6); finally, as we step into the
10 forest, Núñez silently signals for closed mouths, open eyes, and open ears.
11 The monitors' first task of modelling a contemplative engagement in the
12 experience of a morning forest walk begins.
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19 During the course of the performance, audiences will be guided into an
20 ever deeper engagement with their own experience through disorientating and
21 attention-altering actions such as moving in close proximity with others,
22 making prolonged eye-contact with strangers, joining in a collective vocal
23 vibration, walking with eyes closed (Figure 7). If participants are to make an
24 intensified non-daily engagement then we must first of all provide a structure
25 through which they can divest themselves of their habitual social and
26 conceptual patterns.
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37 *I will find myself only when I get lost (NN)*
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40 Our intention is that they should become immersed in the forest, immersed in
41 the performance, immersed in their own actions of engagement - with one
42 another, with the forest, and then with a single, specially chosen tree (Figure
43 8). Our every interaction with them - as a group, and individually - creates the
44 fabric of their experience. The degree to which they can access a mode of
45 'serious play', and allow themselves to 'go deep,' when the text invites it,
46 depends upon the quality of our interpersonal relationship with them. The
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6 degree to which a pathway into contemplation is made viable for them
7 depends upon the depth of our own contemplative presence. As Guardia
8 says, 'You only take people into immersion through example. There are no
9 other ways to immerse people (Guardia, 2017b).
10
11
12

13 In part, the example we set is permission-giving; in part, it is
14 demonstrating a foundational attitude which participants are invited to adopt
15 with regard to allowing themselves to be vulnerable in the unknown of the
16 unfolding performance.
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23 *We must go ahead of the audience in the extent of our nakedness.*
24
25 *(NN)*
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28

29 We also go ahead of the audience in terms of our understanding of the
30 pathways and the obstacles to immersion. Although the audience-participants
31 in *El Ensueño* did not undergo the practice of River Action, they were
32 following a similar experiential process, albeit in a milder and more aesthetic
33 form. Clay reported,
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40 I could see on people's faces a kind of condensed version [of our
41 experience], and... moments of realization or of noticing something that
42 I had already experienced, and then [I found myself] having... empathy
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Guardia states,

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6 You have an organic feeling of how important it is, just the way you
7 touch them, to give them confidence and to contain them - because
8 you have been in that place. This kind of sensibility is born from you
9 having been in that place, in a long practice.... a mindful practice. So
10 actions are actions of mindfulness and opening sensibility and
11 perception (Guardia 2017b).
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19 'Mindfulness' denotes a mode of awareness that is usually characterised,

20 across clinical, psychological and Buddhist contexts, as
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25 ...a kind of non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centred
26 awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in
27 the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. (Bishop *et al*
28 in Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2013, p.43)
29
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34 This describes well the attentional strategy that underlies the contemplative
35 experience of *El Ensueño*. We might, then, see the task of the monitor-
36 performers as akin to the task of the mindfulness instructor, about which Jon
37 Kabat-Zinn writes,
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42 Our job is to take care of the territory of direct experience in the present
43 moment and the learning that comes out of it. This suggests that the
44 instructor is continually engaged in mapping the territory inwardly
45 through intimate first-person contact and discernment, moment by
46 moment... (Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 297)
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Comment [D3]: Slight rewrite to reflect the earlier insertion of material on mindfulness.

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6 Like a mindfulness instructor, the mindful performer-monitor must be able to
7 operate in performance, and in interaction with audience-participants, from a
8 place of lucid present-moment awareness of both the inner and outer
9 dimensions of their experience (Figure 9).
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11
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13 14 15 16 17 **Conclusion**

18
19 Grotowski's work with techniques that 'bring us back to the sources of life... to
20 organic primary experience of life' is directly drawn upon in our training as
21 immersive theatre performers, and in our offer to audiences.
22
23

24
25 Fundamental to our work is the intention to foreground the presence of
26 the actor in an immersive theatre context. In particular, we target the actor's
27 ability to multi-task attentionally from a place of contemplative absorption, and
28 to model invitationally, for audiences, a mode of active mindfulness.
29
30

31
32 The training described here is fundamentally a training in embodied
33 awareness, carried out via energetic form and with particular attention paid to
34 the use of the gaze and the role of intention and environment. These multiple
35 factors influence the degree to which immersive experience is possible,
36 through dilating sensorial sensitivity. Like Grotowski's work in Theatre of
37 Sources, it is a training in the capacity for immersion.
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44 The image of the actor, as in Figure 4, poised on a threshold and
45 peering through a portal, might be taken as emblematic of the role of the
46 performer in an immersive theatre context, inhabiting the dual space of dilated
47 inner and outer attention. Of course, as Jon Kabat-Zinn has pointed out,
48 'ultimately there is no inside and no outside, only one seamless whole, awake
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6 and aware' (Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 284). With a sufficiently
7 panoramic awareness, the performer might move seamlessly, spontaneously,
8 through the many relational vectors that an immersive performance entails;
9 wholly attuned to their own experience, and wholly available to the needs of
10 the performance and the participants.
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Figure 3: Nicolás Núñez transitioning into the portal position in River Action. Photo: Sofie Iversen.

Figure 4: Caroline Clay (foreground) and Deborah Middleton in the portal position of River Action. Photo: Sofie Iversen.

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Figure 7: Caroline Clay (R) leads the serpent of participants with closed eyes. *El Ensueño de los Árboles*, (2017) Chapultepec, Mexico City. Photo: Vicente Espinoza Mayo.

Figure 8: Nicolás Núñez (L) with participants during a moment of contemplative contact with the tree. *El Ensueño de los Árboles*, (2017) Chapultepec, Mexico City. Photo: Vicente Espinoza Mayo.

Figure 9: Nicolás Núñez and Helena Guardia modelling a contemplative encounter with the tree. *El Ensueño de los Árboles*, (2017) Chapultepec, Mexico City. Photo: Vicente Espinoza Mayo.