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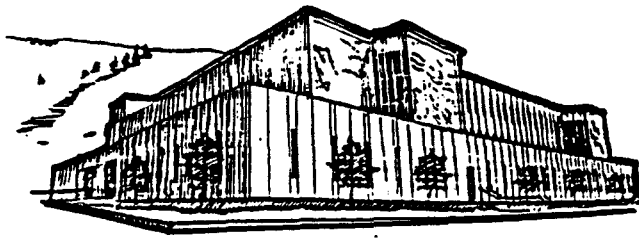
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SELECTED AND SIMPLIFIED PEKING OPERA MOVEMENT:
A GROUNDING FOR ACTORS

by

Chiang, Wei-Hua

B.F.A., National Institute of the Arts, Taiwan, 1990.

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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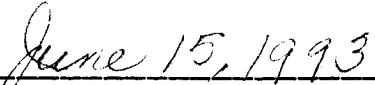
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Selected and Simplified Peking Opera Movement:

A Grounding for Actors

Chinese traditional movement from Peking Opera could become a repertory of precise movements to train a contemporary actor. I have selected a series of Chinese traditional movements to be an organized training exercise, which can support the contemporary actor in the process of orienting himself to the use of the body in performance. I want to introduce the secret power of Chinese movements to the contemporary actor so that he/she can experience them kinesthetically and learn the basic principles which would be useful in the overall physical training.

"Different cultures teach different body techniques." Eugenio Barba says.¹ What do we learn about body reaction from the Chinese culture? How do we convert these movements into a training exercise so as to achieve maximum effectiveness? How do we find the best way to use them or to be able to break them down to understand their useful application.

¹Eugenio Barba, "Theatre Anthropology," in Drama Review, vol.26, no.2, Summer 1982, 7.

At first, I thought Peking Opera movement (abbreviated as P.O.M.) is good training only for the Chinese contemporary actor. For Chinese contemporary actors, P.O.M. is a thread to their roots. The way an Occidental uses his body in daily life is substantially different from an Oriental. Different cultures demonstrate different body techniques according to the way a person walks, greets, gestures, etc. For example, I found that Occidental students in my drama class do not have the habit of kneeling and squatting as I do.

I have been training as an actor for eight years in the National Institute of the Arts in Taiwan. The training has included interpretation of a dramatic text, self expression and transmission of a performance text.

Interpretation of a dramatic text

We are trained so that we can interpret dramatic texts. To be a flexible performer, we have to learn how to interpret a variety of texts from many periods in different styles. As Richard Schechner says, "Training to do this means that the performer is not the primary author or guardian of the text. He is the transmitter. And

you want a transmitter to be transparent, as clear as possible."²

Self Expression

The function of training is to help actors to achieve self-expression. This kind of training has more to do with internal expression by finding the inner motive. An actor's personal expression is woven into the interpretation of dramatic texts. That is, we find or create a way to express and to present a life (role/character) contained in dramatic texts. This kind of training is manifest in Grotowski's work, Stanislavski's work, and the work of the famed 'Actor's Studio'.

This act ought to function as self-revelation...
At the moment when the actor...discovers himself...
the actor, that is to say the human being,
transcends the phase of incompleteness, to which we
are condemned in everyday life...[T]he reaction
which he invokes in us contains a peculiar unity of
what is individual and what is collective.³

So we have various Hamlets: a childish Hamlet, a hysterical Hamlet,

²Richard Schechner, "Training Interculturally", in A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, 247.

³Jerzy Grotowski, "Zbigniew Ossinski and Tadeusz Burzynski, in Grotowski's Laboratory, 55.

a sentimental Hamlet, a womanish Hamlet and a criminal Hamlet, etc. Most contemporary actor training is this kind of training--self expression. Self-expression training is important and popular because it is the tool that an actor uses to transmit her inner motives through her body. As Stanislavski said,

Actually in each physical act there is an inner psychological motive which impels physical action, as in every psychological inner action there is also a physical action, which expresses its psychic nature.

The union of these two actions results in organic action on the stage.⁴

Transmission of a performance text

The function of this training is to allow the performer to transmit himself with a 'performance text' which in this case is the Peking Opera. Peking Opera is the mainstream of Chinese traditional theatre training from which we studied its knowledge, and learned voice and movement for two years. A non-Taiwanese contemporary actor may just need to have two years of effort in

⁴Konstantin Stanislavsky, in Stanislavsky's Legacy, Translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, 11.

training to be a professional. But in Taiwan, a professional traditional actor needs to be trained at least fifteen years in P.O.M. So, the goal of my traditional training is to know specific basic principles in voice and movement in order to appreciate the aesthetic value of my own culture.

Being an actor, I am attempting to find the functions and meanings of the sequence of Peking Opera movement for any actor's training. The answer is positive, I can boldly say that after reading Eugenio Barba's research about Theatre Anthropology.⁵ There are certainly functions and meanings in P.O.M., not only for a Chinese contemporary actor but also for all the contemporary actors in the world.

Often the contemporary Chinese actor learns from the west--how to interpret a dramatic text, scientifically analyze what the 'actor's language' consists of, and also uses of the occidental method of training to express self. All this acting training, however, is closely tied to body training because the body is a vital tool for an actor, and stores sensation and energies needed for expression.

⁵Eugenio Barba, "Theatre Anthropology", in The Drama Review, vol.26, no.2, Sum.1982.

Eugenio Barba asserts that

Different actors, in different places and times, in spite of the stylistic forms specific to their tradition, have used some principles which they have in common with actors from other traditions.⁶

All traditional drama has its particular use of the body. This body movement is a basic material for an actor. Eugenio Barba sees this cross cultural exchange as a great benefit to actors from any culture.

A theatre can, however, open itself to the experience of other theatres...in order to seek out the basic principles which it has in common with other theatre, and to transmit these principles through its own experiences.⁷

Barba shows that these "recurrent principles" are particularly good "bits of advice" and information which are likely to be useful to theatrical practice in general. Barba reveals these principles in various aspects of movement--balance, energy, opposition, dilation, rhythm, technique, and training. Many principles of P.O.M. are similar

⁶Ibid., 5.

⁷Ibid., 6.

to Barba's aspects of movements, and I am trying to find their possible uses for a contemporary actor.

"The way we use our bodies in daily life is substantially different from the way we use them in performance."⁸ We do not consciously think about how we use our bodies in daily life. We move, walk, greet with different gestures or postures in ways determined by the culture in which we live. First, we have to know the difference between "daily body" (the way we use our bodies in daily life) as Barba puts it, and "extra-daily body" (the way we use our body in performance). In P.O.M., there are two different layers of body movements derived from "daily body"--"Extra-daily body" and virtuoso's body. The extra-daily body movement in Peking Opera is dilated, and recreated from daily body movement. Dilation is the act of exaggerating a movement in order to attract audience's attention and to emphasize the message of the movement. For example, if the actor in Peking Opera wants to look at the right side, he won't look at right side directly. His body will go left side first, then look at the right side. Some delicate movements are also transferred from

⁸Ibid., 7.

daily body movement. The vitality of an acrobat shows us "another body" (or virtuoso's body), which uses techniques that are very different from daily practice. "The body's daily techniques have communication as their aim; the techniques of virtuosity aim for amazement and transformation of the body." Barba stated.⁸ The aim of extra-daily techniques, on the contrary, is information; they literally put the body "in-form." These two layers in P.O. M. transform the daily body.

Peking Opera and its movement

Peking opera, the dominant theatrical form in China after the mid-nineteenth century, came to the forefront gradually. It was an amalgamation of several regional forms, distinguished from each other by musical models and performance traditions. This drama is customarily called opera in the west but it has little resemblance to European opera.⁹ In common with all traditional Asian theatre, it sets out to create patterns of sound and movement. Peking Opera is

⁸Ibid., 8

⁹Roger Howard, "The Forms of Theatre", in Contemporary Chinese Theatre, 10.

primarily a theatrical rather than a literary form. Its emphasis is upon rigidly controlled conventions of acting, dancing, and singing rather than upon the text. The plays of Peking Opera are usually classified under two headings--civil plays (dealing with social and domestic themes) and military plays (involving the adventures of warriors or brigands), although the two are often mingled. The dramas are derived from earlier literary plays, novels, history, legend, mythology, folklore, and romance.¹⁰

The stage setting is minimal and bare. The only permanent properties are a wooden table and a few chairs. I call it a "blank in aesthetics" or a minimal setting and simplicity which allows the audience to have more space for their imagination. This simplicity allows for rapid changes of places on the same stage, indicated through speech, action, or properties. In addition to a statement about place, actors might pantomime knocking at gates, entering rooms, or climbing stairs. Circling the stage indicates a lengthy journey.

In order to perform on the almost empty stage, the performer

¹⁰Oscar G. Brockett, "Oriental Theatre", in History of Theatre, 523.

would have to use the extra-daily technique. All stage movement is related to dance, since it is rhythmical, mimetic, and symbolic. Furthermore, each word is accompanied by movement intended to enhance or explain its meaning. Such stage gesture has been fully codified in Peking Opera.

In P.O.M., there are seven basic hand movements, many special arm movements, more than twenty different pointing gestures, more than twelve special leg movements, and a whole repertory of sleeve and beard movements. Methods of walking or running vary with each role. The prescribed gestures and movements are combined according to character, mood, situation, or other conditions. This complicated stage business is handed down from master to trainee. Indeed, the techniques become too difficult for anyone but the highly-trained, to attempt. The virtuosity of a leading Peking Opera actor is certainly considerable. She must be a superior singer, mime and dancer, as well as actor, and she must have acquired the military arts of swordplay, tumbling, somersaults and other acrobatics. Her body must be superbly fit because it is a high-precision instrument for carrying out complex patterns of aural and visual movement.¹¹

¹¹ibid.

Although it is not necessary for a contemporary actor to be an acrobat, he must know the basic principles of body movements: balance, energy and opposition. I will deal specifically with these three principles because I think they are the most important principles of movements for an actor's training.

The study of balance makes it possible for us to understand how a balance in action generates a kind of elementary drama: the opposition of different tensions in the performer's body is sensed kinaesthetically by the spectator as a conflict between elementary forces. But in order to be able to move from a balance which is the result of minimum effort to a visualization of contrary forces - and this is the image of the body of a performer who knows how to master balance - the balance must become dynamic. Muscles in action must replace the ligaments in the maintenance of the position.¹²

Balance in Movement

As Barba states, the characteristic of the traditional actors is

¹²Eugenio Barba, "Balance", in A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, 34.

that they use extra-daily balance to form an aesthetic movement. "Extra-daily balance demands a greater physical effort - it is this extra effort which dilates the body's tensions in such a way that the performer seems to be alive even before he begins to express."¹³ Traditional oriental performers have codified the acquisition of a new balance and have fixed the basic positions.

The Peking Opera movement, of course, is not an exception. We find that in the extra-daily balance in P.O.M. there is a deformation of the daily position of legs and a reduction of the base of support in the foot. In Peking Opera, the actor walks with her leg lifted high off the ground. She moves forward by lifting one leg, stopping in the air, stretching, stepping down and changing to the other leg. The upper body should remain straight. If one tries this, one immediately discovers that the center of gravity changes. In order to look steady and calm, the upper body has to be maintained on the same horizontal plane. Two different tensions are created in the upper and lower parts of the body, and this will make the body find its new point of balance. Therefore, while doing this movement, the more stable one looks, the more effort and skill needs to be put into

¹³Ibid., 74.

achieving balance. That is, the more the balance is threatened. Another walking movement in Peking Opera is the tiny steps. The actor almost walks without lifting her knees but the knees have to be slightly bent. In addition, the vertebral column generates pressure on the sole of the foot during the movement and each step has to be started from heel to toes. At the same time, her joints will be used in ways that she does not usually use them in daily life. Doing this, the upper body will still be stable and straight; thus when walking in this way with more speed, it will appear as if the upper part of the body is floating by. This deformation of daily body technique - the extra-daily technique - is essentially based on an alteration of balance. When practicing these two walking movements of P.O.M., one can find different energies in one's body by finding the new balance. Thus, the body can adopt the special balance position, involving the head and the muscles of the neck, trunk, pelvis and legs. These two walking movements keep the upper body immobile and evoke a dynamic kinesthesia in muscles. Much more energy is used in this way.

Energy in Movement

F. Taviani states in *Lenergia dell'attore come premessa-The Actor's Energy as Premise*,

Studying the performer's energy therefore means examining the principles which performers can use to model their muscular and nervous power according to non-daily modalities.¹⁴

The term energy refers to the performer's nervous and muscular power. How to cause this power in a performer's body is an actor's significant task. An actor's body in performance is totally different from the daily body. An actor should raise a power in order to have the image which the spectator would accept. This power--the energy--is a result of an affiliation of inner spirit and outer body. Basically, an actor's expression is based on the projection of his inner soul through action. An actor without energy is just an empty body, without a soul. He will not be able to transmit his message to the audience at all. Actors who do not have enough energy, that is, if they only have energy in their facial expressions or only in parts of

¹⁴Eugenio Barba, "Energy", in A Dictionary of theatre Anthropology, 74.

their bodies, will not be able to transmit the text's message thoroughly. An actor with total energy will be able to transmit this message completely.

The energy can be properly projected by means of the spirit's transition, inside the body, of emotional feelings into bodily actions. Energy results when the body dilates the soul's expression to the audience's eyes. As Barba states, there are often sudden pauses in Peking Opera movements.¹⁵ However, these pauses do not decrease the intensity of the performance. Instead, it increases the intensity and is highly dynamic. This is actually a form of energy. In addition, in P.O.M. there are basically two types of movements : the vigorous and the soft. These two types of movements generate different kinds of energy. For example, the quality demonstrated in "CLOUD ARMS" is clean-cut and strong (see p.18 for details), while the quality demonstrated in "PETITE CLOUD ARMS" (see p.18 for details) is soft and delicate. Physical training can help the projection of energy. The level of energy can be strong, hard, vigorous, delicate, soft and tender. These dynamic sources can be found in the following movements : free and bound, strong and light, sudden and

¹⁵Ibid., 88

sustained. The moving speed in movements also evokes different dynamic energy. Like a dynamo, an actor's body can start, move, add speed, reduce speed and stop. In P.O.M., each movement is concerned with holding, breathing, projecting, making tension and relaxing of speed in energy.

Opposition in Movement

The two walking movements described above are revealed not only as a result of simple and mechanical alteration of balance, but also as a consequence of tension between opposing forces. As Barba says, "One of the ways the actor's body reveals his life to the spectator resides in a tension between opposing forces; this is the principle of opposition."¹⁶ In the Peking Opera, every movement has to begin in the opposite direction so that the movement will ultimately be carried out. The Chinese actor always starts an action by using its opposite momentum in trying to get the attention of the audience. As mentioned earlier, in daily life, when we walk we step forward and down. But in Peking Opera, we lift our leg, sweep it to

¹⁶Eugenio Barba, "Theatre Anthropology", in The Drama Review, vol.26, no. 2, Sum. 1982, p.12.

the side and almost backwards, before coming forward and down. This is an example of the opposition principle. According to this principle of opposition, if one wants to crouch down, one first rises up on tip-toe and then crouches down. Thereby, most Peking Opera movements are in the "extra-daily" body form of expression, which is more dilating, delicate and is concerned with each joint, involving bones and muscles.

Basic Peking Opera Movements

I will introduce some of the basic movements in Peking Opera, (movements of the arms, waist, legs) which can be useful training for an actor. Each movement must be carried out with Barba's concept of balance, energy and opposition.

I have adapted and simplified the following movements from the traditional P.O.M. because a contemporary actor does not need to be as much of an acrobat as a traditional Chinese actor. However, the practice of P.O.M. will help an actor to express herself better physically.

The basic movement in the foot is to ensure the stability of the actor's position. To position the feet in a T-shape, is the first

fundamental position in P.O.M. (figure 1).



figure 1

CLOUD ARMS

1. Raise both arms and bend your elbows so that your hands are at the chest level. Your right arm should be above the left arm. Position your hands so that the right palm is facing the left palm (figure 2).



figure 2

2. Circle your arms alternatively at the same time in the anti-clockwise direction in a horizontal plane, not in a vertical plane.



figure 3

PETITE CLOUD ARMS

1. Position your hands so that your right wrist touches your left wrist (figure 3).
2. Use your thumb to touch the third finger of the same hand (figure 4).
3. Start rolling your hands around each



figure 4

other, make sure that the wrists do not separate.

RAISING PALM

1. Position your foot in T-shape (figure 1).
2. Straighten your arms and put them at the side of your body. Position your right hand at the center of your stomach. Bend your wrist so that your right palm is facing right and upwards. Raise your right hand slowly past your face and until it cannot be stretched anymore. When your right arm is completely straightened, turn your right palm over 360 degrees so that it still faces the right. Lower your arm slowly, without bending and return to the position where you started. Do the same thing with your left arm. Alternate the movement so that the



figure 5

right arm movement is followed by the left arm movement without any pause.

Speed up the movements (figure 5).

Note: When you speed up this movement, you may find that your balance is threatened, so you have to search for your own balance point so your body will remain upright and stable throughout the exercise.

KICKING LEG

A.

1. Position your feet in the T-shape (figure 1).
2. Raise both arms outward to the sides of the body so your arms form a straight line.
3. Step your front foot forward in 'fixed foot' (figure 6) and kick the other up. Make sure your body and your legs are straight (figure 7).

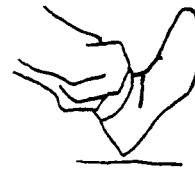


figure 6



figure 7

To make this movement more dynamic breath out while you kick. with this principle of respiratory control, we can now go on to two other leg movements.

B. Do the same thing as movement A but draw a 45 degrees arc with your leg while lowering it (figure 8).

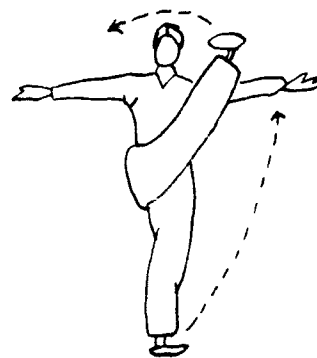


figure 8

C. Do the same thing as in the movement B but use your fore-foot to clap your palm. Make sure your body and arms remain straight throughout the movement (figure 9).

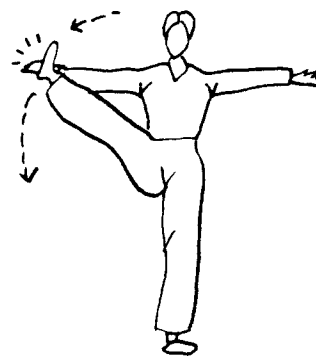


figure 9

SWINGING LEG

1. Squat down and place both hands in front of your body on the ground. Straighten your right leg to the side and sweep it 360 degrees, anti-clockwise around your body, right leg should remain on the ground at all times. You will have to raise both

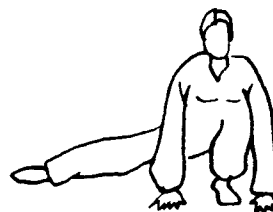


figure 10

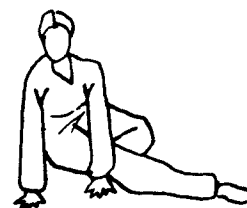


figure 11

hands and then your left foot for a second to accommodate the sweep (figures 10,11,12).

2. Repeat the same sequence for your left leg.

TURNING TRUNK

1. Form a big arc with your arms in front of your body and stand with legs slightly apart. Bend body forward a little. Palms should face the ground, fingers facing each other.
2. Cross your right foot over your left, (or vice-versa) with knees slightly bent (figure 13).
3. Turn your body around 360 degrees so that you come back to your starting position (figure 14). Arms position should remain the same throughout the movement. Continue the movement several times from movement number 2

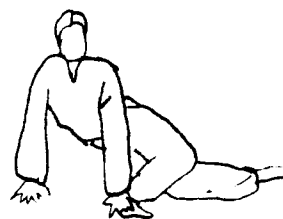


figure 12



figure 13



figure 14

(figure 13).

JUMPING AND TURNING IN THE AIR

1. Position yourself in the bent position as for 'turning trunk'. When you are crossing your foot over the other, raise your foot higher so that it will come down more forcefully (figure 15). Use this force to start a 360 degrees jump. Make sure your bending position remains the same after the jump (figure 16). Try to imagine that your head is tied to a wall in front of you so that even as you turn around, your body and hands remain in the same dimensional level. Your movement should make a big circle in the air.

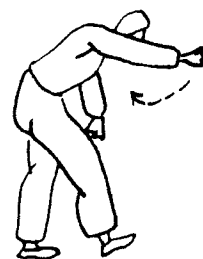


figure 15



figure 16

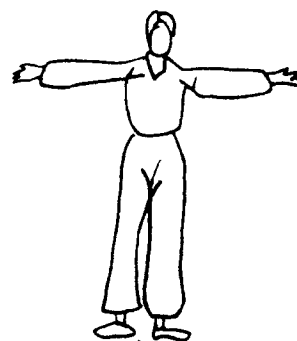


figure 17

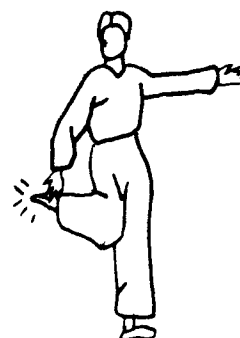


figure 18

JUMPING AND CLAPPING IN THE AIR

1. Stand upright with legs apart. Legs should be as wide apart as the width of your shoulders (figure 17).

2. Raise both arms to the highest point possible. Let them come down and at the same time, bend your right leg to the side so that your right hand can slap with the side of your right foot. Do the same thing with your left hand and left foot (figures 18,19).

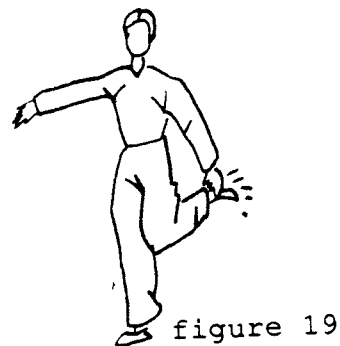


figure 19

3. Do it with both hands and legs together and you will find that you have to jump when doing this. Keep your head up and arch back. The raising and lowering of your hands will aid you in jumping higher (figure 20,21).



figure 20



figure 21

TURNING TRUNK ON THE FLOOR

1. Lie straight on the floor (figure 22).
2. Lift one leg, sweep and circle it over your body. Half-way through the sweep, start sweeping the other leg too (figure 23,24).
3. Using the force of the sweeps, roll your



figure 22



figure 23



figure 24

body over and go back to the same position.

Application of the Selected, Simplified P.O.M for contemporary actors

The application of these selected, simplified P.O.M. can help any actors be more expressive physically. With constant practice of P.O.M., an actor will find that the movements will come naturally. He can innovate and even create his own, distinctive way of expressing through movements.

To practice and apply these movements. We shall begin with :

1. The continuous practice of an action.
2. Finding a point of balance and opposition in the action.
3. Giving a 'counter-impulse in mid-process',¹⁷ which could produce a deviation of direction and a change of dynamics.
4. Finding a point in a precise position which can be the starting point of the same or an other action.
5. Solving problems with body and mind.

¹⁷Ibid., 245.

6. Playing the action repeatedly makes them one's own.

The exercises not only can be repeated in a different order, they can also be done at different speeds, with different qualities-- free or bound, strong or light, sudden or sustained¹⁸ for projecting all energies in a determined direction. Therefore, one's body would have an individual energy.

During the training, one puts one's energy to the test. The actor can measure, explode, control and project her energy, allowing the actor to breathe and play with the movements. By using training exercises, the actor tests her ability to achieve a 'total presence' in the entire body. This produces a condition, in which the actor will find a creative moment of improvisation and performance. That is, the actor has to learn and master the fragments of exercises, and patterns, until she is able to use them to model her energies. At the end of a certain period of time, the actor would have understood the body enough to control something more completely and deeply. The principles of these exercises cause the body to live on stage. Therefore, this energy and power attract the spectator's attention

¹⁸Irmgard Bartenieff with Dori Lewis, in Body Movement Coping with the Environment, 58.

and become the actor's intention.

The Function of the Training

I believe that these exercises would give the actor conscious mastery of his body. Practicing the exercises develops the dilation of the body in order to increase expressiveness. Training is the actor's chance to examine the power of his body and senses without the pressure of public performance. Through training, his body is prepared and warmed-up, and it is now ready to persuade the spectator to believe the acting more readily.

The physical training obliges the actor to abandon the use of the "daily body", to incorporate the body's balance, opposition and energy in "extra-daily body" technique. Actors can apply the training requirement as the yardstick to their personal ability. As Barba said:

Our social use of the body is necessarily a product of a culture: the body has been incultured and colonized. It knows only the uses and perspectives for which it has been educated. In order to find others, it must be detached from its models. It must inevitably be directed towards a new form of

'culture' and undergo a new 'colonization'. It is precisely this path which makes performers discover their own life, their own independence and their own physical eloquence.¹⁹

The Selected, Simplified P.O.M are the 'second colonization'

An exercise is an action which an actor uses to go after her objective by learning and repeating it. For example, an actor wants to be able to go down on her knees while she is bending the legs at the same time. In a certain way, if he moves her body downward, she loses control and her weight goes over. The result is that she bangs her knee and hurts herself.

To solve this problem, one should find a counter-impulse to control and carry the body down, even rapidly, without hitting the knees. By employing The Selected, Simplified P.O.M training, one is able to achieve this movement in a better way. After learning and repeating it, an actor can retain in the body and mind a process of problem solving. An exercise is not only for solving the problem but also finding the problem; one must find an exercise and then

¹⁹Eugenio Barba, "From 'Learning' to 'Learning to Learn'", in A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, 245.

practice it. Because of his knowledge from the exercise, the actor has the opportunity to test his power to go beyond the limit.

After the training, an actor will know the limits of the body and the body will become a deciding factor for what the actor can do and how far he/she still has to develop.

In contrast to the Stanislavsky system, which demands an actor to act from the inside, Peking Opera demands an actor to act from the outside. for example, if an actor needs to portray a delicate character, she can start practicing the "PETITE CLOUD" movement, which is itself a delicate movement with constant practice, the actor will experience the physical delicacy from the movement, and this exterior delicacy will help her understand and achieve inner delicacy of his character.

As Peking Opera is from a different culture, even to a contemporary Chinese actor, Peking Opera is very remote. The sequence of these Peking Opera movements offers a new way of training for a contemporary actor. One learns to search for balance, opposition and energy in a way which he had never done before. The actor can play with these movements when he is familiar with them

and these movements become his own. Thus, these Peking Opera movements will become a resource which will flower in an actor's performance.

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