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What is it? The 'It-ness' of Ensemble

Introduction

In this paper I am going to address and bring together the two questions that originally underpinned the setting up of the symposium 'Encountering Ensemble' at the University of Huddersfield on September 16th 2010.

The first concerns the language and metaphors used to describe the idea of ensemble in live performance. In examining how practitioners describe or evoke the notion of 'ensemble', we can perhaps begin to understand the essence of the thing we are trying to talk about.

The second question concerns the implications an understanding of ensemble has on training performers to work in ensembles.

- Can 'ensemble' be trained?
- Can individuals be trained so that they are able to work in any ensemble, or does training in one particular ensemble not necessarily enhance the ability of its members to work in other ensembles?
- If ensembles can be trained, how does the training differ from performance training that pays no heed to the notion of ensemble?
- If ensembles can be trained, what EXACTLY is being trained?

In addressing these questions I am going to draw on my own practice - over nearly two decades - of performing in and latterly training individuals within ensembles. Through interrogating my practice I aim to get to some understanding of the essence of what I think I am training, and how I am training it.

More than a decade ago I set up The Quiddity Ensemble in Melbourne, as an independent research and performance group through which I could investigate some of these questions. Frustratingly, I found there was no word I could comfortably employ to describe what is happening in a room when an ensemble really connects and its members transcend their individual performances to participate in something ‘other’. I started talking about ‘It’ - “it” is in the room. “it” requires the energy to alter, “it”’s left....

I still haven’t found a better word. So this paper is in pursuit of the it-ness of ensemble.

Descriptions and Metaphors.

It’s tempting to suggest that if we don’t know what ‘it’ is, then ‘it’ doesn’t exist. Yet clearly there is such a thing as ‘ensemble’ performance which those who participate in it and those who observe it recognise as qualitatively different from non-ensemble performance. The problem is, knowing what ‘it’ is.

The Scottish Arts Council writes of ‘ensemble theatre’:

Ensemble theatre occurs when, rather than auditioning freelancers on a project-by-project basis, a group of theatre artists work together over many years to create theatre. These artists can include performers, artistic directors, stage management and key administrative staff.¹

This definition clearly suggests that ensemble is a function of longevity - in other words all that needs to be shared is time and people working together become an ensemble. By this definition presumably any long running West End show, old touring or building-based repertory companies, touring circuses are all ensembles.

¹ <http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/artsinscotland/drama/features/archive/themeensembletheatre.aspx>
accessed September 2nd 2010

Paul Allain, in his book on Suzuki “The Art Of Stillness” quotes Ellen Lauren from SITI in the US. She says:

In teaching as many students as we have in New York, there has now become quite a community who have had some exposure to this training. ... This training can provide a very real vocabulary that actors can speak together; you can immediately become an ensemble, working in the same world with a similar sensibility. (Allain, 2002, p 48)

This approach suggests ensemble is based on what the performers have experienced before the ensemble first meets, not on what emerges in the course of those meetings. Presumably this suggests a definition of ensemble that means that *individuals* are trained and if they have a similar training, they can automatically be an ensemble.

Already there is a contradiction. Is the majority of the work of forming an ensemble done before the performers meet, in their initial training, or does ensemble require longevity, making what the performers bring to the table essentially irrelevant?

Katie Mitchell in her book “The Director’s Handbook” writes:

During this period of rehearsals, you could also consider calling the full ensemble occasionally for movement or voice work, or to relay any new research material. `it is important not to lose the sense of a shared group activity or purpose. Do this once a week for an hour or so... Do not worry if... you do not have time to schedule these ensemble calls”. (Mitchell 2009, p174)

It would be easy to suggest that I’m making fun of Mitchell - I’m not. She cites as formative influences the work of Dodin, Gardzienice and Pina Bausch among others, (Mitchell 2009, p. 222) so clearly aspires to and respects the possibility of ensemble, however her suggestion for how that ‘ensemble’ is to be

maintained is that the ‘*sense of a shared group activity or purpose*’ be encouraged. Ensemble then, is a ‘common purpose’.

Longevity. Prior training. Common purpose. None of these seem to me to be at the core of a sense of ensemble, though all might play a role.

In Simon Callow’s introduction to Shevstova’s book on Dodin and the Maly Theatre, Callow writes of his first encounter with a Maly Production:

The experience was a collective one, like the playing of a great orchestra. What was exceptional was the melos, the underlying sense of the whole. More extraordinary even than the individual performances or the interplay between the characters, was the corporate life manifested on stage. The connectivity of the actors was almost tangible, an organic tissue that made them breathe as one and move with a profound awareness of everything that was going on within the group..... (Callow in Shevstova, 2004, Introduction)

Later he adds:

.. it is the actors who hold you absolutely, not simply as performers nor even as individuals, but as some kind of collective conduit for the life-force. A Maly production is contained within the actor’s bodies, brains, hearts and souls, it is the sum total of their work, their relationship with each other, their relationship with the world. The experience of the production, no matter how stylised the conception, is always deeply human.. (ibid)

I find Callow’s phrase ‘corporate life’ compelling for it points to what seems to me an indisputable reality that is ignored by the idea that ensembles emerge from longevity or from some vague idea of being engaged in a ‘group enterprise’. The ‘it-ness’ of ensemble is something that is created and sustained by performers, in real time, every time they work as an ensemble. It is a function of something performers are doing and communicating through the spaces that separate them. This suggests to me that the essence

of ensemble is to be found in HOW a performer does her or his work - it is a function of their activated bodymind. The HOW is a function of the quality of the attention that each performer is paying to his or her work. Perhaps we could suggest that ensemble is generated and sustained by the qualities of attention that the individuals who comprise the ensemble pay to themselves and their relationships. As the precise nature of an individual's 'quality of attention' seems to elude exact capture in words, we need to resort to metaphors to try to evoke it.

So what metaphors have been used to try to capture the underlying nature of the interpersonal attentiveness within an ensemble?

Strehler, quoted in Delgado and Heritage's book "In Contact With The Gods" says:

I have a deep-rooted and ancient idea of what an ensemble is. I love the theatre only when it is a family, a fraternity, a house filled with parents, children, cousins. I don't mean by this that I think of the family as pure harmony, for a family is also a place of dissent and of abandonment. But the theatre-as-home is the only one that for me is worth the effort. (Delgado & Heritage 1996, p 266)

Ingemar Lindh, Swedish Improvisor who began his work with Decroux and Grotowski before developing his own approach to collective improvisation, writes of the ethics of hospitality at play within ensemble:

... the prime condition for working in a group is to have the capacity of being on your own - so as not to become a burden on others. This is the principle of collaboration on the floor during improvisations; it is also the basic principle of hospitality... otherwise one ends up imposing on, rather than encountering, the other. (Lindh quoted in Camillieri, 2008, p 252)

Nicolas Nunez and Helena Guardia, both of whom have been at the core of the Taller in Mexico City for the last 35 years, talk about ensemble as a meeting between people's essential selves - not their surface 'personalities' - between people who have left their masks outside.

These metaphors are drawn from the domain of codified or structured social interaction. However there is another domain of metaphor that is employed.

Nicolas and Helena both recalled Grotowski discussing ensemble in rather different terms. They talked about Grotowski describing an ensemble as a single body comprising distinct but interdependent vital organs. A brain is necessary, a heart, an anus. Particularly the anus. Nicolas recalled a conversation with Grotowski in which the latter said:

we have to take care ...because as soon as we get together, we start and we build this body – as an ensemble. We all need this body to be alive, and he (Grotowski) told us not to kill, not to destroy, our structures, because he said many groups, many theatre groups, disappeared because they killed ... the anus of the organism. Somebody says 'I can't stand him' 'Neither can I' 'He's not needed' 'Yes, fuck him!' 'Throw him away!' 'Yes, I am going to tell him!'. And they throw this guy away, or this girl, and the ensemble vanishes – destroyed, because it cannot live without an anus. (Private Conversation with the Author, New York, April 2009)

Nicolas also was adamant that Grotowski believed the roles within the body of the ensemble were not fixed. One person might be the brain one day, another the next. Even the director had a mutating role:

(Grotowski) said, also, these roles are not stable. So, if you direct, don't feel that you have to have the last say, the last word, because maybe sometimes you will be so stupid or maybe sometimes you will be the [anus] – even if you are the official responsible one. (ibid)

Maria Shevstova, writing about the Maly Theate, writes of:

Ensembles in the strongest sense of the term, that is, a permanent group, breathing as one. (Shevstova 2004 p. 36)

Metaphors of the ensemble as a body or as a single, unified breath, seek to extend the experience of the individual body to describe the interactive nature of ensemble.

That there are these two domains of metaphor, of social interaction and of the extended body, is hardly a surprise - after all, the very essence of ensemble is to be found in the negotiation between individual's unique use of their bodyminds and the ethics, aesthetics and protocols of how those individuals interact. Ensemble is a hybrid of the individual and the social.

My Practice

I'd like to turn to my own practice for a little while and see how my experience of what works in the studio might interact with the questions I've tried to open up so far.

I did not start training ensembles because I thought I knew what they were. After I graduated I fell into five years work with a Grotowski inspired Physical Theatre company. I ran youth theatres and it seemed a good idea to keep people on stage all of the time as God knows what they were up to in the dressing rooms. I saw The Maly Theatre and Gardzienice. These things coalesced into a sense that it was in ensemble that the heart of my interest lay. In other words any understandings I have are as a result of processes of practical research, of trial and error, of dead ends and glorious realisation. My understandings of ensemble are rooted in my studio practice and my ideas followed rather than preceded that practice.

Over the years my approach has come to focus on foundational principles. The essence of the ensembles I develop does not reside in a specific suite of skills, but in collaboration through a set of shared principles. It is not what the performers do that creates the ensemble, it is *how* they do it. A group of performers with similar skills - actors, acrobats, contemporary dancers - will not, by default, perform as an ensemble. I find repeatedly, teaching in conservatoria such as the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne or the Swedish Ballet Academy, put six circus acrobats or twenty contemporary dancers together and they will not necessarily be an ensemble. However within a couple of days of principle-based training, a group of disparate individuals, assuming they are willing to embrace foundational principles, begins to find that instinctive, responsive and open awareness that is fundamental to inhabiting a genuinely shared space.

The development, through practical collaborative work, of the **HOW** of a particular ensemble, in my work, takes place by encouraging shared perspectives and shared attitudes based on core principles. This emerging commonality of attitude begins to build a bridge between the domain of the idiosyncratic bodymind and appropriate structures of social interaction.

This process is based on acknowledgement of the essential difference between individuals.

This is not a process of eradicating individuality or discouraging idiosyncrasy. In fact the development of commonality underpins and enhances individuality. It empowers individuals to manifest themselves more fully through relationship to others. Individuality is the life blood of ensemble. One of the mistakes performers most often make when they start to work collaboratively is to attempt to facilitate the work of others by withholding themselves - they don't make offers, they don't impose sounds or actions, they don't take a lead - they end up giving nothing and having to be carried by the

ensemble. Hence one of the principles I work from is the seemingly counter-intuitive “Don’t Be Helpful”.

The negotiation that is required between the pursuit of individual objective and sensitivity to external impulse has led, over the years, to my working with the idea, very inelegantly named, of the self-with-others. The self-with-others is a notion of the extended self, of the mindful self at the threshold between the secret, idiosyncratic, unique internal world and appropriate responsiveness to the external universe.

Of course, the simple answer to one of the questions that I started this paper with - ‘what is being trained when we train an ensemble?’ - is ‘individuals’. That’s all we can train. But what we are doing when we train people to work in ensembles is encouraging individuals to develop a particular form of selfhood, an extended selfhood. In training a particular ensemble, the commonality of purpose, the shared perspectives and principles facilitate the meeting points between extended selves. These shared foundational attitudes define the interface between external stimulus and internal reaction and so define the spectrum of appropriate responses within any particular ensemble.

Closing Thoughts

So what does this practical work suggest about the ‘it-ness’ of ensemble. What is going on when a group of individuals, working together, enable ‘it’ to come and visit them and they begin to experience themselves, and to be experienced by those watching them, as an ensemble?

I want to suggest the idea that ‘IT’ is an emergent property of collective selves. The individual self who first joins an ensemble develops into a collective, extended, interdependent self. Though longevity, prior training and a sense of ‘collective purpose’ might all contribute to this development, they are not its core. It’s core is

found in the identifying and decoding of individual thought paradigms and psychophysical blockages that obstruct the ability of performers to respond instantaneously, vulnerably and appropriately to stimulus given by others. Some think of this as 'getting rid of the ego', though for me that sounds too much like a devaluing of individuality. This decoding, I achieve, through encouraging the embodying of core shared principles.

I am not suggesting my principles are the only ones that can underpin ensemble - however, just as a family or social organisation requires shared rules, protocols or courtesies, so an ensemble requires a foundation of common purpose or perspective. In this sense, perhaps Katie Mitchell is right that ensemble is a sense of 'shared purpose', but it is a shared purpose that must be radically and continually embodied in the work of performers, not simply left as an disembodied idea. An ensemble shares a primary task in every moment of its performance - it knows what *must* be done and pays attention accordingly - but the subtasks, those things which could/might be done are individualised by the way each performer responds to common impulses. The ensemble shares foundations but celebrates the unique structures that each individual builds from those foundations, just as in a forest, every tree is unique but all are rooted in the same earth.

Earlier I noted two domains of metaphor that have been employed to describe ensemble, the domain of social structures and the domain of the extended body. My training, predicated on the notion of self-with-others, suggests an understanding of ensemble at the meeting point of these two domains, a training that is about the interaction between the individual and social self.

So, I'm going to add one more metaphor to the pile. A neuron is not a brain. A vital organ is not a person. An individual is not an ensemble. Consciousness might be seen as an emergent property of a brain in which individual neurons appropriately interact. An

individual emerges from a bodymind in which radically different elements appropriately interact. An ensemble is the emergent property of appropriately interacting individuals. Just as a consciousness is altered by, but can survive the death of individual neurons and a body can withstand (though is altered by) the deterioration, removal or transplant of vital organs, so an ensemble can - and does - survive and find itself transformed by the loss of one individual and the arrival of another, though if the wrong individual is transplanted into an ensemble, like a transplanted organ, it can be rejected and in that process can kill the ensemble.

An Ensemble is a flexible, collective self intimately defined by its constituent elements, yet curiously independent of them. 'It', like you or I, can be wilful, awkward and unexpected, just as my experience of myself can become strange to me if my liver is not working as normal or some other biological mystery is playing out beyond the realms of my knowing. 'It' has a personality quite distinct from the individuals from which it emerges. 'It' is sustained purely by a precise and appropriate quality of attention. Though we might understand many of the elements that underpin 'it's' independent corporate life, just as we understand many elements of the brain and the body, we still struggle to explain what, ultimately, sparks 'it' to life.

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