Contemporary Theatre Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gctr20

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To cite this article: Frank Camilleri (2008): ‘To Push the Actor-Training to its Extreme’: Training Process in Ingemar Lindh's Practice of Collective Improvisation, Contemporary Theatre Review, 18:4, 425-441
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486800802379474

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‘To Push the Actor-Training to its Extreme’: Training Process in Ingemar Lindh’s Practice of Collective Improvisation

Frank Camilleri

ABSTRACT Swedish theatremaker Ingemar Lindh (1945–1997) is often associated with corporeal mime master Étienne Decroux, with whom he worked in the late 1960s, and with Eugenio Barba’s International School of Theatre Anthropology in the early 1980s. In 1971, following exchanges with Jerzy Grotowski and the setting up of Studio II with Yves Lebreton, Lindh founded the first laboratory theatre in Sweden: the Institutet för Scenkonst (Institute for Scenic Art). Lindh’s research on the fundamental principles of collective improvisation and performance conceived as process announces an important development in the twentieth-century tradition of the actor’s work upon oneself. This article focuses on the training process that complemented Lindh’s practice of collective improvisation. The adaptation of isometry to actor training marked a crucial point in the Institute’s research on ‘mental precision’ and ‘intention’ as possible means whereby collective improvisation can be investigated. The Institute’s training processes, which evolved over three decades of professional practice, combined codified work (including corporeal mime, Kung Fu, music, and calligraphy) and empirical training methods (e.g. isometric-based work). ‘Isometry’, an approach to sports training developed in the twentieth century, involves the static contraction of a muscle without any visible movement in the angle of the joint. Lindh’s isometric-based processes can been viewed as a development on Decroux’s active immobility. The article contextualizes the Institute’s isometric-based training in terms of history, terminology, and practice.

In Paris [with Decroux] I had met the refined result of a long process. In Wroclaw, brutal enchantment as a price that had to be paid. In Holstebro, the first hesitant steps of long-term patience.
During the period in Storhögen [1971–1976] I had three objectives: firstly, to find a way, my way, to liberate myself from the weight of my heritage, and not get stuck in repetitions of what I already knew [. . .] Secondly, to push the actor-training to its extreme and thus examine what it really was [. . .] And thirdly, to open the actor towards eternity through all this knowledge and not be shut into a blind alley with it: thus increasing one’s creative freedom to arrive at the improvising actor. (Ingemar Lindh)

Ingemar Lindh

‘Continue the work,’ he said as he paused from the t’ai chi form that he was leading during an early morning session at the University of Malta theatre in Valletta, on 26 June 1997. It was still too early for a break since we had only been working for twenty-five minutes, but Ingemar Lindh went upstairs to the dressing rooms. When we heard a glass tumbler hit the floor, Magdalena Pietruska – his close collaborator since 1974 – rushed upstairs after him. By the time the ambulance arrived thirty minutes later it was too late to save the 52-year-old Swedish theatre-maker, who had suffered a cardiac arrest.

The process of evacuation from his base in Italy since 1984 and the lack of support from various institutions had been weighing heavily on Lindh’s peace of mind in the preceding year. But the condition that led to the heart attack on that June morning in 1997 appears to have been hereditary. With his white-hair, wrinkled face and gentle manners, and looking at least twenty years older than his age, one’s first impression of Lindh was that of an ascetic guru. When one got to know him, the self-ironic mischievous side of him, apparent in the language and style he used in private exchanges and public conferences, deflated the clichéd image of a ‘wise old man’ to reveal a down-to-earth individual. Lindh’s wisdom resided in the mastery of his craft and in the intuitive vision that accompanied more than three decades of theatre practice. This article focuses on one fundamental aspect of that practice: the actor-training process that complemented Lindh’s research on the principles of collective improvisation.

In Swedish and Italian contexts, Ingemar Lindh (1945–1997) is widely associated with Étienne Decroux, with whom he worked in the late 1960s (1966–1969), first as a student and then as an assistant involved in the corporeal mime master’s own research. This was an intense formative period which provided Lindh with a sharp insight into a practice of technical precision and aesthetic refinement as well as pedagogical possibilities and ethical considerations. Lindh’s experience with Decroux was to serve as a base for various collaborative encounters with other practitioners and, eventually, as a point of departure for his unique research on the principles of collective improvisation. Lindh’s first collaborative effort was with Yves Lebreton and two other former students of Decroux with whom he founded Studio 2 in 1969 – ‘the first professional mime troupe in Scandinavia’ – which was eventually hosted by Eugenio Barba’s Nordic Teaterlaboratorium in

1. Ingemar Lindh, Pietre
di Guado (Pontedera: Bandecchi & Vivaldi, 1998), p. 96. All quotations from Pietre
di Guado (Stepping Stones) are based on the unpublished English translation by Benno Plassmann, Marlene Schranz, and Lindh’s close collaborator, Magdalena Pietruska. Page references to this book will be given directly in the text. An English version of Lindh’s book is set to appear in 2010, edited and introduced by the author of this article. All other translations from Italian sources into English are by the present author.

Holstebro. But Lindh soon felt the need to set up his own theatre laboratory to explore questions which mime left unanswered. He founded the *Institutet för Scenkonst* (Institute for Scenic Art) – the first laboratory theatre in Sweden – in 1971.

Lindh’s need to set up a laboratory practice must have been informed by his various encounters with Jerzy Grotowski and, especially, with Ryszard Ciesłak, with whom he shared a friendship. Lindh’s narration of an investigation he once held with Ciesłak is indicative of the intuition that was pushing him to research a performative condition to which he could not find answers in the practice of Decroux nor, as it turned out, in that of Grotowski. He narrates how he worked with Ciesłak on the possibility of repeating an action *identically*. Lindh worked on a mime sequence derived from Decroux, whereas Ciesłak developed the walk that can still be seen in the 1972 film on the training of the Wrocław laboratory. After working on their scores, repeating them over and over again, it became clear that there was something that always ‘mutated’. Even if the score appeared identical from the outside, there was always something ‘different’, if only a thought or a sensation. For Lindh, to resist this difference meant to resist something that is alive: ‘If I deny the mutation, I am killing something, I am petrifying something.’ Lindh’s recognition, however unformulated it may have been at the beginning of the 1970s, announces the drive that was to lead him to resist predetermined structures such as fixed scores, directorial montage, and choreography as principles of organisation in the composition and performance of theatre. His research on the principles of collective improvisation may be viewed as the result of his endeavour to give space to the ‘mutation’ which makes its presence felt in the here and now of occurrence, in theatre as in life.

**To Listen**

Lindh’s investigation of the dynamics at work in collective improvisation is based on what he calls the performer’s ability to ‘listen’ and to react to that which is perceived. To ‘listen’ stands for the capacity to consider every perceptible aspect of context as potential material for work. In the Institute’s parlance, the term ‘social situation’ refers to ‘all that is outside of the actor’ (p. 68), including colleagues, costumes, objects, text, music, textures, time, and space. In Lindh’s practice, the capacity to perceive the various component elements of a situation makes it possible to react to that stimulus by way of the dynamics of encounter. In other words, your perception of something (which is already an action if you acknowledge it) may open the possibility of an exchange with a colleague or of an encounter with an object if your interest is reciprocated by the suggestions that a colleague or an object might elicit. Lindh explains that though actions and words in a performance are, to varying degrees, ‘already prepared, […] in the moment they should happen they are consequences of your listening, and not of your wanting to act’. This means that the structure of a
performance by the Institute, which would have evolved as a grid of reference points in the course of personal and collective improvisations, functions not as a fixed score or as a predetermined agent that does not leave any space for ‘mutation’, but rather as an itinerary in which anything could happen.

In following this practice, Lindh was inspired by the mechanisms at work in everyday life:

Theatre is something which is artificial. Life is put inside a frame [...] we call ‘the performance’ [...] This never happens in life. I know what I have to do, I know that I have to go to a shop to buy something. That is my aim, my intention; but I do not know whom or what I shall meet on my way. I stop to greet someone and then I carry on because I know where I am going. I can also trip over the stairs! We can never foresee what will happen on the way even though we know the way. (p. 65)

The capacity to listen to the context and the ability to react to its suggestions are thus at the core of Lindh’s investigation of collective improvisation. The psychophysical status announced by Lindh’s term ‘to listen’ is, of course, not unique in the context of actor-training processes in the twentieth century. Lindh himself had been exposed to the training practices of the laboratories of Wroclaw and Holstebro which endeavoured to cultivate a heightened state of awareness and receptivity. However, as I discuss extensively elsewhere, Lindh’s contribution to twentieth-century theatre practice lies in ‘the placement of the irreducible here and now aspect of “listening” as the primary facilitator of encounter within a compositional process that is also an aesthetic and a poetics’. In other words, Lindh’s unique work lies in seeking to retain ‘mutation’ in the life of performance by means of a practice of collective improvisation. An integral part of this practice necessarily involved the training process elaborated by the Institute in the course of its history which was specifically aimed at addressing this objective.

‘The Individual’s Capacity to be Alone’

I was quite fortunate by ending up being this kind of crossroad[s] between the two greatest theatre masters in the second half of this century [...] It was a very strange crossroad[s], to have been working with Decroux, and then later with Grotowski. It was also a crossroad[s] of principles. One way that looked very much like ‘via negativa’ and the other, Decroux’s work, which one could perhaps call ‘via positiva’ [...] I do not want to do the theatre of Decroux, I do not want to do the theatre of Grotowski. But that is where my starting point is. Now I move forward.

The condition that Lindh identifies as crucial in the Institute’s investigation of collective improvisation is, paradoxically, ‘the individual’s capacity to be alone’ (p. 55). The improvising actor’s capacity to listen

8. *Actions Consequences Resonances: One Year of Study with Ingemar Lindh and the Institutet för Scenkonst*, ed. and comp. by B. Stanley (unpublished document, 1991), p. 56. This unpublished book-length document is comprised of observations by the participants of the fifth session of the University of Theatre held by the Institute in 1989 at their base in Pontremoli, Italy. The document, compiled at Lindh’s request during Stanley’s three-year sojourn in Pontremoli, includes extended quotations by Lindh extracted from transcripts of discussions held during the project.

and react in a group context is considered as a direct consequence of one’s ability to work autonomously alone. The status of this autonomy is directly linked with a cultivated psychophysical awareness that allows the improvising actor to work upon oneself as other, and to do so in a framework where technique and training process is not so much an end in itself as the means that make it possible for the actor to encounter the contingency of performance. In other words, in this context, training is aimed at cultivating an aptitude (that is also an ‘attitude’) rather than acquiring a ‘something’. Lindh’s contribution to twentieth-century laboratory theatre lies in his pursuit of improvisation as an organising principle during performance; such a vision necessarily informed the preparatory stages that allowed this objective to be engaged. Though Lindh’s point of departure in the early 1970s was influenced by the training practices he had been exposed to in Paris, Wrocław, and Holstebro, his concern with the mutation and the life of performance was already present. It was this concern that eventually led him to develop a training process specifically geared at addressing ‘mutation’ and collective improvisation.

Early on in Pietre di Guado Lindh comments on the intuition, as yet unformulated but nonetheless present as a driving force, that was to lead to the Institute’s own specific ways of working towards the performatve phenomenon of collective improvisation. Lindh observes that though it was not clear at the very beginning of his research what the actor should ‘know how to do’,

it was necessary to find a psychophysical process which had to start in the physical [. . .] If there had been a ‘clinical’ thesis of which we were aware, it would – more or less – have been this: to create a physical way of proceeding which would influence the mental structure of the actor in such a way as to liberate it and to enable it to guide the actor’s physical actions, which, in their turn, would become legible signs of one’s reactions and mental acts. (p. 14; italics in the original)

Apart from indicating the significance it had for Lindh, the extended italicization of this text is central to the argument of the current article. For the sake of clarity, the implications of Lindh’s enunciation can be enumerated schematically in the following way: (1) he was searching for a process that stimulated a psychophysical response in the actor; (2) he recognized that the way to obtain this goal was via the corporeal knowledge and dexterity of the actor; (3) he believed that such an optimum physical condition would serve to sharpen the actor’s ‘mental’ capacity to take action via a refined bodymind mechanism of intention; and (4) he looked forward to the resultant phenomenon that would constitute an actor capable of psychophysically inhabiting the here and now of occurrence (to ‘improvise’) in a way that is meaningful (‘legible’) for the actor and for others. In this way, the autonomy of the actor in a group context is a prerequisite condition for collective improvisation. The breadth of these implications marks both Lindh’s affinity with and his distance from his masters. A key aspect that needs to be explained at this point, before the physical training process


developed by the Institute is described, is the reference to ‘mental structure’ and ‘mental acts’.

**Mental Precision**

Lindh’s endeavour in the theatre revolves around the legibility of the actor’s work – that is, what one makes present as ‘content’. The frame of this concern is announced in *Pietre di Guado* by the technique/poetry debate which contextualizes his discussion on the actor’s ongoing formative process (pp. 11–17). In order to obtain legibility, Lindh seeks to ‘liberate’ the actor’s psychophysical mechanism, which is understood not merely as a physiological phenomenon but also as a signification agency. For Lindh, ‘the actor has no message – he is message’ (p. 42) – that is, ‘what’ the actor does is the ‘content’ (not merely a form, a technique, or an aesthetic) that the actor makes present. The ‘psyche’ or ‘mental’ component in the ‘psychophysical’ mechanism that Lindh sought to engage in his practice occupies a central place in this process. Lindh’s choice of terminology is revealing. Rather than adopt the term ‘psychological’, he prefers and insists upon the descriptive term ‘mental’. For Lindh, the term ‘psychological’ implies a mechanism (e.g. need, desire, and motivation) that filters the performance of an action by predetermining it, submitting physical action to a procedure that announces a split where the mind controls the body. The term ‘mental’ is preferred, in that for Lindh it indicates the exclusion of psychological mechanisms, in the process highlighting the status of action as an intention to do something without a (psychological) motive to do it. Further light can be shed on the phenomenon if reference is made to specific instances where the term is applied by the Institute.

Commenting on the physical aspect of the Institute’s aspiration to obtain a psychophysical state, Pietruska argues:

> We did not adopt the form of the body as a physical reference that can help the actor resume an action faithfully but which then becomes a kind of content in itself. With Ingemar we researched the possibility of resuming faithfully the mental act, the intention, leaving the body to adapt by itself. If I accomplish the [mental] act, the corporeal form becomes very precise and adequate to that which I am doing. Every act of our work is content and form together.11

The focus on physical exercises was thus not an end in itself, an aesthetic choice, but a means of cultivating a psychophysical awareness which in Lindh is manifested in ‘mental acts’ or ‘intention’. The work on ‘mental precision’, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this article, is often used to indicate the specificity of Lindh’s research in twentieth-century theatre practice. In the parlance of the Institute, the term ‘mental precision’ indicates the movement or action in the mind that precedes its physical manifestation. In this sense, Lindh’s reference to mental precision and the mental structure of the actor does not in any way imply a

prevalence of mind over body. The status of the action in the mind marked by ‘mental precision’ and ‘intention’ is indeed that of a physical action: the physical action that we see (and read) is a manifestation of the same phenomenon that marks a mental action. This mechanism does not entail a psychology of desire/need/motivation that is inherent in an announcement such as ‘I throw a stone because I am angry’. Rather, the mechanism of the ‘mental precision’ investigated by Lindh is a reaction elicited by the capacity to listen to a situation, announced in ‘I throw a stone because first I pick it up from the ground and then I aim it at something or someone’. The legibility of that action (e.g. ‘showing anger’) occurs after the event as an interpretive act. It is in this sense that Lindh’s practice of collective improvisation always aimed at staying one step ahead of a psychology (e.g. motivation) and of procedures (e.g. choreography) whose status is predetermining. Lindh believed that in a context where the performer’s physical prowess is accompanied by a sensitized mental mechanism, it is impossible to distinguish with certainty between the cause and effect, implying that it is a question not of the mind guiding the body but of a mutually informing state that announces a bodymind. This impossibility, which Lindh strove to engage in performance, provided the impetus for the Institute’s reformulation and subsequent development of a process that found its crystallization in a two-way training approach which distinguished between academic and empirical forms of training for the actor.

### Academic and Empirical Forms of Training

By the early 1990s the Institute’s terminology distinguished between two forms of training that had evolved in the course of twenty years of professional activity. Speaking in 2004 about training under Lindh’s guidance, Pietruska refers to a ‘combination’ of exercises: on one hand, academic or codified forms of training such as corporeal mime, kung fu, t’ai chi, calligraphy, and music; and on the other, empirical forms that employed acrobatics, biomechanics, physical and plastic exercises as a base for the work that was specifically developed by the Institute – namely, isometry, super-energy, dance-training, alternation, and intention. Pietruska makes it clear that the distinction between these forms of training is not so much ‘the type of training per se’ but ‘the way of relating to the training’. ‘Academic’ training refers to techniques that are already set and prescribed and which need to be learnt as a body of knowledge – for example, a martial arts form or music. ‘Empirical’ training is aimed at ‘what to do’ rather than ‘how to do’ and therefore employs a way of proceeding that is dependent on tasks whose nature is formulated in the process of the work according to the outcome of the previous task. The current research of the Institute utilizes the term ‘non-codified’ to refer to Pietruska’s and Roger Rolin’s specific development of the empirical processes they had elaborated with Lindh. The term ‘non-codified’ was coined by Rolin in 1995 and it should not be mistaken for or used interchangeably with the practice denoted by ‘empirical training’. When Lindh died in 1997, Pietruska and Rolin were...
still in the process of developing this new form of training. Pietruska is, of course, aware of the problematic status of designating something as ‘non-codified’ and she herself questions whether anything exits that is non-codified, but the term is relative to the practice of the Institute. The empirical training of the Institute, and its subsequent ‘non-codified’ development, concerns a form of training that ‘does not use any concrete indication in the task that can be referred to any physical form’. This kind of training is specific to the research of the Institute and contributed directly to the development of a practice of collective improvisation. The rest of the article will tackle the nature and implications of this type of training, with a specific emphasis on the empirical processes developed under Lindh’s guidance.

The point of departure of the Institute’s laboratory work in 1971 was conditioned by the work that Lindh had received from Decroux and Grotowski. Pietruska explains:

The physical training of the Institute derived directly from the work that had been elaborated by Grotowski, which Ingemar then re-elaborated with his actors to adapt it to our exigencies. The training constituted all the exercises that were in the baggage of work received from Grotowski (physical, plastic, biomechanical, acrobatic etc.) plus the technique of corporeal mime that Ingemar had acquired from his teacher Decroux.

The ‘biomechanical’ training that Pietruska mentions in relation to the exercises received from Grotowski appears to be a generic term that describes the kind of work that Lindh had experienced from the Teatr Laboratorium and which is still visible in Torgeir Wethal’s film Training at the Teatr Laboratorium in Wroclaw (1972). The training process that Wethal’s film highlights, both in Part I, which illustrates plastic exercises, and in Part II, which shows a dynamic re-elaboration of exercises derived from hatha yoga, is similar to the physical and acrobatic-based work in Physical Training at Odin Teatret (1972) – that is, another film that documents a practice that Lindh was exposed to when he started work with the Institute in 1971. There is hardly any doubt that Lindh’s exchanges and encounters with the Wroclaw and Holstebro laboratories at the turn of the 1970s must have exposed him to the practices visible in Wethal’s films of 1972. Lindh’s role in these exchanges was that of a former student and close collaborator of Decroux, and hence a source of extreme interest for Grotowski and Barba. Lindh’s initial laboratory investigation with the Institute in northern Sweden, therefore, can be compared to what was happening in Wroclaw and Holstebro at the time. His description of the Institute’s physical training in 1971 is highly reminiscent of the work documented in Wethal’s films of 1972. Apart from confirming the generic use of the term ‘biomechanics’ to refer to a specific way of working with physical exercises, and apart from providing an instance of Lindh’s self-ironic style, the following quotation announces the limits that this practice soon made evident:

As you know we started in 1971 in the deep forest in Sweden. [...] I wanted to explore the training that I had had to its maximum, even to a
kind of madness. Where does this lead? Where is the limit before the body explodes? Very quickly this turned out to be simple virtuosity. But we tried. Mostly we developed this very vague idea I had about Meyerhold’s biomechanics: actors working together in extreme unpredictable physical situations, acrobatics. You have an arsenal of ten or eleven exercises that you vary in a flow, and then you can use the colleagues at any moment and they have to respond. This is what I understood from Meyerhold’s work. It was to be able to react physically, immediately to a situation. Also on that we became very clever.\footnote{Lindh, “‘Gathering Around’”, p. 73.}

The limits of ‘virtuosity’ and ‘cleverness’ in the work soon became apparent for Lindh. In Pietre di Guado, Lindh acknowledges that notwithstanding its potential for liberation, this kind of physical work did not come without its share of danger. He could see that theatre laboratory practitioners ran the risk that musicians and dancers frequently ran: ‘of a technique becoming too autonomous’, of a virtuosity where technique could easily become ‘an end in itself: an alibi instead of a challenge, an everyday refuge instead of a daily discipline’ (p. 9). Instead of overcoming obstacles, the skill automatically released by the actor’s training became an aesthetic for self expression, and this expressivity ‘did not necessarily contribute to the qualitative growth of what one had to say’ (p. 24). The eloquence that comes with biomechanical and acrobatic virtuosity often ends up masking the absence of content; hence Lindh’s insistence on acts of mental precision in the empirical training he devised and in the performances he directed.

Beyond Decroux and Grotowski

Pietruska observes that ‘the physical work, in the form proposed by Grotowski, was abandoned pretty soon’.\footnote{Giuntoni, ‘Il Ritorno’.} Lindh mentions that this work ‘lasted for two or three years only’ because their ‘biomechanical training became very academic’.\footnote{Lindh, “‘Gathering Around’”, p. 74.} Divorced from the context that had given it birth, this work did not have the same value of process and discovery that it had had for Grotowski before the latter’s paratheatrical phase. For the Institute, the status of this work was ‘academic’ in constituting a form of knowledge that is complete in itself.\footnote{Cf. Lindh, “‘Gathering Around’”, pp. 73–74.} Pietruska adds that the reason they had abandoned this way of working was that ‘the passage between the comprehension of its mechanisms and their practical application [in theatre] is not automatic’.\footnote{Giuntoni, ‘Il Ritorno’.} This is the same reason that Lindh gives as regards corporeal mime: ‘because of the failure of the attempt to merge mime training and our other actor training into one body, we stopped working with mime for more than four years’ (p. 30). Lindh’s response to the ‘academicized’ nature of the Institute’s training at the time was to initiate a process of re-elaboration of the technical knowledge he possessed, adapting it to the demands of the Institute’s research as informed by his intuition to investigate the ‘life’ and ‘mutation’ in human action.
The specific problem that mime posed for Lindh in this task was that it could not be re-elaborated and adapted to the needs of the Institute’s research in the way that he did with the work derived from Grotowski:

Within this form of training, we always chose to remain faithful to the technique as it had been elaborated and taught by Étienne Decroux, including its negative aspects since the secret is often hidden within honest mistakes. It is a ‘perfect’ technique, accurately thought-out both on the practical as well as on the theoretical level and equipped with a poetic power which is overwhelming. What is already perfect cannot be subsequently developed. (p. 29)

Decroux’s technique was practised in various periods in the Institute’s history, with the intermediate interruptions serving to save Lindh and his actors from becoming seduced by such a ‘perfect’ technique that is so autonomous that it can be an end in itself. Pietruska highlights the specific quality that Decroux’s work contributed to the Institute’s research:

The principles of mime, in the form designed by Decroux, helped us to understand the physical and geometric laws of the body, of the body’s relation to space. In fact, the simultaneous movement of various parts of the body creates a dramatic dialectic that is intrinsic to the body; it makes possible the body’s generation of its own contradictions, creating its own dialogue via cause-effect, shock and resonance. In this sense and in our case, the technique of mime functioned as a practical meditation, a practical theory for the global awareness of itself and for the work on the construction of a theatre performance. 26

Though the practice of Decroux’s technique was submitted to various interruptions in the course of the Institute’s history for the reasons mentioned above, the insights that it provided remained a constant reference for Lindh and his collaborators (p. 29).

To recapitulate the account so far, the process of re-elaboration and adaptation of the Institute’s training baggage can be said to have been guided by the objective to retain the life in the work of the actor. This objective was approached by means of: (1) a resistance to fixed scores and to academicized forms of training – implying, therefore, a shift in the form of precision away from the physical and formalist dimension, towards what eventually came to be conveyed by ‘mental capacity’; and (2) a reduction, as much as possible, of the distance between training and its application in theatre. The theoretical and practical knowledge that Lindh had acquired from Decroux and Grotowski was thus set in a new framework where the distinction between ‘technical work’ and ‘creative [performance] work’ was intentionally blurred. In this way, ‘training’ was not separated from the ‘artistic’ work but was always already part and parcel of creation. The two-pronged strategy that Lindh adopted to tackle this issue was: (1) to adapt exercises (including those derived from Grotowski) as points of departure or proposals to be developed rather than as systematized technique complete in itself; and
to do so within the context of group work, thereby engaging collective dynamics based on awareness and listening: ‘working in the group on the flow of exercises, on listening and on the rhythmodynamics, the exercises were submitted to a different treatment than the classical physical exercises’. It was from this context that the Institute developed a different kind of ‘training’ that can be located between technique and performance work. This type of work is designated in the Institute’s terminology by the words ‘empirical’, ‘free’, and, following the development by Pietruska and Rolin since 1995, ‘non-codified’. As explained earlier in this article, the difference between academic and empirical training is not so much the form as the way one relates to the work. Initially, in the 1970s, the Institute’s empirical training employed as a point of departure material from acrobatics, biomechanics, and plastic exercises in order to explore a form of training that is already part of the so-called artistic and creative process of theatre. This work eventually led to forms of training specifically developed by the Institute, such as isometry, super-energy, dance-training, and alternation.

In the course of its twenty-six years of practice under Lindh’s guidance (1971–1997), the Institute adopted and adapted various forms of training, always distinguishing and striking a balance between academic and empirical processes. Balance was also sought within the two types of training processes – for example, as regards the codified kind, Lindh once commented that t’ai chi, with its fluid flow of energy, was adopted to counter the mathematical aspect of corporeal mime. The co-existence of academic and empirical processes marked an important intersection for the Institute in serving to complement rigour with freedom, precision with mutation. The development of the Institute’s isometric-based training as a form of empirical process occupies a central position in this intersection. This approach to training placed Lindh’s highly codified mime background in a context that permitted its re-introduction after having been sidelined for more than four years due to the dangers of becoming engrossed in too perfect a technique (pp. 29–30).

Isometric Training

‘Isometry’ was the name given to a new approach to sports training in the early part of the twentieth century. As its etymology implies (Gk. isos ‘equal’ + metron ‘measure’), it involves the static contraction of a muscle without any visible movement in the angle of the joint. Instead of handling weights to develop the muscular capability of athletes, a fixed bar was introduced in order to eliminate the injury-prone movements whilst still retaining the muscular effort demanded by the original exercise: ‘It was muscular tension and not the movement of bending and stretching that had to give the strength’ (p. 33). Simple examples of isometric exercises include pressing the palms together in front of the torso and pushing against a door frame – in both cases, maximal contraction of the muscle is needed whilst remaining static. Odin Teatret


actress Julia Varley provides some insight on how Lindh transferred the isometric approach to actor training:

Isometrique means engaging the muscles as if you are doing an action, carrying the intention right through to the moment in which it is most dynamic and about to explode. The instant is interesting because it is compressed. [...] The holding back allows resonance in the space. When we say something important we stop moving; even when I think I stop moving but I am still active. The holding back is as alive as the movement.29

The isometric approach developed by the Institute involved the isolation of the instant immediately preceding the most dynamic moment of a specific action – for example, the moment before contact when kicking a ball.30 Later, the focus shifted to stops at any point in mid-action which are then completed without having to generate a new impulse. In these cases it is necessary to retain intensity in the stillness in order to ensure that the continuation of a particular action is not a new beginning. In the stops thus generated: ‘The action must be continued mentally’ (p. 34).

By pushing the investigation to extreme consequences, a number of discoveries were made, including the fundamental difference between (physical) impulse and (mental) intention. The continuation announced by an isometric stop in the shift of intention from a physical to a mental plane (pp. 34–35) functioned as a constitutive element of the Institute’s work on intentions, which in turn marked an integral aspect of mental precision. This work on intentions is another area of Lindh’s empirical training that favoured action in the here and now without the requirement of a (psychological) motive as a cause.

Due to its nature, it is impossible to describe the empirical forms of training of the Institute in greater detail because in resisting codification, this work resists formulation and is dependent on the specific situation. However, it is possible to provide further indications of what it entails and looks like. The point of departure is always a task, such as the one announced by the isometric-based instruction to stop an action at any point of its development. That point of departure can then be developed in an infinite number of directions. In the case of the Institute, the empirical status of Lindh’s elaboration of isometric training for the theatre also provided a base for the Institute’s vocal work. A new basis for the voice work of the Institute was developed accidentally while researching isometry – that is, the tension and energy available for the practitioner when an intention is stopped at the physical level is continued at a vocal level. In this way, Lindh found ‘a base, a particular muscular tension which is necessary to bring out the voice. The throat is relaxed and both the physical and the vocal acts originate from the same source’ (p. 36).31 Similarly, the kind of energy that accumulated during the instant when an action is curtailed on a physical level led Lindh and his collaborators to push further and explore what they eventually called ‘super-energy’ – that is, the generation of a flow of energy that cannot be manipulated and is thus resistant to predetermined corporeal stances. This resistance once again announces the intimate relationship that


30. See Eugenio Barba’s description of sats as ‘the energy that can be suspended’ in The Paper Canoe, pp. 55–61. In his discussion, Barba refers to Lindh’s description of Decroux’s ‘mobile immobility’ as the execution of intention in immobility (p. 57), as well as to Kunio Kompara’s observation that ‘the basis of no¯ dance lies in stopping each movement just at the moment when the muscles are tensed’ (p. 59).

31. I experienced this phenomenon during an individual work session with Magdalena Pietruska in 1996. I have since had the occasion of investigating this.
characterized the technical work of the Institute and its investigation of collective improvisation in performance.

The work on super-energy was developed in conjunction with another branch of empirical training that made use of recorded rock music to facilitate the generation of ‘explosive’ energy. The use of music in such cases was called dans-training (dance-training; p. 180). Pietruska explains how the objective of the work on super-energy was to explode in the space in the most extreme possible way without depending on any predetermined technique. At which point an organic mechanism that the body possesses takes over [...] a survival technique that the body has and which the organism activates [...] and which does not require a precise form, the form that it takes is the form that is adequate to the situation.32

Lindh often referred jokingly to this mechanism as the ‘banana skin principle of self-preservation’ – that is, the phenomenon indicated by the impromptu physical reaction to minimize injury caused by a sudden fall. At the time, this quasi-anarchic element in the work of the Institute was a reaction to their mastery of codified technique as well as to Decroux’s heritage which had led Lindh to acknowledge that ‘there was something in perfection that was a hindrance for freedom’. It is worth quoting Lindh in full on the empirical passage that linked the work on super-energy and dans-training because it also highlights the imperative to bypass psychological mechanisms of motivation. The following extract is taken from a transcript of Lindh’s speech in the Helsinki symposium of 1994 and as such is infused with a self-ironic conversational tone:

I said ‘No, just explode as far, as strongly, as ... yeah, as much as you can. And then, hopefully, the body is clever enough not to commit suicide but will take care of itself. And see what happens when the body starts to care, instead of the technique taking care of you.’ This training lasted for very long, at least two minutes, and we had to call for an ambulance. Then they got used to this. This was also when, for the first time, we introduced an exterior stimulus, which was music from the outside. Because there was another element that always was [a] kind of hindrance for me to think of, and that was when people started to speak about motivation. And now for the first time, we got rid of the motivation. I said, there is no motivation, just follow the music, and just go for it ... and do not imitate the music. You should work, not Pink Floyd. So the only task the actors had was to be superior in energy to the music. [...] it was a big liberation for me, to finally do the constatation, that theatre is absolutely useless. And that there is no motive whatsoever to act. And then for the first time, we came very close to life. Because otherwise life would be mere speculation.33

The capacity to be adequate to the situation is a major tenet in Lindh’s practice of collective improvisation. Being ‘adequate’ entails adjusting to the conditions of a given situation. By liberating the actor from the
constraints of motivation, this empirical mode of training enabled the
performers of the Institute to take action by adjusting to the situation
without the need for predetermined formulations. Lindh was here in the
process of practising a freer form of training that contrasted, and
therefore complemented, the highly codified heritage he had received
from Decroux. Lindh himself admits that the way to the empirical forms
of training developed by the Institute was facilitated by their
sophisticated codified background:

I do not believe that we would have been able to develop the isometric
training – at least not as rapidly – had we not worked on mime. At the same
time, isometry created such an opening as to make it possible for the mime
technique and all the other forms of our training (physical, plastic,
biomechanical, acrobatic and vocal) to converge, not only in the
theoretical principles but also in practice. (p. 37)

Paradoxically, the Institute reached this point of convergence when it
least needed it: at the time when it was searching for total immobility
during the work on the performance Fresker (Frescoes, 1979–1982). The
process of empirically based work, which Lindh had located in a domain
of collective improvisation between technique and performance, often
led the Institute to make unexpected discoveries.

The Institute’s work on immobility was inspired by its performance
research on the mechanism of the fresco which depicts ‘the dynamism in
the immobility – in the non-movement’ (p. 31). The aspect of ‘active
immobility’ reminded Lindh of Decroux, who based most of his
approach on the difficulty that the actor has in ‘doing nothing’. For
Decroux, ‘the actor who can execute precise “stops” is a good actor’
(p. 32). Decroux’s approach was to perform the smallest possible
movements until one is able to master even the tiniest one in its most
minute detail, until immobility becomes the ultimate consequence of
minimization in space and time. The nature of this kind of immobility is
dynamic. The aspect of ‘active immobility’ also reminded Lindh of
Grotowski’s use of the term cadre (frame) during an intensive period of
work on plastic exercises with the Polish master. Grotowski applied the
term to mark the ‘micro instant’ of the transition between two
movements ‘when one movement or one part of the body stops and
the other goes on’ (p. 33). Grotowski believed that it should be possible
to maintain absolute stillness, at least for a fraction of a second, during
this micro instant. These two references indicate how the knowledge
acquired from Decroux and Grotowski allowed Lindh to form an
individual way that marks a convergence as much as a transcendence of
one’s legacy – for it was this process that led to the development of
isometric training for the actor. In this way, the work on a performance
theme (i.e. the instant announced by frescoes) led to the exploration of
active immobility via isometry, which in turn obtained a way of working
that brought together physical, vocal, and mental acts in a manner
reminiscent of a bodymind. Lindh himself observes how the systematic
work on the mime in tandem with isometric and other forms of training
led to the body ‘opening its eyes’, having important implications for ‘the
actor’s global consciousness and even for the construction of performances’ (pp. 37–38).

**Assimilation and Alternation**

In the processes adopted by Lindh, whether academic or empirical, the total assimilation of technical and performance material is essential. In a context geared at collective improvisation, where the only points of reference are often experiential, it is indispensable for the practitioner to master one’s material in a manner that can be summoned on the spur of the moment and adapted according to the exigencies of the situation. Lindh uses the term ‘incarnation’ to designate that long and patient process whereby the actor – through daily work – impregnates oneself with one’s own materials and lives through them. This applies both to ‘themes’, which the actor finds by means of improvisation, as well as to external materials such as text, costumes, and so on; in other words it is a process during which all this becomes a part of the actor.

An exercise or performance material is absorbed not simply because one can do it but when it can be caught in mid-flight at any moment and in any unforeseen situation: ‘that is how my actions become physical wisdom and are not merely knowledge’ (p. 44).

The ‘incarnation’ of material makes it possible to vary the form of an action whilst still retaining ‘faith’ in its content as intention. For instance, the precision of the intention ‘to throw a stone’ remains intact even if it is manifested by the flick of a finger or a movement of the head or an arm. This capacity announces the Institute’s strategy of alternation as an integral part of the process of incarnation. The strategy of alternation serves to counter the danger of mechanical repetition which, Lindh observed, is ever present in the work of the actor, whether in the process of assimilation where a continuous repetition is a necessity, or when the material has been so completely mastered that the ‘living experience’ is transformed into mere skill (p. 49). Lindh acknowledged that though it is sometimes necessary to work technically on one’s material, this must not be allowed to become mechanical and monotonous and can be interrupted by the use of alternation, by surprising oneself. I work on an action, I abandon it and direct myself to something else. When I return to my first action, I do so from a completely different angle. [...] Alternation implies the capacity to penetrate one’s own materials at any moment whatsoever; it means that one is able to interrupt the premeditated development and also to invert the order. (pp. 48–49)

On a technical level, the defamiliarization dynamic of alternation serves to keep the action alive as well as to hone the capacity for variation that is essential in improvisation.

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35. See ‘One does not repeat a movement so many times in order to learn it, but to reconstruct it from different directions, to know it from inside and outside, from left to right, to be able to do it at any moment’ (Varley, ‘Tre Mesi con Ingemar’, p. 285).
For Pietruska, alternation serves to disrupt the constricting linearity of the cause-and-effect logic of motivation, in the process facilitating the occurrence of more complex dynamics which, in being multi-directional, are evocative of the logic in operation in everyday life.\footnote{Giuntoni, ‘Il Ritorno’.} In the example mentioned above, where the precision of the intention ‘to throw a stone’ remains intact even if manifested by the flick of a finger, the (psychological) motivation of why ‘flick a finger’ whilst intending to ‘throw a stone’ does not enter Lindh’s picture of mental precision. Similar to isometric-based work, alternation is aimed at sharpening the performer’s ability to operate on a plane that, in Lindh’s experience, is more reliable and efficient than either the psychological mechanisms of motivation or the formalist processes of fixed scores and choreography. In this framework, the physical manifestation of the performer’s work is the result of precise mental actions. And in not being ends in themselves, the physical actions we see in a performance by the Institute aspire to the singular status of occurrence – that is, not as if happening for the first time, but indeed happening for the first (and the last) time.

**Conclusion**

By the time of his death in 1997, Lindh’s collaborators were in the process of further developing the empirical training of the Institute. I can still recall Lindh’s interest when Roger Rolin, who had been working with him since 1978, led a training session at the University of Malta in 1996. The instructions Rolin gave were few and very general (too vague for my taste then), but the immediacy to the phenomenon of theatre was indisputable to the observers present. Pietruska’s description of what in 2004 constituted the current training of the Institute reminded me of that tentative session in 1996 where it was evident that Rolin was empirically exploring a new way of working. This new way of working eventually evolved into what is now termed ‘non-codified’ training. I shall quote Pietruska in full on the matter to provide further indications of the Institute’s current training, as well as to conclude this article by way of placing Lindh’s resistance to technique training into perspective:

A very imprecise task is given to the actor, for example, to use a hand, or the head or the feet, and to seek ‘to be with’ that part of the body by projecting one’s thought and desire (i.e. one’s mental direction). It is not a gymnastic type of work, but rather the hand becomes the means whereby, the vehicle through which, I project myself in the space. There is no form that the exercise necessarily needs to reach; the actor is free to use the hand in a manner and with the dynamic and rhythm one wants. In this way, the creative mechanism of the actor is immediately stimulated because I am placed in a situation where I project myself in the space with my desire [mental direction] and do not have to concentrate on how to perform the exercise. We have reached the constatation that this is the most expedient way to accede to the creative process of the actor. However, it must be pointed out that this kind of [non-codified] training has followed a very precise line of development. Ingemar’s teacher, Decroux, had conducted
his work towards an extreme corporeal precision beyond which it is impossible to go. The need felt by many theatremakers, like Grotowski, was to discover an actor-training process that made possible a physical precision which could serve as a means to accede to mental precision. Ingemar had already done this with Decroux. When he began to work with us, with his actors of the Institute, the interest of the research was no longer focused on physical precision but on mental precision, from the very beginning.37

Pietruska’s qualification that the Institute’s non-codified type of training developed from its highly codified background serves to place in perspective the issue of technique in the work of the actor. In this context, the movement beyond technique that empirical training underlines seems to be possible only after technique has been mastered. Nevertheless, the experience of the Institute, especially the non-codified work conducted by Pietruska and Rolin since 1997, indicates that whilst academic training is essential for physical precision, its tendency to become an end in itself can be countered by empirical processes that serve to enhance the mental capacity to be precise with one’s intentions. Lindh’s combination of training processes aspired to cultivate the capacity to operate autonomously in the here and now of occurrence, in solitary and group contexts. Ultimately, the vision of the improvising actor that guided Ingemar Lindh’s research is that of the autonomous practitioner.