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Diving In: Adolescents' Experiences of Physical Work in the Context of Theatre Education

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Abstract

This study deals with adolescents' experiences and perceptions of physical actor training practice in the context of theatre education. The study took place in Kallio Upper Secondary School of Performing Arts in Helsinki, Finland, where I work as a drama teacher. As a researcher, I carried out an authorized inquiry with two groups of 16-year old students who took part in acting classes as an optional subject in their curriculum. This qualitative phenomenological research followed the basic principles of an embodied narrative inquiry, presented by Liora Bresler (2006). Regarding the developmental process the psychodynamic approach is being used along with the phenomenological. Overall the students' response was positive: they found it easier to *dive in* when there was an emphasis on the physical in the course work. Also the fact that the work was collective was considered helpful. Physical work seems to provide possibilities for an adolescent to take steps in personal growth. We can call these break-through experiences. However, when the work is both physical and collective it can also create unnecessary emotional distress. Therefore, special attention should be paid to dialogical encounter in pedagogical situations.

Preface

This article is based on my thinking about a constructive learning environment for supporting adolescent's personal growth through theatrical work in the context of theatre education. I also seek to combine certain aspects of the tradition of physical theatre and youth theatre education in secondary school teaching with a practical pedagogical view: a combination that is not so much found in international literature. A couple of adjustments seem necessary before I start. Firstly, a "constructive" learning environment does not necessarily mean the best possible environment for everyone, but in my experience, for the majority of students, or a considerable large number of them. Secondly, I am about to describe a certain approach to theatre education that can be called 'psychophysical', which means basically that there is an emphasis on physical work. It is not a specific, theoretically and practically outlined method but a collection of principles and procedures that draw mostly from the tradition of physical theatre. When we talk about psychophysical training or work we must also consider the possibility of traumatic experiences: such training can cause unnecessary emotional distress and anxiety if run carelessly. The growth of an adolescent is usually a pains taking process that cannot but include some amount of emotional distress and anxiety in itself. A teacher's task is to help the student to deal with these emotions.

Introduction

I really don't know where all this energy comes from! It's wonderful to listen to one's body. ("Strawberry")

This is a comment from a student of mine just after a session of physical actor training practice in the context of youth theatre education (1), a comment that he/she wrote under a pseudonym on a piece of paper. In my work as a drama teacher and a director in youth theatre, during two decades of shared moments with young people in a rehearsal room, I have encountered this phenomenon of student actors' expressions of enthusiasm after major break-through experiences. These experiences have mostly coincided with classes where I used a psychophysical approach to theatre education. Some students comment on their previous experiences in other occasions, and point at conventional work based on verbal approach instead of physical, and speak of "talking heads acting".

Physical work has got it. Traditional amateur acting simply runs lines. It's a long way to true performing from there. ("Bum")

The research at hand deals with experiences and perceptions of young people who are about to discover things about themselves and their relationship with the world. They take part in acting classes as an optional subject in their curriculum at Kallio Upper Secondary School of Performing Arts in Helsinki, Finland (hereafter referred to as Kallio). Even though this study takes place in a school milieu, the basic ideas described in this article are concurrent, in my understanding, with youth theatre activities as a leisure time hobby. The participants of this study consist of two groups of 16-year old student actors, each formed of 18 students at Kallio, the majority of them female, and all of them Finnish, except for one exchange student from New York, US. These students participated in my acting classes from December 2007 to March 2008. Kallio is a regular upper secondary school with an emphasis on performing arts. Students come from all over Finland and those who choose acting classes are usually strongly motivated in studying theatre. Many of them do not have a lot of experience of it, though, if at all, so the students' background is relatively heterogeneous. As their drama teacher I was able to relate to their experiences more closely. These experiences affiliate either with their endeavor of studying theatre or their personal growth or both.

Adolescents are in an important but contradictory stage in their lives as they are moving from childhood to adulthood via adolescence. In the course of personal growth, in early childhood, there is a transitional space, an intermediate developmental phase between the psychic and external reality, as discussed by D.W. Winnicott following the psychodynamic frame of reference in theorizing the developmental process. Traces of this space remain in the experience of a human being (Winnicott, 1971). This space is the site for change. In the middle of the process of change, it is not easy to define oneself. If we consider the 'body' referring to the whole human entity, as it is usually done in the field of theorizing psychophysical training (Zarrilli, 2009), defining oneself means defining one's body. It is troublesome for anyone to comprehend one's body from time to time, as the sense of absence marks our perception of our own body (Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). For an adolescent, whose body is undergoing rapid changes in a relatively short period of time, it is inevitably difficult. Defining one's body requires bodily ways. In the context of youth theatre education, physical actor training practice seems to be fit for that purpose, since it combines bodily action, a fictional situation, with an ability to present other situations and language capable of referring to real-life objects. In other words, an adolescent can treat the transition with the fictional situation: it is a fiction of growth. (2)

As Bruce Burton (2002) has shown, theatre provides essential rites of passage for young people in the growth to maturity, and these experiences "can be planned and structured in a systematic way to enhance the passage through adolescence" (p. 64). He stresses the

importance of youth theatre, because “contemporary society fails to identify or celebrate crucial developmental stages in the growth to maturity” (p. 63). I find it essential that we develop pedagogical procedures capable to overcome this gap and support these steps towards adulthood.

Linked to theatre’s resemblance to rites, there is an emphasis on the collective in physical theatre: the group executes movements together, or shares a motion otherwise. Julia Whitworth (2003) writes of her experiences of Suzuki training, a vigorous psychophysical actor training method that draws both from Oriental traditions, especially Japanese *noh*, and Western traditions: “The collectivity of the exercise keeps the participant going. . . .As an individual, one could not do it alone; one would not do it alone” (p. 25). That is, an individual *could* make the movement as such, but she *won’t* do it without the help of the surrounding people. In this respect, it is the collective movement that helps one to get started. (3)

Diving in is easy in a group. (“Sheriff”)

It goes also vice versa: physical work can enhance the collectivity of the group. As Eeva Anttila has stated, bringing the students into physical encounters with each other strengthens their dialogical network (2003, p.305).

Speed seems to work for the function of the group. (“Bum”)

It is not about fusion nor about identification with the mass, rather about being an individual with other individuals.

The first research question in this study is: What are the kinds of experiences and perceptions student actors attain from/through physical actor training practice? What does it mean to them? To analyze this more closely: What does actually happen when one gets overwhelmed by a constructed situation in a training practice environment? If acting is primarily about being in a situation, which is, on the one hand, real between an actor and fellow actors and spectators, and on the other, fictional, the key task for an actor is to act in this situation, fully, with energy and heightened awareness if needed (Zarrilli, 2007). Thus, in such an extra-daily situation it is a specific state of bodymind that is required. How do the students’ experiences relate to this? A further, and perhaps a more important point, but also vague or complicated to research: what kind of processes do young persons undergo during a period of a course in acting? How do these activities resonate to their personal life-situation, i.e. is it possible to

find traces in their experiences that mark the transition to maturity? Secondly, the study opens up to the area of the organisation of training. How does this kind of work relate to the tradition of physical theatre and pedagogical procedures linked to it? How should the training be organized in order to create favorable conditions for the processes in question? And finally, what are the limitations of this approach? The organization of the research – the researcher being a part of reality he is studying – brings also limitations to the research itself, which will be discussed later. In the manner of qualitative research, I investigated the students’ experiences and perceptions of physical actor training practice, with the wish, presented by Max van Manen, “to see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself” (1990, p.130). Regarding the frame of reference, this study follows the phenomenological approach, as outlined by van Manen among others.

In the next section I will present some remarks on training and the state of the actor’s bodymind and/or bodymind awareness in psychophysical training, as met in the tradition of physical theatre, including important standpoints in relation to the processes in question. Then I will outline the pedagogical and psychological principles behind this research and present the methodology and procedures as well. After that I will describe the course work the students refer to, and then turn to viewing the students’ response.

Some Remarks on Training and the State of the Actor in the Tradition of Physical Theatre

There has been a great deal of consideration of “the state” of the actor, referring to the state of mind or the bodymind and/or to the bodymind awareness, especially in the tradition of physical theatre. Nevertheless, the profound work of Russian director and actor training developer Konstantin Stanislavski grounded this problem in the beginning of the twentieth century, even though Stanislavski has not usually regarded as represent physical theatre. (4) Stanislavski spoke of the creative state, meaning a state of the actor’s bodymind awareness favorable for experiencing and embodying, and combining these two processes into one (Benedetti, 1982). Actually, Stanislavski was the first actor trainer to use the word ‘psychophysical’. (5) Many theatre directors and actor trainers of the first decades of the twentieth century, such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud and Jaques Copeau, as well as Stanislavski, concentrated on the problem of tying the aspects of body and mind more closely together. Later, especially after the English posthumous publication of *Theatre and its Double* by Artaud in 1958 ideas drawn from this desire to overcome the controversy were developed in Europe and the US, for example by Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, and Herbert Blau, and in the East, by, for example, Tadashi Suzuki (Zarrilli, 1995b). Artaud demanded the European, verbally oriented actor to

become “an athlete of the heart” and actor training to come near to that of dancers’, mimics’ and athletes’, and insisted an emphasis on an actor as a psychophysical entity (Murray & Keefe 2007, p.18; Sontag 1976, pp.xxiv, xxxii). According to Stanton B. Garner Jr. Artaud’s confusing term “metaphysics” means simply a dream of a psychosomatic way of being (2006, p.11). Here the occasional obscurity of Artaud’s poetic language turns concrete.

It is usual in the tradition of physical theatre to set high standards for training. Copeau insisted on training that takes place before anything else is done in the production of a performance (Zarrilli, 1995b). Actor’s training as a discipline is of dedication: Barba stresses the importance of the actor’s own attitude to the work. What really counts in training is the justification that the actor gives to it, and how this justification is manifested in physical actions (Zarrilli 2009). For Meyerhold the form of training was crucial: he believed that a fixed number of certain exercises and “etudes” could constitute the basis of actor training or the essentials in actor training were embodied in these movements or acts (Law & Gordon 1996 p.153). According to Suzuki the form allows the student to work with or against it. The purpose of training is to uncover, to change the unconcentrated body of everyday life (Suzuki 1986, 1995). Grotowski spoke of actor’s psychophysical training as a process of eliminating one’s personal obstacles, and called this *via negativa* (1969, pp.16-17, 101). For Barba training is “a process of self-definition --- which manifests itself through physical actions” (as cited in Zarrilli, 2009, p.40).

For these writers the state of the actor is the crux idea of acting. Grotowski (1969) saw the actor as an utmost sensitive intermediary between outer impulses and reactions. Suzuki (1986) seeks to heighten the actors’ physically perceptive sensibility and innate expressive abilities, and to develop concentration on the body through controlling the breath, so that they can truly feel “fictional” on stage (Suzuki, 1995, p.155). Copeau urged the actor to discover a state of “motionlessness” in order to be ready for what comes next (as cited in Zarrilli, 1995b, p.182). This state of readiness is important for Blau (1982) also, for whom the ideal moment for an actor is to be “on the edge of a breath, looking” (p.86).

Gradually the exercises make you stop planning and become open to everything.
 (“Bum”)

I feel somehow more responsive. I am more sensitive to what is happening around me. (“Auntie”)

It is about using your body as a whole. Movement cuts out unnecessary tension and thinking too much. When the body is active, the mind is vivid and alert. (“Sheriff”)

The idea of readiness by concentrating on breathing is clearly indebted to eastern traditions: it combines acting closely to disciplines of somatic techniques and martial arts. In the centre there is a specific state of bodymind awareness, manifested in subtle inner sensations, which can be enlivened by somatic work. The actor’s consciousness “thickens”: I find Antonio Damasio’s (1999) concept of core consciousness helpful to be used in this connection. Damasio theorized a core self-perception in a human brain, typical to most animals also: core consciousness allows them to be aware of and react to their environment. The result is greater alertness, sharper focus, higher quality of image-processing.

When you move a little, you become alert. (“Gnome”)

The state of bodymind awareness, encompassing the core consciousness, is aroused by or with the assistance of the situation, which, in turn, consists of concrete ideas or directions. This is something palpable for the actor to work on. Concentrating on the moment also changes the quality of self-consciousness: one acknowledges oneself as *looking out*, rather than as *seen from the outside* by oneself. In fact, this duality of consciousness coincides, as it is shown by Grotowski in his brief text *Performer/Le Performer* (1988). The creative state, possessing the quality of relaxation, requires this shift. (6)

These findings undoubtedly lay the basis on our understanding of actor’s training and the state of the actor in the tradition of physical theatre. (7) Nevertheless, it is important to carry out further research on these matters in order to clarify the concepts for the needs of theatre education, as well as to develop pedagogical procedures. The forms of training that modern psychophysical approaches to acting use are drawn either from traditional, often oriental disciplines or from the tradition of psychophysical practices or they may be invented. In any case these forms are not used as given but as applications, combined to other forms. At the end, the variety of practices gather to encapsulate the essential problem of the actor’s state as I am seeking to contribute in this article on the basis of the students’ response.

On Pedagogy and Psychology of Actor Training in the Context of Theatre Education

Pedagogical principles have not been in the centre of focus in the tradition of actor training, concerning, for example, the relationship between the student/actor and the teacher/director. This seems to concern particularly psychophysical training. Nevertheless, it is essential to carefully consider the ways to work, especially with youth theatre education, where a large number of practices in professional actor training are diffused or filtered to as applications.

A dialogical relationship between a student/actor and a teacher/director can be considered as a sound starting point for a pedagogical process. (8) Eeva Anttila seeks to enhance the good of the other in an educational situation, following the profound ideas of dialogical pedagogy by Martin Buber (1947). She makes the essential nature of dialogue more feasible in practice, capturing the essence of true education: “How much not telling others what to do is needed for a dialogical relationship to evolve, and (...) how much telling others what to do can a dialogical relationship, once established, endure?” (Anttila, 2003, p. 286) According to Shannon Ridley (2004), following Mikhail Bakhtin, the basic concepts of dialogue are attention and response, rather than expression. This aspect attaches dialogical encounter deeply to the centre of the event of acting, since it emphasizes the situational counterparts in it. As discussed earlier, embodiment brings its contribution to dialogue. Deborah Kronenberg (2007) maintains: “Converting thoughts and feelings into physical, whole body abstractions allow a depth of ideas to emerge around a topic that dialogue alone could not reach” (p.132). Liora Bresler (2006) has stressed the importance of empathy in research because research takes place in a relationship: “meaning. . . emerges from embodied cooperative human activity” (p. 29). Closely related is the idea of empowerment: an elementary part of empowerment is a sense of being capable and having an impact, as well as a possibility to affect change in the world (Kronenberg, 2007).

It is crucial to carry out research into voluntary participation in training. I think it is important to develop ways to operate in a manner that makes dropping an exercise any time easy and natural, resisting an assumed pressure to join in or keep on an activity against one’s own true will. To be able to throw oneself into situations that involve physicality, one needs confidence on the pedagogical authority that guarantees that there is a reasonable policy and/or a pedagogical purpose behind the actions in the rehearsal room. The teacher, representing the pedagogical authority, “is someone through whom the

teaching passes“, as Grotowski (1988, p. 376) put it: the teacher has proposals dealing with the forms of training, she has considered the goals of the exercises, and she brings a contribution to the intensity of training, but the work itself is done by the student. As the work takes place in an intensive atmosphere it is important to discern the possibility of emotional distress. It is a serious matter of examination whether these two concepts, voluntary participation and pedagogical authority are in an opposition to each other, in some degree, and what kind of procedures could ease this opposition. Suzanne Burgoyne and Karen Poulin (1999) report on emotional distress among student actors. Whitworth (2003) reminds that physical training methodologies may even entail “totalitarian possibilities”. To resist these possibilities, it is essential to scrutinize how the principles of dialogue, empathy and voluntary participation actualize in training situations. This is for a teacher a constant object to self-reflection.

However, we need to differentiate as much as possible the emotional distress *due to* the relationship between the teacher/director and the student/actor and the emotional distress *regardless to* it. Growth, or change, always contains a moment of emotional distress; transition tends to cause friction. Adam Phillips (2000) writes of Winnicott’s interpretation of Hamlet: “nothing ruined, nothing gained” (p. 47). Without ruthlessness there is no transition, Phillips concludes. In order to create a state in between, a space for something new, one needs to undo something of the former. We can call this the aspect of intervention: the former may be reluctant to give way to the new and this calls for an act that is somehow harsh, ruthless. This may be a reasonable interpretation of Artaud’s (1958) “cruelty”, by which he meant “the most absolute and complete moral discipline” that will make actors “crude empiricists” (pp. 113-114). The statement of cruelty refers to physical actions, to a discipline that possesses a quality of an ultimate truthfulness and desire. We could consider this “destructiveness” of action as a way for a young person to work on her transition to maturity, to process the inevitability of leaving something behind. For Hamlet, the key issue is the contradiction itself, typical to transitions, and hence, to rites (see, for example, Turner, 1982).

Being in a controversy of a transitional phase in life, is, for Winnicott, to be “caught between being and doing” (as cited in Phillips, 2000, p. 39): the alternative way of being is not available and the doing proposed seems impossible to execute, as it is with Hamlet. A person has moved from a stable state to an unstable one and is seeking to get back to balance. This collapse acts as a signal that marks the transition first launched and then completed. In a transitional state one could say: “I am in a process”, and mean both being involved in the process of perception of oneself, and feeling it, and simply, in the physical

process that the group is undergoing, these two aspects being intermingled inseparably. Following Winnicott's thinking we may conclude that acting is primarily about being, not doing, even though the tasks for the actor were defined by doing and the training was mostly about doing. Doing is a means for being. Thus, the state of the actor is a state of being. (9) For an individual, being is the essence; being oneself?

Methodology and Procedures

As mentioned earlier, this is a qualitative research and it follows the phenomenological frame of reference: the aim is "to acquire understanding about concrete lived experiences by the means of language" (van Manen, 1990, p.23). The focus of the research is on the embodied experience. As Merleau-Ponty (1995/1962) observes: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body, is for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them." (p. 82). To describe bodily experiences by language is problematic: how to reach the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the phenomena, the on-going flux of moments (Anttila, 2003). Yet, in this research, writing proved a good tool to document the experiences instantly, since the writing took place at the end of the sessions. It also granted the anonymity, which interviews could not have done. The organization of this research is highly inspired by Bresler's (2006) concept of embodied narrative inquiry that she calls with good reason "a methodology of connection." An embodied narrative inquiry attends to the presentations of a lived experience – in this case to the texts written by the students. Bresler (2006) distinguishes here two levels of connection: "connection between the narrator and his/her story, and connection to the audience, the listener(s)" (p.25). Perhaps in anonymous writing the tendency is to emphasize the former connection and diminish the importance of the latter, in order to create a peaceful stance for the writer to encounter and study his/her experiences in the process of writing. Improvisatory complexions, as suggested by Bresler, characterized the progression of carrying out this research. She points out that the using of methodological terms like 'open-ended' and 'semi-structured' indicate a "distinct style of interacting with participants of study" (p. 32).

I will now describe the progression of the research, starting with collecting the data. In the beginning of the courses I asked the students to answer some questions anonymously during the forthcoming sessions. I also asked the students' and their parents' permission to use the answers in my research, in an inquiry that was also authorized by the local education department. I told the students that they can write about their experiences and perceptions straight out, following the way they felt and without preconception. We had a

conversation of my role in these situations, myself being the teacher and the researcher. I told the students that I did not expect certain kinds of answers and since they were invited to write anonymously, under a pseudonym, they could write freely without fear of any kind of judgment. I reminded them that they were not going to be graded in these classes. Nevertheless, the idea of assessment is deeply rooted, and an expectation for assessment seemed to carry through. Also the students might have felt uneasy to criticize the procedures, as the reader is the same person as the criticized, or to write about difficult or contradictory feelings. Thus, this kind of organization of a research brings limitations within. Also, in general, research itself may affect the on-going reality it is researching. But, as van Manen (1990) maintains, the act of researching is an intentional act of attaching oneself to the world, in order to become a part of it: “to know the world is to be in the world in a certain way” (p. 5).

The questions, presented orally to the students, were simple and open, following the idea of open-endedness and semi-structured construction, such as follows: How do you feel right now? During the last two weeks, what has felt good and what has not? What do you think about physical work? The students were asked, on a voluntary basis, to answer this kind of questions, one or two each time at the end of a session, on a piece of paper. The answer sheets were mixed and then handed to me. Students made up pseudonyms, such as “Phoebe Caulfield”, “Auntie” and “Sheriff”, which made it possible for me to combine different texts by the same writer together. The identity of each writer remains unknown to me, except for the identity of the US exchange student (pseudonym “June”), since she was the only one to write in English (she was aware of this). I translated these pseudonyms from Finnish into English when it was possible. Translations of the students’ comments are mine as well.

The framework for data analysis consisted of operations typical to qualitative research, considering finding themes, categorization, and crystallization. At first I compared the answers given by the two groups of students that participated in the study to each other, and since there did not seem to be significant differences between them, I decided to analyze and present the response of both groups combined. The program for both groups was basically the same, and the composition and the function of the groups were also very much alike. In the preliminary analysis I looked for what seemed to arise from the data. Then, I used different categorizations such as arranging the data chronologically or combining the texts by the same writer together or according to specific themes. In order to find themes I sorted the texts into thematic piles and used multi-dimensional scaling and cluster analysis on the pile-sort data to identify subthemes. Actually, by this time, a

lot of interpretative analysis had already been made, just as Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard (2000) predict. I observed the aspect of immersion when I was interpreting the material: where do the interpretations come from? I was careful, as much as possible, not letting my own possible first impressions affect the interpretation: my aim was to let the data speak, to get the voice of these young people be heard. In this kind of inquiry it is possible for a young person to express her experiences directly and uncensored and, at the same time, remain unseen. Following Bresler (2006), a researcher needs “awareness of one’s story and the ability to reflect on how it impacts one’s choices of issue and lenses, and the ways in which one hears participants’ narratives” (p. 28). I also considered the idea of crystallization, presented by Laurel Richardson (2000): “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (p. 934). The outcome of an examination is dependent on the viewpoint of the examination. Richardson (2000) also reminds that “we know more and doubt what we know”, and “we know there is always more to know” (p. 934). Research, all in all, deals with interplay between part and whole, description and interpretation, tightening one’s focus and widening it (Bresler, 2006).

In presenting the outcomes of the inquiry I used narrative description, in order to highlight the diversity of individual processes during the period of time in question, to maintain the fact that the processes are indeed different from and sometimes contrary to each other, and to see how the experience unfolds in time. I have placed these narratives at the end of the section where I describe the students’ experiences and perceptions of the work. Before them I present the data arranged according to specific themes.

Course Work

The course at Kallio that provided the framework for the research, is titled *Acting: Improvisation*. It is the first in a series of eight courses of acting, which the students can join in during their three years of stay at the school. The other courses contain the basics of actor’s work with the text, advanced work in actor training techniques, and theatrical productions. Each course consists of 18 sessions, 75 minutes each. The students attending the first course are usually first year students at the age of 16. The data of this research is from two groups of students taking part in the first course of acting, 18 persons each, the majority of them female, as mentioned earlier. I have titled the work on these courses as “physical actor training practice.” The work did not follow any specific form of psychophysical actor training, but shares some principal ideas with it: training is pre-productional, and there is an emphasis on power of image over spoken word, the creative role of the actor and the necessity of theatre to engage with the senses (Murray & Keefe

2007, p.18). As training always occurs in a cultural context, and relates to the performance that is rehearsed later (Zarrilli 1995a, p. 72), the training in question is linked to the tradition of physical theatre, as vague as it is. However, the purpose of training was not to prepare actors for any theatre in particular, or a specific performance, but to gain knowledge of oneself through collective psychophysical experiences.

There was an emphasis on physical work in the classes: the idea was to stay on the move. Everything possible was done by movement; for example, learning each other's names or getting a partner. Another basic idea was to raise instantaneous action: the fictitious situations started quickly, and the instructions gave but the point to start. Usually improvisations were separated from each other by running loosely around the room, in order to "drop" the previous improvisation; hence the expression "improvising along with running", that will be met later. The improvisations were not about inventing text, but about action. During the first half of the course most work was done simultaneously. The work of a number of pairs working at the same time creates, for an observer, a sense of chaos in the room, even though the work of each pair is not chaotic as such. But the chaos also covers, gives a shelter, and diminishes the significance of language: it goes beyond comprehension. In my experience, this kind of organization of work tends to cut social bonds that tie a person to her social context, and make it possible to act in a different way than usually.

The basic structure of a class was to start with some full-speed action, such as dancing with rock or disco music or playing a physical game, then move to preparatory exercises, such as stretching and opening up the voice, usually in a form of a game as well, and then to improvisations. All these elements could be mixed at any point. Most work was done with fiction: assuming a fictional situation and characters. The characters were outlined roughly by their position in the situation: the instructions tended to inform only what the characters were doing (at the starting point), without defining them otherwise. Written texts were used at some point, in order to free the actors from the obligation to invent the text whilst in a situation. The texts were brief, often written instantly by the group, and not analysed before hand, just learned by heart.

Lastly, I will describe in detail three exercises that will be referred to in the students' writings.

"Run and Shout!": An actor runs across the room expressing a specific situation (not described as "a feeling"). A person tries to escape something, a person wants

to catch another person and punish her because of being mean earlier (this another person is fictitious) or a person suddenly sees a dear friend at the other end of the room and runs to hug her. Two or three actors do this simultaneously, but independently.

The next one is an exercise of pure contact, presented by Augusto Boal (1992, p. 63), in my adaptation.

“Colombian Hypnosis”: In pairs, an actor focuses completely on the palm of her partner’s hand. The partner keeps her palm in front of the actor’s face and then starts to move her hand. The actor moves along with the hand, the hand moves the actor. The partner has to guarantee the safety of the moving actor, who is moving spontaneously, following the impulses given by the hand. At the same time, both of them can follow the music.

In this exercise the actor will inevitably use her “forgotten” muscles (*ibid.*), but it is also a matter of trust, throwing oneself into the contact, into a state of consciousness that is extraordinary. This exercise seems to cause constant lapses in the sense of time, hence the name “hypnosis”. The group moved towards performing along with the next exercise.

“The Story Circle”: Everyone writes a monologue where someone tells with enthusiasm about a fabulous incident she just saw. The students switch texts and learn their lines by heart. Then, the first group of six starts to run in a circle, and the others form an audience in the middle, facing one direction. A single spot forms the stage right towards the audience. Each student can take a position on the spot, one at a time, and start to tell her story. The others keep on running, but anyone of those other five can, at any time, push the speaker away and take the position instead. It is also possible just to run past the speaker. The speaker can go on from the point of the story where she was interrupted at the previous turn. A displaced speaker continues running until she takes another turn on the spot.

The idea of such an organization of an exercise is to raise the intensity of the act of telling a story and at the same time, help the actor focus on telling the story and not being too self-conscious: to acknowledge oneself as looking out, rather than as seen from the outside by oneself (as discussed on page 9). The exercises described above will be referred to in the following sections that present the students’ response.

Students' Expectations and Assumptions Before the Work

In the next three sections I will outline the students' expectations and assumptions before the work and their experiences and perceptions after it (after a session/several sessions/the whole period of work). I will also give some examples of processes the students may have gone through during this period. Verbatim quotations from the students' texts, in my translations, are separated by quotations marks, if they appear in body text.

At first I will map out the students' expectations and assumptions on the work to come. The following quotations are from texts that the students wrote in the beginning of the first session, before anything else was done. There is a sense of contradiction in the statements below, as the students write of excitement and fear with colourful expressions.

I am scared stiff, having a massive stage fright, and still enthusiastic. ("Maniac")

I feel tensed up but candid. ("Strawberry")

I feel somehow mealy: soft, instable. Peaceful and confused. ("Hem")

In spite of the idea that the entrance to the work is not going to be easy, because of excitement, or "stage fright", the students feel they are "full of energy" and "full of wishes". They assume they really get something from the work: they hope that the work "comes up to great expectations". The texts give the impression that there may be something extraordinary within reach. The students have distinctly the idea that the work will take place in a group. The group is, they hope, the place for communication, dialogue. The work in a group

--- makes it easier to let go and fail. ("Winterland")

It should be easy to dive in (in a group), to do one's best. ("Sheriff")

They wish that the group starts to unite, by laughter, for example. The expectation of having fun is clearly present. The students recognize that the unity of the group is not primarily for the group itself, but for the generation of an atmosphere where the work is possible, as a group.

I want tight, serious team-work. Mature working! ("Stool-Jane")

The students' relation to the work to come seems to be quite sensitive; they have a number of expectations on the pedagogical situations that they are going to take part in. They do not want to be forced, and there shouldn't be "too much criticism". Especially, they do not want to be embarrassed. Some students also hope that there is not much (or at all) performing in front of others.

I don't want a tensed atmosphere where you should always somehow succeed.
("Dumbo")

The students stress the importance of voluntary participation and they call for empathic understanding from the teacher. They wish to have a shelter for their work, and it seems that they want to give space for something new to arise.

The students have also a number of expectations on the course work that may be based on their reading of curriculum but also on their former experiences or, simply, institutional rumours. The course work, in a student's view, is

--- something that requires full presence, keeps one on one's toes, surprises.
("Kisse V. Dean")

This formulation ties the general course work to the idea of acting, as it points out to the state of readiness (discussed on pages 6-7). Acting is, of course, in the focus in theatre education. Acting, for the students, is physical, and the physical makes way for playing a role.

When you act, the body works pretty much. ("The Golden Cabbage Shoe")

I expect physical things, for example strong feelings and how to perform them.
("Phoebe Caulfield")

Practice is pre-work for the role. ("Snow White")

It is interesting that "Phoebe Caulfield" regards strong feelings as "physical things": performing feelings is, for her, performing the physical symptoms that indicate those feelings. (10) Acting takes place in fictitious situations:

You put yourself into situations, positions and attitudes that you wouldn't personally have. ("Walrus")

The phenomenon of hazardous excitement, as a young person is acting, physically involved, pushing the limits a little but still having fun, is nicely put together in the next citation of a text by “Walrus”.

Training acting is nerve-racking, cheek-burning and nice. (“Walrus”)

As the goals for the work the students stress freeing oneself somehow, without defining “free” precisely. When we talk about freedom, it is interesting to ask free from what. According to Jerry Rojo (2000), the trainee seeks to set oneself free from “natural reticence, inhibitions, and censorship” (p. 25). Rojo talks about “self’s built-in, life-long repression”, and maintains that “the actor’s own body is naturally self-censored or restricted as a measure of self-preservation”(p. 25). (11) For the students the goal is to “free one’s imagination” or

--- to free oneself from continence, to lose oneself, to be relaxed. I think it is basically about freedom. (“Auntie”)

“Losing oneself” is quite an exquisite expression; maybe the meaning of it involves a certain quality of an oxymoron, or a paradox. Losing oneself may make it possible to find something of oneself, via losing one’s repression, or crossing boundaries. In order to aim at freedom the students wish that they can be

--- present in the situation and not extremely self-conscious. (“Laundry Lady”)

Being “extremely self-conscious” seems to be an undesirable state, in their opinion. Instead, they stress the situational aspect: they want to be “present”. Being present in a situation relates to the concept of core consciousness, as discussed earlier (pages 8-9). By the practice the students want

--- to get courage, to lower the threshold. (“A little bit eek”)

They seem to think that they need courage in order to do something different, or to be something different. The aspect of transition is present in the students’ texts, as an implicit presupposition for the goals of the work. They think that their work with themselves seeks “to broaden the boundaries.” To broaden the boundaries, we can argue, means conquering new areas of human behavior, but also entering new areas of self, and taking a step in one’s personal growth.

Students' Experiences and Perceptions of the Work

In this section I will describe students' experiences and perceptions of the work and phenomena that seem to arise from the data: embodied experience, enthusiasm, atmosphere of collective experience, confidence, transition/change and anxiety (12), as well as students' comments on course work and the organization of pedagogical situations. Overall the students regard the work as pleasant and rewarding. Their reflections after the first session are relieved and delighted. The texts speak clearly of an embodied experience.

I feel much more relaxed and free. ("Snow White")

Physical distress is not necessarily nice when you have it but afterwards the feeling is good. ("Armadillo")

I was terribly excited. Now it's over. I feel hungry and sweaty but light. I had ache in my shoulders when I woke up in the morning but not any more. Even the pen is sweaty. ("Hem")

After several sessions (two or more) the impression of enthusiasm is reaffirmed. The students analyze their feelings with an extraordinary insight. They talk about broadening the boundaries and "a flow of energy". These issues relate to their ideas of the goals of the work.

I want to start doing this more in the future! ("Stool-Jane")

Boundaries broaden. There is a flow of energy and sound. ("W")

In the beginning I was terrified of performing, now I almost like improvisations. Physical work eases stage fright. ("Maniac")

A lot of work was done simultaneously, all students working at the same time. The room was full of movement and sound. This seems to create an atmosphere, a shelter of chaos, where it is easier to dare.

When everybody acts straightforward you can be courageous and give it all. ("Icy or something...")

It is easier to be relaxed in exercises that we do together, when it's physical. ("A little bit eek")

I think physical work opens doors and breaks down walls. ("Gnome")

Simultaneous work and shared physical experiences – collective experience – seem to increase the coherence of the group rapidly: the feeling of safety arises already at the first session. The contacts between students turn palpable and comparison between the students gradually begins to decrease.

The group feels safe. ("Gustav Wasa", after the first session)

I have had more contact to my fellow actors. ("Gnome")

You don't need to compare yourself to others. ("Maniac")

The question of comparison is important, even though artistic work as such is non-measurable. Still, an individual finds ways to measure her accomplishments compared to others, especially an adolescent. The students stress the importance of the group. Confidence is crucial. "Melina" talks about the unity of the group and writes:

Confidence is increasing inside this group. It is a very challenging task, but very important and rewarding too. ("Melina")

This "challenging task" is the primary concern of the teacher. Confidence within the group relates to being brave as an individual, and raising self-confidence.

I would never have believed to be this brave already, at the third session! ("A little bit eek")

Self-confidence is growing all the time. ("Heka")

Here we find a student ("A little bit eek") somewhat surprised at what he/she recognizes as a change in his/her actions during the first three classes, and he/she is astonished at his/her courage.

We can consider statements of change as traces of transition in the students' life-experience. At least, something seems to have changed, or moved to the state of transition.

I feel lively and vivid, but a little confused. ("Strawberry")

Physical distress felt good. It left me less time to think, that's how my fear vanished, I guess. ("Kisse V. Dean")

It feels like I dare to be and do now. ("Snow Flower")

Confusion marks a change, we can argue. Also, it is a strong expression to say that "my fear vanished" or "I dare to be and do now". When something is surpassed, it is fascinating and frightening at the same time. An experience of growth comes into being; a fictitious subject of personal growth is generated, and, for a moment, it is possible to reach an experience of something-that-one-could-be. This kind of experiences may be far-reaching in one's personal life. To be able to create favourable circumstances for these experiences the work needs to meet certain requirements; maybe the thrilling excitement before the course (met in the students' comments on page 17) fulfilled one of those requirements.

When borders are crossed, even in a shelter of a chaos, however, there is always a risk: a greater possibility for trauma, along with a chance for a great victory. Especially when the work challenges the body, when the body is involved, the work can cause anxiety.

Physical work makes me anxious. Sometimes I have skipped the session to avoid the anxiety. I like ball games more (as we had them a couple of times). ("Icy or something...")

Running and shouting made me anxious. I know I should forget my barriers and get along, but it was still a distressing experience. ("Icy or something...")

Here a student describes his/her feelings of physical work at the ending of the course. Physical work has made him/her anxious, even to the amount that he/she has skipped sessions because of it. He/she calls an exercise (Run and Shout) a "distressing experience", and it is evident that the exercise could not help him/her overcome the "barriers" he/she recognizes in him/her self. This is, of course, a serious matter and not to

be passed too lightly. Even though everything is done on a voluntary basis, the common movement of the group can cause pressure to an individual to do the same, against one's own true will. These moments should be noticed and reflected. Also the feeling of failure in a commonly executed movement or task is an apparent option, and the comparison returns. However, experiences of emotional distress or anxiety do not seem to be in the foreground in this data.

The students comment widely on course work and the organization of pedagogical situations. Their descriptions of the work and their feelings after it are amazingly expressive and precise. Here we have some answers to the question: What do you think about physical work?

It attunes you to a good state for acting. ("Armadillo")

You get more ideas when you move and the act is on. ("Hakunamatata")

Physical work – the fact that you start to move – has a psychological effect on me too, as if it could bring forth the right things that lay hidden behind wrong kind of energy. It refreshes emotions. When you move and concentrate on your fellow actors you don't worry. ("Hem")

It is self-reflection through physical work. I feel alert and active. ("Strawberry")

In the notion that physical work "attunes you to a good state for acting" we find a crystallization of the quintessential idea of the course work – and the research – in question. Physical work creates a bodily state that makes interactions crucial for acting possible (see page 8). The function of physical work as a way to define oneself (as discussed on page 4) is manifested in a notion by "Strawberry": "it is self-reflection through physical work".

At the end of the training period I asked the students: What do you think about physical work now that we are finishing the course? The answers are, once again, clear-sighted:

It is an essential part of training, self-evident. It has released my tension a lot. I could have it even more. ("Maniac")

It feels natural, not especially weird. Physical touch is the most useful and enjoyable part of it. I can really feel that I am here at this moment and my partner pays attention to me. (“Armadillo”)

It feels better now, safer than in the beginning. I can let others come to me and I can approach them physically. I am no longer shy of my own body, movement or action. (nameless)

There are also comments that seem to indicate that when we talk about physical work, there is an “enough” for each individual. According to a student the course was “physical enough” and another one was sometimes disappointed when the class was “not physical enough”. Here, we can ask: enough for what? And when there is an “enough”, there is also “too much”, as it becomes clear by the following citations.

IT DOESN’T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE THAT PHYSICAL! (“Crusher”)

Sometimes I feel so lazy that I would like to skip the session, because it is so hard to work so physically. (“Maniac”)

Basically, it is up to the student how much she chooses to be bodily involved in each action, but it is essential for the teacher to “read” the group carefully and to choose the next exercise according to the state of the group at each moment. Still, there can be single individuals for whom there is too much or not enough physical work at a session or at a particular moment.

At the first session there was a set of short improvisations that started rapidly and contained changing of characters (these ways of working were used later also). These sudden beginnings in improvisations follow the idea presented by Keith Johnstone (1992): he speaks in favour of instantaneous action, as he writes of spontaneity. Together with a constant changing of a character sudden beginnings seem to have the ability to benefit the moments of getting started.

High speed feels good. When you concentrate on moving, you don’t have time to plan and this makes it true improvisation. (“Bum”)

It felt strange to change roles just like that, but it was also liberating, because then you knew you were somebody else. (“Strawberry”)

I loved to play different characters: a shy and uncommunicative character and a brave and social one. I am rather shy myself and when I had to play the social character it was nice because then I could give it all. (“Treadmill”)

This interplay between an idea of a character and the self in the level of embodied experiences may function as a means to test different subjectivities: physical improvisations route the way to the unknown, to areas of self that are not so familiar. This may be essential in adolescents’ growth to maturity, but also meaningful to anyone trying to outline the areas of self. It seems that beginnings are important: the beginning of an exercise, the beginning of a session, the beginning of a course or a training period. There seems to be advantages in beginning right away, in getting straight to the action. A sudden beginning may open the way to surprising findings.

Physical work may have helped me to find new aspects of myself and to test new things, courageously. (“Sheriff”)

The students evaluate the course work, the forms of practice, commenting on the organization of the pedagogical situations and giving definitions to or appraisals of each individual exercise, commenting also exercises described earlier on page 13.

It is not really physical exercise as in gymnastics, it is not about checking out who moves best. You can move as you wish, at your own tempo. (“Dragon”)

Improvising along with running felt at first hazardous, but in the end I was totally relaxed. Shoot! What a flame! (“Walrus”)

Practicing Colombian hypnosis was an amazing experience. The tribal music almost made it feel like dancing. I can certainly understand why they call it hypnosis. I was entranced. – I also enjoyed the running exercise (Run and Shout), as it allowed us to open up and be free, loud, and energetic. – In the Story Circle the vast physical movement of running in circles and violently presenting our monologues to the class was energetic and amazing. The constant motion and bloodflow is a good tool to help a person remember their lines, as well. (“June”)

The question of performing in front of an audience is under special consideration: on the one hand, it is the audience that makes theatre theatre, but on the other, the moment of

stepping in front of others is often, for a young person, hard. It can cause some kind of alienation.

It is scary to be in front of others so that everybody is looking. (“A little bit eek”)

When I am on the stage, I feel like reciting strange words instead of channelling my work into my character. (“Crusher”)

Here we meet some delighted reflections of overcoming this threshold.

It was nice to perform to an audience (the rest of the group). Improvising has felt a little vacant without it. (“Auntie”)

I forgot that I was in front of an audience! (nameless)

It seems that it is important to slide from “chaos improvisations” to performing, and not to underline the shift from practice to performance. Here the students refer to an exercise that consisted of a dialogue performed in pairs so that one actor was in front of the audience and the other one behind it. The one in the front was looking at the partner over the audience. It seems that this kind of organization of an exercise can help a person to get started with performing.

The aspects of gender and sex are not discussed in this article, simply because they did not, surprisingly, arise from the data. The students did not use these or resembling words in their texts, nor did they seem to refer to these issues otherwise. In my reading, these issues did not appear in other sublimated forms, either. For example, there was only one student to use the word ‘anxiety’, and on these few occasions the word was being used, it did not seem to concern specifically the aspects of gender and sex (quotations on page 22). It is still possible, of course. Nevertheless, the data did not provoke to discuss these issues, leaving them for further study. First of all, this state of affairs raises the question why these issues actually were absent in these texts.

Three Different Narratives, Three Different Processes: “Phoebe Caulfield”, ”Maniac” and ”Icy or something...”

Finally, I will present some scenarios of processes the students might have gone through during the training period. As obvious, they are my own conclusions, since the data consists of fragments, and the students did not write an aggregating text that would

explicate their individual processes. Thanks to the pseudonyms, I had the opportunity to combine the texts by the same writer together and get an idea of the process a singular student refers to. In the following narratives I chose to use the pronoun 'she', for the sake of fluency. The sex of each writer remains unidentified.

For "Phoebe Caulfield" physical work seems to be something that she has been looking for. She had an idea of such a work beforehand and the training in question fulfilled her expectations. Possibly she also sought an area or state where to cross one's borders. Probably she also had a hunch of her own potential. In the end of the period she feels that physical work has become an inseparable part of her ways to work and she will definitely go on with it. The process seems to have changed her in a manner that was not surprising her.

For "Maniac" the process has been much more surprising. She is not as much enthusiastic as "Phoebe Caulfield", but she recognizes the aspect of transition in her being. She had great fear to overcome in the beginning, but she succeeded in it. Relief characterizes her reflections. Physical work felt extraordinary in the beginning and she considers its benefits, but as the course went by, the work began to feel troublesome every now and then. As the novelty passes it may be difficult to reach the same intensity that was there in the beginning. Nevertheless, as such, the process is definitely rewarding and tempts to go on. In these kind of cases the student may be surprised by her own achievements.

For "Icy or something..." physical work was a source of anxiety and distress. She had to start with a comparable forceful stage fright. After the first few sessions she was relieved and delighted: the work felt good. However, in the course of time the anxiety grew larger and by the end of the training period she was ready to quit but she kept on going, because she did not want to drop the course half-way. It seems that it would have been better for her to do everything with fiction, i.e. in a shelter of a character.

It is easier when you are in a role. ("Icy or something...")

Also, it probably would have helped her if we had continued simultaneous work throughout the training period, or otherwise eased the stress caused by distracting self-consciousness. She had been interested in directing in the theatre, and she had thought that acting was something she should get familiar with. Unfortunately, "Icy or something..." seemed to be disappointed mostly with her own work and not with the course work as such. She must have had doubts on her own potential at the first place since she chose that

pseudonym. Training should be capable to set aside this kind of doubts and not to confirm them.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this study indicate clearly that in actor training exercises and improvisations that take place in the context of youth theatre education, the emphasis on physical work, by creating an intensive atmosphere of excitement, joy and seriousness, makes it easier for the students to *dive in*: to throw oneself into fictitious situations and characters. This work provides possibilities to contribute personal growth and discoveries of oneself. Breaking the barriers of everyday behavior and perceptions of self gives way to these discoveries. The pedagogical situation seems to create space for transition: there are fleeting moments of transitional space, where moving towards new areas of self is possible. In the center there is the transformation, and since the work is collective, shared, the group changes as a group. In the course of time the group becomes a community with the habits of behavior of its own. The whirl of the turmoil unites the group and makes it possible for an individual to “give it all”. At its best, it becomes possible for an individual *to be*, to be different from what one usually is, or in different way than usually. This, in turn, makes it possible for an individual to grow: to take a step in one’s personal growth. In the context of fiction individuals may test different subjectivities. Physical actions in a shadowy rehearsal room can serve as rites of passage: the actual space, those few square meters on the floor, stand for a space for transition.

This process is about physical work, dominated by its democratic nature, and characterized by non-linguistic processes, and fiction. The work takes place in the context of fiction, but it is real: real physical movement and contact, real strain. In this emphasis of physical work it is essential, though, to see that the work is based on a dialogical encounter between the student/actor and the teacher/director, and the factors of empathic understanding and voluntary participation are truly present, in order to avoid unnecessary anxiety and emotional distress. This presents something of a challenge.

As mentioned earlier, the aspects of gender and sex were absent here. They remain subjects for further study. Yet, we can follow the ideas of Winnicott in this respect also. According to Phillips (2000), Winnicott maintained that the position *to be* could be considered as a feminine feature. Maybe the option *to be* could have meant for Hamlet being somehow feminine; it could have been for him a subjectivity to be tested.

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Notes

1. "An actor" means here anyone who acts, as it is with Augusto Boal (1992, p.39). "Actor training" may seem to refer to professional actor training, but since the exercises that youth theatre education uses draw directly from the conventions of professional actor training – in adaptations – it is practical to use the term "actor training" in this respect. An amateur actor and a student actor are, simply, actors.
2. For the process of growth an adolescent undergoes, see, for example, Peter Blos (1962). My use of the expression 'fiction of growth' owes to Esa Kirkkopelto, who gave me this idea.
3. Here we have the passive voice: something makes someone start, or perhaps something starts in someone. What that something is is the subject of investigation.

4. Stanislavski grounded his work on earlier findings, most importantly to those by Denis Diderot, and psychologist Théodule Armand Ribot, and had a number of colleagues, as well as successors (Roach 1993, pp.195-199; Zarrilli 2009, pp.13-14).

5. According to Zarrilli the concept of psyche “comes very close to the uses and meaning of both the Sanskrit *prana* and the Chinese *qi*, and thus, to breath”. This interpretation gives new insight to the use of the word psychophysical. (Zarrilli 2009, pp.18-19)

6. It is very interesting that Bresler finds these same elements important for learning and teaching music as well as for qualitative research: “Body/mind alertness and openness to what is happening are crucial”. (Bresler 2005, p.177)

7. Not necessarily in ‘postdramatic theatre’: see Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006).

8. See also an important notion by Margaret Macintyre Latta and Karl Hostetler (2003): “To learn about other(s) and in turn self, to create and concomitantly be created, is elemental, ontologically basic to the primacy of being. Educators must ask themselves if this is not the heart of learning. If so, such play ought to be accorded central consideration within education.”

9. This is where somatic work points at. We can also consider doing “covering” being. Somatic work is to uncover.

10. She does not use an expression such as “to empathize with the character”, as in commonplace use of language.

11. For the suppression that faces the actor’s body see also Roach (1993, pp.218-220).

12. Here, I read the word ‘anxiety’ in its psychiatric meaning: an unpleasant state of mental uneasiness.

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