



New Words for Ancient Paths¹

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Every age dreams of the previous one, said Jules Michelet. While day-dreaming about past theatre ages, we invent our own technique moving along ancient paths. We feel the need to forge words which belong to us and may evoke our mirages and presumed conquests. It is good to ponder over the names of ancient ways but, equally, it is useful to re-baptise regularly the terms of our working language.

Today actors apply a technique which doesn't aim at fixed forms and patterns nor does it respect well-defined 'rules of the game', as in the case of performances with a pre-arranged codification like ballet, kabuki or kathakali. I speak of the actors in those theatres which lack or refuse a codified tradition, and have no specific stylisation or recognisable manner. These are theatres with a particular destiny or vocation: they live as if they were always in a *statu nascendi*, in an emerging state or in the constant condition of the new beginner even if they have many years of experience.

Such theatres are generally qualified as experimental, laboratories or simply group theatres. They correspond to an important independent tradition. A tradition of the new sounds like a poetic oxymoron, and it is indeed a contradiction. But this incongruity is an essential part of the history of modern theatre.

It is obvious that the tradition of the new cannot employ repeatable procedures which ensure a result within a reasonable margin of error. Nevertheless this theatre which is perpetually in a *statu nascendi*, or is an eternal new beginner, has been the living paradox which inspired Stanislavski, Craig, Copeau, Brook and Grotowski.

We often use expressions such as 'body language', 'theatre language' or 'actor's language'. But within the context of a theatre in a *statu nascendi*, teaching acting technique has never been like teaching a 'language' which is difficult but has a definite structure. Latin, Sanskrit or ancient Greek can be transmitted through tested methods, and anyone can learn these languages in time.

On the contrary, in a theatre which is an eternal new beginner, teaching can only trigger and inspire a personal process. This may perhaps lead to success, but unfortunately it does not always achieve its aim despite commitment and devotion.

I'm referring here to a technique which functions as such only after one has embodied it and, looking back, can forget the numerous defeats while displaying a few discoveries. Such a technique is clear and consistent only when observed *a posteriori*. But each of these techniques is a particular micro-history, the consequence of an unrepeatable biography.

All these paradoxes and contradictions cause both veneration and rejection, scepticism and fetishism around the idea of the actor's technique. We are facing a technique of a particular type which the Italian theatre scholar Franco Ruffini has compared to a duckbill platypus.

The duckbill platypus is a mammal, but its nature seems to contradict natural classifications: it is a mammal that lays eggs, has both teeth and a beak, with webbed feet like a duck and with a small poisonous spur on the back legs.

Also the actor's techniques have poisonous spurs. They cannot be taught methodically, one step after another like a packet of reusable knowledge, in the same way one can pass on cooking recipes, an aerial or naval route or the basic behaviour when playing tennis. They are not like the so-called 'body techniques' which we learn unwittingly by simply growing up in a determined milieu. The actor's techniques are not *body* techniques, but a technique of a *personality*, of a particular and unique body-mind.

How come then that during the whole of the twentieth century the idea of an actor's training materialised? How did the idea originate of an apprenticeship which does not aim at a form, a style or a pre-established performance genre? Was it superficiality or illusion?

It was always a question of an anti-training or a pedagogical fiction. It was a revolt and a need to destroy the theatre in order to reinvent it anew. The exercises didn't serve to prepare an actor for a theatre with a precise and recognisable profile. On the contrary, the exercises tended to free the actor from a stereotyped stage behaviour, mimetic attitudes and clichés.

In theatre, cliché is a word which provokes fear. Every experienced actor has his own stage personality, his own recurrent behaviour, a peculiar way of managing his energies and a recognisable rhythm in his own scenic *bios*. How should one distinguish this recurrent recognisability from the notorious clichés? Rather than a technical question, this is a concern which the actor feels with respect to his personal discipline. It has nothing to do with aesthetics, but with the anxiety of becoming artistically sterile, stagnating.

The exercises and the training teach *discipline* first of all. This word too provokes fear. An automatic reaction makes us think of somebody limiting our freedom and imposing rules of thought and conduct. But in art, discipline oscillates between two different processes which in practice mingle: the action of learning (in Latin: *discere*), and the unswerving respect for rigorous *self-imposed* rules.

The exercises invented in the twentieth century stem from a yearning for experimentation and change as well as for discipline. But they also reflect a desire to guide the actor towards an untamed zone of his or her own inner landscape.

The results, when they emerge, are different for each individual. They are attained through a long period of practice, thought and afterthought, exhaustion, constant trial and error. At the end of this period, a few results of obvious value may at times appear. But this obviousness is not enough for the person who wants to adopt these results. It is not enough to know *what* he wants to find, if he doesn't know *how* to find it.

Stanislavski depicted this dilemma with a very simple image. He said he felt like a prospector for gold who had spent years excavating mountains of earth and gravel. A hundred times he had sunk into discouragement, and a hundred and one times he had got up again. In the end he possesses a small handful of raw gold. He shows it. Everybody understands the value of his search and labours because of the power of evidence. It is all there, in his fist. But they will also understand that knowing gold exists and can be found doesn't necessarily mean they know *how* to find it. Above all everybody realises that the technique for finding gold consists 99% in the work of the stonebreaker and 1% in the stubbornness of a person in love.

Learning is not a problem, *learning to unlearn* is problematic. This exhortation to ‘learned ignorance’, to extract the difficult from the difficult, has been the compass for Odin Teatret during half a century.

Methods, theories and images which try to explain the actor’s embodied knowledge – which we call technique – help to evoke visions and forge provisional personal languages. They can assume the credibility of a mythology which has worked for some people and which can also work for others. But these methods, theories and images have no guarantee.

We can list numerous technical and artistic rules. However, when we have to do with a creative process, every so-called rule functions both in one way and in its opposite. Negating a rule and striving to contradict it to the end, is at times more effective than doing one’s utmost to apply it.

Although the words we use when speaking of the actor’s technique are neither theories nor recipes, we are often forced to disguise them as such. Most of the time this disguise does not serve to give credibility to our words, but to what they suggest.

We have a tendency to distrust words. But when used in practice, words are never inaccurate when they are applied in a specific context and within a direct and long-lasting working relationship which allows one to metabolise incomprehension and errors. Words are dangerous when they give the illusion of defining once and for all their own content and direction. At times words nourish. And like all that nourishes, they are also filled with viruses. By repeating them, their nourishing nature decays, becomes banal, and the viruses attack.

For this reason we often have to change our working terms to prevent them from stagnating. They are like snowballs. They are good for striking, but we cannot hold them for long as if they were stones or gold nuggets. A snowball can be a weapon and yet it is a stone of water. A contradiction in terms, like those arrows of ice in some crime novels: they strike, make their way to the heart and stop it beating. Then they disappear without trace.

How can we turn our *technical* language into *effective* words, ready to disappear? How can we escape the rigidity of formulas without losing the rigour of the craft? We must know how to dissolve old formulas in new images which open a path in our inner geography. We have to know how to swallow petrol and spit fire.

Which is the language of the actor? The ancients said: the dialogue. They thought only about the text which can easily be written and spoken between two or more people. But the actor, on stage, always has a dialogue. Even in a monologue, he addresses the spectators, the gods, his father's ghost or a part of himself from which he feels separated, a part which lives in exile within himself.

Also the actor's extra-daily presence on stage is an incessant dialogue of impulses and tensions whose multiform flow provokes a sensation of intensified life in the spectator. This *organic effect*, which impacts on the spectator's senses and memory, can be generated only by the actor's embodied knowledge (Barba; Savarese, 2002).

How can we explain in words this continuous inner somatic-mental dialogue? How can we infuse new life into our language so it doesn't lose its suggestiveness and stinging stimulation, degenerating into automatism and abstraction?

From the start, all actors are endowed with three languages. Only if they are aware of these languages will they be able to develop the characteristics of each of them. By interweaving them, making them attuned or discordant, they may orchestrate a symphony of dialectical sensorial and mental stimuli.

These three languages are: the sonority of the voice, the meaning of the spoken words, and the gestures and attitudes accompanying them. Meyerhold had already pointed out two of these languages - that of physical reactions, and that of the text's meaning. To these two, must be added the language of sonority which can easily negate the meaning of the words through an ironic, pathetic or aggressive inflection. Hence the necessity of an apprenticeship – a training – whose aim is to improve the suggestive power of the voice, its melodious possibilities and emotional impact. The voice's intonation is music which induces associations, ambiance and moods. The sonorous language conveys *non-conceptual* information which, like an autonomous overtone, comments constantly upon the text.

Also the language of our 'spontaneity', of our daily manners and gestures, can undergo a training to free itself from its obvious connotations of repetitive gesticulation. The language of clichés which is typical of our social and private personality can be revitalised through mental and physical

impulses which link more or less distant realities, antithetical thoughts and ideas which are reciprocally irreconcilable. A physical and vocal training familiarises the actor with this paradoxical way of thinking with the whole body-mind. “To give a kiss as if it were a look, to plant looks as if they were trees, to cage trees as if they were birds and to water birds as if they were sunflowers”. This programme, which the Chilean Vicente Huidobro proposed to his generation of fellow poets, could also apply to the training of the actor’s body-mind.

Like an oxymoron – the contradictory image forged by the black brightness of a poet’s words – the actor’s behaviour becomes a *clear enigma*: evident in its sensorial and emotional consequences, yet difficult to explain in rational terms. This process of *mentallsomatic poetry* (let’s not forget that in Greek *poiein* means materially to forge) turns physical and vocal clichés into *unfamiliar effective signs*, a synthesis of differing intentions that transport the spectator into a universe of metaphors and self-biography.

Today only a few actors know how to distil from the dialogue of their three languages as many shadows which whisper. If these shadows manifest themselves, the spectator feels questioned by their whispering. Three shadows are projected in opposite directions by the three material languages of sonority, meaning and somatic dynamisms. Every shadow whispers in its own language: Švejk, tiger and angel.

The language of Švejk, the character created by Jaroslav Hašek and adopted by Bertolt Brecht, hides through his words the true sense of his actions. His speech is the art of reticence.

The language of the tiger is that of the imminent and dissimulated danger which at times the spectator perceives without being able to explain it. The tiger doesn’t take a step without being ready to attack. Even while resting it is preparing to pounce. When motionless, the danger is greatest. Its grace is ferocity. It adores what is alive, and what it adores becomes its food.

The language of the angel is the most difficult to describe. As their etymology says, angels are messengers in a pure state. They exist only in the moment when they perform a task loaded with destiny. Their life is embodied in the entrusted message. The messenger is the message, and even the minutest nuance of the message is essential. The angel concentrates on

the power of each sign, of each look, each syllable and intonation, the smallest rhythmic modulation and the most elusive stillness. But she is not aware of what the message says to the person who receives it. She doesn't pretend to interpret it: she just passes it on. She combines all this with her blind vocation – incomprehensible even to herself – of only being an angel: a messenger conscious of not being able to know if there is a sense in what she transmits; and what this sense is for each single spectator.

Don't think I am grabbing the words by their tail and making them squeal as I spin them in the air. What I am saying is obvious. Which of us has not experienced at least once the angelic language of an actor who, in spite of herself, has whispered to us one of our secrets?

Note

- ¹ Speech of thanks on the occasion of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters bestowed on Eugenio Barba by Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, on 1st July 2014.

Reference

BARBA, Eugenio; SAVARESE, Nicola. **A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the secret art of the performer.** New York: Routledge, 2002.

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