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The Pleasure Principle:

Some Fundamentals for a Psychophysical Training.

Delivered at the CETT/Central School of Speech and Drama :
'How To Act' Conference, February 2007

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Outline:

The aim of this paper is to look at the idea of 'pleasure' as a strategy and an objective in a process of psychophysical training. In particular I want to suggest how a rigorous insistence on the primacy of pleasure in the approach a performer takes to his or her work, provides important strategies for structuring that work and developing and channelling creative energies to underpin their development. In other words, how the pursuit of pleasure can help create and sustain what Mexican practitioner Nicolas Nunez calls 'the will to work'.

My observations are based on my practice over the last decade - a process of training that I have been developing here and in Australia. I will also be drawing on some of the insights offered by participants in a research project I ran in Huddersfield in 2005, during which 14 performers from a number of countries and with diverse training histories, participated in a process of psychophysical training under my leadership and reflected before, during and afterwards on five key concepts – pleasure, energy, impulse, concentration and complicity.

Perhaps I should admit that my use of the phrase 'the pleasure principle' is not intended to denote a Freudian or psychoanalytical underpinning to this work. It's just a good phrase.

Definitions:

One of the key things to emerge from the 2005 research project was how different people's understandings of simple words such as 'pleasure' can be. So perhaps I should start with some definitions of my own.

Pleasure – at least as I am using the term in this paper - is inherently an active not a passive state. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book 'Flow' writes that what he calls 'optimal experience': 'is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated and defended privately by each person.' (p.2)

This terrain of 'optimal experience' is, for me, split into three distinct areas. In the course of this paper I'll look at each in a bit of detail, but briefly they are as follows.

Fun: Fun is something that we can have – the ability to laugh, enjoy being in a rehearsal space. It is easy, relatively superficial and, after a while, like sweets and pop, becomes unsatisfying.

Pleasure: Pleasure is something that we achieve through our work. It is a state we achieve through our efforts. It is a sustainable and repeatable state, though it is sustained only if we commit ourselves to that process of sustaining.

Joy: Joy is epiphanic, something we encounter in our work from time to time (if we are lucky). In a state of Joy we are inspired and often inspirational. It is an unstable state that decays inevitably. While we cannot make ourselves joyful, we can make ourselves receptive to the possibility of Joy.

Fun:

It seems self evident that any process we want to commit to for an indefinite period should contain strong and immediate elements of fun. I am not talking of the fun that surrounds the work – the conversations beforehand or the socialising afterwards – I am talking about the work itself. Fun should be intrinsic, because to be able to engage in the work through immediate and easy enjoyment offers a portal through which the trainee can walk, if they are to discover the landscape beyond.

Czikszenmihalyi writes: ‘the key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself.... When experience is intrinsically rewarding, life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain.’ (p.67 – 69)

At the start of a creative process the participant needs to be able to place themselves at their ease. There are a number of simple ways that this can be encouraged. It’s useful to create an environment where the ideas of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are redundant; one where mistakes are welcomed and the trainee feels that they are uncritically accepted and respected for who they are and for what they bring to the work. I require an atmosphere where laughter is generous and inclusive, where we recognise and cherish the fact that we are both ridiculous and magnificent.

The results I’m looking for are simple - I need an environment that participants want to inhabit, one where they work because they want to.

In such an environment the fears that impede us, either at the start of a process or that emerge from that process, can be placed into a context and be seen for what they are – mental constructs that can be overcome through the process of engaging in work.

It’s fun that makes trainees want to come back for more. The idea that there is ‘more’ is crucial, for as I suggested at the start, fun soon pales into tedium, leaving an important hunger for something deeper and more nutritious.

Pleasure:

At the heart of the training process, for me, is an insistence that the trainee actively pursues pleasure within each and every task. Note that I say within each and every task – I am not talking about the trainee doing what they want, I am talking about the trainee finding active pleasure in what the task requires of them.

From the outset this demands of the trainee that they place themselves into a conscious relationship with the work they are engaged in. They must become mindful of their work. They must observe the task that has been asked of them and make conscious decisions about how they will pursue and engage with that task. And they need to take responsibility for the outcomes of their work.

When faced with a training task for the first time, the trainee is not asked to ‘get it right’, or even just ‘to do it’, the trainee is asked to work within that task to discover what gives them pleasure.

Czikszenmihalyi reminds us that ‘ pain and pleasure occur in consciousness and exist only there’

(p19). I am requiring a trainee to structure their conscious engagement with the task so that the doing of it is pleasurable, not unpleasant. I'm asking the trainee to undertake a conscious ordering of their consciousness.

This does not imply that the trainee should avoid difficult or unpleasant tasks. Quite the reverse – it requires that they construct a positive, pleasure-based rationale for undertaking tasks they might otherwise seek to avoid. It requires that they find the strength to be vulnerable, to endure pain, to take emotional risk by structuring their engagement with the task in a way that they expect to yield tangible pleasure-based outcomes. Even if, on balance, a trainee does not 'enjoy' a task, it is necessary for them to be able to identify what within that task was pleasurable to them. For that nugget of identifiable pleasure within a painful task can be the key to that performer being able to repeat their engagement with a thing they fear, or to engage with other weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Pleasure is inherently personal and subjective, so all tasks – even ones designed to encourage complicity or the development of ensemble – need to be personalised. As trainer, I set up the task, but the content of that task, the pursuit of pleasure, is a private and self generated terrain.

When a trainee returns to a task – and a training routine requires a continual revisiting of a relatively small number of core exercises – she or he needs to address the task as a fresh experience. The question develops from 'how can I pursue pleasure in this unfamiliar task?' into 'how can I find again, or find differently, pleasure in this familiar task?' Specifically, when a trainee revisits a task, they need to address the question of how engaging with that task can yield them pleasure *on this occasion*. The idea of time and repeatability enter into the trainee's agenda. The question becomes, 'how, *today*, will I achieve pleasure in this task?'

Xana Miranda, a Portuguese participant in the 2005 research project, addresses this question in some reflections she wrote after the end of the project. She writes:

"Sometimes it could be boring to do the same game –but it never is – it is never the same game. It's a challenge and the challenge for me is pleasure."

Eilon Morris, another participant, wrote:

"I was thinking about the other side of pleasure, boredom, and the relationship of that to the work. By revisiting exercises, it has the potential to become boring. We are moving away from the superficial pleasure of excitement and we're hitting a wall where you go 'actually I feel bored'. As you move through that sense of boredom, you find the blocks, and either by sitting with those blocks or finding another task in your mind, there's a point where those blocks fall away. And that's a pleasure for me – the releasing of those blocks."

Eilon is touching on a really important element of pleasure as a training methodology. If a trainee is 'not enjoying' an element of the necessary training, it is incumbent on them to explore what it is in their relationship to the task that is preventing them taking pleasure. And it is incumbent on them to do something about it. To do this they need to address the very immediate question of *how* they are inhabiting the space on any particular day. It demands that they take responsibility

for their own engagement, in the moment, with the task, rather than permitting that which is extrinsic to the work – other people or things that happened at other times - becoming excuses for their inability to engage fully in the creative flow which is intrinsic to the work.

Eve Wedderburn, another participant in the 2005 project, writes to this idea very clearly when she reflects on her work:

“That’s where pleasure is – when you give up all of those things that you’ve held in front of you as ‘why you cannot work’ or ‘why you do not want to work’. As soon as you let them drop, that’s the moment of pleasure – when you give into it.”

The mechanics of pursuing pleasure within training are complex. These are some of the requirements that pleasure-centred training places on its participants. It requires that a trainee:

- actively engages in the work,
- that they adopt a conscious attitude to their work,
- that they break the set task into sub-tasks as a way of identifying and pursuing personal pleasure in the shared work – this in turn requires that they engage with the detail rather than the generalities of a task,
- that they identify and address the personal blockages they encounter in the achieving of their pleasure objective,
- that they take responsibility for the discoveries and achievements they make in the course of their work
- and (perhaps most importantly) that they revisit this matrix of obligations every time they revisit an exercise – in other words that they engage in a task always in the present.

Put simply, the trainee learns that if she or he has achieved pleasure in a task, when that task is to be repeated, they will have to find a fresh way of addressing it. Yesterday is irrelevant, for the work is happening today.

When I am training performers, I insist that they forgo excuses and take responsibility. It is a tough approach, which builds, I hope, a mental toughness on the part of the trainee. Yet when that toughness feels overwhelming – as at times it must because all of us need to be able to blame other people from time to time – then we can take a step back from the details of the training and reminds ourselves of the bigger picture. What I’m asking performers to do is to enjoy themselves – hardly an imposition – and to accept that if they are not finding pleasure, if they are suffering and struggling and can never get other people or audiences to do what they want them to do – then perhaps responsibility for that is personal rather than the result of a cruel and hostile universe.

Clearly the training is designed to develop productive attitudes of mind alongside developing physical capacity. It offers a strong scaffolding round which to construct performances able to withstand the critical gaze of an audience. I’m not suggesting that performers should be indifferent to their audience, I am suggesting that in the real-time of performance, unless the aesthetic you are employing demands an immediate and radical responsivity to your audience, it is seldom useful to worry about how you fear you might be being perceived. Like pleasure and pain, fear also only resides in the consciousness of the individual. Far more useful, I would suggest, for

a performer to focus on pursuing the intrinsic worth of the performance while it is happening, and worry about how it was received once it is over. This is particularly true I think for performers who, still in training, are taking unfamiliar versions of themselves in unfamiliar aesthetics to audiences onto whom they have projected their self-doubt. It is of limited use telling a performer to concentrate unless you give them a strong sense of what to concentrate on – concentration on the pursuit of personal pleasure within the necessary performative tasks offers a clear and self-structured journey for each performer through the creative process of real-time performing.

Joy:

I'm not going to talk much about joy – the epiphany when you are visited by inspiration and time and space dissolve into a sparkling and multidimensional present. It is the moment (however long it lasts, it is a single moment for past, present and future have compacted into a simple 'now') – the moment where all the mechanics of training and performance are replaced by a tremendous sense of easeful possibility. We cannot force our performance to be inspired or inspirational – we need to make our performance work at the highest level of competence and keep the door open to the possibility that inspiration will visit us. We can insist on pleasure, but only hope for joy.

It seems to me that the relationship between competence and inspiration is central to any training regime. We cannot offer trainees an approach to performing that demands that they are inspired before they can perform, because inspiration does not come on cue. However nor should we offer them a training regime so prosaic, functional or joyless that it precludes the possibility of their becoming exceptional in front of their audience. We need to offer them the structures of task and concentration that will allow them to deliver their necessary performance while remaining open to the unexpected arrival of deep and extraordinary joyfulness.

The Problem of Pleasure:

Before I end I would like to talk for a moment or two about the problems inherent in basing training on pleasure. I hope that I have made clear that when I talk about pleasure as a foundational principle, I am not talking about a flaccid approach to training based on having a nice time. Nonetheless for many performers – especially though not exclusively younger performers - pleasure is a problematic concept.

Eve Wedderburn, writing before the 2005 research project, wrote:

“I have huge fears about notions of self indulgence – as if it were somehow morally suspect to enjoy performance, or ‘showing off’ or being watched. I have a concern my intellectualisation of performance is in fact a long winded/long-worded defence against accusations of self indulgence. Because pleasure isn't enough of a reason to work. I need to convince myself that my work is ‘important’ beyond my own selfish interest. I also half wonder if the whole of the academy is made up of clever people pole-axed by the notion that they should be feeding the starving millions with their intellect rather than playing ‘let's pretend’. I find it difficult to express/acknowledge pleasure in creative places and find being serious a much safer emotional place to be in”

I think Eve is touching on a really important issue. We feel that our work should be significant

and fear that if we are enjoying ourselves we are not working hard enough. We fear that if we are representing serious and/or tragic characters or situations in our work, then we are dishonourable or inauthentic if we experience deep personal pleasure while doing so. We fear that we have to prove those people who think that acting is trivial and valueless wrong by suffering through our work. We fear that as artists, we should be tortured – and as we generally in the West we can't find anyone to torture us, we'll torture ourselves. As if somehow there is a moral imperative on us that we should suffer.

For many young performers and for the purveyors of much popular culture, the image of the suffering artist is a very attractive one.

I suggest that the moral imperative – if there is one – lies elsewhere. We work with our imaginations and bodies, creating work that others will take the trouble to come and watch (if we're lucky). I think it is incumbent on us to acknowledge the joyous nature of that task. We are asking people to come and see us creating the culture of our age – it is not our job to submit them to suffering. It may be that we ask them to submit to images of, or evocations of, or stories about suffering, but they are not coming to watch us suffer.

Though I entirely accept the personal nature of morality, for me there is a moral imperative as an artist. It's to make art. I am not an artist if I sit around and complain that no one will give me a job. I am an artist – able to contribute to the culture I work in – if I sustain my creative practice. Sustaining a creative practice is not just a matter of delivering artistic product, it is about continuing to grow, to explore, to innovate, to dare. I ask those who train with me to base their ongoing commitment to sustaining their practice on the simple fact that, though requiring effort, their practice yields both intrinsic pleasure and increasingly complex outcomes.

Czikszenmihalyi writes: 'the self becomes (more) complex (ie developing both differentiation from others and integration with others) as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were.' (p.42)

Eve Wedderburn reflected after the completion of the research project on how her attitudes to pleasure had changed. This is what she wrote:

“The notion of pleasure has become significantly less problematic for me. Pleasure is no longer bound up in complicated notions of self-indulgence but is about a genuine and whole-hearted engagement with the work. On reflection, my earlier position, that the work, or work in general, should involve an element of self denial is in fact a much more egotistical and self-indulgent attitude. It requires and allows a kind of withholding from the work – and specifically a withholding of the joyous, creative, vulnerable self from the work. It is a defensive stance, but I think the defence is not of oneself from accusations of self-indulgence, but in fact is of the ego, that likes to take itself very seriously.”

Conclusion:

If a training is to sustain those who participate in it, it must allow for them to return to it

throughout their lives and, with each visit, discover something new about themselves.

Many of the participants in the 2005 project wrote, after the event, of how for them the pursuit of pleasure had become a form of energy.

One wrote:

“I’ve got to the place where pleasure is concentration. Concentration is pleasure – the actor totally committed to the act...”

Another wrote:

“I feel that by focussing on pleasure, I am engaging in the exercise more, so therefore that brings more pleasure.”

Participants enter the space and give themselves permission (and are given permission by me and their co-performers) to have fun. In that environment the pursuit of pleasure becomes not a distraction from the process of work, but a deepening of it. And through that process of insisting on pleasure they generate pleasure, they are generous in their giving to others and they create the desire for themselves and their colleagues, to return to that space and experience the journey again.

While an individual must be the source of their own pleasure, like the laughter that overtakes you when you tell a joke, it becomes an energy on which you ride, by which you are swept away. And when the laughter is over, you know that you will never be able to tell that same joke to those same people again, not in the same way, because everything has changed and you need to go back to the beginning and start everything as if for the first time.

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- The quotations from participants in the 2005 research project are from unpublished transcripts of conversations taken during the project and from written materials submitted before, during and after the project.