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Movement Improvisation in Psychophysical Training

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In this paper I intend to talk through the approaches to psychophysical training that I've been developing over the last decade. In the training, improvisation is the primary language of the physical work but, rather more importantly, the performative imperatives that improvisation imposes on participants serve as models and metaphors through which trainees can identify, explore and understand their capacity within a range of improvised and non-improvised performance structures.

First a couple of definitions:

By psychophysical training I mean an approach to training that treats the mind and body holistically rather than as a dualistic system. Within a psychophysical approach to training it is understood that our patterns of movements, our physical habits, our embodied personality are reflections of, are altered and controlled by our patterns of thought. Through concentrated physical work, we can identify and alter our patterns of thinking and, inversely, through identifying and challenging our habitual patterns of thinking, we can alter how we use our bodies. Psychophysical training is an approach to performer training that is intrinsically focussed on process rather than outcome. Though there may be clearly defined objectives for a training process, those outcomes might best be seen not as ends in themselves but as way markers on an individual's continuing journey towards self-knowledge and self-mastery.

My second brief definition is more personal. Though I come from an 'acting' background, my performance practice now is entirely located within improvised performance work – mainly with Quiddity Theatre's ongoing series of 'Spontaneous Combustions'. For more than a decade, my main creative interest has been in training performers and in directing non-improvised performances. The range of my work is fairly wide – ensemble physical work, theatre for children, theatre with children, opera, circus, dance, hybrid arts. Elements of the training I'm describing today have proved useful to me across this range of work in a number of contexts, educational, professional, community. So although the work I am describing is relatively specialised, its applications are wide.

The Training

Early in any training process there are a number of core concepts that I need to put in place. These fundamental underpinnings to the training process are simple ideas that the trainee needs to be able to recall and apply in any situation they encounter as their training develops.

These concepts are all attitudinal – concerned with how the trainee positions him or herself in relationship to the work they are undertaking. It is my contention that all of these attitudes and principles are all intimately related to -and are drawn from - my improvisation practice. Just as I want performers to be able to remember and apply these principles in their training and performing of non-improvised work, so I try to remember and apply them to my own work as an improviser. As I'm talking to a room full of people with clear understandings of improvisation,

I'll not patronise you by pointing out those links – I'm sure they are apparent enough!

Almost always the first structured exercise I explore uses juggling bags and these core principles usually emerge in the early stages of the bag exercise. The bag exercise, at the start, comprises trainees standing in a circle and an increasing number of juggling bags being passed in random patterns between participants. It is necessary for each person to treat each throw they receive and give as a gift, received and given without judgement. Our aim is to serve the exercise by facilitating the work of others. As the exercise progresses we can begin to identify each throw as the passing of energy or the receiving of an impulse and we can begin to be quite specific in understanding how that impulse is received, absorbed and transmitted through our musculature and our attention. Although the principles I am going to outline apply across the training programme, I will refer to them specifically in the context of the bag exercise, as that is where a trainee will usually first encounter them.

So what are these core concepts – almost all of which will usually reveal themselves in the opening fifteen minutes of a bag exercise?

Some Principles

1. 'Don't apologise' – Training is immediately compromised if we waste our energy on fearing how someone else has received something we have done. If I do a poor throw, I need to make a note to myself to improve my throwing and not to waste my energy, or the energy of other people on apologising for something that cannot be altered. Apologies refer to an action that exists in the past – performance requires a rigorous attention to the present.

2. 'Don't be helpful' – Either do something or don't. If you half throw a bag (and the bag falls short) because you don't want to risk it hitting the person you are throwing to, you oblige that person to make additional efforts to compensate for your own, albeit well-intentioned, half-heartedness. To try to help others by compromising the integrity of one's own actions risks being patronising and undermining. It suggests that you think the person you are working with will not be able to 'manage' an impulse given with full effort, so you try to help by offering them an 'easy' way of engaging with the exercise. Such half-heartedness almost always ends up making things harder for colleagues. The most useful thing we can do is to do our job and let other people have the space to get on with doing theirs.

3. 'Pay attention' – Passing juggling bags is the sort of work one might do at primary school level. It is also the heart of my training process. Participants must learn the mental discipline and the intellectual curiosity to invest even this most simple of exercises with their undivided attention. They must learn to approach the exercise as if for the first time, investing the familiar with full concentration. For of course the bag exercise, though operating within a number of fixed structures, is never the same twice. As such it is a profound metaphor for all live performance. We lose the potential for the extraordinary if we fail to notice how any exercise is unique at the moment of its execution. In asking participants to pay attention, I am asking them to be aware that all work comprises a

sequence of present details and if they treat any moment as if it is familiar, or worse, as if it is unimportant, they betray the innate possibilities of the creative process.

4. 'Enjoy the drop' – All live performance is predicated on the imminence of the unexpected. At the core of a performer's attitude to their craft needs to be the question of how they welcome and exploit the unexpected. For a performer to 'fear' that something might go 'wrong' is like someone going to Norway in winter and fearing it might snow. In fearing the unexpected a performer is fearing that which defines their work. The unexpected infuses every moment of live performance, indeed it is its defining characteristic – and if you have completed a live performance and *not* encountered the unexpected, you were almost certainly not paying adequate attention to the unfolding details of what you were supposed to be involved in. So in the bag exercise you might receive perfect, imperfect or frankly ludicrous throws. You might catch, drop or be entirely unaware of a bag that has come your way. Whatever the outcome of someone throwing a bag to you - a bag in your hand, a bag at your feet or a bag halfway across the floor - it needs to be absorbed into your performance without your wasting even a millisecond of energy on wishing that things were different. Things are never different, in the moment that they exist, things are as they are and we need a mental toughness in relationship to our work that allows us to accept and exploit the existing rather than pining for the imagined. So the drop is not a failed catch, it is that which proves that we exist only in the present and must sculpt our performance from that simple fact.

5. 'No Wrong, No Right' – It's a truism that in improvisation you can't get anything wrong. That's a useful starting point for trainees, to point out that they are engaging in a creative and developmental process, without defined or 'correct' outcomes. As such you offer them the freedom to concentrate on the journey without fearing arrival at an incorrect destination. However a rather more powerful 'mental construct' for them to address is that as they cannot get anything wrong, so they cannot get anything right. We can encourage them to stop striving for the end, instead to focus on the process. As we are improvising, there is no destination, only journeying. Some end results of that journey will be more 'appropriate' than others, some more surprising, but none of them will be right. As an approach to training, this encourages trainees to see every exercise, every rehearsal, every performance as an expression of creative process – each performance containing strengths and weaknesses, each one offering the seeds of the personal exploration that will underpin the next performance. This dismissing of the concept of right or wrong also offers us a strategy to tackle the utterly destructive paradigms of 'perfectionism'. Somehow some still consider 'perfectionism' a virtue – a torturing virtue, but a virtue nonetheless. Performers strive for the 'perfect' performance – which is, by definition, impossible – and then they have to live with the twin disappointments either of failure ('I know a lot of it was great but I got that move wrong...') or fear ('I did so well, what if I never achieve that again, or what if I set my sights too low...'). If we can free trainees from a striving for rightness, we might be able to replace it with a faith in their own capacity to sculpt any moment towards an appropriate outcome. In other words the trainee will learn to reflect on their work by comparing how their expressive capacity dealt with the challenges of a particular creative task. That in turn allows them to reflect on how and where their individual capacity needs development. This is a much more useful

set of reflections that asking the performer to judge their work against sets of externally imposed 'standards' over which they can have no control.

6. 'Know your task' - By the time several bags are flying round the circle in random patterns simultaneously, the question of task becomes imperative. It's no use asking a trainee to concentrate unless you help them understand what to concentrate on. They need to invest detailed attention in what it is that they are being asked to do. How do you catch? How does the energy pass into your arm and transform from an energy of receiving impulse into an energy of giving an impulse? How do you pay attention to three bags simultaneously? When are you active and when not? Are you able to break down the onslaught of busy-ness into a balance of activity and rest? Once a trainee begins to see the major task (participating in an exercise) as comprising multiple coexisting minor tasks (and of course each of those minor tasks themselves comprising multiple yet-more-minor tasks) then the trainee can begin to approach their process as a series of details which, to resonate, need to be invested with attention. The links to my own practice as an improvising performer here are particularly important. At any point when I am creating in real-time in front of an audience there is the task – performing – which comprises multiple, detailed possible-tasks – responding to a sound, a muscular impulse, a thought, an architecture, a memory, a particular gaze from an individual audience member. What allows the performance to live and grow in the present is my ability to identify possible sub-tasks and to choose which of them to invest with my attention. In training I ask trainees to learn to identify and concentrate on a hierarchy of task in the present, thus endowing all of their creative process with their undivided attention, for the 'product' can only be the sum of the moment by moment tasks that the performer undertakes. Inevitably – and usefully – this means that within the shared task (of for example the bag exercise) each individual might well invest their attention in different subtasks. I might find my physical dexterity is a little lacking so I will focus on the actual act of my hand opening and closing over a juggling bag. A colleague might have brought stress from the outside world into the space and will perhaps choose to concentrate on finding mental and physical stillness. As long as all participants in the exercise are doing whatever is necessary for them to meet its major objectives – and provided they are doing so in a way that does not impede the participation of other trainees – then this requirement that trainees continually set themselves specific tasks within the process contributes to their ability to sculpt the training to their specific daily development. It also confers on the trainee an obligation to take personal responsibility for their own absolute engagement with their training, both by being cognisant of what they are doing and by reflecting on what it is in their psychophysical makeup that prevents them achieving their objectives.

7. 'Pursue Pleasure' – a core part of setting tasks is identifying pleasure. It is of central importance to any ongoing process of training that participants engage with it for the intrinsic pleasure it yields, rather than because they hope, that at some mythical future point, the fact of having-trained will do them good. Of course there are a huge number of ways an individual might identify and pursue pleasure, through challenge, through achievement, through sharing, through repetition, through immersion in the moment. What matters is that the trainee is clear, in the setting of their own tasks, what pleasure they seek, what pleasure they encounter and what possible pleasures that opens up for

future work processes.

8. 'Positive Feedback' – The process of positive feedback (and I acknowledge with gratitude my debt to Al Wunder for helping me to understand some of the mechanics of this process) starts as a way to encourage trainees to reflect on their work and the work of colleagues, but develops into a profound sense of personal acceptance. Positive feedback is predicated on a requirement that reflection – personal and shared – is based on an analysis of the details of what actually took place rather than being based on what the reflector feels 'ought' to have happened. It requires that we accept what exists and look for ways to develop that, rather than working from the basis that our work would be better if we were someone else in some other place with a different history and/or set of skills. Positive feedback must, if it is to be effective, be detailed and rigorous. It requires that we talk about what we noticed and why it was effective. As a developmental pedagogy it suggests that growth will come through an individual or an ensemble allowing their areas of strength to flourish and that development within areas of weakness will be enabled by the self-confidence intrinsic to knowing what your strengths are. Put simply, we require trainees to leave their comfort zone, to take risks. I think the most useful way of doing this is by enabling them to know clearly how to return to their comfort zone when creative risks feel a little bit overwhelming.

A Summing - up

The bag exercise – an entirely improvised process within a strictly defined score – is the core metaphor for the training process. In ten years of developing approaches to training, I have yet to discover a single training question that cannot usefully be opened up through variations of this exercise. This is unsurprising – the passing of bags between people and the need to accept and exploit the impulses that are passed to you, combine the core metaphors for all performance training – the need to develop one's psychophysical capacity and one's communicative abilities in tandem.

As the training process progresses there are a series of ways that I will work, ranging from the purely improvisational to the relatively prescribed. Or, to use some phrases that I find useful in talking with trainees, from the macro-improvisational – where the performers are responsible for both what they do and how they do it, to the micro-improvisational where what they do is fixed, through scripting or choreography, but the way that they do it, the fine details of impulse, action and reaction, remain fluid, as they must in all live performance.

So I train through bag exercises, solo, pair, trio, quartet and whole group dancing, through energy focussing exercises, through scored movement exercises that focus specifically on sensory engagement and a number of other processes that I've developed to help trainees identify and deepen specific performance languages.

However the heart of the training is attitudinal. However one rehearses a piece of non-improvised performance, what one rehearses is not what is performed. Both the presence of an audience and the very passage of time means, whenever a piece of work is performed, in public or in a studio, it is altered. The rehearsal process is not a way of fixing performance, it is a setting of the

parameters within which the director/choreographer/writer are happy to see the performance exist. Sometimes those parameters are tight, sometimes loose. The tighter the parameters of a performance, the more detailed will be the improvisational subtasks that the performer will need to focus on if they are to keep the flow of energy within their performance immediate. But however fixed or fluid the form and content of a final performance, every live act is, at some level, an improvisation, for it cannot have happened before. So the heart of the training must be that we allow performers to develop their capacity to respond appropriately to the unexpected in real-time. Put simply, live performance is always an improvisation, so a performer who is not confident to improvise will never be really confident to perform.

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