

A White Spot in a White Space:

Revealing the Imaginary World of the Actor's Body

Sebastian Mattia

“As a stimulus for reflecting on the state of things” are the first words I remember Tadashi Suzuki using to describe the intent of his method when I first trained with him at Toga Village in the summer of 1994. In “Culture is the Body,” he elaborates on this idea: “The main purpose of my method is to uncover and bring to the surface the physically perceptive sensibility which actors had originally, before the theatre acquired its various codified performing styles, and to heighten their innate expressive abilities” (Suzuki 28). These words have great implications for the actor.

“No house should ever be *on* a hill or *on* anything. It should be *of* the hill, belonging to it, so hill and house should live together each the happier for the other,” (Wright 171). I quote some lines from Frank Lloyd Wright as a metaphor, lines that originate from architecture, an art and a science that contains multiple elements. The structure of a house needs a solid foundation. The house or building is situated in space, in a space with a perspective, a design, and lines that you can perceive from all angles; and the outside is an imaginary reflection of the inside. But what it actually looks like inside is up to the person who lives there: order or disorder; clutter or cleanliness; brightness or darkness. . . .

The Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT) provides the basis for acquiring a solid body structure and for opening up a free creative space in the mind. Whether you are trying to become an actor or you want to “build yourself up” as an actor, you have to understand the importance of the ground. When you are on stage, you could find yourself feeling very vulnerable and unprepared to apprehend new sensations and feelings coming from the space, the lights, the costumes, the perceptive presence of the audience, and especially the perceptive presence of the other actors with whom you are working. You have to “re-program” your body, as well as your mind.

Making such discoveries is more or less what happened to me in the three-day Symposium on the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, held in Toga Village in March of 2010, where I could exchange experiences with teachers and practitioners from many countries. After three days in which we took turns teaching, our discussions on the SMAT became much freer, as if liberated from a shadow. It became more

and more a discussion among a group of people who have different perspectives along with similar experiences.

At my own institution in Italy, I almost always teach beginner acting students. The most difficult problems I have found with them are first, to send them on a journey inside their own bodies to discover themselves; second, to get them to look at how they have set up this “house” (their body) they are living in; and third, to see how they give energy (through breathing) to this house to make it warm and comfortable to live in. During the days at the symposium, I had to force myself to do the same, to be a young actor again, and I discovered that my house was in disarray; it felt disorganized, and uncomfortable. It became clear to me that first of all, I am a human, then an actor, and then a director. The SMAT addresses first of all your essence as a human, how and where you are. The training makes you feel like a white spot in a white space. The spot could be everywhere or anywhere. . . . You have to perceive it, transform it, work it into something new, and restart from the very beginning.

During these three days, certain key words kept persistently returning to me: *perception, transformation, participation*. And then again from the beginning, full circle, with different levels of meaning as I gained a new perception of the other symposium members, experienced a transformation of their new information and vitalized by their participation. The Suzuki Method stimulates a deeper perception of your body, of course, but it also enhances how you can feel the bodies of others—the actors as well as audience. The Suzuki Method works inside you and outside you. The actor works on the stage and expands him or herself, his or her energy, outside the stage in social life and relationships, too. So we have a method and we have a philosophy.

I began learning the SMAT when I was nearly thirty years old. I had already worked for ten years as a professional actor but I wanted something more, and the feeling I had with the methodology of the SMAT was immediate, liberating, and increasingly growing. I was taking my first steps as a director and I realized that the method had developed in me a process of observation which now moves on two levels: it helps me understand the process of development of the actor, and it allows me to discover the peculiarities, the presence, and the energy of the stage for my work as a director, giving me the opportunity to move toward a clear vision and a philosophy of our times.

The process of teaching also becomes a personal training process, a tool for self-diagnosis. Every time I do training I try to remain deeply connected with the fatigue, pain, and effort that I have to go through to get results. You “teach yourself.” The

body changes every day. Training is different at every minute of life. When you discover something new about yourself, your body has already changed and you have to start again. It is “the cage of doing theatre”: living and dying at the same time. You are exploring yourself.

I quote what Laura Benedetta (Italian singer-actress) has written about the method:

In the beginning, the training destabilizes you and puts you into a state of crisis. Then the voice takes off; it becomes a musical instrument—which it must be for those who want to make it as an actor or singer. After reaching a genuine fatigue, your concentration becomes higher, and you can see “beyond the hill” as feel you are slipping into hell. The Suzuki Method is a distinct theatrical philosophy, quite remote from either the clichés of bad theater or the clichés of egotistical stardom. Performing part of the Suzuki training before going on stage for me is crucial. It is what reciting is to singing. I have done it even in a cramped room no larger than two meters square. It gives you a concentration of voice and a kind of Suzukian “magic of the East” that is essential for dealing with stage performance. (Personal interview)

But the Suzuki Method doesn't finish its work on the stage; it walks off the stage and into life. At the same time, since the restrictions and constraints of education and society come out of school and walk onto the stage, we have to retrain the actors' bodies to be able to develop a creative organic energy. With the social changes in recent years has come a systematic destruction of the freedom of the mind, which erases in young people the ability to see and describe things with a sense of paradox and fantasy. Fantasy has been replaced with programmed sequences and systems of rules. We live in a society in which schools are designed and organized specifically for being a literal cage of rules and systems. The student-actors, for example, with whom I work and who came from such schools are often emotionally fragile and devoid of a sense of responsibility to guide their behavior. They eschew knowledge, have little respect for authority, lack team spirit, and treat the theater space as if it were still their old school. Since so much information is available to them, and they are bombarded all the time with trivial virtual “experiences,” they are disinclined or even unable to share their experiences within a group. The theatre is struggling to survive, due to such increasing self-obsession, individualism, disaffection, and loneliness. Anyone who is under pressure, especially young people who possess a tiny instinct for freedom, cannot or will not summon the effort required to probe any depth of psychophysical understanding within the SMAT. They recoil from physical suffering and reject the training during the psychophysical phase, while they increasingly believe that merely having an understanding of the system of thought by itself will distinguish them as individuals and as performers.

As a typical example, a question I am frequently asked is, “When can we see a scene from a play in training?” Students want to see the effect of the training immediately in their scene. Therefore, it is necessary to establish from the start that the training is a discipline that exhibits itself *later* in a performance. Why do they not perceive themselves as the agents of the training, as players inside a performative context? They are the training; the method is not a performance!

I train many student-actors who attend school to learn many disciplines (dance, singing, moving, improvisation). The thing that strikes me most is the casual attitude they have to being taught. They do not repeat the exercises to instill them deeply into their bodies. Before a performance they never do a good warm up. It is also very difficult to get them to memorize lines. It seems to me they have applied to themselves so much to virtual “sharing” in electronic systems that their ability to grow through real sharing experiences with their body is often lost. Sometimes they rely too freely on spontaneous impulses or on everyday action and speech, a habit coming from the traditional Italian art of “*improvviso*” (a kind of improvisation). There is a pervasive fear in them to assert, to discover, to offer.

The art of theatre is a type of craft, a form of physical, manual teamwork. The first discovery that a student-actor should make regarding the theatre is to understand the importance of the preparatory stages: unloading the truck, carrying the scenery into the theater, setting up, tearing down, watching the show from backstage, and so on. I know for a fact that the general perception they have of theatre comes from secondary experience through media systems. Another problem they have is being able to communicate successfully in a theatrical space, especially within our Italian Renaissance tradition, where there is a great distance between the actors and the audience.

The new communications media, which deals with ever more massive “virtual” theater venues, creates remarkably beautiful images, and telescopes into the mind of the viewer with impressions wrapped in a fantastical imagination. But it thwarts the development of devices that lay genuine poetic groundwork. As a result, young actors tend to merely amplify the here and now of the present day and then relate it to the only communicative context they know: the one they grew up in.

The most potent imaginative forces reside within the “imaginary world” of the actor’s body, in his voice and in his capacity to harmonize himself with the space he occupies. The SMAT creates the possibility for the actor to create inside his “body-space” stronger, more visceral images, images which are physical rather than conceptual, instinctive rather than intellectual, transported to the audience by subconscious forces that speak directly to the collective unconscious. The

exercises create extremely dramatic scenic movements that stir inner passions, creating a dynamic of existence that opens up collective spaces of perception. Audience and actor alike are transported into another dimension where images are painted in the silences or colored by the sound, rhythm and tension of the spoken words. Today, many ailments from bulimia to anorexia, from smoking to Internet addiction, from working all day to epidemic apathy, from satyriasis to asexuality, from telephone mania to isolation—all these, paradoxically, cause the loss of the ability to feel pleasure. Thus, anhedonia, once restricted to a rare syndrome of depression, is increasingly emerging as a common disease.

Investigation into the perception that the Suzuki Method fosters in actors, links perfectly with what Marshall McLuhan has concluded: the progression of sensory and emotional apathy is associated with the invention and deployment of new media. In his view, the media is an extension of ourselves, of our senses and perceptual abilities: they reveal technologically the dramas that we belong to.

Without culture, the people of any society (even a society of two) have no dignity, no concern for their own roots, and no sense of belonging; and because they never desired culture in the first place, they have no desire to refine it, let alone reject or destroy it. It is important for them to revive their primordial rituals and find a link with their ancient sources of energy in order to create a desire for culture and a sense of belonging. That is why theatre is important. In both the traditional Western theatre (e.g., in *commedia dell'arte*), and in its Eastern counterpart (e.g., Japanese kabuki), there is a subtle movement expression using the hips or *koshi* (hips and abdomen). And in both traditions the mask serves as a powerful tool for the integration of this expression. Without using actual masks, the Suzuki Method explores the universe of the mask, mainly through sitting and standing exercises, including exercises called “statues.” The actor’s body, which acts as a kind of mask to a face not covered by an actual mask, needs even more control of expression to create a neutrality inside which the imagination of the players can flourish in the relationship between their instincts and their body.

On one level, the SMAT develops several indispensable inner potentials in an actor: self-knowledge at a very basic level, a keener sense of self-observation, and a greater capacity for physical and emotional memory. These qualities are what every human being must aspire to but are particularly vital for an actor.

Another aspect of the training relevant for those who wish to understand the nature of the actor and the art of acting is the development of faith in an environment of truth: to be a white spot in a white space, to learn to have faith in one’s own aspirations. For it is through this process, through overcoming insecurity, that an

actor gains strength for when he must face a play and an audience, exhibiting a wide spectrum of colors, varied breath, and a range of emotions so that his words will be drawn on the body and thus on the voice. It is a process which leaves a mark both on the actor and the individual. If the person acting in the scene is true, sincere, and open, the actor will transmit that faith to the audience.

In any dialogue between two people there is always a hidden and mysterious reservedness. That which goes unsaid expands in the void of what remains after what is said has “broken down barriers.” In the SMAT you have to learn to manage silence; only then do you discover that a dialogue with your fellow actors is still alive even in the silence.

One’s essential creative nature, the energy which lies on the same level as intuition, seldom if ever comes when first summoned. The SMAT disciplines constitute a method for converting such intuitive sensitivities into something of second nature. The wheels put into motion a system that involves all the elements of human nature at the same time, both spiritual and physical. And to be able to control them and extend them into the interior space of the body as well as the performance space requires time and effort. The Suzuki Method represents a solid foundation of continuity from which to probe the depths of our inner resources, which are in a state of continual regeneration. The Suzuki Method is a means to reach a goal. Its organic creativity liberates passions, unveils the drama, and heralds in the comedy; it generates the theatrical action, the catharsis. Action is passion and passion is what governs the character, what enables the actor, the individual to grow.

At the symposium Mr. Suzuki told us that he continues to teach his company because he loves them. Similarly, the effort made by Mr. Suzuki, Miss Saito, Secretary General of the Japan Performing Arts Foundation, and the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) to have us here is a lesson in being human and in social living. Organizing this symposium clearly shows that they wish us to maintain our human connections by way of the fundamental experience of working together on a stage. In closing, I would like to express how inspired I was by Mr. Suzuki’s explanation of the Japanese word *asobi* (when the mind and the body move into another world). This has helped me with understanding the training, working in the theatre, and living in society. So like the hill and the house sharing one space together, I feel more and more fulfilled day by day.

Works Cited

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