

Gesture and rhythm: the performing arts as disciplines of refinement

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The performing arts and the balance of body, mind and soul

In contemporary Western culture, there is a need to return to considering performative art forms as disciplines of refinement, as holistic educational pathways capable of weaving together the different aspects of the individual. In following this line of thinking, it is not enough to limit ourselves to the traditional dualism of mind and body. Rather, we need to consider the various components that cannot be unequivocally or simplistically reduced to cognition or physicality, such as imagination, memory, intuition, will, impulses, affection. All of these – interrelated – aspects also represent different levels of interpretation, or the different languages by which we all enter into contact with the world and each other. We begin with the premise that in the contemporary cognitive sciences, it makes little sense now to talk of body and mind as though these terms corresponded to genuinely separate, observable objects, or to separate regimes – the soma and the psyche. Rather, they represent integrated, interacting systems that lend themselves poorly to conceptual abstractions (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016). Yet the fact remains that, in the standard discourse, the terms “body” and “mind” continue to evoke a relatively precise meaning, and it is therefore not helpful to jettison them from the lexicon. What we propose is to supplement these two levels with at least a third that will serve as a conjunctive faculty between the cognitive dimension and that of the body, one that has been forgotten – or hidden – in contemporary discourse: that of the “soul”. In this sense, it is possible to explicate a connective level, a vehicle – or link – between the two poles of materiality and conceptualisation.

And though it is difficult, today, to speak of a relation between mind, body and soul, since most would hesitate to use the last of these terms in an academic context, it is important to recognise that the soul has a role in directing the cognitive processes of the imagination, which have such a central place in the performing arts in particular.

Today, “imagination” is treated as being synonymous with our facility for fantasy, but really it should be acknowledged as a broader cognitive faculty, one that is connected more explicitly with the image and the imaginary (Durand, 1999). For Corbin (2013), the world of images is underpinned by this imaginative faculty, which is the domain of the soul, and which offers a link, a connection, between the domain of thought and that of action, between the mind and the body.

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Here we shall not be dealing with imagination in the usual sense of the word: neither with fantasy, profane or otherwise, nor with the organ which produces imaginings identified with the unreal: nor shall we even be dealing exactly with what we look upon as the organ of esthetic creation. We shall be speaking of an absolutely basic function, correlated to a universe peculiar to it, a universe endowed with a perfectly “objective” existence and perceived precisely through the Imagination (Corbin, 2013, p. 3).

In this regard, in the modern age, the fields of education and pedagogy – as cultural environments and academic disciplines – have been left impoverished, certainly insofar as academics have focused on cognitive processes, on the education of the mind. It is the education of the intellect that has been championed, with a little room reserved for the training of the body to encourage the clean and healthy development of what is, after all, simply the *structure* that supports the psyche, as though the body were a sort of casing that is best kept whole and fully-operational if the mind is to be able to reason (i.e. function) properly. The soul, meanwhile, has been abandoned to the (religious) realm of confession, treated as a marginal concern if not outright as a fantasy for the weak-minded.

In contrast to the academic discipline of education, in the performing arts we have witnessed – especially in the last century – an extraordinary blossoming of self-awareness in terms of the role of performance as an art of transformation and holistic training, and thus as an instrument of great educational and pedagogical potential (Stanislavski, 2009; Mejerch’old, 2016; Artaud, 1998; Grotowski, 1968; Barba, 2003; Brook, 1996).

Over the last century, theatre researchers have attempted to elucidate the balance between the different components of the person, in some instances modelling the sentimental dimension, in others the physical, and others the mental aspect, only to reveal that these are ultimately in a state of reciprocal tension, with each part affecting, and being affected by, the other two. They have taught us that, to better command these faculties, the actor must constantly educate him or herself through the process we call *actor training*, a discipline – it turns out – that is open to the influence of the widest variety of processes of renewal and self-improvement, including the “Ways” of Eastern philosophies (Dō) and martial arts, which seek no less than the transformation – indeed the transfiguration and infinite improvement – of the individual.

The performing arts provide a programme, a pathway, of education – we may even say of initiation, or disciplination – that requires that we maintain this very combination of body, mind and soul and that, as such, constantly compel us towards the *integration* of these different components and associated languages.

There is a tendency, in the performing arts, towards a process of conditioning within a specific, structured context to present (in the sense of making present, in the here and now) a system of signs,

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a set of orchestrations. They are systems for communicating through *organic* signs, transmitting a meaning via the imaginal link of the soul. These disciplines are precisely defined by a structured context in which a system of symbols is able to reveal signs of transformation (Mezirow, 1991, 2009) within the process of educating the person to overcome his or her constraints.

Indeed, the sign, the gesture, is never purely corporeal but passes through all the dimensions of the person, uniting him or her with the world and with other people.

The physical gesture, when incorporated into a system of performative art (in an analogous fashion to what happens in systems of liturgy), is a sign with the power to transform, in the first place because it imposes an alternative rhythm on the everyday flow of time – in the performing arts, each gesture belongs to a specific *liturgy* that is concerned with the everyday sense of time; it becomes an instrument for changing the very rhythm of the flow of time (Jousse, 1974)

– and in the second place, because it alters the relationship and the dynamics between the performer and the audience.

Rite and rhythm: time

Performance, in the performing arts, is a system of signs that imposes order on time, as though to counter its destructive, dissipative aspect. The dynamic tension between time and the gesture-sign is central to processes of initiation and the realm of ritual: the physical gesture enacted in dance and theatre, indeed in religion, constitutes a ritual: that moment in which the relationship between time's aspect as destroyer – bringer of the dissolution of the self, of death – and the constructive nature of time as memory – which is to say the permanence, repetition and condensation of tradition – is vivified, instilled with life, made present.

Time can either lead unequivocally and directly to the end of each individual (in the nihilist world view), or it can turn back on itself, retrace its steps, re-traverse the experience, retrieve it, repeat it, bestowing concentrated instances of eternity and producing a well of earned or gifted time to counter the natural degeneration of each single existence.

This extra time, stolen from the finiteness of our destiny, can be considered at either the level of the individual, or at that of the collective. With the individual, we can find the power of regeneration in processes of rebirth, restarting, transformation: as we have mentioned, paths of refinement or initiation, programmes of disciplinarian. At the level of the collective, memory becomes the place where practices of collective transformation settle and become established, practices that are incarnated in our traditions and by which the transmission of culture and praxis are made concrete, become history. The role of culture is to discover and preserve the transhistorical, transcultural dimension of such diverse traditions, as a path to the symbolic and material concept of tradition

itself.

Ritual and rhythm: the transformation of relationships

A performer should not seek to transmit content (for that, a text is sufficient); rather, he or she should attempt to create an encounter within a specific space, a potential, liminal area in which people can share meaning. As Turner has shown, in the communal activities of society meaning is mediated by performative acts, performances that serve to transform contexts, to represent in social dramas, to reconfigure new equilibriums, to create moments of *communitas* (Turner, 1982, 1986). Performance offers itself as a ritual with the potential to represent changes in the dynamics, relationships and positions of power in community contexts.

By harnessing the system of representation, performance can create an essentialised depiction of a moment of crisis in the community, a social drama. By allowing us to see more, to see something that is presented outside of ourselves, rather than projected by our own preconceptions, the shared understanding of this representation allows us to form an awareness of what is happening. At the same time, performance does something, it transforms, not in the simple sense of revealing, but rather by activating a system that produces an effect on the community.

[...] life-crisis rituals, the most transformative kind of rites of passage, already exhibit a marked degree of generalization - they are the fairly late product of social reflexivity. They confer on the actors, by nonverbal as well as verbal means, the experiential understanding that social life is a series of movements in space and time, a series of changes of activity, and a series of transitions in status for individuals. They also inscribe in them the knowledge that such movements, changes and transitions are not merely marked but also effected by ritual. Ritual and juridical procedures represent germinative components of social drama, from which, I suggest, many performative and narrative modes of complex culture derive. [...] The performance transforms itself. True, as I said, the rules may “frame” the performance, but the “flow” of action and interaction within that frame may conduce to hitherto unprecedented insights and even generate new symbols and meanings, which may be incorporated into subsequent performances. (Turner, 1982, p. 78-79).

Performing arts and play

Imagination is the driving force behind a form of knowledge that is capable of transforming dynamics, relationships and contexts in a more implicit, but no less effective, way than the mechanical forces of nature, or the persuasive forces of reason. It is the performing arts that give the faculty of imagination a communally recognised, socialised form.

I have argued that these art forms, with their balance of freedom and discipline, are the continuation of the play of children (Antonacci, 2012a), which is not merely a form of entertainment but a noble, and in a deeper sense, a human activity equivalent to love and work.

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Play is a special state that is the wellspring of culture (Huizinga, 1980), a symbol of an innate mode of being, a way of being in the world (Fink, 1992), and has roots in initiation and ritual magic (Lanzi, 2012). It is a way of being that has the semblance of fiction, playfulness, transformation: all characteristics associated with the performing arts.

Play is an activity that marries freedom – since one cannot play if one is not free – with discipline, in the sense of the wilful submission to a set of rules that have no other purpose than facilitating the game itself. It is said, for this reason, that play is autotelic, it is its own end (Fink, 1992; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

This tension between rule and freedom is common to all performative arts that share with play the quality of being free, arts that, indeed, offer freedom of choice yet are bound or regulated by expressive techniques much like the rules of a game. Games and performing arts are also free insofar as they stand outside the logic of means and ends that characterises the world of production and consumption. They are freed from commerce, with its primary and material necessities, and are practised freely as a symbol of freedom in the face of the controlling hold of our needs.

This contradictory tension between individual freedom and rules, discipline, technique, is shared by any process of education and initiation that – albeit situated amidst the norms, directions and discipline of a tradition – must be incarnated on each new occasion in a unique, unrepeatable story driven entirely by its own liberty.

The dynamic tension between rule and freedom, between tradition and innovation, represents the *drama* (the choice of a word imbued with lyrical and theatrical potential is deliberate) inherent in every individual story that is incorporated into the collective narrative.

In the language of the Jungian school of depth psychology, each individual must, as a matter of priority, *individuate* him or herself.

However, it is not enough to envision an isolated individuating journey. Each path has to be incorporated within the project of the community, before gradually emerging as a means of moving beyond the limits of the self, towards the other or towards the transcendent, depending on one's traditions.

And although such paths are each situated within a specific historical and geographical setting with its own ritualised and codified traditions, they bear a common stamp that allows us to consider a number of invariable qualities in transhistorical and transcultural terms.

All the same, this path, or journey, remains a process of individual germination that is effected for the first and only time for each new person: an unrepeatable springtime, in the course of the immeasurable springtimes of the cosmos.

The tension between the collective and the individual is a familiar aspect of dance and theatre. In these disciplines, the script – or choreography – that is reproduced is unchanging, identical to itself

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in every detail, yet it is required to impact upon the audience every evening as though new, as though performed for the first time, because it is the first time for *that* encounter between the audience and performer.

Before it can impact upon the audience, however, the performance must first impact upon the performer, because if he or she does not experience it fully and authentically, it cannot be credible for the spectator, who will duly lose interest.

This is why we need a system of effective practices that allow performers to maintain a vivifying tension with the “script”, to bring it to life, make it present, at each new performance (Barba, 2003).

Education as passing beyond the self

To what end do we undertake, incarnate, these paths of education-initiation-refinement-training? To avoid falling into self-referential, onanistic practices – the idolatry of the self – it is necessary to think in terms of passing beyond the self. These are not easy disciplines to undertake, to master: if pursued with painstaking patience, inner strength, rigour, discipline, they can lead to a condition of power that risks bubbling over into a state of pride and arrogance, and thus falling miserably short of the principal objective, the disciplining of the self.

For this reason, action must be grafted to a text that is more than a mere pretext, hence the recourse to tradition or the adhesion to an external textual reference or other-directed choreography. And even more so, it is for this reason that these disciplines must be undertaken as a gift of the self to the audience. Grotowski speaks of the “holy actor” (1968), not in the confessional sense, but in the sense of the actor who enters deep within himself to give of himself entirely, within the scene, text, script or whatever, in order that the spectator senses, perceives and absorbs its meaning.

If theatre is an encounter (Grotowski, 1968), the relationship between actor and spectator is revealed in a connection, a point of contact, that imparts transformative momentum to each party. However, this process is not the sharing of content; content is only a vehicle between the individuals involved. The relationship between them is a living process concerned with dynamics, actions, emotions and images, over and above the information and words.

Theatre and dance make the invisible visible. They are the means by which an ineffable meaning is given form, is made visible, comprehensible. And the performer invests all his or her mastery and technique to become the vehicle for this message. He or she becomes a figure of connection, via the link of the imagination.

Considered in this light, the poetics of performance becomes one of surpassing, of passing beyond humanity, as though it were the production of life. The entire oeuvre and, indeed, the life of Antonin Artaud (2001) are illuminating in this respect, as they embody a process of refinement that,

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rather than inflating, manages to be kenotic, a stripping away at the self.

Approached this way, the performing arts can be pathways to a sort of sainthood inasmuch as they merge with the processes of liberation that are inherent to the poet, the child, the madman: all figures of liberty because they are free of the binding dependence on the judgements, demands and needs of others, and other obstacles to the psyche, and because they are capable of unleashing, on the real world, an amplified, extra-ordinary vision.

These art forms, however, do not emerge from “spontaneistic” practices; this sort of “lay sainthood”, the devotion to one’s art, is not achieved through naive naturalism, or idealised purity. Rather, it is cultivated in the form of freedom from habit, from convention, from prejudice, from the chains of ideology, from fear. Grotowski defined it in terms of the “eradication of blocks”, as a “*via negativa*”: this meaning of holy is related to mastering oneself, more than a way of salvation or redemption. This is described as a negative way, a

“via negativa - not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks. [...] The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not want to do that, but rather resigns from not doing it” (1968, p. 17).

We can interpret Stanislavski’s work on physical action in his second period of research in much the same terms, so too with Mejerch’old’s “biomechanic actor” and the “acting machine” of Carmelo Bene, to cite just a few examples among the leading proponents of modern theatre (Antonacci 2012b).

A performance is analogous to any ritual event, insofar as it expresses an unspeakable, ineffable knowledge that is given form to impose a rhythm on experience and orient it in time within a paradoxical continuum, that which emerges from the connection between a past that has ceased to be – because it is finished, fixed, dead – and a future that lacks the expressive forms it needs to be conceived. Situated somewhere in this fluctuation is *performance* (and, equally, ritual) as *present*, both in the sense of making a meaning present, giving it form in a specific point in time and with a regular, regulated rhythm, but also in the sense of performance as *a present*, a gift. Ritual can only find its rhythms in the forms of tradition if that tradition is somehow brought to life, if it is forward-facing, designed for an existence that is still in development – searching for a radical, authentic path of initiation – and that is prepared to give freely of itself.

Training, in the performing arts, asks us to amplify our control of our behaviour to reach a greater, more expansive and holistic awareness that combines the various planes of experience – physical, mental, psychic, spiritual, mnemonic, intuitive, linguistic/discursive. It aspires to the education of the person who inhabits the present moment, who is primed to pass beyond the self.

We must therefore not let ourselves be intimidated, or be frightened to speak of what is unsayable, even if this leaves us open to the accusations of mysticism that Stanislavski feared (quote in Barba,

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2003). Not least because, today, we are witnessing a worrying return to the soma and the neuron, and thus to an entirely deterministic, positivist level of explanation.

It falls to us, today, to recognise the function of the performing arts – and ritual – as a harmonic connection between the individual and history, between freedom and regulation, between the material and the spiritual, and to promote that alternative, spiritualistic materialism – or embodied spiritualism – which practice and experimentation have managed to preserve from time immemorial, in spite of the codification of individual disciplines.

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