

# The importance of physical training for actors

Geta-Violeta RĂVDAN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *We live in the time of total performances, where the status of a total actor brings forward the body of the actor as the conveyor of creative impulses. Thus, the actor's corporality becomes, to themselves, the very object of a fervent, continuous search towards its discovery and development as a means of expression. This aspiration calls for the usage of a deep, long-term way of introspection, self-discovery and awareness of one's own limits and energies of physical dimensions. Constantly sustained physical training by the actor is meant to support the creation of one's own extraordinary corporality, characterized by attributes such as: expressiveness, self-knowledge, freedom of expression, awareness, vigilance, creativity, coordination, motor refinement aso.*

**Key-words:** *corporality; total actor; corporal expression; training; expressiveness.*

## 1. Introduction

„The untrained body, like the sculptor's marble, can express nothing but its own limitations.”<sup>2</sup> Although it is known that, ever since the theatrical representations of Antiquity, movement has always increased dramatism by changing the aesthetics of shows, there have been times in the history of theater when the corporal plasticity of the actor has been ignored. It is thought that the desire for perfection of every separate art has led to a rupture in the world of arts at a certain point. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one can notice, within arts, a tendency to return to origins and towards both a syncretism between arts, as well as between arts and science. We may talk of a cyclical evolution of art, wherewith one starts from an initially undifferentiated art, followed by the artist's trial to specialize in a unique direction, thus obtaining the differentiation of arts by establishing rule systems and symbols pertaining to each of them separately. By following the trajectory of the ascending evolutionary spiral, one reaches the initial departure point but on a neatly superior level, the syncretism obtained by creating the harmony of various elements reunited into a whole which respects and highlights the particular in order to generate unique artistic formulas.

In the present day, many directors practice the overlapping of choreography and theater, which forces the actors to open themselves towards new ways of interpretation meant to lead the performance towards a total show. Sometimes, the text is left aside in favor of movement, which is why the actor must appropriate various corporal techniques through which they can develop their corporal abilities, which (essentially) carry a fundamental role in the building of a character. In performances that emphasize movement, the actor builds their character by subjecting themselves to a double effort: first, they must activate and mobilize their cognitive and affective processes and second, they must intensify their metabolism due to the muscular activity needed for movement. The great challenge of a performer is to perceive and estimate as precisely as possible the intensity of the two types of effort in order to be both expressive and performant.

Nowadays, we talk about a total actor, who owns an acting technique which, besides vocal abilities, also includes motor control and corporal expression. But the courage to use

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Arts of the University “Ovidius” from Constanta, ghuncanu@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Lust, Annette. 2002. *From the Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Lanham. p.70.

one's body wisely (and in accordance to stage situation) with its unique particularities requires time. Obtaining corporal expressivity requires serious training through which one learns how to consciously direct one's body by intertwining mental and motor training. To these, we may add:

- discovering and accepting one's own corporality;
- learning relaxation and breathing techniques;
- obtaining corporal control that involves: being aware of one's own physical, mental and physiological limits, of perceptions, of corporal segments' coordination, of body weight and, by default, of balance;
- openness towards trying new auditive, tactile and visual sensations;
- correct time-space perception;
- increasing focus and attention;
- knowing and deepening expressive means.

Through such an aware and correctly directed training, the actor will discover their own body with its limits, strength and energy, which they will subsequently be able to use on stage. By learning to control muscular energy and to utilize it most efficiently, the actor will be able to individualize their corporal training with time. In this context, where being aware of one's own corporality and gaining gestural refinement are premises within contemporary theater, the subject of the actor's corporality can only be an endeavor which supports the need to study these aspects more profoundly.

## 2. Premises of the actor's corporality

A harmonious body has been regarded, ever since Ancient Greece, as a balance between physical and spiritual qualities, directed towards perfection. *Mens sana in corpore sano* remains an expression that signifies the aspiration of a wise man towards a constant interrelation between a healthy mind and a healthy body. This means: a balance between the *psyche*, the immaterial spirit, regarded since ancient times as the one that animates the *soma*, the material body, a fundamental relationship between the body and the soul. If we relate that to acting, we can state that good bodily health will give the actor optimal development and balance of emotional mechanisms. Also, the continual psyche-soma process leads the actor towards a deeper knowledge of self and of the environment.

Since every person is unique in their ways of manifesting their feelings, actors are so much more prone to releasing artistic expressions according to their own personality. Each body is unique in its way, loaded with its own personal history, the culture of its country, the social class it comes from. This aspect can be best seen in dancers, when particular elements can be noticed in different dancers within the same choreography. If dance allows the performers to use their well-trained body, actors often must give up on their own body, however beautiful it may look. They must, in the first place, find and put on the *body* of the character. The actor's corporal expressiveness should not and cannot be identical with that of the dancer, because the actor has the task of reflecting their unique personality through their body and not just submit themselves to conventions and closed off techniques. Which is why adequate physical training will help the actor obtain the freedom necessary for its manifestations. Therefore, a harmonious training of the actor means a constant balance between the intellect, soul, will and corporality, the actor being represented by their voice, body and mind.

Beginning with the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the actor's body starts raising questions. The actor will surpass their role as a reciter, becoming a living presence at the service of artistic expression. Great pioneers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theater will manage to inspire new ways to make theater in the light of new significations. Slowly, new value systems will oppose to the

spirit of the times. They raise against the current that had overcome theater in general, by breaking the rigor of certain patterns of thought of a closed off society. They will reduce the theatrical show to its essence by ignoring conventions, hierarchies and even, many times, by breaking the bond with literature. Their theatre is a commonly conceived creation, but under the authority of an accepted leader – the director. But the main entity from which creation stems remains the actor, nor the director! They all get into contact with Asian culture and art, becoming inspired from the secrets of the Asian scene, as it is well known that Asian theater is the one to address both the senses and the spirit.

The great theoretician and dramatist of Nō theater, Zeami<sup>3</sup>, pleaded since the 14<sup>th</sup> century for a continuous training of the actor with themselves, this being, he said, the safest way by which the actor can cause emotions within the spectator and constantly surprise the latter. His advice and words amaze because of their current applicability and general validity for all actors around the world. This important name of Asian theater will influence, among others, the great western reformers of theater, K. S. Stanislavski (1863-1938), J. Grotowski (1933-1999), E. Barba (n.1936), V. Meyerhold (1874-1940). As a common point with Zeami's theories, they will highlight, in their theatrical endeavors, the organicity (naturalness) of the theatrical gesture, and the text spoken by Grotowski's actors will be pronounced the same as in Nō theater, under the form of an incantation. On the other hand, if with Stanislavski movements are natural, all movements of the Nō actor are stylized and coded.

Although, at the beginning of elaborating his method, Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavski would place the actor's physicality last, after the understanding of the text and the psychological analysis, towards the end of his life (between 1936-1937), he will remedy his own considerations by placing physicality before all other processes. Thus, characters are first approached from the point of view of the physical manners of the character, such as walking, posture, make up etc. Stanislavski will discover that mastering the body will bring the actor ease in more deeply understanding the inner state of the character. Although he will advocate for a thorough physical training of the actor (such as for a sportsman or dancer), he prefers an art of profound living for his actors (thinking more about the psychological motivation of a movement than about the movement itself) instead of an art of representation. As far as the permanent training of the actor is concerned, absolutely all of the great theoreticians and pedagogues of the era will support the idea that the actor must constantly reinvent themselves, which can only be done through sustained work throughout their entire career on stage. Besides vocal exercises, he also sustains the need for acrobatic exercises, fencing, gymnastics (also found in other reformers such as Meyerhold, Lecoq, Chekov etc.) and ballet. Through her dance, Isadora Duncan will inspire Stanislavski in developing his actor's movement. Emile Jacques Dalcroze's system will also open his curiosity for creating an awareness of movement and for inner justification and he will borrow the benefic effects given by muscular relaxation from the same system.

By placing himself against psychological naturalism, Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold (1874-1940) claims the need of a culture of the body, "a culture of corporal expressivity which perfects the only instrument of production the actor has"<sup>4</sup> In other words, through formal discipline, the actor builds their own system of physical expression with the help of the body, their main means of expressivity on stage. His biomechanics<sup>5</sup> will once more accentuate

---

<sup>3</sup> Motokiyo, Zeami sau Seami (1363-1443) is the most important dramatist, theoretician and actor of Nō theater. With his father, he will play a decisive role in building the foundation of this theater. He writes over 200 plays, of which 90 are currently part of the repertoire of Nō theaters.

<sup>4</sup> Borie, Monique. 2019. *Corp de piatră, corp de carne*. București: Nemira, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Biomechanics will become the expressive foundation of its theater, having as a fundamental law the idea that the entire body is a participant to all human movements. Corporal plastics did not completely exclude speech, it only helped words by giving them new significations (expressing inner states, feelings). Actors were forced to hum during movement (vocal

this idea, but he will not be the only director of his era to give importance to the physical dimension of the actor. Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba will both sustain this disciplinary necessity based on training for the actor's body, in order to obtain an expressive shape. They agree that, through their body, the actor has the possibility to create shapes and that the body has its own memory, preserving an ancestral practice of forms from ancient theatre.

Grotowski believes that breaking free from the stereotypes and blockages in the actor's everyday body and obtaining a body meant for art can be done through a "conscious search within our organism for the shapes of which we foresee the contours"<sup>6</sup>. He goes even further, launching the idea that the presence of live impulses within the actor's body makes it easier to interpret text. In other words, theatric creation is tied to a developed relationship between organicity and verbal expression.

For Barba, the purpose of the actor's training is gaining corporal expressivity by searching a reinvented, recomposed corporal shape. After this training, the spectator will not notice the technique used for preparation, only the living body that the actor has acquired. His actors work to build muscles, but this does not cancel the living energy of their bodies. Barba and Meyerhold remind us of the Asian actors who inherit, for generations, a series of shapes that they use. The two plead for a western actor who should develop a set of movements and gestures on their own, a physical sheet fixed in trainings which can be passed along between actors, with only their inner charge varying.

### **3. The body, a „plastic instrument at the service of the art of movement”<sup>7</sup>**

The actor of our days is a total actor, regarded as an orchestra, having not just an acting technique, but also vocal and motor abilities and corporal expression. Gestural or behavioral stereotypes leading to robotization can be corrected through proper training. When properly guided, the actor can find their own corporal identity characterized by their own limits and, in time, they can individualize their corporal training; "...the actor should know their own body very well, because this is the instrument they are playing. They should know their body as well as a violinist knows their violin."<sup>8</sup>

It is necessary that the actor know their own body well before using it as an instrument on stage, overcoming the barriers imposed by its limits. This entails an attempt to consciously create contact with one's own body, understand its characteristics and availabilities and interact with other bodies. Their physical expression will improve by knowing their own body, its energy, strength and limits. The actor, as well as the dancer and the sportsman, needs to learn how to control their muscular energy and distribute it efficiently, this being the foundation from which the actor can act and react.

If, in their private life, the actor's body obeys a technique conditioned by culture, social status and professional development through which something in particular is communicated, the actor uses a different kind of corporal technique on stage, where the body is transformed, ready to amaze. Everyday technique does not require a major use of energy, while stage technique is based precisely on increased effort, with large amounts of energy used even for the slightest purpose.

Psychologists have been saying for decades that physical training helps rebuild or maintain emotional balance. Actors constantly use and even "abuse" the emotional aspect, which is why they need this balancing even more by using physical exercise and especially by

---

impulses would have to synchronize with physical actions) or use speech as a music sheet. It seems that, more than with any other director, the actor is placed in the spotlight, reflecting the director's outlook through their body language.

<sup>6</sup> Borie, Monique, *op. cit.*, p. 47

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118

<sup>8</sup> Sarvari, Eugenia. 2015. *Spre un teatru al formelor spiritual.* București: Tracus Arte, p. 163.

undergoing constant physical training. Maintaining one's health and one's physical training should become a real responsibility for the actor. The quickness with which the actor can accomplish a motor task required by the director/choreographer highly depends on the abilities acquired with sustained training. Physical training first of all helps undo physical and emotional blockages that may appear when a choreographic moment appears in the professional life of the actor.

"If you perform daily physical exercise, focusing on all levels of consciousness, clarity and relationships, the actor's body will finally become your natural state. Even if you are required to do something completely new and unfamiliar, your body will react correctly. It will automatically find the easy, right way of doing almost anything."<sup>9</sup> (Lorna Marshall)

Just like, with musicians, certain areas of the brain are developed after intense study, to be more precise, the proportion of cells specific to musical activity changes, so can modifications happen within actors after corresponding physical training. Although our body is maneuvered by the brain, neurologists affirm that physical training contributes to the development of the brain, just as muscles help the heart as well.

In recent years, a new term is being used: brain neuroplasticity. This corresponds to the idea that states that our life experiences continuously change our brain by new neurons being born or by new connections between them being created. Therefore, the brain has the capacity to adapt and repeated experiences can modify the brain. That is precisely what can happen within the actor's corporal training, where they will acquire new qualities meant to help them in their actions on stage. Along with stimulating the sensorial, mobility, motricity, the experience of a specific training of the actor means more than artistic development, it is also a personal development of the subject. Through various techniques and instruments, the individual who is involved in phenomena characterized by play and creativity can achieve a deep knowledge of their own body and mind, thus acquiring an easiness in communicating, trust in their own instincts and creative abilities.

When the actor has difficulties discovering the essence of a character, it often helps if they perform a logical, concrete, physical action that corresponds to their character, and the feeling will soon show.

"Where do you start? From simple physical actions born, in their turn, from your character's behavior logic. The inner line of the role is also built this way. Do you feel this approach? Do not touch the feelings, start with physical actions."<sup>10</sup>

Adequate corporal training will help the actor discover their own body, starting with the essential element, the spine, then the legs and finally, the arms. Through this endeavor of personal discovery, the actor reaches an understanding and discovery of the specific mechanisms on which movement is based. They may start with exercises performed standing, then continue with other exercises on the floor only to go back up vertically. The two planes (vertical and horizontal) and the heights (low, medium and high) are alternated. A straight spine is obtained by feeling the neck well stretched, thus giving the impression of it being pulled up (in a different kind of expression, the union of heaven and earth).

Just as a sportsman, a dancer, a musician train and practice consistently, the actor also has a duty to maintain their freshness. Actors working with Stanislavski understood the need to retreat inside work laboratories occasionally, where they would train the instruments necessary for stage creation. Even more so, the mind-body abilities of puppeteer actors must be maintained through constant training. They probably need a more intense corporal training than drama actors. Uncomfortable, most of the time contorted positions, where a handler is forced to play for minutes at a time, the weight they need to support, the limited acting space all put their physical condition to the test.

---

<sup>9</sup> Oida, Yoshi and Marshall, Lorna. 2009. *Actorul invizibil*. Oradea: ArtSpect, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Banu, George. 2016. *Repetițiile și teatrul reinnoit – secolul regiei*. București: Nemira, p. 58.

The actor can feel in their body the dynamics of action and text and muscles can express psychological conflicts. Therefore, if the actor learns to control their muscular energy, they will, in time, learn to distribute it correctly as well. Thus, inner energy will manifest according to body movements. Their potential for physical manifestation will increase if they know their own body well and, with this self-knowledge, they will better perceive their own limits, strength and energy. If we look at the body as piano keys, the way notes are separate from each other, so does the body, which is formed of separate segments, assemble by creating shapes.

Although there is no perfect recipe for such a training, sports (along with dance) remain an important source of inspiration for the actor's physical training. But one must take into account the following: if, on one hand, the intense study of dance helps obtain corporal expressivity, on the other hand it risks imposing an exaggerated mannerism on the actor; sports-inspired exercise, practiced without measure and without guidance from a specialist, risk to transform the actor into a much more rigid, unaesthetic individual than a malleable, pleasant one on stage. The actor's training is not identical to the one of a sportsman, who needs to perfect their abilities; the actor needs to work more on their sensibility, because by working solely with the mind and body, an actor will not be able to convey to the spectator the entire array of feelings experienced within a role.

#### 4. Conclusions

The harmonious combination of dance, theater and music, present ever since ancient Greeks, is encountered more and more often in the art of contemporary shows. Perhaps with the desire to perfect each one individually, they separated becoming arts in themselves, but are presently looking for bridges in order to intertwine again. The suggestive force of words and gestures leads to a formula of a total show, through which uncensored emotions and instincts, hidden deep within the subconscious, may be revealed. More and more often, we can observe, in theater shows, non-verbal moments transformed into stage movement (or even dance) or the giving up on dance (in dance shows) and heeding place to text or other dramatic elements. Although we appear to permanently remain the same, we are all subject to change and permanent transformation. We relate to a self-perception of ourselves, by which we guide ourselves in the tumult of our changes. Following the same train of thought, the contemporary actor can only be a fervent creator, always different, modifying their expression with each new role and by a new approach on their own body and its interaction with the other partner bodies. The body's energy, knowing one's own internal forces which can be mobilized, discovering one's limits and abilities are aspects on which the actor's corporality relies.

Actors permanently ask themselves what they can offer the spectator in order to win them over with every role they approach. The ephemeral character of theater and of the world in general forces them to transform themselves permanently, to develop and discover new ways and instruments through which they can bring life and people in front of the public. Living in a society characterized by continuous and rapid change, the contemporary actor can only appropriate all the means of stage expression, being forced to permanently adapt to the conditions and requirements of their times. Which moreover make the actor feel like they have to juggle all the expressive means of their own body, following the tendency towards the statute of a total actor, which is a practice used ever since the most ancient times. In this century where the entire theatric phenomenon is overcome by syncretism, theater creators, just like their forefathers, are in permanent search for new expressions.

Rehearsals are the point in which all future actions of the actor on stage are studied and reevaluated, to the extent it is necessary in order to choose the optimum option through which they will express what is desired. Physical manifestation on stage requires detailed

preparation of the necessary balance between body and mind (psychological – motor). The body is not capable of appropriating even the slightest movement without receiving orders from the brain to do so. We cannot move without thinking in advance about what we are about to execute in terms of movement.

Automatisms are installed after a long period of work and after a long experience in motricity. Dancers understand best the need and advantages of training over a span of several years in order to gain control over the body. It is true, there is no such thing as perfection and even less so a perfect movement, but the only means of obtaining corporal expressivity is found in studying and knowing one's own body. That is how stage freedom is obtained, only through precision gained through repetition and countless attempts to find a final form.

Given one's desire to obtain exactness and refinement for every gesture or movement they perform, the actor must educate their body towards being aware of its every movement. Being aware of one's own movements entails training through which the actor:

- improves coordination of their bodily segments;
- obtains an increase of their speed of reaction and spontaneity, strength and physical endurance;
- develops their ability to work with a partner and as part of a team;
- learns to relax;
- obtains an increase in muscular tonus, in articular and muscular mobility;
- becomes aware of the importance of breathing and acquires the ability to use it efficiently;
- obtains a series of light skills which are necessary in stage practice (walking, light jumps, rolling, running and various postures, low difficulty acrobatic elements);

Various corporal techniques which increase muscular strength, mobility, speed of reaction, rhythmicity, support the actor into discovering a different kind of body than their everyday one. Maintaining physical training as part of the actor's routine will, in time, lead to obtaining motor uniqueness adapted to every stage situation. Constant, aware physical training, different from the one performed by sportsmen or dancers, must be a continuous process, spread all throughout one's entire career. The lack of constant training will lead to a loss of motor abilities acquired by the actor or to an insufficient capacity to develop a character to its real proportion.

Various training methods which are specially conceived to develop the actor's corporality show the necessity to include a few aspects as part of physical training: using as diverse an array of exercise as possible; diversifying work methods by inviting in specialists who have different work methods; changing the work space at certain intervals in order to adapt to space and time more rapidly.

The success of actors, scriptwriters and directors who are trained in theater schools and who understood the need for their own complete preparation makes us more entitled to support the idea that physical training is indispensable to the actor. In the entire world, those who aspire to the title of a total actor study, alongside the history of theater, singing, logopedics, foreign languages, yoga, acrobatics, dance and sports, all being certain that the actor must be in remarkable physical shape. In this context, the need for physical training is highlighted as a component of great importance on the difficult road of the actor towards discovering and developing their own corporal expressivity.

## 5. References

### Books:

- Banu, George. 2016. *Repetițiile și teatrul reînnoit – secolul regiei*. București: Nemira.
- Lust, Annette. 2002. *From the Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Lanham.
- Oida, Yoshi and Marshall, Lorna. 2009. *Actorul invizibil*. Oradea: ArtSpect.
- Sarvari, Eugenia. 2015. *Spre un teatru al formelor spiritual*. București: Tracus Arte.