

EMBODIED ACTING: COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS OF PERFORMANCE

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This dissertation applies current thinking in cognitive science to elements of the actor's process of preparing and performing a role. Findings in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and linguistics radically challenge the dualistic concepts that have dominated acting theory since the early twentieth century, and suggest more holistic models of the actor's cognitive and expressive activities. Chapter 1 suggests how a vocabulary for nonverbal communication (nvc) drawn from social psychology can be used to analyze and describe actors' communicative behavior. Chapter 2 examines the relationship of thought, language and gesture by considering Lakoff and Johnson's (L & J) analysis of how conceptual thought is metaphorically shaped by the body's experiences in the physical world. This assessment is combined with David McNeill's theory that gestures are key ingredients in an "imagery-language dialectic" that fuels both speech and thought. Elements of both analyses are applied to Jacques Lecoq's actor training exercises. Chapter 3 investigates the actor's concepts of self and of character. This is supported by L & J's analysis of the metaphorical construction of self and of different selves, a description of the connectionist view of mind, Merlin Donald's proposition that mimesis is central to cognition, and Fauconnier and Turner's theory of conceptual blending. Aspects of Michael Chekhov's approach to character are considered in the light of these findings and theories. Chapter 4 addresses the actor's sense of identification with a character. I refer to work on proprioception, LeDoux's exploration of the neural foundations of self, and Gallese and others' work on "mirror

mechanisms” in the brain that provide an experiential dimension to action and emotion understanding. I suggest that these findings validate the effectiveness of Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Actions. Chapter 5 describes the findings of Antonio Damasio, Joseph LeDoux and psychologist Paul Ekman on emotion, and applies them to exercises created by Stanislavski, Strasberg, Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, and Susana Bloch. The Conclusion proposes a model of the theatrical act, and suggests ways in which actor training can be remodeled in the light of the information described.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	I
ABSTRACT.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
LIST OF TABLES	VIII
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	12
1.2 EMBODIED ACTING	18
1.3 WHY SHOULD THEATRE PEOPLE BE INTERESTED IN COGNITIVE STUDIES?	20
1.4 CHAPTER OVERVIEW	24
1.4.1 2.0 How does the actor communicate meaning non-verbally?	24
1.4.2 3.0 What is the relationship between thought, physical action and language?	25
1.4.3 4.0 How does the actor create a character?.....	26
1.4.4 5.0 How does the actor identify with the character?	27
1.4.5 6.0 How does the actor embody emotion in fictional circumstances?.....	28
1.4.6 7.0 Conclusion	29

2.0	HOW DOES THE ACTOR COMMUNICATE MEANING NON-VERBALLY?..	30
3.0	WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT, PHYSICAL ACTION, AND LANGUAGE?	53
4.0	HOW DOES THE ACTOR CREATE A CHARACTER?	80
5.0	HOW DOES THE ACTOR IDENTIFY WITH THE CHARACTER?.....	113
6.0	HOW DOES THE ACTOR EMBODY EMOTION IN FICTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES?	145
7.0	CONCLUSION.....	186
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	192

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Categories for defining nvc.....	39
Table 2. Analysis of nvc in "Earnest"	41
Table 3. Laban Efforts as behavioral actions.....	51
Table 4. Lecoq's Seven Levels of Tension.....	172

1.0 INTRODUCTION

... imagination bodies forth / The form of things unknown ...

A Midsummer Night's Dream, V 1 14

Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially on our bodies ...

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh

It all happens at once. It has to. The impulse, the breath, the speech, the gesture, the walk, the awareness of the guy in the fifth row who's nodding off, so I punch the end of the line that bit harder. And because I punched harder, my partner is surprised and jolted into her response with that extra calorie of spontaneity, which crackles the air, and the audience almost imperceptibly sits up, drawn in, more alert.

It all happens at once.

And then it's gone.

It's the nature of live performance. Beautiful, ugly, embodied, ephemeral, frustrating, blissful, gone... but living in people's memories (when we've done our jobs well). And we hope that the memories are strong enough to get us the next job. Naturally, we want to do the best we can, but even more perplexing than the nature of performance itself is the question of training for it. How on earth does one train in a process that simultaneously combines all the features of living real life? Even thought? The obvious answer would be to live life, but the vast majority of

people placed in front of an audience and asked to “be themselves” have the utmost difficulty in behaving naturally. They stammer and mumble, their muscles stiffen, they move awkwardly. Clearly, the ability to perform is a specialized one, incorporating features beyond those used to live everyday life. What is the relationship of acting to real life? What features do they share? What distinguishes them from one another? I’m going to attempt to answer these questions through combining my own professional experience as an actor and director with insights gained from the field of cognitive studies.

The germ of the idea for this dissertation appeared when I was studying English Literature at Oxford. At that time in England, training in acting was considered a vocational activity, and didn’t merit a degree of any sort. Inspired by Peter Brook’s The Ik, and Tadesuz Kantor’s Wielopol Wielopol, The Marx Brothers, Max Wall, and Morecambe and Wise, I was sure at that point that my future lay in theatre, but I had been persuaded by my teachers and parents to take up my Oxford place instead of going to drama school. Oxford didn’t have a theatre program (and still doesn’t), and the study of drama was considered a component of Literature. The prevailing attitude towards live performance was that it offered an interesting perspective on a written text, but wasn’t worthy of study in its own right. Although I was heavily involved in university ‘dramatic societies,’ performing and directing both contemporary and classic plays, I felt dissatisfied with my studies, and didn’t really know why.

I had a sort of theatrical epiphany when I saw a performance by a group called Moving Picture Mime show. They performed three long mime pieces, one with full-face ‘larval’ masks, and two in a cartoon mime style. I was thrilled to see what could be done without costumes, props or... words! - and had a vision of what could happen if this level of physical expertise could be applied to scripts. In a state of fervor, I sat down to write a manifesto for this new

theatre that would use body language to make plays vibrant and accessible – but couldn't get beyond three sentences. This was puzzling and frustrating –the idea *felt* so real and evident, but resisted being put in to words. Looking back, I realize that I just didn't know enough about theatre. Following urgent but inchoate intuitions, I steadfastly ignored missives from the Careers Office about a future in publishing or the Foreign Office, and on graduating, started to work as an actor.

In the four years following my graduation I was involved in a wide range of performance styles, giving myself a practical apprenticeship. I started a street clown trio with Simon McBurney, who was then studying at Jacques Lecoq's school in Paris, and who went on to start Theatre de Complicite. This was a crash course in physical communication: we learned what worked by counting up our takings at the end of the day. We toured around the UK in an ailing Alfa Romeo, and got picked up to be the opening act for a gothic punk band called Bauhaus. Which was the end of us as a trio! I performed in the first show by the new Almeida theatre company, played percussion in a pop band, and did a yearlong tour of an agitprop piece about unemployment. I started the 1982 Theatre Company with Neil Bartlett, who later went on to run the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. We performed Brecht and Shakespeare in an imagistic and deconstructionist way, touring the UK, Europe, Canada, and the USA, before being invited to become company in residence at the University of Essex.

During this period I attended a workshop run by Dario Fo, and as a result went to train at his summer school in Italy, subsequently being invited back to teach. Through my association with Fo, the 1982 Company was invited to present the English language premiere of his solo show Mistero Buffo. This was based on the historical figure of the *giulare* - a minstrel clown who performed comic versions of stories from the bible. I adapted the show for ensemble

performance, performed in it, and directed it. The show did very well at The Riverside Studios, and then transferred to The Tricycle Theatre before touring the UK. Having the opportunity to do many performances of the same piece alerted me to my limitations as a performer, and the need to get a thorough physical training.

Fortunately, I won an award from the French government that allowed me to go and train in Paris for a year. On Simon McBurney's advice, I trained with Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux, two teachers who had just left Lecoq's school and set up their own studio. The yearlong course was structured as a sequence of "*Stages*" focusing on topics such as clown, commedia, melodrama, and tragedy. Each day started with physical training, and was followed by improvisatory exercises in the relevant style. This training was foundational for me. I discovered the value of play and fundamental rules of physical performance –Lecoq's principle that everything moves, that one's body changes according to factors such as physical environment, levels of emotion, degree of will, and that, in a reflexive relationship, the skilled actor can use his or her body to create the illusion of these elements for the audience. I learnt that physical principles inform different styles of performance, and that stillness, rhythm, and tempo can create dramatic shape. Monika was at that time Peter Brook's Movement Director, and relayed many of his working practices to us as well as the key principle that she learnt from him - that theatre is the art of making the invisible visible. All of this wonderful information fed into the conviction that I had formed at Oxford, that the body is central to the communication of meaning in performance.

On my return to London from Paris, I created a solo theatre show about a Polish Count who lived in a cupboard, which I performed in England, Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East over a period of three years. I did more Shakespeare, and also started working with Theatre

de Complicite, which by this time was established enough to be invited to mount a season at the Almeida theatre, and to bring a production of Durrenmatt's The Visit into the National Theatre. While I enjoyed working with them, I wanted to start my own company, and did so in 1991. Over the course of seven years we created seven original shows, devising scripts through improvisations based on archetypal stories such as Don Quixote, Don Juan, the Fall of Lucifer. With support from the Arts Council, regional Arts Associations, and The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, we were able to create a new show each year and tour it in the UK before runs in London and at the Edinburgh Festival. During this period I also had the opportunity to train with Yoshi Oida and Master Nakamura in Noh theatre, Keith Johnstone in Improvisation, Antonio Fava in Commedia and Augusto Boal in the format that he called The Rainbow of Desire.

Throughout these different experiences, I was looking for ways to make theatre vital and accessible, to discover how words could be credibly expressed and integrated with movement to create visceral responses in audiences. Concurrently with my professional career, I had been teaching in a variety of contexts, from impromptu sessions with Moroccan street children to running workshops in conjunction with my company's shows, teaching at colleges in England and Europe, leading master classes with Monika Pagneux, training clowns at London's Circus Space, and actors on courses in conservatory programs in London. Moving beyond one-off workshops into longer courses made me reflect on what I was discovering in performances and my own training, and deepened my conviction that there were certain basic principles that underlie multiple styles of performance, and that these could be identified through the activities of the body. For example, it is true of both the Commedia performer and the actor working in the style of psychological realism that particular gestures can be expansive or contractive, their movements direct or indirect, postures closed or open. It is also true that audiences receive

information from these physical traits and make meaning from them, sometimes consciously, but generally through an unconscious process.

Moving to the States for the new millennium introduced me to a different world of theatrical knowledge. In the professional realm, I found a great reliance on Stanislavski and Method acting, and this emphasis on “internal” process helped me to explore the links between thought, feeling and expression. In the last nine years, I’ve directed fourteen productions, and acted in thirteen. These pieces have ranged from Shakespeare through psychological realism to multimedia image concerts. Similarly to my experience in Europe, I’ve recognized common principles that are present in a variety of styles, and also that among practitioners there is a lack of a practical vocabulary to talk about performance. We don’t have terms to describe elements of, or differentiations in, posture, gesture, tempo or the use of space, but these features are essential in communicating meaning, and are inextricably linked with the conceptual thought that Stanislavskian analysis deals in. Theatre is, of course, more than just saying the words... *how* we say them is just as much a communicator of meaning.

This brings me to the knowledge that helps to tie all of this together, and which gives a theoretical structure to the principles of performance that I have been uncovering in my practical experience. I realize that the focus on physical communication thus far may suggest a lack of attention to the “internal” elements involved in the acting process. However, in my own acting, I’ve been constantly aware of a reflexive relationship between physicality and thought and feeling. This phenomenological experience is one that many of my fellow performers have mentioned, yet has little acknowledgement in training methods, be they physically or psychologically oriented. (A significant exception is the program run by Stephen Wangh at NYU, beautifully described in his book *An Acrobat of the Heart*). The first clues that I had that

this phenomenon was being addressed by scientists came from reading Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence and Antonio Damasio's The Feeling of What Happens, but it was not until I was introduced to cognitive studies in my doctoral work at the University of Pittsburgh that I realized the full extent of the potential of cognitive science to illuminate the process of acting. Here at last is a range of empirically based research that acknowledges the centrality of physical experience in perception, cognition and expression, and offers insights into the mysterious processes of emotion, empathy and imagination that an actor engages in when preparing and presenting a role. How has this come about?

The last thirty years have seen major changes in the scientific understanding of the brain, the mind, and its mechanisms. These have been prompted by increasing sophistication in brain scanning technology that has provided a wealth of neurobiological data about the brain at work. This information was simply not available before because the workings of the brain are for the most part unconscious, and therefore not available to conscious inquiry. Findings in fields such as neuroscience, psychology and linguistics have radically altered the suppositions that have informed many areas of inquiry. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (L & J) present an overview of these discoveries in Philosophy in The Flesh, stating that the three major findings of cognitive science show that

- 1) the mind is inherently embodied,
- 2) thought is mostly unconscious, and
- 3) abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.

One of the most radical conclusions to be drawn from these findings is that conceptual thought is not separate from the body in the way posited by the Cartesian concept of reason. This fundamentally alters the foundation on which theories of acting have rested since at least the late

eighteenth century and French philosopher Denis Diderot's seminal analysis Paradoxe sur le comédien (written in 1773, but not published till 1830).

It was Diderot who crystallized the concept of “outside in” or “inside out” to characterize the ways in which the actor creates the appearance of being affected by emotion. Puzzling over the issue of whether the actor has to be moved in order to move an audience, Diderot described seeing the famous English actor David Garrick do a party trick in which he rapidly altered his facial expression to convey a wide range of emotions: “Can his soul have experienced all these feelings, and played this kind of scale in concert with his face? I don't believe it, nor do you.”¹

Diderot defined the two possible approaches available to an actor as having to do with the level of “sensibility” –the capacity to feel “genuine” emotion – or the use of technique. Although Garrick himself considered that he used a combination of both, Diderot decided that it must be that case that the actor uses physical technique to affect an audience. Although much of Diderot's analysis was prescient when viewed in the context of cognitive science, the conceptual division of “psychological” and “physical” approaches to actor training continues to this day. As many actors have acknowledged, it is not an “either/or” phenomenon, and cognitive science now provides the empirical research that supports a holistic understanding. Of course, Diderot is not solely responsible for the conceptual division – the tendency to differentiate “internal” from “external” processes results from a fundamental feature of human perception –a feature that I will talk about later on.

Despite the tendency to separate physicality and psychology, there is a widespread recognition that the actor's body is central to any consideration of the acting process. As Joseph

¹ Diderot, 60

Roach points out in The Player's Passion; "The actor's body constitutes his instrument, his medium, his chief means of creative expression –this is a commonplace on which performers and spectators alike have readily agreed." ² Roach goes on to make the point that "conceptions of the human body drawn from physiology and psychology have dominated theories of acting from antiquity to the present"³ and makes it the focus of his book to trace the historical relationship of these changing conceptions to changes in acting theory. From a historical perspective, it would seem inevitable that as understanding of the body develops through scientific research, so theories of acting will alter to accommodate new information. It would be reasonable to expect that the changes in understanding of the mind/brain that have occurred in the last thirty years would have provoked alterations in acting theory and training. This process has, however, been very slow, and few would argue that actor training in the West is still dominated by Stanislavski's work and the fundamentally nineteenth-century concepts that informed it.

A detailed consideration of the slowness to adapt would form a dissertation in itself, but briefly, and from my own perspective as a theatre professional who is also a professor, a number of reasons present themselves. The twentieth century saw the growth of specialized training programs for actors, replacing the ad-hoc apprentice system that had prevailed in earlier centuries. Alongside this, the founding of the Actors' Equity Union in the early part of the century (1913 in America, 1930 in Britain) gave further legitimacy to the idea of acting as a profession with its own lore and traditions.

Within that profession, there is considerable suspicion of written theory, probably because so much knowledge about acting is held and communicated in a sort of oral tradition - the lore of the studio. This suspicion is strongly influenced by the tendency towards a kinesthetic

² Roach, 11

³ *ibid.* 11

learning orientation in actors and is further reinforced by the oft-repeated exhortation of “Show me, don’t tell me!” in actor training, which prioritizes embodied experience over narrated information. While this is necessary in realistic acting styles, it can create an unconscious prejudice against theory. This prejudice is manifested by the tendency of twentieth-century writing about acting to fall in to one of two categories:

a] Practitioners who outline a specific practical approach, generally claiming uniqueness, and

b] Theorists who view acting from a cultural, social, historical or political perspective.

In this dissertation I intend to bridge the gap between these two categories, and apply some of the most significant discoveries of cognitive science to the practice of acting, drawing on my three areas of experience; as a professional actor and director; as a teacher and trainer of actors; and as a researcher. To do this, I will approach acting as an experiential process that is a seamless expression of psychology and physiology, using the term “psychophysical” to express this meld. While Roach’s focus was historical, mine is forward looking. I hope that the information in this dissertation will be part of a significant shift in both the theory and practice of actor training. I know that this is an ambitious goal –I feel that it is justified by the magnitude of the changes in the understanding of the mechanisms of the human mind that have led to the concept of the embodied mind.

Writers in both the categories mentioned above tend to frame their considerations of acting in a way that depends on the Cartesian duality of Reason separate from Body. This separation is now empirically disproven by recent discoveries in the field of cognitive science and I intend to draw on these to show the centrality of embodied experience in cognition, thought and communication. I believe that training the body must be a central feature of an actor’s

preparation, no matter what style she or he is involved in. While many programs incorporate activities such as Alexander Technique, yoga, or dance, these do not directly address the relationship between verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, L & J point out that many abstract concepts are metaphorically shaped by our physical experiences in the material world. This means that many words and phrases have a latent gesture or spatial tendency inscribed in them. A training method that incorporates this principle will feel intuitive and holistic, and equip the actor with an integrated physical expressivity that makes text vibrantly alive in performance. Equally important are discoveries that have a bearing on non-verbal communication, character, empathy and emotion. I will link these discoveries to core elements of the acting process by using examples of practical exercises drawn from the work of Stanislavski,⁴ (the Method of Physical Actions), Michael Chekhov, Jerzy Grotowski and Jacques Lecoq. These practitioners have been chosen primarily because each focuses on physical activity as a means of exploring and expressing dramatic action –both improvised and textual. As practitioners who have independently formulated a process of actor training, they have each created a body of work that is illustrated by practical exercises. Despite the wide range of styles that are associated with these practitioners, I hope to show that when examined through the lens of cognitive studies, certain foundational processes underlie the varying exercises, and that they fit into a coherent process that can be described by criss-crossing the border between the lore of the studio and the world of theory.

This analysis will reframe the debate about the nature of acting by going beyond dualities such as body/mind or emotion /reason to describe acting in a holistic sense, a sense that recognizes the way that meaning is both made and expressed in movement as well as language in

⁴ In common with more recent translations, I use the “i” at the end of Stanislavski’s name, except where referring to a published work that uses the alternative “y”.

an environment defined by space and time. This approach provides an environment for the cultivation of the visible expression of invisible processes and will serve practitioners, teachers of acting, theorists and historians by creating a vocabulary of performance that is drawn from empirically based analyses of mental and physical processes. The benefits are wide ranging; teachers will have a sound conceptual structure for their work, practitioners a more precise vocabulary for communicating with one another. Scholars will have more reliable tools for talking about authorship through action, or distinguishing between styles of acting in relation to genre and period, or screen and stage. Closest to my heart are the benefits to actors. So much of what we do is intuitive, with success hard to repeat, and the reasons for failure difficult to define, and this information will enable us to peer in to the mystery with greater clarity.

1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent years have seen an increase of published works that acknowledge the holistic nature of acting by using the term “psychophysical”, but there are comparatively few that seek to apply the findings of cognitive science to the practicalities of acting. An early example was Glenn Wilson, who writes from the unusual perspective of a social psychologist who also has professional performance experience. His goal in The Psychology of the Performing Arts is to benefit both life scientists and performers by reviewing what psychology, as “the science of behavior and experience”, has to say about performance. In a wide-ranging survey he refers to many essential features of an actor’s activity, including training and role preparation, characterization and motivation, and posture and gesture. Principles of psychology are linked to these activities, with some specific examples. These examples are limited in their usefulness by their origin in a

singular acting style, which Wilson apparently assumes is universal, or holds true in all circumstances, a notion that is contradicted by most recent performance theories. Also, his understanding of the principles of Stanislavski's teaching has been superseded by more recent scholarship. His book, published in 1985, is based on information that precedes many of the discoveries in cognitive science that form the theoretical foundation of this dissertation. This is exemplified by his reinforcement of the notion that "external" and "internal" approaches to creating a role form a legitimate duality. It is a fundamental assertion of my approach that cognitive science disproves this duality, both conceptually and practically.

In Action Reconsidered: Cognitive Aspects of the Relation between Script and Scenic Action (2008), Erik Rynell investigates the way in which recent findings in cognitive science can be applied to the process of translating a written script into action on stage. Working in a similar area as this dissertation, Rynell recognizes fundamental similarities between those findings and certain theatre practices. Our paths diverge, however, in the intent of our investigations. While this dissertation is concerned with examining key psychophysiological aspects of an actor's process in order to improve actor training, Rynell's focus is to make an argument for the centrality of intentional action in drama, a position that he feels has been challenged by much of 20th Century experimental and avant-garde theatre. In making this argument he creates a useful model of dramatic process that he refers to as Background, Situation and Intention (BSI). This model is informed by the timeframes of Past (background) Present (Situation) and Future (Intention) as communicated by a play's script, and a character's intended, and subsequently executed, actions. Rynell creates this new terminology in order to disassociate the process from any one practitioner, and applies it both to drama "with action" and "without action", concluding

that the renewed emphasis on action as a subject of cognitive studies will have an effect on contemporary theatre.

In a publication that applies psychology to acting processes, Dutch psychologist Elly Konijn investigates actors' emotions in Acting Emotions: Shaping Emotions on Stage. In this study she draws on the history of acting theories, interviews with actors, and her own experience as an actor-in-training. The central feature of her work is a four-tier schema that purports to describe actors' emotions. This work uses the self-reporting of the actors that are interviewed without any material corroboration, and as Rhonda Blair points out in her critique of Konijn's work, this does not approach the empirical standards of normal scientific research. A significant difference between Konijn's work and this project is that Konijn does not refer to the available neurocognitive research on emotion, thus restricting herself to analysis of the conscious mind. As many researchers in the field of cognitive science point out, the vast majority of mental activity happens below the level of consciousness, and is not available through conscious reflection alone.

An approach that does engage with contemporary neuroscience to some extent in its consideration of emotion in acting is Susana Bloch's *Alba Emoting*, described in Phillip Zarrilli's Acting (Re)Considered⁵. Bloch, an experimental psychologist, began a multi-disciplinary research project in 1970 to investigate the links between the psychological, subjective, and expressive features of emotion. Her work identifies correlations between voluntarily controlled muscular activity (called the effector pattern) and what would colloquially be called the "internal" experience of emotion (the "subjective-feeling component"). These findings correlate well with psychologist Paul Ekman's findings about the relationship between

⁵ Zarilli 219-238

facial expression and emotion, and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's differentiations between emotion as a physiological state, and feelings as the conscious registering of the emotion. Bloch uses her findings to propose a psychophysiological approach to training actors in the simulation of emotions, using consciously chosen breathing patterns, muscular activity and facial expressions. Although I would not agree with her distinction between "real" and "simulated" emotion (the difference she posits is contextual rather than essential), and find other aspects of her methodology to be out of step with current thinking on emotion, there is useful information in this article. Bloch's application of behavioral psychology to actor training is very much in accord with the focus of this project. I will refer to Bloch's work in the chapter on emotion, but go beyond it in that I consider other areas of acting from a neurobiological basis. Bloch, for example, does not consider issues of character, imagination or empathy in her writing.

In The Nature of Expertise in Professional Acting: A Cognitive View, psychologists Tony and Helga Noice investigate the mental processes that are involved as actors memorize and then retrieve verbal and behavioral material.⁶ Using a wide range of data from behavioral experiments they identify certain principles that are empirically shown to benefit retention of material. These include: plan recognition (identifying a character's intentions); use of prior knowledge (linking newly learned material to knowledge held in long term memory); reduction of arbitrariness (identifying a specific narrative of character intention); distinctiveness (segmenting the text into idea units - 'beats'); self generation (the autonomous decision making of the actor in analyzing text); self referencing (the connections made by the actor between the character and him or herself); causality (using the idea unit segmentation to construct a causal chain); mood congruency (matching their own affective state to the fictional circumstances);

⁶ Noice xviii

context effects (the reciprocal effects of other actors and fictional circumstances); overlearning (repetition); and practice effects (consolidation through trial and error).

The Noices' own research, and summaries of other studies, provides very useful information in identifying effective memorization strategies. However, they identify what they consider to be the essence of acting as "to use the memorized text to actually do *anew*, at every performance, what the character would do within the particular dramatic situation."⁷ From a perspective based on neuroscientific evidence, the distinction between memorized speech and behavior and "doing anew" is not as cut and dried as the Noices' statement implies. This definition of the essence of acting would seem to be drawn from acting lore rather than psychology. The Noices' reliance on behavioral experimentation and self-reporting also means that they cannot take advantage of the ability of fMRI based research to identify unconscious brain processes. The focus of their book is on memorization, and while the information it provides is extremely helpful in identifying effective memorization strategies, the authors' insistence that this is the central feature of acting expertise seems limited in scope. Little attention is paid to phenomena such as empathy, imagination, or emotion, aspects of the actors' process that would certainly seem to be as important as memorization, and which are considered in detail in this dissertation.

In The Actor, Image and Action, Rhonda Blair looks at how "developments in cognitive neuroscience...might be used...to help the actor, in Stanislavski's words, reach "unconscious creativeness through conscious technique"⁸. She surveys twentieth-century developments in science that have a relevance to acting theory, the twentieth-century heritage of actor training, and aspects of cognitive neuroscience "that have implications for the way we think about

⁷ Noice, 35

⁸ Blair, xii

acting.”⁹ Although Blair identifies her goal as to provide “practical tools for the actor”, as well as information for “performance studies research”¹⁰ the structure, organization, and content of her book serves the latter far more than the former, serving as a valuable overview of the information in the field. I suspect that most readers would need more explicit guidance to use the information in practice. Chapter 4, “Applications”, consists mostly of case studies of Blair’s own directing approaches. One activity is given the title of “exercise,” but as Blair herself acknowledges, it incorporates many of the questions that an actor might normally ask about a dramatic speech, without any explicit application of cognitive science, and is a description of a mental analytic process rather than a studio activity. In the case studies, the techniques that she describes are directorial, rather than actor-centered, and encourage imaginative visualization of the text through close reading, a not uncommon approach in contemporary theatre practice. The distinctive feature is the insistence on imagined sensory stimuli, rather than the Stanislavski-derived psychological analysis of “Objective” and “Obstacle”. While Blair’s overall focus area is similar to that of this project, she does not provide clear and specific links between cognitive science and particular, actor-centered training exercises. That activity is a central feature of this dissertation, helping us to better understand those aspects of acting that are not accessible through conscious reflection.

⁹ *ibid*, xiii

¹⁰ *ibid*, xiv

1.2 EMBODIED ACTING

Through the examination of fundamental features of the acting process from a cognitive perspective, I hope to show that cognitive studies can offer an explanation of the way in which an actor creates effective performances. The definition of effective will of course vary from style to style, and genre to genre, but one of the perennial questions of any enquiry into the acting process in Western culture is how the actor discovers “truth” in performance. While this is not the singular and instantly recognizable feature that is suggested by the use of the word in Method training, it is probably safe to say that most productions require actors to be credible as fictional characters, or as themselves in fictional circumstances. Method acting expands upon a feature of Stanislavski’s early work to demand that the actors use autobiographical experience to create credibility in characterization, while other approaches depend more on imaginative transformation. The contrast between these two approaches is vividly illustrated by a story about Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov, recounted in Mala Powers’ introduction to Chekhov’s On the Technique of Acting. Despite its apocryphal nature it offers a revealing glimpse of the way in which many practitioners characterize the difference: “Asked by the teacher to enact a true-life dramatic situation as an exercise in Affective Memory, Chekhov recreated his wistful presence at his father’s funeral. Overwhelmed by its fine detail and sense of truth, Stanislavski embraced Chekhov, thinking that this was yet another proof of the power of real affective memory for the actor. Unfortunately, Stanislavski later discovered that Chekhov’s ailing father was, in fact, still alive...Chekhov was dropped from the class owing to an ‘overheated imagination.’”¹¹

The findings of cognitive science show that the distinction between memory (and

¹¹ Chekhov, 1991, xiii

indeed, reason) and imagination are less distinct than the story would suggest, and that imagination is an important feature of many of our thought processes. Clearly, as a spectator, Stanislavski experienced an emotional truth in Chekhov's performance, but was stung to discover that Chekhov had arrived at this through a process that was different from the one that Stanislavski was teaching at that point in his career. Towards the end of his life, he developed a way of working that he called The Method of Physical Actions that brought his conceptual framework much closer to Chekhov's way of working. Both of these approaches use physical experimentation to stimulate the imagination so as to create performances that seem emotionally and psychologically truthful to an audience. The holistic process through which this occurs is the subject of this dissertation.

To investigate this topic, I'm going to pose five basic questions:

- 1 How does the actor communicate meaning non-verbally?
- 2 What is the relationship between thought, physical action and language?
- 3 How does the actor create a character?
- 4 How does the actor identify with the character?
- 5 How does the actor embody emotion in fictional circumstances?

Each of these questions will be addressed in a chapter that will investigate specific aspects of the relevant cognitive processes, and then apply them to practical exercises drawn from the pool of practitioners mentioned above. The material will be foundational rather than comprehensive in nature, and inevitably, there will be overlaps in the information –hopefully these will be considered by the reader to be useful paths of connection rather than redundancies.

1.3 WHY SHOULD THEATRE PEOPLE BE INTERESTED IN COGNITIVE STUDIES?

A simple answer would be that the scientific investigation of the mind and brain offers theatre people better ways of understanding the psychophysical processes involved in performance. Cognitive science also offers us tools with which to describe the distinctions between different approaches as well as to recognize fundamental similarities amongst them. Not only that, but as Bruce McConachie points out in his preface to Performance and Cognition, “the sciences of the mind and brain offer conclusions that are based on years of experimentation and research”¹² and consequently have a validity that rests on an empirical base. Furthermore, the understanding that cognitive science offers us is one that acknowledges the central role of the body, and helps us to better understand the relationship between thought and expression, a subject that is at best hazily expressed in most theories of acting, and is generally known by the imprecise term “action”.

Different approaches to actor training tend to fall into categories of physical and psychological, even when it is widely acknowledged that it is the physical that communicates the psychological. This separation reflects not only historical factors, but also, more fundamentally, a feature of our “commonsense” understanding of ourselves that is based on unconscious concepts. As philosopher Mark Johnson points out: “Mind/body dualism is so deeply embedded in our philosophical and religious traditions, in our shared conceptual systems, and in our language that it can seem to be an inescapable fact about human nature.”¹³ That this notion of dualism is mistaken might seem to contradict our phenomenological experience, and certainly requires an adventurous mental stance to acknowledge. A useful analogy is our experience of the

¹² McConachie (2006) x

¹³ Johnson 2007, 2

sun. Our perception shows us that the sun moves in the sky, but we know from the work of astronomers and physicists that it is the earth that is moving. Similarly, our perception of our bodies suggests a split between mind and body, but empirical research in fields such as biology, neuroscience, and psychology show otherwise. Johnson traces this phenomenon to its root in the “many ways in which the successful functioning of our bodies requires that our bodily organs and operations recede and even hide in our acts of experiencing things in the world.”¹⁴ Our organs of perception are designed to hide themselves from consciousness so as not to impede our fluid and instantaneous experience of the material world. For example, we are aware of what we see, but not of our eyes doing the seeing.

Another feature of what is called “the recessive body” is the way in which we experience emotion. Much recent research (with neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux prominent) takes a biological rather than psychological approach to emotion, revealing the neural and endocrinal processes that stimulate the physiological symptoms that we interpret as emotion. A part of the brain called the amygdala responds to neural information and releases hormones that result in features such as increased heart rate, perspiration or changes in breathing patterns. We are sometimes aware of these, but cannot sense the activity of the amygdala or our endocrine system. So it often seems to us that the experience of emotion is something that is part of a disembodied consciousness rather than the processes of the body. The tendency to separate mind from body is, paradoxically, a result of the particular nature of our physical existence. Johnson stresses the difficulty of avoiding dualism in both our thinking and our language: “In short, the idea of a fundamental ontological divide between mind and body –along with the accompanying dichotomies of cognition/emotion, fact/value, knowledge/imagination, and thought/feeling – is

¹⁴ *ibid.* 4

so deeply embedded in our Western ways of thinking that we find it almost impossible to avoid framing our understanding of mind and thought dualistically.”¹⁵

In an earlier work, Philosophy in the Flesh, Johnson teamed up with linguist George Lakoff to discuss the implications for philosophy of the discoveries of cognitive science. The recognition of the crucial role of the body in perception and conceptualization leads to the concepts of the cognitive unconscious, the embodied mind, and metaphorical thought. The study of philosophy may seem an esoteric pursuit for an actor, but L & J point out that everyday life is composed of activities that are based on unconscious concepts such as causation, the nature of the self, and morality, to name a few – all topics of philosophical inquiry. As human behavior is the raw material of any acting, an understanding of the processes involved in perception, understanding, and the creation of meaning is of great value to the actor.

The term “cognitive unconscious” refers to the 95 percent of thought that occurs below the level of conscious awareness and is involved in shaping conceptual systems, meaning, inference, and language through metaphorical thought. Significantly, the understanding that arises from cognitive science is one that contradicts a number of commonly held beliefs, in addition to that of mind/body split mentioned above. For example, L & J demonstrate that our commonsense understanding of the self is based on a metaphoric concept that is buried in unconscious processes. When we think of our “true self”, or encourage someone to “just be your self”, we are characterizing personality traits through the use of unconscious metaphors and schema. Clearly, this has implications for the actor’s creation of an alternate fictional self, and I will look at this process in more detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁵ Johnson 2008, 7

The concept of the embodied mind is one that fundamentally alters the mind/body split on which twentieth century approaches to actor training are based. Training that is primarily physically oriented, such as that of Grotowski and Lecoq, is considered exotic by the mainstream, and to be tied to a particular style of non-realist performance. Training methods that stress psychology tend to neglect the mechanics of expression beyond vocal work in the belief that these will take care of themselves, and that “technical” training will lead to non-naturalistic behavior in performance. I propose that the two approaches are in fact representative of positions on a continuum, rather than being mutually exclusive or necessarily oppositional. I hope to show how physically based work can stimulate the imagination to create performances of subtlety and nuance in both behavioral and linguistic expression. The empirically based concept of the embodied mind provides a foundation that explains the effectiveness of approaches to training and rehearsal that consciously link physicality and environment in the expression of meaning. This feature is shared by all the practical exercises that I investigate.

Given the dualistic tendencies of Western thought, many theatre practitioners associate actor training that focuses on the body to be tied to a particular style of “physical” theatre. My own experience as a performer and director has encompassed many styles and genres, from Shakespeare to post-modern imagistic performance, from stand-up to Ibsen, from farce to psychological realism. This personal perspective reflects a wider phenomenon; theatre in the West is in a unique historical period where a multiplicity of styles jostle with one another, and are increasingly combined or juxtaposed in performance. This situation makes it all the more important for actors to develop skills that enable them to move from one style to another. I believe that the questions I have posed will lead to information that is foundational in nature, and that will support a wide range of styles. Some styles will demand more from certain areas of the

range of information that I present than others. For example, farce tends to represent characters with little psychological complexity, but relies greatly on tempo, rhythm and clarity of physical expression for its comedy. In contrast, acting Ibsen will draw more heavily on the information on self, character, empathy and emotion.

1.4 CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1.4.1 2.0 How does the actor communicate meaning non-verbally?

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate the equality of physical behavior to language in communicating meaning. That there is a need to do this in a consideration of acting is a reflection of another duality within contemporary Western theatre. Various training methods prioritize either the psychological or the physical, but few are systematically structured in a way that consistently acknowledges the holistic, reflexive relationship of these two elements.¹⁶ This would seem to reflect the traditional view within psychology that language and non-verbal communication are two separate systems, devoted to different subject matters. Recent research has suggested that this view is limited and imperfect. I'll refer to the work of experimental psychologist Adam Kendon and others that demonstrates the close relationship between language and nonverbal behavior. This research suggests that gestures are closely linked to speech, and are equal conveyors of meaning in many contexts. I'll investigate the way in which

¹⁶ Notable exceptions being Lecoq's school in Paris, and the work done by Stephen Wangh in the Experimental Theatre Wing of NYU. Neither of these, however, explicitly integrate cognitive science as a theoretical foundation of their work.

psychologists analyze and codify communicative physical behavior so as to provide an empirically based vocabulary for theatre practitioners, and then describe some training exercises that can assist actors in developing their skills in this area.

The importance of this information for actors is that it gives us ways of understanding and defining behavior and gesture, elements of performance that we frequently employ intuitively or unconsciously to communicate the thoughts and feelings that are not explicitly expressed in speech. Even when a character's speech is a sincere and full expression of her or his thoughts, the integration of non-verbal communication is essential in creating performances that appear credible to an audience.

1.4.2 3.0 What is the relationship between thought, physical action and language?

In this chapter I will investigate the relationship between written and spoken language. I will draw on the work of David McNeill, a cognitive linguist, who writes about the difference between the ways our brains process written and spoken language in his 1992 book, Hand and Mind. He demonstrates that written language is linear, segmented and hierarchically structured, whereas speech incorporates gesture, which is basically experienced as image, and is processed by the brain in a global, synthesized and simultaneous way. Bad acting, I suspect, often arises because the actor hasn't made the mental leap from the linear nature of written language into the gestural imagery of spoken language.

McNeill argues for a new conception of language, viewing it as an imagery-language dialectic, in which gestures provide imagery. Gesture is an integral component of language in this conception, not merely an accompaniment or ornament. I will apply McNeill's analysis to the work of Jacques Lecoq, whose theatre school in Paris has been highly influential in British

and European theatre since the 1960's. While Lecoq's work largely predates the findings described above, and was developed independently of this scientific research, much of it displays remarkable synchrony with the mechanisms that L& J and McNeill identify. Lecoq's founding principle was "*Tout bouge*" – everything moves. His fascination with, and analysis of movement enabled him to develop a highly sophisticated repertoire of physical exercises. Given the foundational nature of sensorimotor experience outlined by L & J, it is evident that such a repertoire is more than a simply physical experience for the actor, and provides a rich resource for the embodiment of thought in language.

After giving a brief history of Lecoq and his school, and a survey of his methods, I will examine some of his exercises in detail, linking them to the cognitive processes outlined by McNeill, and showing how their physical nature parallels cognitive processes, and extends the range of the actor by establishing neuronal patterning that is beyond the normal everyday range of behavior.

1.4.3 4.0 How does the actor create a character?

In this chapter I will investigate the relationship between the actor's concepts of self and of character, and how the two inter-relate. I'll start by surveying the prevalence of the conceptual dichotomy that leads theatre practitioners to talk of "inside out" or "outside in" approaches to the creation of character. Several aspects of current cognitive studies offer a better understanding of what is actually happening when an actor embodies a character. I'll describe L & J's analysis of the metaphorical construction of the concepts of self and of different selves, and Paul Ekman's work on the way in which consciously chosen muscular activity can affect the autonomic system, and thence the experience of emotion. This is followed by a description of the connectionist view

of the brain, which offers hypotheses about the ways in which abstract concepts can be linked to motor activity, and a consideration of Merlin Donald's proposition of the way in which mimesis is central to cognition. I then outline the theory of conceptual blending that was developed by Fauconnier and Turner (F & T), and show how it undercuts Stanislavski's notion of the possibility of complete identification between self and character, before tracing the close conceptual fit between F & T's hypothesis and character exercises designed by Michael Chekhov.

1.4.4 5.0 How does the actor identify with the character?

This chapter investigates the ways in which actors discover a sense of identification with the characters that they embody, considering the supposed distinctions between “persona” acting, and “transformational” acting. I'll describe the way in which proprioception –the physiological process by which information about where the body is and what it is doing is relayed back to the brain – might operate in creating a sense of altered self in the actor, proposing that not only is character expressed by action, but also that *actions create character*. I refer to work by philosopher Shaun Gallagher and psychologist Andrew Meltzoff that describes how proprioception is more than kinaesthetic awareness, and Joseph LeDoux's exploration of the neural foundations of self, and consider the implications of this information for the concept of the “essential self” that is used in some acting discourse. I propose that the idea that an actor can achieve authenticity in a role by identifying the “essential I” with it is misguided. As an alternative, I suggest that embodying a character involves expressing a range of behavior that reflects the actor's understanding of an author's intent, that seems credible in the fictional circumstances, and that forms a temporary situational self through the imagination, with feelings

that arise from a combination of physical actions and empathetic stimuli in the fiction. To support this analysis, I draw on philosopher Robert Gordon's Simulation Theory and the work of Vittorio Gallese and others on identifying "mirror mechanisms" in the brain that provide an experiential dimension to action and emotion understanding. I also refer to the work of experimental psychologist Jonathan Schooler who has identified a phenomenon that he calls "verbal overshadowing" in which verbal descriptions of visual stimuli compromise visual memory. I then trace Stanislavski's progression from linguistic analysis of a script to the "active analysis" that he used in the later stage of his life, suggesting that the cognitive research that I've described validates the efficacy of The Method of Physical Actions.

1.4.5 6.0 How does the actor embody emotion in fictional circumstances?

As with the other areas that I have covered, there have been significant advances in the understanding of emotion in the last thirty years. Nevertheless, approaches to emotion in contemporary actor training are still dominated by the nineteenth century ideas that influenced Stanislavski's earlier work, and by Lee Strasberg's insistence on "emotion memory" as the sole path to authentic feeling in performance. In this chapter I describe the findings of neuroscientists Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux and psychologist Paul Ekman that articulate the current understanding of emotion. This is that emotions are brain representations of body states; while the senses of vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell function by nerve activation patterns that correspond to the state of the external world, emotions are nerve activation patterns that correspond to the state of the internal world. These autonomic responses occur automatically and unconsciously, and it is only after the brain becomes aware of these physiological changes that we experience an affective state. In a neuroscientific understanding of this process, there is an

important distinction between emotion (physiological reactions to stimuli) and feeling (conscious awareness of affective state). The implications for the actor are that consciously controlled physiological actions, such as breathing rapidly and shallowly, or tightening one's muscles, not only communicate an emotional quality to the audience but can also generate a feeling within the performer. Additionally, Ekman's experiments show that it is possible to evoke the feelings of specific emotions by voluntarily changing one's facial expression. I investigate the implications of these findings by examining exercises created by Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, and psychologist Susana Bloch. The chapter closes with an example from my own teaching of a way in which scientific knowledge can be integrated with studio techniques to provide effective training in the specifics of psychophysical behavior.

1.4.6 7.0 Conclusion

In the conclusion I describe some of the exciting implications for theatre and for actor training of the research that I have described. I draw on this research to propose a model of the theatrical act, and suggest possible ways in which a cognitive perspective could be integrated into actor training, and also inform the creation of a holistic vocabulary of performance. This vocabulary would acknowledge the embodied nature of meaning described by L & J, and link the theatrical elements of Time, Space and Story that meet in, are defined by, and expressed through the body.

2.0 HOW DOES THE ACTOR COMMUNICATE MEANING NON-VERBALLY?

This chapter deals with what actors don't say, how they don't say it, and how this communicates meaning to an audience. I realize that this may sound perverse –after all, the vast majority of theatrical presentations originate with a script, which is comprised mostly of dialogue. Most theatre practitioners, however, recognize that *how* one says the dialogue is vitally important, since the “how” also communicates. In a novel the author can describe the unspoken thoughts, feelings and motivations of a character. The playwright however, is restricted largely to the words that a character says, and it is up to the actor to contextualize those words by deciding on motivations that drive the words, to create facial expressions and physical behavior, to make the speech sound life-like through the use of vocal tone, varied emphases, tempo and cadence of speech. As Peter Brook points out, speech is the end result of an impulse. In most script-based productions, a process that derives from Stanislavski's early work is used to discover those impulses. The actor and director in rehearsal investigate the dialogue in the context of the given circumstances and the narrative to determine what impulses produce the words - a process that is generally called table work or analysis. The decisions that arise from the analysis generally get called interpretation, and lead to behavior that confirms, modifies, or contradicts the explicit meaning of the words of the script. It is, of course, this behavior, or nonverbal communication, that we focus on when rehearsing a script. The words, after all, already exist –it is our job to make them come alive through choices that are communicated through the behavior.

Given that this activity is so central to the practice of making theatre, it is a curious paradox that we don't have a developed vocabulary for behavioral communication, and that few training programs, if any, offer courses in nonverbal communication (nvc). This suggests that the approach to teaching physicality is unfocused, if not haphazard, especially when considered in the light of recent evidence about the centrality of nonverbal cues in communicating meaning. Several studies show that adults rely more heavily on nonverbal than verbal cues in determining meaning in personal interaction, and also that nonverbal cues are trusted more than verbal if the two are in conflict.¹⁷ Clearly, if an actor does not integrate his or her physicality with the meaning of a script's verbal content, an audience runs the risk of being confused or unconvinced. In this chapter I'm going to investigate the way in which psychologists analyze and codify nvc so as to provide an empirically based vocabulary for theatre practitioners, and then describe some training exercises that can assist the actor to develop her or his skills in this area.

The codification of nvc in the field of psychology is comparatively recent. As experimental psychologist Adam Kendon points out in Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance, the modern concept of nvc originates in the 1940's, as developments in audio-visual technology allowed for the recording and study of movement as meaning. The films of Gregory Bateson, an ethnographic consultant, alerted psychiatrists to the way in which interpersonal communication uses far more than words: "It was soon realized that tones of voice, modes of hesitation, styles of talking, patterns of intonation, vocal quality, bodily posture, bodily movements of all sorts, glances, facial expressions, were all playing a very important role..."¹⁸

However, this period of analysis of nvc was characterized by a belief that nvc used devices quite different from speech and dealt with different areas of meaning, specifically, that it

¹⁷ Argyle (1970), Birdwhistell (1970), Mehrabian (1968), Philpott(1983)

¹⁸ Kendon 2004, 69

was concerned only with interpersonal relationships, and that language was the only form of communication that could convey abstract ideas and complex information. This position is typified by Bateson's observation that "...nonverbal communication is precisely concerned with matters of relationship...From an adaptive point of view, it is therefore important that his discourse be carried only by techniques which are relatively unconscious and only imperfectly subject to voluntary control." (Bateson 1968 pp.614-615, quoted in Kendon, 71) Ten years later, a very similar view is expressed by Peter Trower, Bridget Bryant and Michael Argyle in their book *Social Skills and Mental Health* (1978): "In human social behavior it looks as if the nonverbal channel is used for negotiating interpersonal attitudes while the verbal channel is used primarily for conveying information." ¹⁹

Obviously, if this attitude is applied to actor training, nvc is something that actor training need hardly pay attention to, since meaning is conveyed by words, and nvc, being "relatively unconscious" can't be controlled. This rationale, whether through conscious deliberation or just by default, seems to underpin those actor-training programs that focus on a psychological approach and let the body take care of itself. However, Kendon's, and others', recent research shows that this approach is misguided and incomplete, and offers a more holistic account of the way in which speech and nvc complement each other in communicating meaning.

Kendon's research focuses on the use of gesture that accompanies speech, and the ways in which the two are not separate as previously thought. He suggests that gestures are closely linked to speech, and yet present meaning in a form fundamentally different from that of speech, and that through hand movements, people (often unconsciously) communicate thoughts:

Gesture contributes in many different ways [to meaning]. In some cases it may

¹⁹ Argyle et al. *Social Skills and Mental Health* (1978): 16

seem as if a gesture provides an expression parallel to the meaning that is provided in words. In other cases gesture appears to refine, qualify or make more restricted the meaning conveyed verbally, and sometimes we encounter the reverse of this. In yet other cases gesture provides aspects of reference that are not present at all in the verbal component. In other cases again, gesture may serve to create an image of the object that is the topic of the spoken component.²⁰

Clearly, the identification of the different ways in which gesture communicates meaning can be extremely useful for the actor. While Kendon's focus is on hand and arm movements, the principle extends to other features of non-verbal communication. Current research on the different systems at play in nvc can be used to create a framework for training in nvc equivalent in detail and scope to vocal training. This would offer theatre practitioners a way of codifying the ways in which we express thoughts and feelings that are implicit in a situation, but not explicitly expressed in language. In current theatre practice, this is commonly called subtext, but since that term depends on the concept of reading lines of text, I would like to propose the term "non-verbal meaning" as one that offers more scope, and is more sensitive to the current understanding of communication.

The challenge for the actor is to make consciously chosen non-verbal communication appear credible. Given that much of this activity is involuntary and unconscious, this is a significant issue. Psychologist Geoffrey Beattie observes that

[v]oluntary or deliberate facial movements, like false smiles, are controlled by the cerebral hemispheres and show an asymmetry in their expression on the face as a result of this. Involuntary facial movements that reflect real emotion, such as

²⁰ 2004, 161

genuine smiles, are controlled by lower, more primitive areas of the brain, and are essentially symmetrical on both sides of the face.”²¹

Clearly, the difference between apparently genuine and false displays of emotion will provoke a response in audiences. Observant members might find the difference discernible at a conscious level, and would probably identify false displays of emotion as “bad acting”, unless such a false display was appropriate in the fictional circumstances. Other, less observant members might feel vaguely unsatisfied or subliminally unconvinced by the acting, without being able to identify why. Like a pianist practicing scales, it makes sense for the actor to work at practicing the mechanics of physical expression, to understand and control how features like posture, gesture, and facial expression communicate, and how to make voluntary actions in these areas *appear* involuntary, and therefore spontaneous. Like any other skill, this takes practice, and needs to be assimilated to the point where its mechanics are engaged unconsciously.

The “conscious competency” model of assimilation is useful in demonstrating the process by which this can happen.²² This model is a useful reminder of the need to learn, and train others, in sequential stages. According to this model, the learner always begins at Stage 1 – “unconscious incompetence”, and if successful in their training, will end at stage 4 – “Unconscious competence”, having passed through stage 2 – “conscious incompetence”, and stage 3 – “conscious competence”. In stage 1, the student has no awareness and no ability in the skill being taught. In stage two, the student is aware of the skill, but has not yet developed any ability. In stage 3, the student is able to perform the skill, but needs to consciously think about it, while in Stage 4, the skill has become integrated to the point where it can be performed without

²¹ Beattie, 2004, 15

²² It is difficult to pinpoint the originator of this model. It became current in various forms of business management training during the 1970’s, and is described in print in W.C. Howell and E.A. Fleishman (eds.), *Human Performance and Productivity*. Vol 2: Information Processing and Decision Making. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1982.

conscious thought. These stages are easily recognized by anyone who has learned a skill such as riding a bike or driving a car.²³

It is worth reminding ourselves of this process in order to counter the still active tendency in theatre programs to resist “technical” training in the misguided assumption that it will produce “technical” performances. This mistrust is based on a phenomenon that it is easily recognized from an experiential point of view. If an actor is thinking of technique while performing, they are not focusing on the fictional circumstances of the play, and from the point of view of people who mistrust technique, this inevitably compromises “truth”. This stance ignores the concept of “dual consciousness” expressed by Michael Chekhov, which describes the phenomenon of being simultaneously aware of self and character. I’ll explore this more fully later in the chapter on character, but for now, it’s a useful example of how an understanding of acting as a psychophysical activity rather than a mental one leads to propositions that sit well with current cognitive discoveries.

Chekhov’s concept is rooted in the notion of thought and physical activity being inextricably entwined. The research of Kendon, mentioned above, and David McNeill (addressed in the next chapter) demonstrate the way in which the physical activity of gesture is part of the process of generating “utterances” – a term for communication that may be linguistic, gestural or both:

When a speaker speaks, the speech is organized into a series of packages ...

[t]hese packages tend to correspond to units of meaning ... which may be

referred to as ‘idea units’. Gesture is also organized into packages of action,

²³ A non-driver is at the level of unconscious incompetence. A beginner would be at the level of conscious incompetence. Someone who’s just passed his or her driving test is at the level of conscious competence. The driver who gets to work without remembering the drive is unconsciously competent.

... which coincide with and tend to be semantically coherent with ... the 'idea units' ... However, the gestural expression typically takes up just a part of the idea ... For example, it may bring out an aspect of meaning associated with the verb ... or it may add an imagistic dimension to something referred to by a noun. The precise way in which a coincidence is achieved ... appears to be variable. In our interpretation, this means that the speaker can adjust both speech and gesture one to another as if they are two separate expressive resources which can be deployed, each in relation to the other, in different ways according to how the utterance is being fashioned.²⁴

Kendon's summary of his findings offers an endorsement of Chekhov's approach and an intriguing corollary to the Stanislavski-inspired model of breaking dialogue up into units (beats). Again, this aspect is something that I will investigate more fully in the next chapter. Kendon's work demonstrates that speech and gesture are linked, and is part of a growing body of work that disproves the notion that nvc is reserved for interpersonal relationships.²⁵ For many theatre practitioners, this may seem self-evident from practical experience. After all, the whole concept of non-verbal meaning depends on this notion, but the paradoxical situation that obtains in most theatre training programs is that there is no systematic organization of the elements that communicate non-verbal meaning, or even a comprehensive vocabulary. Now that there is an empirical basis for codifying nvc, it makes sense to use this as a basis for an approach to training actors in physical communication.

²⁴ Kendon, 2004, 126

²⁵ David McNeill is the foremost among authors in this area, and I discuss his work in Chapter two.

In Successful Nonverbal Communication, Dale Leathers offers a useful overview of the different categories that psychologists now use in analyzing nvc. While these categories are based on the observation of behavior, they can be used as a framework for the creation of communication when combined with acting studio exercises. The systems that Leathers identifies generally interact with verbal communication, but can operate in the absence of speech, or even assume a dominant role in certain situations. He defines three nonverbal systems; the Visual, which includes Kinesic, Proxemic and Artifactual subsystems; the Auditory; and the Invisible, which includes Tactile, Olfactory, and Chronemic subsystems. For the purposes of this discussion, I will be selective, and focus on those elements that are in the actor's control in a performance, and communicable to an audience in the majority of situations. Smell, for example, is not often used as a communicative device in theatre, and Artifactual communication (the information that is conveyed by the overall appearance of face and body and includes appearance modifying options) is more in the purview of costume and make-up design.

The Visual system is the major source of nvc, followed by the Auditory, and then the Invisible. In the Visual system, Kinesic communication is made up of facial expression, eye behavior, gesture and posture, and Proxemics consists of the use of space, distance between individuals, and the idea of territory. The Auditory system is made up of nine different attributes that can be consciously controlled by the communicator: loudness, pitch, rate, duration, quality, regularity, articulation, pronunciation, and silence. In the intriguingly named Invisible system, the tactile subsystem, while experienced by an individual as touch in daily life, becomes visible to an audience in performance, and is closely related to gesture. Chronemics deals with the use of time in interpersonal interaction. In western culture, this is closely associated with status –the scheduling of meetings, for instance, often reflects the relative hierarchical positions of those

involved, and lack of punctuality is often considered an affront to the established pecking order. In performance, time is, of course, important, but the unit most relevant to the actor is the second, or even the microsecond. At this level, the manipulation of time becomes intuitive rather than mechanical, a matter of feel.

In order to apply the analysis of nvc to acting, it makes sense to make some adjustments. Firstly, because the categories used by social psychologists are formulated from the point of view of the observer, the changes that I propose below mean that categories can be used for both the observation and the creation of behavior. Additionally, the adjustments mean that conceptual connections can be made across categories, acknowledge the degree of control that the actor can exert, and make links with familiar concepts and existing terminology. The following table lists nvc terms on the left, theatre terms on the right.

Table 1. Categories for defining nvc

Facial expressions	Facial expressions
Eye behavior	Eye behavior
Posture	Posture
Gesture	Gesture
Space, Territory, Closeness	Spatial dynamics and movement (blocking)
Vocal loudness	Volume, projection
Vocal rate	Tempo of speech
Duration, regularity, silence	Rhythm of speech
Pitch	Pitch, inflexion
Quality	Timbre
Articulation	Vocal production, enunciation
Pronunciation	Accent and dialect

To demonstrate how these terms can be used in the analysis of performance, I'm going to apply them to an extract from Act II of The Importance of Being Earnest. This extract demonstrates the way in which Wilde sought to define what the actors embodying his characters *do* as well as say, revealing his awareness of the degree to which behavior communicates meaning:

Cecily. May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

Gwendolen. [With elaborate politeness.] Thank you. [Aside.] Detestable girl! But I require tea!

Cecily. [Sweetly.] Sugar?

Gwendolen. [Superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [**Cecily**

looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]

Cecily. [Severely.] Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen. [In a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

Cecily. [Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.] Hand that to Miss Fairfax.

[**Merriman** does so, and goes out with footman. **Gwendolen** drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.]

Gwendolen. You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.

Cecily. [Rising.] To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

Gwendolen. From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.²⁶

The stage directions are explicit, specific, and detailed in describing the desired physical and vocal behavior of the characters, and make clear the way in which the comedy of the scene arises from the tension between genuine feelings and “the shallow mask of manners.” In the last speech of the section quoted, no directions are given beyond “Rises in indignation” - this, together with the cumulative effect of the preceding stage directions make clear the desired manner of vocal delivery. However, to include such a level of detail for all the dialogue in a play becomes unwieldy and restrictive, and, of course, there is also considerable variance among playwrights in the extent that they use stage directions that describe behavior, a feature that is

²⁶ Jacobus, 2001, 783

affected by many factors, including period, style, and genre. In the case of this extract, the following analysis will show that the amount of nvc that communicates meaning far exceeds even the stage directions that Wilde has included.

I'll refer to two filmed versions of the play. The first, directed by Anthony Asquith, was released in 1952,²⁷ and features Joan Greenwood as Gwendolen, and Dorothy Tutin as Cecily. The second, directed by Oliver Parker, was released in 2002,²⁸ and features Frances O'Connor and Reese Witherspoon respectively in the same roles. Some allowance has to be made for the fact that the second version has cut significant portions of the script, and often intercuts a scene with visual montage shots of action that is only reported in the stage play. Both cinematographers use close-ups to direct attention to the action of placing sugar in the tea, rendering a portion of the actor's behavior invisible, and also cut to reaction shots of Merriweather's face on some lines. In the following table, lines and stage directions are in the left hand column, descriptions of behavior in each version in the second and third column respectively.

Table 2. Analysis of nvc in "Earnest"

Script [original stage direction] { } = cut in Asquith () = cut in Parker	Asquith 1952	Parker 2002
Cecily May I offer you some tea, {Miss	Facial expression not visible, exaggerated	Neutral facial expression, low vocal

²⁷ The Importance of Being Earnest. Dir. Anthony Asquith. Perf. Michael Redgrave, Michael Denison, Margaret Rutherford, Edith Evans, Dorothy Tutin, Joan Greenwood. Paramount Pictures, 1988.

²⁸ The Importance of Being Earnest. Dir. Oliver Parker. Perf. Judi Dench, Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, Frances O'Connor, Reese Witherspoon. Miramax Films. 2002

Fairfax}?	rising inflexion at end of sentence	timbre, constant pitch, eyes closed at start of line, then narrowed with visual focus avoiding G. and directed downwards
Gwendolen. [With elaborate politeness.] Thank you. {[Aside.] Detestable girl! But I require tea!} 'Miss Cardew' added in Parker	Upright posture. Forced smile, followed by angry facial expression (narrowed eyes, muscular tension around mouth), visual focus on C. from corners of eyes, switching to front at end of word in avoidance of eye contact, narrowing of eyes.	Body and face not visible. Descending vocal inflexion
Cecily. [Sweetly.] Sugar?	Slight lean towards G. hand extended towards sugar bowl, eyes switch down towards hand, then up to G. Head tilted, chin pushed forward.	Downturned mouth, angry expression, closed eyes, head tilted down
Gwendolen. [Superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more.	Eyes widen, head turns towards, C, eyes narrow, then close on 'No' open on 'thank you'. Visual focus sustains on C. then switches downwards. Slight chuckle after 'Sugar', followed by a sneer and then a smile. Vocal inflexion descends on last three words, as head is turned to front, breaking eye contact with C.	Moves into C.'s personal space to sit down, sneers, then smiles, seats herself with torso oriented away from C., posture reclining on back of chair, visual focus in opposite direction from C, tilts head away from C., rests it on hand, closes eyes briefly, then moves hand to chin
[Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]	Visual focus on sugar bowl. Frown. Hand grasps sugar cubes, visual focus switches to G. Hand places sugar cubes in cup, as visual focus switches to cup. Small smile. As cubes are released, focus switches back to G. Hand emphasizes action of releasing cubes.	Close-up of C.'s hand placing three cubes of sugar in cup, then mid-shot showing chin thrust forward, angry expression, changing to smile as C. looks sideways at G., dropping fourth cube in cup. Passes cup to Merriweather.
Cecily. [Severely.]	Not visible. Rising	Rising vocal

<p>Cake or bread and butter?</p>	<p>vocal inflexion on ‘cake’, then again on ‘butter’</p>	<p>inflexion on ‘cake’, slight pause, consistent pitch for rest of line. Head turned to side, away from G. Chin thrust forward, corners of mouth turned down. Visual focus to side away from G, brief closing of eyes on ‘bread’, simultaneous with slight shrug of shoulders.</p>
<p>Gwendolen. [In a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.</p>	<p>Receives cup from C. Head and visual focus switch to cup. Slow vocal tempo on first sentence, with low pitch. Vocal inflexion descends on ‘please’. Head moves front after receiving cup. Eyes close on ‘cake’ open on ‘is’ and close again on ‘rarely’ This word is drawn out (first vowel sound sustained). Head tilts to side on ‘best houses’. Smile follows completion of sentence, with visual focus switching down.</p>	<p>Smiles, sits up, accepts cup of tea from Merriweather. Flat vocal pitch on first sentence, slight pitch variation suggesting laughter in second sentence, torso turned away from C., visual focus directed away from C., then down to cup.</p>
<p>Cecily. [Cuts a very large slice of cake, and puts it on the tray.] (Hand that to Miss Fairfax.)</p>	<p>Visual focus on cake, mouth open with tip of tongue placed on top teeth, as hand takes slice of cake and places it on plate. Visual focus switches to plate, then to G. Mouth closes; muscular tension around mouth. Visual focus switches to Merriweather as plate is handed to him. Sustained eye contact with Merriweather as plate is transferred.</p>	<p>Action not shown – cut to facial reaction of Merriweather.</p>
<p>[Merriman does so, and goes out with footman. Gwendolen drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches</p>	<p>Merriweather purses lips, looks down and sideways at G. before placing plate on table in front of her.</p>	<p>Upright seated posture. Widening of eyes, slight ‘gulp’ vocalization as tea is drunk. (other action not shown, close-up of</p>

<p>out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. Rises in indignation.]</p>	<p>G. head lowered, visual focus down, sips tea, and then looks up and forward suddenly with open mouth and a slight frown after tasting it. Mouth closes. Muscular tension around mouth as she looks down to cup again, then expression of disgust. Visual focus switches to C. and sustains for speech.</p>	<p>Merriweather's hand placing cake on table)</p>
<p>Gwendolen. (You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you, Miss Cardew, you may go too far.)</p>	<p>Eyes narrow. Expression of puzzlement on 'sugar'. Vocal rhythm steady, pitch low, pronunciation smooth, pitch descends on 'cake'. G. stands on 'cake'. Visual focus sustains on C. Volume increases on 'gentleness', 'extraordinary' is emphasized by elongation of central vowel sound, eyes close simultaneously with this. Vocal tempos increases, volume increases, timbre gets fuller until 'Miss Cardew', then a quick visual switch to Merriweather precedes a sudden softening of timbre and decrease of volume for 'you may go too far'</p>	<p>(Not included)</p>
<p>Cecily. [Rising.] (To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.)</p>	<p>Looking down and away from G until 'machinations' Sideways head movements. Chin thrust forward. Vocal rhythm has slight pauses, vocal tempo increases to 'machinations', when face assumes aggressive expression; lips pressed together, chin pushed</p>	<p>(Not included)</p>

	<p>forward, eyes wide. Visual focus sustains on G. from this point to end of speech. Stands on ‘there are’. Vocal volume increases on ‘no lengths’, slight pause after these words, and tempo increases for final phrase. After standing, posture is upright with arms held away from torso, chin raised.</p>	
<p>Gwendolen. From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. (I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.)</p>	<p>Elongation of words, raised volume, raised pitch in first sentence. Upright posture, raised chin, sustained visual focus on C. Increase in vocal tempo in second sentence, sideways movement of the head on ‘never’, visual focus switches down and to the side, then back to C. Chin raised further on ‘My first’, ‘invariably’ elongated by sustaining of second vowel sound. Final consonant of ‘right’ emphasized. Considerable pitch variation throughout. Arms drawn back from shoulders in final sentence, breathing rate increases in tempo.</p>	<p>Leans towards C., sustains visual focus on her. Low vocal timbre, low volume, exaggerated vocal articulation, consistent pitch. Head inclined towards C., chin thrust forward, muscular tension around mouth.</p>

The close examination of these two different versions raises many interesting points. Firstly - it becomes extremely evident how the application of technology raises awareness of nvc. Even watching the scenes attentively at normal speed I did not notice facial expressions that appeared when the material was run in slow motion. Psychologist Paul Ekman calls these “micro expressions” –rapidly appearing and disappearing expressions that do not register consciously in

the viewer's awareness. (I'll address Ekman's work more fully in chapters four and five.)

Repeatedly experiencing the scenes also alerted me to vocal mannerisms that weren't evident in the first viewing. Perhaps the most surprising feature is the sheer amount of nonverbal information that is present, and by extension, the sheer amount of information that we process unconsciously when interacting with others or watching drama. For reasons of clarity and space, I have only included the nvc of each actor as they are speaking –there is, of course, double that information when one considers the nvc that is displayed as characters listen to each other and respond nonverbally.

As one would expect from actors at the top of the profession, there is a high degree of facility and accomplishment with nvc. It is unlikely that the actors in these scenes were consciously thinking about posture, gesture and vocalics as they were speaking; just as in daily life, the process is largely intuitive in delivery, but depends, of course, on the preparation of rehearsal. It's intriguing how actors separated by fifty years use very similar aspects of nvc to communicate –the chin pushed forward, the narrowed eyes that both Tutin and Witherspoon use to communicate Cicely's dislike of Gwendolen. From an analytic point of view, the identification of components of nvc makes it possible to use objective criteria to identify the differences in style that are evident. The 1952 version appears more formal; comparing the elements of nvc show that this impression is generated by a number of factors. Firstly, Tutin and Greenwood maintain upright postures throughout. Neither of them recline as O'Connor does, nor use the inclination of the torso that she does towards the end of the scene. Both actors in the 1952 version have a high degree of vocal articulation; vowel and consonant sounds are clearly distinguished and not run in to one another. Vocal tempo is slower overall in the 1952 film, and the rhythm of speech from both actors includes more pauses than in the 2002 version. This sets

up the confrontation at the end of the scene to be more forceful, however, than in the 2002 version. Both actors maintain an upright standing posture, sustain their visual focus on one another, and increase the volume and tempo of their speech. The contrast with the behavior in the earlier part of the scene is more marked than in the confrontation between O'Connor and Witherspoon. This means that there is greater variation in the dramatic tone of the piece, something that might suggest that Asquith's version is closer to a stage tradition of presenting the play in England, while Parker's version seeks to fit the play into the romantic comedy genre of contemporary film making. A full analysis of the differences between the two films is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but hopefully this approach demonstrates the validity and usefulness of using a vocabulary derived from social psychology to analyze performance.

The identification of activities and categories in nvc can also be used to create a framework for the training of actors. The examination of behavioral communication in daily life shows us both the source material and the expressive territory of acted behavior. In training, however, it is possible for an actor to increase the range of their expressive behavior beyond that which they use in daily life. Different training methods have different attitudes towards this potential. In the Method approach, the insistence on 'truthfulness' and the use of biographical material as the source of that truth encourages the actor to stay within the range of expressiveness that they are comfortable with in daily life. At the other end of the spectrum, Jacques Lecoq's work with actors draws on the experience of daily life, but seeks to radically increase the range of expressivity through physical training, and the embodiment of animals, qualities, and materials. This offers the actor a repertoire of physical expression to use in performance that is far beyond what is used in daily life. While the full range of this repertoire may not be explicitly called on in the style of psychological realism, it gives the actor increased

fluency and precision in nonverbal communication. Moreover, the plurality of styles that currently coexist in Western theatre means that actors need to be adaptable. A focus on the structure of the body and its mechanisms identifies principles that underlie a variety of training methods and performance styles. When this is allied to the perspective of cognitive science on the way that the body shapes meaning, it is possible to identify foundational principles of activity that link Story, Space, and Time in performance.

Lakoff and Johnson (L & J) point out that “Our abilities to move the way we do and to track the motion of other things give motion a major role in our conceptual system. The fact that we have muscles and use them to apply force in certain ways leads to the structure of our system of causal concepts. What is important is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization.”²⁹ This is because “(our) brains are structured so as to project activation patterns from sensorimotor areas to higher cortical areas.”³⁰ A simple example of this can be seen “when we conceptualize understanding an idea (subjective experience) in terms of grasping an object (sensorimotor experience) and failing to understand an idea as having it go right by us or over our heads...A gesture tracing the path of something going past us or over our heads can indicate vividly a failure to understand.”³¹

A corollary of this analysis is that metaphor is central to both perception and thought, rather than a post-perceptual activity that occurs only in poetry, which has tended to be the way it has been identified in the twentieth century. This has important implications for actors seeking to create vivid embodiments of thought, because it shows that many concepts are metaphorically based on a sensorimotor source domain, and therefore have latent movement inscribed in them.

²⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, 19

³⁰ *ibid.* 77

³¹ *ibid.* 78

This understanding of the way in which physical experience in the material world shapes conceptual thought gives an interesting valence to a statement made by Michael Chekhov long before cognitive science was established:

[T]here are no purely physical exercises in our method...our primary aim is to penetrate all the parts of the body with fine psychological vibrations. This process makes the physical body more and more sensitive in its ability to receive our inner impulses and to convey them expressively from the stage to the audience.³²

Chekhov proposed that the actor should practice a range of gestures in order to increase sensitivity and expressivity:

Train yourself to make certain gestures with the utmost expressiveness, as fully and completely as you can. These gestures might express, for instance: drawing, pulling, pressing, lifting, throwing, crumpling, coaxing, separating, tearing, penetrating, touching, brushing away, opening, closing, breaking, taking, giving, supporting, holding back, scratching.³³

That this is more than a mere technical exercise is supported by L & J's description of the way in which we create conceptual metaphors through a process of conflation:

We acquire a large system of primary metaphors automatically and unconsciously simply by functioning in the most ordinary of ways in the everyday world from our earliest years. We have no choice in this. Because of the way neural connections are formed during the period of conflation, we all naturally think using hundreds of primary metaphors.”³⁴

³² Chekhov 1991 43

³³ *ibid* 41

The authors go on to give examples of the way in which sensorimotor experience is mapped on to conceptual thought. Taking one of these examples that uses one of the words from Chekhov's list enables us to see how the link between physical action and thought occurs. In this example, the primary metaphor is "Help is support," and is derived from the Sensorimotor domain of physical support and the primary experience of "Observing that some entities and people require support in order to continue functioning."³⁵ Through a process known as conflation, "permanent neural connections between the domains develop."³⁶ This means that Chekhov's exercise, through the use of physical activity, is stimulating a mental concept.

While much of Chekhov's work acknowledges the psychophysical features of expression, it lacks organizational principles that correlate with current knowledge. Rudolf Laban's work, however, provides a useful framework for an initial approach to the demonstration and practice of physical actions as metaphorical expressions. Laban was a choreographer who developed a system of notation of human movement in the 1920's. Combined with his book Effort, this notation is now known as Labanotation and is widely used in choreography. Laban's analysis of movement in space can be used to create a list of actions that have both experiential physical origins, and metaphorical applications. The following chart is derived from my practical experience as an actor in England in the 1980's and 1990's.

³⁴ L & J 47

³⁵ *ibid* 52

³⁶ *ibid* 48

Table 3. Laban Efforts as behavioral actions

WEIGHT	SPACE	TIME
<u>Heavy</u>	<u>Direct</u>	<u>Sudden</u>
<u>Light</u>	<u>Indirect</u>	<u>Sustained</u>

Selecting one quality from each column gives you eight choices:
<u>Heavy-Direct-Sudden</u> describes a PUNCH
<u>Heavy-Direct-Sustained</u> describes a PUSH or PULL
<u>Heavy-Indirect-Sudden</u> describes a SLASH
<u>Heavy-Indirect-Sustained</u> describes WRINGING (wringing out a cloth)
<u>Light-Indirect-Sustained</u> describes STROKING (like stroking an animal)
<u>Light-Indirect-Sudden</u> describes FLITTING about.
<u>Light-Direct-Sudden</u> describes a DAB or TAP
<u>Light-Direct-Sustained</u> describes a GLIDE

The heavy, direct, and sudden action that is described by “Punch” can become a verb of action that is metaphorically applied in the vocal delivery of a line. I have found this approach to be very useful in helping trainee actors to achieve behavioral differentiation of their actions, since psychophysical actions offer detail and variety. For example, if an actor has chosen “to seduce” as a conceptual action, this could incorporate the psychophysical actions of “stroking,” “dabbing,” and “flitting.” This approach also offers directors a clear and specific vocabulary to use in communicating with their actors. Another significant benefit is the added ease with which instructors, directors, and actors can identify levels of intensity. Because the metaphor of

“punch” has a physical origin, one can talk about the range of movement or the relative force of the metaphorical punch in the vocal delivery.

Activities such as these enable the actor to link Space, Time and Story in precise ways, and offer the actor a model of the way in which impulse becomes action that is congruent with the current understanding of the embodied mind. This understanding enables direct actions to be applied to make instantaneous links between “internal” experiences of psychological and emotional states, and “external” expressions of those states through behavioral activity. The next chapter investigates this process in more detail.

3.0 WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT, PHYSICAL ACTION, AND LANGUAGE?

The previous chapter demonstrated how visible behavior communicates meaning. In this chapter I will investigate the psychophysical processes through which this behavior arises by looking at recent research on the relationship between written and spoken language. The difference between the two is at the heart of the challenge that actors face. Most performances (but certainly not all) start with a written text. As described above, most of the dialogue in plays note what characters say, and leave it to the actor to create the “how” of its being said. This involves, of course, a psychophysical process that combines thought, imagination, and expression as the actor seeks to embody the fictional content of the script. While theatre practitioners are familiar with this meld, the traditional view within psychology (as noted above) has been that language and non-verbal communication (nvc) are two separate systems, devoted to different subject matters. David McNeill, a cognitive linguist, has been one of the pioneers of the move towards recognizing nvc as an equal partner of language as a conveyor of meaning. In Language and Gesture (2000) McNeill states that “Utterances possess two sides, only one of which is speech; the other is imagery, actional and visuo-spatial. To exclude the gesture side, as has been traditional, is tantamount to ignoring half of the message out of the brain.”³⁷

³⁷ McNeill (2000),

This statement stems from earlier work, described in his 1992 book, Hand and Mind, that probes the difference between the ways our brains process written and spoken language. “[G]estures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases and sentences- gesture and language are one system.”³⁸ Moreover, an understanding of the distinction between the ways that language and gesture operate underscores the importance of physicality and image in the actor’s process: “If one knows how to read them, the gesture can convey meaning no less than language, but the method used by the gesture for doing this is fundamentally different from language.”³⁹ Although McNeill recognizes language and gesture as parts of the same system, he proposes a view of their functions that makes them complementary to one another, and identifies crucial differences between them: “Language has the effect of *segmenting* and *linearizing* meaning. What might be an instantaneous thought is divided up and strung out through time...the total effect is to present what had been a single instantaneous picture in the form of a string of segments.”⁴⁰ In written language, this effect is unmediated by any physical action, but when language is spoken, meaning can be complemented or modified by gesture: “Gestures are different in every way. This is because they are themselves multidimensional and present meaning complexes without undergoing segmentation or linearization. Gestures are *global* and *synthetic* and *never hierarchical*.”⁴¹

In McNeill’s analysis, the term “hierarchical” arises because speech relies on “bottom-up” processing; the meanings of the words are combined to create the meaning of the sentence. In understanding a sentence we start with the lower level words (hence “bottom-up”), whereas in gestures, we start with the overall concept portrayed by the gesture. It is this concept which gives

³⁸ McNeill (1992), 2

³⁹ *ibid* 19

⁴⁰ *ibid.* 19

⁴¹ *ibid.* 19

rise to the meaning of the individual parts (hence “top-down”). Consequently, a gesture is a symbol –it is global in that the whole is not composed out of separately meaningful parts. Rather, the parts gain meaning because of the meaning of the whole. To illustrate this, McNeill provides the example of a person representing a running cartoon character by moving his hand through space whilst wiggling his fingers: “The gesture is a symbol in that it represents something other than itself—the hand is not a hand but a character, the movement is not a hand in motion but the character in motion, the space is not the physical space of the narrator but a narrative space, the wiggling fingers are not fingers but running feet. The gesture is thus a symbol, but the symbol is of a fundamentally different type from the symbols of speech.”⁴²

A further, and significant, difference between language and gesture is that gestures have no standards of form. These are the linguistic rules that utterances must follow, or be rejected as ungrammatical. Gestures have no such rules and therefore reflect the idiosyncrasies of the speaker: “Precisely because gestures are not obliged to meet standards of form, they are free to present just those aspects of meaning that are relevant and salient to the speaker and leave out those aspects that language may require but are not relevant to the situation.”⁴³

These findings have important implications for actors and trainers of actors. They identify one of the crucial components involved in transferring written scripts into embodied behavior. Bad acting, I suspect, often arises because the actor hasn’t made the mental leap from the linear nature of written language into the gestural imagery of spoken language. Given that about 90% of spoken utterances in daily life are accompanied by gesture, acting that does not incorporate gesture will appear stiff and unexpressive. (I should point out here, that I consider vocalics to be gestural). In theatre, we often refer to this as a lack of “investment”, meaning that

⁴² McNeill 1992, 27

⁴³ *ibid.* 41

the actor doesn't seem to be fully engaged in the character's thought processes. Common responses from instructors and directors include exhortations to "feel it more", or to transpose biographical experience to the fictional circumstances, or to discover analogous situations that might prompt imaginative identification. Following these suggestions might result in the imaginative connection necessary to make the dialogue more expressive, but none of them acknowledge the psychophysical process that underlies the phenomenon. The exercises of Jacques Lecoq that I describe later in this chapter prepare the actor to respond gesturally to written language by developing a heightened awareness of the relationship between thought, gesture and language. Before looking at his work in detail, there are several more relevant cognitive principles to consider.

McNeill develops his analysis of the relationship between gesture and speech in Gesture and Thought (2005), arguing for a new conception of language, viewing it as an imagery-language dialectic, in which gestures provide imagery. Expanding on an approach introduced by Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s, McNeill posits that gestures are key ingredients in an "imagery-language dialectic" that fuels both speech *and* thought. Gesture is an integral component of language in this conception, not merely an accompaniment to, or ornament of, speech but synchronous and co-expressive with it. While McNeill's earlier work demonstrated what gestures reveal about thought, here, gestures are shown to be active participants in both speaking and thinking. Gesturing is actually a dialectical component of language, and both participate in formulating meaning, with their opposition creating instability that gets resolved in expression. The instability of the confrontation of opposites (imagery and language) in the process of thinking for speaking seeks resolution in utterance that can be expressed either as gesture or speech, or both. This analysis is developed from close observation of the synchrony of speech

forms and gestures that suggests that they are co-expressive of the same underlying thought unit. The smallest element of this dialectic is the Growth Point (GP), a snapshot of an utterance at its beginning psychological stage.

This analysis has exciting implications for actors, since it includes immensely valuable information about the relationship of thought to expression – the core of meaning in a performance. While the analysis uses observed speech and gesture to identify units of thought and their expression, its findings can be reverse-engineered to apply to the reading of a script in preparation for performance. While actors who are familiar with a Stanislavskian form of script analysis think of objectives and tactics, McNeill’s empirically derived theory offers a reliable way of analyzing dialogue that depends on the identification of units of thought, the differentiation between contextual information and new ideas, and the points in a phrase or sentence where a gesture is originated. This happens when new information is added to established context, which gives the actor a useful tool in textual analysis, and facilitates the subsequent transformation of written language into embodied speech.

A key feature of McNeill’s theory is the differentiation of “background” and “focus” – visual metaphors that distinguish contextual information from information that is “newsworthy”. McNeill describes a process whereby we construct meaning as we speak:

The speaker shapes the background in a certain way, in order to make possible the intended significant contrast within it. Background and contrast are both necessary and are constructed together. A new “meanin” is a fresh differentiation from a constructed background - meaning has this dual character of being both a

focal point and an implied background, and both are necessary...⁴⁴

The Growth Point (GP) can be thought of “as an image that is being categorized linguistically - an image with a foot in the door of language, as it were. The combination is called a growth point since it is meant to be the initial form of a thinking-for-speaking unit out of which a dynamic process of organization emerges.”⁴⁵ A further feature of the GP is that it “addresses the concept that there is a specific starting point for a thought. Although an idea unit continues out of the preceding context and has ramifications in later speech, it does not exist at all times, and comes into being at some specific moment; the formation of a growth point is this moment, theoretically, and it is made visible in the onset of the gesture...”.⁴⁶

The suggestion is that in everyday speech, when speakers are mentally focused on the content of their communication, a new idea is marked by the preparation phase of a gesture. Consequently, when an actor identifies a new idea in a passage of dialogue, he or she knows that this an appropriate moment for a gesture, and in choosing to use one, helps to clarify meaning for an audience. In this model, meaning progresses in a stream of contrasts between context and GPs –information communicated by a GP forms context for the next new idea.

Another significant feature of McNeill’s model is the concept of the catchment. This is “a kind of thread of consistent dynamic visuospatial imagery running through the discourse segment that provides a gesture-based window into discourse cohesion.”⁴⁷ It is recognized when two or more gestures in a sequence of discourse display recurring features, such as shape, movement,

⁴⁴ http://mcneilllab.uchicago.edu/topics/growth_points.html accessed 5/29/09

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

space, orientation, dynamics and so on. These indicate how an individual groups meanings, or separates them. Again, an understanding of this naturally occurring phenomenon gives the actor a useful tool in consciously choosing gestures that help audience members understand the implicit meaning of a piece of dialogue by showing them the linkages between different ideas. The concept of the catchment also helps us to identify lack of differentiation in a performance; if we see repetitive gestures when the content varies in ideas, it suggests that the actor has not successfully established this variety at an ideational level.

McNeill's theory fits in to a widely used categorization in social psychology of types of gestures. British psychologist Geoffrey Beattie explains these in Visible Thought –The New Psychology of Body Language. Beattie takes care to distinguish between gestures and “emblems”, which are physical signs that are consciously sent and consciously received. Easily reproducible, these are signs such as the “thumbs up” that have become codified in the cultures in which they are used. In contrast, the vast majority of gestures are unconsciously generated, produced alongside words (rather than substituting for them), and almost impossible to inhibit. This last feature probably explains the fact that most people, when confronted with a discrepancy in meaning between verbal and nonverbal communication, will trust the nonverbal.

Spontaneously occurring gestures that accompany speech can be divided into two main categories; Iconic and Metaphoric. The Iconic gesture is one “whose particular form displays a close relationship to the meaning of the accompanying speech.”⁴⁸ These are generally pictorial representations that show the speaker's mental image and point of view. Beattie cites an example from McNeill's Hand and Mind where a speaker describes a cartoon figure bending back a tree, saying “he bent it way back” and accompanying this by the physical action of grasping and

⁴⁸ Beattie, 65

pulling back. Sometimes Iconic gestures add information to what is said. In the example quoted above, the gesture shows that the tree was attached to the ground –information not explicitly mentioned in the verbal portion of the utterance. An important feature of the gesture analysis described by Beattie is that of timing. Gestures generally have three phases; the preparation, where the arms move from their resting position, the “stroke” where the main action occurs, and the retraction, where the arms return to their resting position. In spontaneous gestures, the preparatory phase normally precedes the noun or verb most closely associated with the gesture, so that this can be synchronous with the stroke. Contrived gesturing often looks “wrong” because the timing is off.

The second category of spontaneously occurring gesture is called “Metaphoric”. These are essentially pictorial, but the content is an abstract idea rather than a concrete object or event. “The gesture presents an image of the invisible – an image of an abstraction.”⁴⁹ Metaphoric gestures frequently represent abstract concepts that have been metaphorically formed from sensorimotor experience. Lakoff and Johnson (L & J) present an accessible and cogent overview of this process in Philosophy in the Flesh:

Metaphor allows conventional mental imagery from sensorimotor domains to be used for domains of subjective experience. For example, we may form an image of something going by us or over our heads (sensorimotor experience) when we fail to understand (subjective experience). A gesture tracing the path of something going past us or over our heads can indicate vividly a failure to understand.”⁵⁰

L & J contest the traditional theory of metaphor that includes the precepts that it is purely linguistic, and that “metaphorical language is not part of ordinary conventional language.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ McNeill 1992, 14

⁵⁰ L & J 2000, 45

Indeed, they state that “[c]onceptual metaphor is pervasive in both thought and language. It is hard to think of a common subjective experience that is not conventionally conceptualized in terms of metaphor.”⁵² This is because “[o]ur abilities to move in the ways we do and to track the motion of other things give motion a major role in our conceptual system. The fact that we have muscles and use them to apply force in certain ways leads to the structure of our system of causal concepts.”⁵³ An example of this process can be found in our understanding of time. “There is an area in the visual system of our brains dedicated to the detection of motion. There is no such area for the detection of global time.”⁵⁴ Motion is directly perceived and is thus available as a source for our metaphor systems to give shape to the abstract concept of time. The neural activity that makes this connection becomes more established with repetition until a permanent connection is forged in the brain in a way that makes metaphor part of our perceptual apparatus rather than a post-perceptual activity of disembodied reason. Thus, in English, the most basic metaphor for time involves “an observer at the present who is facing toward the future, with the past behind the observer.”⁵⁵ We conceive of the future as being ahead of us, the past behind. As F & T point out: “Metaphoric thinking, regarded in the commonsense view as a special instrument of art and rhetoric, operates at every level of cognition and shows uniform structural and dynamic principles, regardless of whether it is spectacular and noticeable or conventional and unremarkable.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ *ibid.* 119

⁵² *ibid.* 45

⁵³ *ibid.* 19

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 140

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 140

⁵⁶ Fauconnier and Turner 17

While Jacques Lecoq's work largely predates the findings described above, and was developed independently of this scientific research, much of it displays remarkable synchrony with the mechanisms that L & J and McNeill identify, suggesting that Lecoq's analysis of human behavior was both insightful and thorough. Lecoq's founding principle was "*Tout Bouge*" – everything moves. His fascination with, and analysis of, movement led him to develop a highly sophisticated repertoire of physical exercises. Given the foundational nature of sensorimotor experience in shaping abstract thought outlined by L & J, it is evident that such a repertoire is more than a simply physical experience for the actor, and provides a rich resource for the embodiment of thought in language. Indeed, in some of his statements, Lecoq almost duplicates the statements of principle that L & J lay out:

... the laws of movement govern all theatrical situations. A piece of writing is a structure in motion. Though themes may vary (they belong to the realm of ideas), the structures of acting remain linked to movement and its immutable laws ... Outer movements resemble inner movements, they speak the same language. My main fascination is with the poetics of these permanencies, which give birth to writing."⁵⁷

This focus on movement and its laws as the structure of acting bears an astonishing conceptual resemblance to L & J's identification of sensorimotor experience as the source domain for conceptual metaphor.

Lecoq's statement also links strongly to L & J's work on neural modeling and the embodiment of mind. L & J make a strong argument that "the same neural mechanisms used in

⁵⁷ Lecoq, 21

perception and movement are also used in abstract reasoning.”⁵⁸ They focus on models for three kinds of concepts:

1. Spatial relations concepts, for example those named by English words like *in*, *on*, *over*, *through*, and *under*.
2. Concepts of bodily movement, represented by verbs like *grasp*, *pull*, *lift*, *tap*, and *punch*.
3. Concepts indicating the structure of actions or events...like *starting*, *stopping*, *resuming*, *continuing*, *finishing*, including those indicated grammatically as in process (in English, *is/are* plus the verb stem plus *-ing*: *is running*) or completed (*has/have* plus the verb stem plus *-ed*: *has lifted*).⁵⁹

L & J make clear the relationship that they see between bodily experience and conceptual thought: “In such models, there is no absolute perceptual/conceptual distinction, that is, the conceptual system makes use of important parts of sensorimotor system that impose crucial conceptual structure.”⁶⁰ This statement lends credence to Lecoq’s observation that “Outer movements resemble inner movements, they speak the same language.” Indeed, a significant thread of Lecoq’s philosophy of training for the theatre, expressed in The Moving Body, repeatedly links a progression of training to the development of the human in learning about the world. As babies our experiences of the physical world are images, touch, movement, before they are language. In writing about his method of improvisation, Lecoq says ” The aim of these initial exercises, taken as a whole, is to delay the use of the spoken word. The imposition of silent performance leads the students to discover this basic law of theatre: words are born from

⁵⁸ L & J 38

⁵⁹ L & J 38

⁶⁰ *ibid* 39

silence. At the same time they discover that movement, too, can only come out of immobility.”⁶¹

Thus the progress of an actor through Lecoq’s training method replicates the processes described by L & J whereby our physical experience of the world shapes the structure of thought:

The dynamics underlying my teaching are those of the relationship between rhythm, space and force. The laws of movement have to be understood on the basis of the human body in motion: balance, disequilibrium, opposition, alternation, compensation, action, reaction. These laws may all be discovered in the body of a spectator as well as in that of the actor.”⁶²

Lecoq’s biography reveals a lifelong fascination with movement and the body, and places him in a tradition of movement oriented work that leads from Copeau through Dasté to his school, and has been expressed in the work of artists such as Dario Fo, Ariane Mnouchkine, Simon McBurney and Julie Taymor, and companies such as Footsbarn, Mummenschanz, Complicité, Commotion, Peepolykus, Theatre O, and Theatre de la Jeune Lune among many others. Born in Paris in 1921, Lecoq taught physical education and sport from 1941 to 1945. This brought him into contact with Jean-Marie Conty, a master of physical education and friend of Antonin Artaud and Jean-Louis Barrault. This led to an increasing interest in theatre, and the formation of a theatre group in 1945 that staged large-scale festive events celebrating, for example, the homecoming of prisoners of war. Jean Dasté happened to see one of these events and invited Lecoq to join his theatre company, known as the "Comédiens de Grenoble", where he was put in charge of physical training. Here he was introduced to Japanese Noh theatre, and discovered masks, in particular Dasté’s ‘noble’ mask, which was the forerunner of the neutral mask. The ideas of Copeau, who had been Dasté’s teacher, became a reference point for Lecoq’s

⁶¹ Lecoq 35

⁶² Lecoq 21

exploration, in particular the “ambition to take theatre that spoke simply and directly to unsophisticated audiences.”⁶³ In 1948 Lecoq moved to Italy, originally for three months, but stayed for eight years. During this period, he directed at the university theatre in Padua, and researched Commedia dell'Arte with the sculptor Amleto Sartori, rediscovering the technique of making leather masks, and developing the neutral mask. He then set up the drama school at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan with Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, and worked as a director and choreographer with actors such as Dario Fo and Anna Magnani. In 1956 he came back to Paris armed with discoveries about Commedia dell'arte, Ancient Greek tragedy and the movement of the chorus, and a set of commedia masks given to him by Sartori. In 1956 he opened his School of Mime and Theatre and later set up his own theatre company, worked at the National Popular Theatre with Jean Vilar, and then on television, writing and directing a series of twenty-six silent comic films entitled La Belle Equipe (The Great Team). Before long the school had expanded and Lecoq decided to devote all his efforts to teaching: “I have always loved teaching, seeing it as a path to my own greater knowledge and understanding of movement. Through teaching I have discovered that the body knows things about which the mind is ignorant. This research into body and movement has been my passion and I still long to share it with others.”⁶⁴

Lecoq taught at his school until a few days before his death in 1999. Ten years on, the school continues to flourish under the direction of Lecoq's wife, Fay, with classes led by former students. The nature of the teaching evolved during Lecoq's lifetime, as he added significant features such as the study of clown in 1962, and the Laboratoire d'étude du mouvement

⁶³ Lecoq, 5

⁶⁴ Lecoq, 9

(Movement research laboratory) in 1977.⁶⁵ At the time of his death, the structure of the course involved a first year with open admission, followed by a second year by invitation only, for approximately a third of the first year students. Lecoq describes the training as taking place along two parallel paths, the study of improvisation and its rules, and the investigation of movement technique and its analysis. Concurrently with their classes, students engage in “autocours” – self-directed group work that generates small productions that are shown to the teachers and other students. The first year involves work with the neutral mask, expressive and character masks, movement training and analysis, and creative exploration that links theatre with painting, poetry and music. Students that graduate to the second year work on five dramatic styles, which Lecoq calls “territories”, following the metaphor of “The Journey” that he uses to describe a student’s progress through the school. Lecoq describes the styles as follows:

- 1 Melodrama (grand emotions)
- 2 Commedia dell’arte (human comedy)
- 3 *Bouffons* (from grotesque to mystery)
- 4 Tragedy (chorus and hero)
- 5 Clowns (burlesque and absurd)⁶⁶

I will examine some of his exercises in detail, linking them to the cognitive processes outlined above, and showing how their physical nature parallels cognitive processes. In particular, I will focus on three areas of his work. Firstly, I will look at exercises in heightening awareness of fundamental sensorimotor experiences such as push/pull. These links to what L & J call primary metaphors – projections of activation patterns from sensorimotor areas of the brain

⁶⁵ Information about Lecoq’s biography is drawn from the school website, http://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com/jacques_lecoq-biographie-uk.php?bg=01, accessed 9/5/09, and *The Moving Body*.

⁶⁶ Lecoq, 15

to higher cortical areas. Secondly I will look at Lecoq's work with the neutral mask, where actors develop their range of sensorimotor experience by embodying rhythms such as those of fire and water, different animals, and man-made substances. This work leads to the third area, that of exercises in embodying poetic metaphors, which reverses the direction of the process, starting with a received linguistic stimulus, and translating it into sensorimotor experience. This again links very closely to the cognitive processes relating written language to speech outlined by L & J and McNeill.

Early work in a student's progression through Lecoq's school involves silent improvisation, and investigation and analysis of movement. To describe the bare bones of the activities cannot hope to replicate the somatic experience, but will at least give the reader a flavor of Lecoq's approach. The following is a description of an exercise that uses the actions of "push" and "pull" as a foundation to approach different dramatic territories. The information is drawn from my own experiences of learning and teaching, and the description noted down by Simon Murray, a former pupil of Lecoq's, in his book in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series titled simply Lecoq. The text can be considered a reliable source for an understanding of Lecoq's approach: Murray prepared the written description with Thomas Prattki, who became the pedagogical director of the school after Lecoq's death. The sequence as described would not take place in one session, but indicates how primary physical experience is first investigated to identify components of meaning, then consciously controlled to lead to dramatic expression.

The first step in the work demonstrates an attention to semantic detail. The dynamics of pushing and pulling are broken down into three pairings, or six distinct units; I push...I pull; I am pushed...I am pulled; I push myself...I pull myself. It should be borne in mind that the verbs

push and pull fall into L & J's second category of neural modeling, "concepts of bodily movement", and that the same neural mechanisms used in perception and movement are also used in abstract reasoning, meaning that the exercises help students to make links between movement and thought and feeling.

An instructor invites the students to walk across the space individually, naturally, with no acting. The others in the class observe the movement of the walkers, and are asked to reflect on questions such as these:

Do they push the space, are they pushed by it?

Do they have to push themselves through the space, or are they pulled by something?

Do they push the space with the upper body, while some force appears to pull the pelvis back?

What images are generated by the different ways of walking? (Someone who pushes the space may appear powerful, someone who is pushed, reluctant, someone who is pulled, naïve)

Do diverse ways of walking suggest different emotional states?

Is it possible to correlate different permutations of pushing and pulling with different emotions?⁶⁷

This exercise alerts students to a number of factors –firstly that posture and movement by themselves can suggest meaning, secondly, that their own personal walks have habitual patterns, and thirdly that push and pull actions can help to find physical characterizations in different styles. All of this rests on the fundamental recognition that movement communicates meaning,

⁶⁷ Murray, 135

and begins the process of increasing students' sensitivity to this fact. By placing conscious attention on movement that has become unconscious through habituation, the exercise stimulates the neural connections between this movement and its conceptual expression. Having heightened students' awareness through observation, the components of the exercise can then be used to make conscious choices of physicality. Students can be invited to experiment with, for example, pushing the space with their chest, or pulling the space with one shoulder. One development that I have used is to invite two students to work in the space simultaneously, moving in relationship to one another while focusing on "push" and "pull" with different parts of the body. In over twenty years of teaching this exercise, I have found that students repeatedly report a changed sense of self when working in this way. Comments on pushing with the chest report a sense of aggression, or confidence, or cockiness, for example. Evidently, different students will have different experiences depending on their personalities and their habitual postures. What is significant is that there is a changed sense of self through consciously chosen muscular activity (I will look at the physiological processes involved in a later chapter), and for players and observers alike, a recognition that the dynamics of silent spatial interaction suggest narrative.

In Lecoq's approach, the work on push and pull and other primary physical activities serves as a foundation for exploration in other dramatic "territories", and as an approach to text.

As Murray points out:

When students work with text it is important to register the relationship between words and actions, or physical behaviour. Is the body expressing the same emotion as the words, or do they counterpoint each other? In *Commedia* there is sometimes a complete congruence between a character's body and verbal language. However, in many of the other dramatic territories there is often a strong contradiction between body and

language. A character might push with words, but the body is pulled back. A character may state he is not scared, while his body expresses the opposite.⁶⁸

In the vocabulary of psychological realism, this understanding would refer to the communication of “subtext”, something that is better defined as non-verbal meaning, as detailed in the previous chapter. Lecoq’s approach offers the student a way of defining, naming, and working on the components of physical expression that make up nvc. For analysts of written drama and observers of performance, the concept of congruity and contradiction in nvc and speech also offers an empirical basis for considerations of character and style. Where there is consistent congruence between verbal and nonverbal features of communication, we would understand the character to be “simple” (all thoughts and feelings declared, as in farce, for example), whereas frequent contradictions in this area would suggest complexity (conflicts between declared information and thought and feeling, as in psychological realism). This can also be one of the components that identify different genres of drama and their attendant styles of performance. The example of Commedia that Murray mentions could be logically extended to farce and sitcom, for instance. In a comedy of manners, however, such as The Importance of Being Earnest, much of the humor arises from the contradiction of verbal and nonverbal content, as indicated in the analysis in the preceding chapter.

Murray describes how the preparatory work on “push” and “pull” extends through several phases of development at Lecoq’s school. He describes an exercise that is used in the development of Melodrama, where the psychophysical implications of “push” and “pull” are heightened by the increase of force necessary to accomplish the actions. In the first phase of the exercise, students work in pairs, one behind the other, with the person behind holding the pelvis

⁶⁸ Murray, 135

of the one in front, who leans forward against the pull. This leads to an experience of “dynamic balance” - a physical expression of stasis that is nevertheless charged with energy. Once again, Lecoq’s awareness of the metaphorical connection between physical activity and thought is apparent in linking the physical experience of balance with a dramatic status quo. The next development of the exercise is for both the students to exert more force –the one in front to push the pelvis forward in order to walk, the one behind to pull the other back to prevent the walk. This generally results in an off-balance situation as one or the other succeeds. The heightened physical experience of the breaking of the balance gives both participants a strong sensation of the dramatic impact of a disruption of balance. This experience embodies the process described by McNeill in his definition of the mental development of a GP, where the state of balance would be the background, and the breaking away the focus, or “newsworthy” event. Once again Lecoq’s focus on the semantic detail of physical activity parallels cognitive dynamics.

Lecoq then draws upon this heightened psychophysical experience in a silent improvisation entitled “The Departure”, in which a member of a family leaves home. The metaphorical values of push and pull are employed in the spatially and physically expressed dynamics among the family members, some of whom may want to “push” the departing member out, others of whom may want to “pull” her back. The balance of a status quo and the imbalance that results from a departure are now expressed in dramatic narrative.

While the exercises described above are conducted without masks, they encourage an awareness of physical expression that is deepened by the work with the neutral mask. This is a full-face mask with symmetrical features, devoid of expression, that serves several functions. Lecoq talks about the way that it produces a state of calm in the wearer, and consequently, receptiveness to the environment. While this may sound somewhat mystical, the physiological

process by which this can happen is suggested by Paul Ekman's work on facial expression and emotion, which will be described more extensively in chapters four and five.

The effect of the neutral mask is startling. From my own experience of training in it and teaching others, I see the mask demonstrate in a profound way the immense potential of the body for expression. It immediately uncovers the degree of engagement that the wearer has with his or her environment, both literal and imagined. It also has the effect of essentializing the dramatic quality of themes that arise in improvisation, creating a sense of archetypal drama. In part this arises because the thoughts that we are accustomed to expressing through speech and facial expression have to be communicated in physical action. From the perspective of observers, the actor wearing the neutral mask is somehow exposed –the corporeality of expression being difficult to fake.

An example of how the essentializing quality arises can be seen in an exercise in which students are invited to imagine a situation where they are arriving at a dock to wave goodbye to a loved one who is departing on a boat. The improvisation is conducted in small groups of students each wearing a neutral mask, and beyond the information that I've just described, there is no specification of given circumstances. The students are thus free to create their own individual imaginative connection with the situation. The primary focus of each individual is on the imagined loved one, rather than on creating interaction with other members of the group. As the exercise is performed, observers notice the ways in which various aspects of the participants' behavior communicate meaning; the individual who arrives after the other members of the group, and who doesn't wave, turning abruptly to leave; the person who continues to wave after the rest of the group have departed, and so on. Activities such as these suggest emotional identification

with a theme of personal loss without describing an explicitly detailed set of fictional circumstances. It is this feature that Lecoq calls “essential”.

In daily life we are accustomed to watching faces as the primary communicators of meaning and emotion. When the face of an actor is covered by the neutral mask, the communicative aspects of other parts of the body shine out; posture, gesture, tempo and rhythm of movement. In the primary phase of the work, this transparency allows the instructor to identify postural and gestural habits that might need correcting, habits that limit the range of expression. One actor might, for example, have a tendency to tilt the head to one side, which tends to communicate appraisal or consideration to observers. As an unconscious habit, this would lead to inappropriate choices in performance. Clearly, habits cannot be changed overnight, but the use of the Neutral mask assists actors in making the essential first step, which is to notice and identify the habit. Other actors in a workshop format, observing, realize the potential for communication that is inherent in corporeality, and hone their skills in “decoding” nvc signals. This in turn enhances their own abilities in “encoding” such signals.

The work on neutrality is intended to enable the actor to discover a physical starting point, “a blank page on which drama can be inscribed.”⁶⁹ It provides “reference points” – until one discovers neutral tempo in oneself, then it is difficult to gauge fast or slow. If one cannot discover neutral posture, it is difficult to use the full expressive range of expansion and contraction, symmetry and asymmetry in postural attitudes. This focus on physical expression develops an ability in the actor to be specific and expressive in their nonverbal communication, no matter what style of performance they perform.

⁶⁹ Lecoq 36

Beyond the diagnostic and corrective features of work with the Neutral mask lies the work of discovering the body's response to different environments, and then embodying the rhythms of natural elements, objects and animals. Lecoq uses an improvisation entitled the Fundamental Journey, in which the masked actor moves through imagined natural environments. The focus is on the embodied experience, but introduces students to what Lecoq calls the "poetic aspects of the theme: ... The crossing of the river can be compared to passing through adolescence to adult life, with all the movements finding their reflection in emotional feelings: the currents, the whirlpools, the waves rising and falling, washing back and forth from one bank to the other."⁷⁰ This again recalls the metaphorical links between movement and thought that L & J describe. In this phase of the work, the actor thinks of her self being acted on by different rhythms of nature. The next phase is to embody those rhythms, starting by physically identifying with the rhythms of the elements, and discovering the different senses of the self that they provoke.

This process engages the actor in what Lecoq calls "identifications" - identifying and moving in the rhythms of natural elements and different materials. In the work with elements, the students seek to embody the different rhythms of fire, air, water and earth. Working with water, for example, entails discovering the difference in rhythm between a bubbling spring, and the steady flow of a mature river, or the difference between waves gently lapping at a beach, and the sea in a violent storm. Materials might include oil, rubber, cellophane wrapping –each have a distinctive pattern of movement that can be embodied. Lecoq uses a developmental approach where the technical work of controlling the body so that it mimics different rhythms is subsequently transposed into expressive drama. These activities extend the range of the actor by

⁷⁰ Lecoq 42

establishing neuronal patterning that is beyond the normal everyday range of behavior. This approach can be contrasted with Method acting where “Truth” resides in the biographical experience of the actor, which is brought to the fictional character as the vehicle for its expression. In this style of acting, the neuronal patterns are those belonging to the biographical experience. This approach devalues, if not negates, the function of imagination in creating a role, whereas Lecoq’s work stimulates the imagination through extending the actor’s collection of sensorimotor experiences that can become source domains for conceptual thought. For example, Lecoq describes elastic materials as “nostalgic to return to their original shape, even though they may not succeed”.⁷¹ A detailed physical embodiment of such a process can give the actor the muscular memory source material for varied characterizations: “After having experienced, by means of these identifications, the greatest possible number of natural or animal dynamics, the actor (or author) is in a position to use these experiences, sometimes unconsciously, to feed the characters which he must act (or write) and to bring out some of their fundamental characteristics.”⁷² In the example of “elastic materials” mentioned above, the somatic experience links with themes of striving, nostalgia, and failure.

The use of the neutral mask heightens the actor’s awareness of, and ability to draw on, the sensorimotor source domains of abstract thought, something that Lecoq makes explicit: “The main results of this identification work are the traces that remain inscribed in each actor, circuits laid down in the body, through which dramatic emotions also circulate, finding their pathway to expression.”⁷³ Through consciously chosen muscular activity, repeated over time, actors develop ‘muscle memory’ of a variety of different rhythms of movement that are linked to

⁷¹ Lecoq 45

⁷² *ibid* 45

⁷³ *ibid* 45

concepts and emotions. Lecoq suggests that these are then available to the actor when she subsequently works on a text: “These experiences...remain forever engraved in the body of the actor. They are reactivated in him at the moment of interpretation. It may be many years later, when an actor finds himself with a text to interpret. The text will set up resonances in his body, meeting rich deposits awaiting expressive formulation.”⁷⁴

At this point, it is useful to recall L & J’s statement that approximately 95% of the brain’s activity is unavailable to conscious reflection, and McNeill’s observation that the processes involved in generating gestures are largely unconscious. Lecoq’s method offers a way of accessing and training some of those unconscious processes, bringing them to the level of awareness, and creating a reservoir of somatic experiences for the actor.

Having developed a foundational awareness through investigating the movement of the body, Lecoq’s training process progresses to encounters with text:

Words are approached through verbs, bearers of action, and through nouns, which represent a designated object. We consider words living organisms and thus we search for the body of words. For this purpose we have to choose words which provide a real physical dynamic. Verbs lend themselves more readily to this: to take, to raise, to break, to saw, each contains an action which nourishes the verb itself.⁷⁵

Again, the approach demonstrates a remarkable congruity with the principles identified by L & J of metaphoric transference from sensorimotor experiences to conceptual thought. Also, by focusing first on singular units of linguistic meaning, Lecoq’s process is sympathetic to the way in which the brain makes meaning of written language. As McNeill points out, written language

⁷⁴ *ibid* 45

⁷⁵ Lecoq 49

is processed in a “bottom up” fashion, with meaning constructed from the constituent parts. These synchronies between Lecoq’s exercises and empirically identified processes of cognition mean that students are sensitized to the micro processes of communication in ways that make them more likely to become aware of the GP phenomenon. The consciousness of the relationship of movement to speech develops a greater facility and variety of nonverbal expression, as well as offering a foundation for performance that can move beyond realism.

The next step in Lecoq’s progression is through poetry. He reads the students poems and invites them to work in groups of three or four. Lecoq chooses poems that address natural elements, and invites the students to improvise physically to discover a group movement in response to the poem. The poems are richer in imagery than everyday language, making the transition from image-based gesture to segmented language an easier one. Lecoq uses a sophisticated array of pedagogic methods, and takes account of shifts in direction –from the body in response to environmental stimuli to the body expressing internal stimuli. Music is also used as a stimulus for movement before the students approach dramatic texts. Lecoq uses a neologism – “mimodynamic” - to describe a way of working that includes both imitation (mimesis) and also “physical movements which translate into bodily action the sensations aroused...by colours, words, music.”⁷⁶

The approach to dramatic text encourages this translation of response into physicality: “In our way of working we enter a text through the body. We never sit around and discuss, but adopt the ‘mimodynamic’ method. In the same way as we did for music and poetry, we explore the different texts: working through movement, we ask the actors to get to grips physically with the

⁷⁶ Lecoq166

text, its images, its words, its dynamics.”⁷⁷ While it may appear that this approach lacks psychological subtlety, the physical groundwork that has been laid down by the time the students approach text leads to a refined and nuanced expressiveness. This means that they are highly responsive to, and expressive of, the impulses that lead to “utterances” in McNeill’s analysis of thinking for speaking.

While Jacques Lecoq’s work predates the findings of cognitive science that Kendon, McNeill, and Lakoff and Johnson mention, it displays synchrony with the principle that physicality is often an equal component of meaning with language. Through an approach that always begins with physical activity, Lecoq’s exercises offer a training that perfects an actor’s ability to create both iconic and metaphorical gesture, and an awareness of the link between movement and conceptual thought. It also develops sufficient voluntary control of expression to effectively mimic involuntary expression.

For some in mainstream theatre, there is an assumption that Lecoq’s work, because it is physically based, leads graduates of his school to do “physical theatre”, and dictates a style of performance. Simon McBurney of Complicite has countered this view by stating that “all theatre is physical”,⁷⁸ meaning that no matter what style of performance an actor is engaged in, meaning is communicated through the body. Lecoq himself was fond of saying that he trains the actor for a theatre that hasn’t been invented yet, and was insistent that his graduates discover their own style. It is true that he has influenced companies who are radically experimental in their style, such as Complicite and Theatre de Soleil, but he has also trained actors such as Geoffrey Rush, who is well known for naturalistic film performances. It seems that Lecoq prepares the actor for a variety of styles by focusing on fundamental cognitive and expressive

⁷⁷ Lecoq 137

⁷⁸ Conversation with the author, February 18, 1991, London.

activities. Ariane Mnouchkine, speaking in a video documentary about Lecoq, said “His down to earth style ... showed me a certain truth which is not to imagine that everything takes place in the head ... the theatre is flesh. It’s from the verb made flesh and Lecoq transmits that.”⁷⁹

There is however, a marked difference in philosophy between Lecoq and proponents of a style of psychological realism that depends on autobiographical experience as source material:

In my method of teaching, I have always given priority to the external world over inner experience ... It is more important to observe how beings and objects move, and how they find a reflection in us ... People discover themselves in relation to their grasp of the external world, and if the student has special qualities, these will show up in the reflection. I do not search for deep sources of creativity in psychological memories... I prefer to see more distance between the actor’s own ego and the character performed ...

Neither belief nor identification is enough –one must be able genuinely to play.”⁸⁰

Lecoq’s statement again displays coherence with the basic principle expressed by L & J that our experience of movement in the physical world shapes our conceptual thought. It also raises questions about the degree of identification between actor and character. This is also a topic that can be investigated using the findings of cognitive science, and is the subject of the next chapter.

⁷⁹ Roy and Carasso 1999

⁸⁰ Lecoq 19

4.0 HOW DOES THE ACTOR CREATE A CHARACTER?

The process of creating a character, obviously, is at the heart of acting and theatre, and is at once both obvious and mysterious. Obvious, because the character is who we see and hear on stage, mysterious, because we generally cannot see or hear the relationship between actor and character. Indeed, in most styles of theatre, an audience considers the apparent melding of actor and character as evidence of “good” acting. The process by which the actor melds self and character is one that is frequently described by contemporary actors as occurring through two possible pathways –“internal” or “external”; “inside out” or “outside in”. Although there are many variants of what precisely is meant by this, in broad terms these reflect ideas of “psychological” or “physical” starting points, and sometimes “sameness” (of self and character), or “difference” (between self and character). These two notions reflect the split between body and mind in Western thought that we now know is mistaken, and rest upon a concept of the individual that is in itself metaphorical –that of the body as a container, with thought being something that occurs “inside”, and mimesis or imitation something that happens “outside”.

These perception spring from phenomenological experience and are part of the “recessive body” phenomenon described by Mark Johnson. Ultimately, what is happening when an actor prepares and performs a character is that patterns of neurons firing in the brain provoke physical action that can be perceived by an audience. The process by which this occurs is largely unavailable to conscious reflection; we define those aspects of it that we can become aware of in

metaphorically shaped concepts. Many of the proclaimed differences between approaches to acting are actually differences in the types of metaphors used to describe self and process.

In this chapter, I'll describe several aspects of current cognitive studies that facilitate a better understanding of what is actually happening when an actor embodies a character. I'll begin by reviewing some examples of the prevalent "inside/outside" dichotomy in acting discourse, and then describe aspects of cognitive theories that suggest that this dichotomy is mistaken. At the linguistic level, L & J provide an accessible analysis of the metaphorical construction of the concepts of self and different selves, and how these are based on physical experience in the material world. Psychologist Paul Ekman demonstrates how consciously chosen muscular activity can affect the autonomic nervous system and thence the experience of emotion. I go on to describe the connectionist view of the brain, which models mental activity as a series of neural networks, and give examples of how such modeling can create hypotheses of the way in which abstract concepts, such as morality, are linked to motor activity. In this I draw on George Lakoff's description of work by Sri Narayanan, and also on Paul Churchland's analysis of the cognitive basis of morality. I also summarize Merlin Donald's description of the way in which mimesis is central to cognition and precedes language in human evolution. Finally, I turn to Fauconnier and Turner's theory of conceptual blending to offer a description of how the model of "mental spaces" can be used to understand the way in which we can combine different concepts while simultaneously maintaining an awareness of their differences. These features of cognitive studies will then be applied to a consideration of character exercises designed by Michael Chekhov.

This consideration of actor and character seeks to discover foundational cognitive principles that underlie multiple theatrical styles. My intention is to examine the starting point –

the actor's embodiment of a character - rather than the varied theories that lead to different styles, while recognizing, of course, that discourse about acting tends to get framed by references to different methodologies or theories. Certain metaphors recur; twentieth-century concepts of approaches to acting translate Diderot's nineteenth century paradox of "sensibility" and technique into the "inside/outside" conceptualization mentioned above, and, following the publication of An Actor Prepares in 1936, often defined the dichotomy with reference to Stanislavski, and later Strasberg.

For example, the English actor Michael Redgrave, writing about Stanislavski in 1946, observes that:

There are in England today, roughly speaking, two styles of acting: the acting in which the effect springs from the cause, and that which begins with effect and which rarely, and only in part, seeks the cause. The latter style is still very much preponderant. It is very seldom we see a production in which more than a few actors are faithful to the author, the director, and their artistic conscience. "Always he sought," said Nemirovich-Danchenko, "the essence of the play in the times and events described; and this he expected the actor to understand. This is what Stanislavsky called the core, and it is this core which must stir the actor, which must become part of him for the time being."⁸¹

In talking about cause and effect, it seems that Redgrave is talking about thought and expression. The juxtaposition of the quote from Nemirovich-Danchenko links "cause", "artistic conscience", "essence", and "core" together. The latter term implies that these are all interior qualities, and that consequently, for theatre to be art, the actor must move from cause to effect, from "inside" to "outside".

⁸¹ Cole 407

A similar sentiment is expressed by John Gielgud:

Komis' [Komisarjevsky's] interest and help had encouraged me tremendously, and I began to feel that I could study a part from the inside, as he taught me, not seizing at once on the obvious showy effects and histrionics, but trying to absorb the atmosphere of the play and the background of the character, and then to build it outwards so that it came to life naturally, developing in proper relationship to the other actors, under the control of the producer.”⁸²

Again, the notion is that “showy effects and histrionics” are external and therefore superficial, and that “inside out” is the preferable direction in creating a character, with internal thought leading to external expression.

Olivier also uses the “inside/outside” dichotomy, although he identifies himself as working in the opposite direction to Gielgud and Redgrave. In response to a question about how he had created his characterization of Richard III, he talks about how he started with two “extraneous externals”; a voice that was an imitation of old actors imitating Henry Irving, and a big nose:

I'm afraid I do work mostly from the outside in. I usually collect a lot of details, a lot of characteristics, and find a creature swimming about somewhere in the middle of them. Perhaps I should mention now what everybody's been talking about for years, and that's the Actors Studio and the Method. What I've just said is absolutely against their beliefs, absolute heresy. And it may be, as long as you achieve the result of, don't let's call it naturalism, don't even let's call it realism, let's call it truthfulness, that it doesn't matter which method you use. ... Some people start from the inside, some people start from the

⁸² Cole 339

periphery. I would say, at a guess, that Alec Guinness is what we'd call a peripheral actor. I think I'm the same. The actor who starts from the inside is more likely to find himself in the parts he plays, than to find the parts in himself; perhaps not necessarily in himself, but to find the parts, go out to them and get them, and be somebody else.⁸³

Several intriguing concepts emerge from Olivier's statement. He feels the need to apologize for his "external" approach, and then justify it by saying that it can lead to "truthfulness", and then makes a separation between character and self that suggests that the internal approach leads to autobiographical acting, and that there is a distinction between characters as autonomous beings, and characters as facets of one's own "self". The full significance of these distinctions will be clarified later by the work of L & J, but for now it is intriguing to note the amount of thought and feeling provoked by what is ultimately a metaphorical distinction between "internal" and "external".

Peter Brook also refers to the concept of "internal" and "external" in The Empty Space, and like Olivier, references Method acting as an example of an "internal" approach:

There have been times in theatre history when the actor's work has been based on certain accepted gestures and expressions: there have been frozen systems of attitudes that we reject today. It is perhaps less obvious that the opposite pole, the Method actor's freedom in choosing anything whatsoever from the gestures of everyday life, is equally restricted, for in basing his gestures on his observation or on his own spontaneity, the actor is not drawing on any deep creativity. He is reaching inside himself for an alphabet that is also fossilized, for the language not of invention but of his conditioning.⁸⁴

The observation suggests that the desired feature – "invention", or creative choice – is no more

⁸³ Cole, 410-411

⁸⁴ Brook, 125

likely to proceed from an “inside-out” process than from “external” codified gestures.

While these comments range in date from 1939 to 1968, it is evident that the inside/outside conceptualization persists in current discourse about acting. During a discussion about acting and mirror neurons that took place at the Philoctetes Center in New York in 2007,⁸⁵ talk turned to the question of “mirroring” in the sense of imitation of gesture. Moderator Adam Ludwig, an experienced professional actor, responded to a comment about Delsarte by observing that “you can do this ‘outside in’ thing where you imitate just the form...but over years that form becomes hollow because the intention isn’t learned also.” Tony Award winning actress Blair Brown, invited to talk about her own experience of “external approaches” commented that “I had worked with a lot of English directors who took much more that approach, which was - just in broad terms - Americans work ‘inside out’ and British –the Brits –work ‘outside in’, and I work both ways.” Ludwig describes an exercise of Michael Chekhov’s; “You create an other [that] you can relate to and imitate in your head. You close your eyes and imagine the character, then you begin to imitate it through gesture.” In the context of the discussion, it is clear that Ludwig considers this an “external” approach. The potential difficulties that arise from using the “inside/outside” schema to describe acting become clear as one investigates the statement: presumably the activity is “external” because it involves physical imitation, but the initial act of imagination would seem to be one that is “internal” in that it is done through thought alone.

Current texts on acting, intended for use as practical instruction, also use the concepts of “inside/outside” to talk about an actor’s relationship to character. Robert Benedetti’s The Actor

⁸⁵ Brown and Ludwig’s comments are transcribed from the video of the discussion available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loB-Lg0X1qo&feature=PlayList&p=E42C219FA01A9888&index=0>

Accessed 12/21/09

at Work was first published in 1970 and is now in its ninth edition:

During the first half of the twentieth century, the British acting tradition stressed the importance of externals in the acting process, working “from the outside in”. Our American tradition, on the other hand, stressed the importance of internals, working “from the inside out.” For the past sixty years, however, a real effort has been made in both countries to combine these two approaches. ... If your performance consists only of external movement and speech unconnected to an inner energy, it will seem hollow and lifeless; if it consists only of inner intensity, without skillful outer expression, it will seem vague and self-indulgent.⁸⁶

Benedetti’s statement differs from others in saying that both “external” and “internal” activities are necessary, rather than positing an either/or process. Nevertheless, notions of what happens “outside” and “inside” the actor’s body are used to define the quality of performance, and are set up as a dichotomy. Although the proposition sounds reasonable, the dualism that is established is complicated the moment one asks how an actor communicates “inner energy”, or indeed, how an audience member will identify it. The answer has to be that it is through audible or observable communication, which would be considered “external” in the conceptual system used by Benedetti and the others quoted.

That this way of understanding actors’ approaches to character is widespread in Western theatre is further confirmed by Robert Gordon, whose The Purpose of Playing is an admirable analysis of trends in contemporary acting. He introduces his work by summarizing eleven common topics of debate among contemporary practitioners and critics in a series of questions. In one of these he asks: “Should the actor work from the “outside in” (commonly associated with

⁸⁶ Benedetti, Robert, 73

the traditional British acting practice of characterization through techniques of voice and movement) or from the inside out (somewhat misleadingly assumed to be a Stanislavskian approach)?”⁸⁷ When one considers this question in the light of the findings of cognitive science about cognition and expression, it becomes apparent that the premise on which this question is based is a false dichotomy that misleads practitioners and theorists alike. The origin of the dichotomy is understandable – the body is visible, thought is not - but even before one delves into its metaphorical formation, the complications mentioned above demonstrate its lack of coherence under examination.

We now have information that offers more empirically based insight into the actor’s process. One of the features of cognitive science’s understanding of the mind is the fact that a large proportion of the brain’s activity occurs unconsciously, and is consequently unavailable to introspection. The abstract concepts that we are conscious of are shaped metaphorically by our physical experience in the material world, as described in the introduction and Chapter 1. In the analysis provided by cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not just a feature of language, but is fundamental to cognition through the transference of meaning from one domain to another. Mark Johnson explains how the metaphor of the body as a container arises:

We are immediately aware of our bodies as three-dimensional containers into which we put certain things (food, water, air) and out of which other things emerge (wastes, air, blood, etc.). From the beginning, we experience constant physical containment in our surroundings (those things that envelope us). We move in and out of rooms, clothes, vehicles, and numerous kinds of bounded spaces.⁸⁸

The kinesthetic experience of the body as a container is transferred to feelings and concepts of

⁸⁷ Gordon, 15

⁸⁸ Johnson 1987, 21

the mind, and therefore creates a notion of the mind as something with a boundary that separates interior from exterior, and that has contents.

One of the corollaries of this is that our experiencing consciousness, the foundation of our sense of self, is also shaped metaphorically in a variety of ways. Investigating the way this happens is essential for an empirically responsible description of the relationship between the self of the actor and that of the character. It is worth remembering at this point that the concept of the embodied mind that L & J describe in Philosophy in the Flesh, is fundamentally different to the notion of the mind that we are familiar with in Western thought that separates reason from the body:

...our conceptual systems and our capacity for thought are shaped by the nature of our brains, our bodies and our bodily interactions. There is no mind separate from the body, nor are there thoughts that have an existence separate from and independent of the body, nor are there thoughts that that have an existence independent of bodies and brains. But our metaphors for mind conflict with what cognitive science has discovered. *We conceptualize the mind metaphorically in terms of a container image schema defining a space that is inside the body and separate from it.*⁸⁹

This metaphorical conceptualization of the mind is what gives rise to the “inside /outside” conceptualization of work on a character. When mental activity is thought of as “inside”, and communication as “outside”, it is inevitable that the two will be considered to be separate. When the mind is conceptualized as a container, it is inevitable that “[i]deas and concepts are internal, existing somewhere in the inner space of our minds, while what they refer to are things in the external, physical world. This metaphor is so deeply ingrained that it is hard to think about mind

⁸⁹ L & J 265-266, my italics

in any other way.”⁹⁰

When one considers the above quotes from theatre practitioners in this light, one can see how notions of truth, imagination and self are identified as “internal” because they are mental concepts. Gestures without intention are “hollow”, and Olivier’s approach to characterizing Richard III by imagining a big nose and an imitated voice is identified as “external” because these are things of the body. Yet L & J state that “[t]here is no true separation of mind and body. These are not two independent entities that somehow come together and couple...[r]ather, mind is part of the very structure and fabric of our interactions with the world.”⁹¹

Consequently, rather than trying to argue the relative merits of psychological or physical approaches to characterization, it makes sense to acknowledge that the central activity in creating a character is the stimulation of the imagination, and that this can occur from a variety of prompts. This reflects the variety of activities described by the practitioners above without getting tied into knots over what is “internal” or “external”. To make a division along these lines results, as we have seen, in identifications of process that do not reflect how the mind/body actually works and therefore are of limited use to the actor, if not actively counter-productive.

Several aspects of cognitive science help us to better understand what is actually happening when an actor conceives of and embodies a character. The first of these that I’ll describe is L & J’s analysis in Philosophy in the Flesh of the way that we construct metaphors of self as a way of defining different aspects of our experience of personality. It is probably reasonable to say that in creating a character an actor creates an alternate “self” from his or her own identity. This notion can be seen in Olivier’s description above of how an actor can “find himself in the parts he plays, or find the parts in himself”. This implies an essential self of the

⁹⁰ *ibid.* 266

⁹¹ *ibid.* 266

actor, and then aspects of the self that are embodied in character roles. This conceptualization rests on a metaphoric system of mental life, which we all use, and which L& J call the “Subject - Self Metaphor system”. In this system;

...there is always a Subject that is the locus of reason and that metaphorically has an existence independent of the body. As we have seen, this contradicts the fundamental findings of cognitive science. And yet, the conception of such a Subject arises around the world uniformly on the basis of apparently universal and unchangeable experiences.⁹²

Olivier’s idea of “himself” would be what L & J identify as the Subject –“ the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will and our ‘essence’ - everything that makes us who we uniquely are.”⁹³ Because the Subject is that aspect of a person that is the experiencing consciousness, it exists only in the present:

The Self is that part of a person that is not picked out by the Subject. This includes the body, social roles, past states, and actions in the world. There can be more than one Self. And each self is conceptualized metaphorically as either a person, a place or a location.⁹⁴

There are four types of everyday experience which form the source domains of the system:

1) manipulating objects 2) being located in space 3) entering into social relations, and 4) empathic projection –conceptually projecting yourself onto someone else. There is a fifth special case; each person is seen as having an Essence that is part of the subject. The Subject may have many Selves, but only one of these selves is compatible with the

⁹² L & J 268

⁹³ *ibid.* 268

⁹⁴ *ibid.* 269

essence, and this is called the “real” or “true” self.⁹⁵

This conceptual understanding of Subject and different Selves underlies most attempts to describe the relationship between actor and character. For example, Uta Hagen, in the widely read Respect for Acting says:

The Representational actor deliberately chooses to imitate or illustrate the character’s behavior. The Presentational actor attempts to reveal human behavior through a use of himself, through an understanding of himself and consequently an understanding of the character he is portraying. The Representational actor finds a form based on an objective result for the character, which he then carefully watches as he executes it. The Presentational actor trusts that a form will result from identification with the character and the discovery of his character’s actions, and works on stage for a moment-to-moment subjective experience. ... I believe that the illustration of a character’s behavior at the cost of removing one’s own psyche, no matter how brilliant the performance that results, creates an alienation between audience and actor...the vital empathy with human behavior, the emotional involvement between actor and audience will be lacking.⁹⁶

Hagen’s description suggests that the difference between the “Representational actor” and the “Presentational actor” is essentially one of “identification with the character”, which results in “subjective experience”. When viewed in the context of the Subject-Self system, the distinction between the approaches that Hagen describes is metaphorical rather than actual. Both activities that she describes involve a Subject (an experiencing consciousness) and one or more selves in the form of people or objects (“forms”). The notion of an essential self is implied in the phrases “the use of himself” and “one’s own psyche”, and would seem to equate with Olivier’s

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 270

⁹⁶ Hagen, 12

description of an actor “bringing himself to a role”. So the concept that is expressed by this progression of thought is that an actor can only move an audience if he projects his “essential self” into the role.

This idea falls into another one of the categories of conceptualization that L & J describe, where the Subject can project him or herself onto another person in one of two ways; Advisory Projection and Empathic Projection. In Advisory Projection “I am projecting my values onto you so that I experience your life with my values.”⁹⁷ In Empathic Projection, “I am experiencing your life, but with your values projected onto my subjective experience.”⁹⁸ This metaphoric conception is key to the debate about self and character and underlies notions of whether the character is similar to, or different from the actor’s “essential” self. In the example quoted above, Hagen clearly favors Advisory Projection, and the two types of projection account for the distinction that Olivier makes between “finding oneself in the part” and “finding the part in oneself”. L & J relate this metaphoric system to the capacity to imitate:

Imitating makes use of an ability to project, to conceptualize oneself as inhabiting the body of another. Empathy is the extension of this ability to the realm of emotions – not just to move as someone else moves, but to feel as someone else feels.”⁹⁹

Empathy as a cognitive mechanism is immensely important to a consideration of acting, and I’m going to talk about it in depth in Chapter 4. For now, L & J’s statement serves to highlight the fact that the dichotomies of “internal/external” and “same/different” are based on metaphorical conceptualizations that are inaccurate representations of how the mind/body works. Given that

⁹⁷ L & J 281

⁹⁸ *ibid.* 281

⁹⁹ *ibid.* 281

physical imitation and the ability to feel as someone else feels are linked faculties, and that both incorporate the imagination at some level, it would seem that “outside in” and “inside out” approaches are actually doing the same thing; stimulating the actor’s imagination so that she can create an imagined self, who is then embodied in fictional circumstances.

While most of us are comfortable with the concept that imagination is a mental activity, for many it may be difficult to conceive of a physical activity as something that can stimulate the imagination. One of the ways in which this can happen can be seen in the fact that consciously chosen muscular activity can affect the autonomic nervous system, and thence the experience of emotion. Psychologist Paul Ekman and others identified this phenomenon while researching the facial expressions associated with different emotions:

I found that when I made certain expressions, I was flooded with strong emotional sensations. It wasn’t just any expression, only the ones I had already identified as universal to all human beings. When I asked Friesen if this was happening to him to him also, he reported that he, too, was feeling emotions when he made some of the expressions, and they often felt unpleasant.¹⁰⁰

Ekman’s experience was confirmed by further studies, and their findings are congruent with research by Antonio Damasio and others in the field of neurobiology. (I will investigate this phenomenon in detail in chapter 5.) It seems likely that consciously directed muscular activity in other areas can also have an effect on the autonomic nervous system. For example, Ekman noted that conscious alteration of the voice would probably have an effect:

In this research we asked people to make certain facial movements, but I also believe we could also have obtained the same results if people had made the voice sound for each

¹⁰⁰ Ekman 2003, 37

emotion. It is much harder for people to produce the vocal sounds of emotion deliberately than to make the facial expression. But we did find one woman who could so, and indeed, she produced the same results with the voice or the face.¹⁰¹

If consciously chosen muscular activity can stimulate something as apparently “internal” as emotional states, then the idea that “internal” and “external” approaches to the creation of character are in opposition, or even separate, is clearly mistaken.

Despite phenomenological experiences such as that investigated by Ekman, the mistaken conceptual divide between physical and mental activities is a persistent one. A variety of sources in the field of cognitive studies can assist in gaining a better understanding of what is actually happening in the relationship between thought and physicality. Given that most of the mind’s activity is unconscious, our current understanding of it arises from research in a variety of fields such as cognitive psychology, neurobiology, and linguistics, with a reflexive relationship between theoretical hypotheses and clinical research. An understanding of the connectionist view of mind is foundational to this field, and is therefore worth spending a bit of time on.

Connectionism is a view of the mind as a system of networks, a theory that became popular with cognitive scientists in the 1980’s, and is considered by some to be an alternative view to the computational model that prevailed prior to this. Connectionism creates models of mental activity based on the hypothesis that it is a result of the processes of interconnected networks of simple units. This modeling is used in a variety of different ways. For example, each unit in a network could represent a word, and the connections between the units would represent semantic similarity. The most common forms of connectionist models identify neurons as units, and synapses as connections. These models cannot come near to matching the scope of the

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* 36-37

brain's activity (it has an estimated 10 billion neurons, each with multiple synapses), but suggest the nature of the process that is involved. There is general agreement among connectionists that one type of neural network – the “recurrent” network, is a better model of what happens in the brain than a “feedforward” model. In the recurrent network, connections can form a “directed cycle”, meaning that (in the case of a neural network) some synaptic connections will have more “weight” than others, and that with repetition over time, patterns of connection emerge and become confirmed. In the “feedforward” model no such directed cycles occur.

Connectionist modeling is used to describe cognitive tasks such as visual and aural perception or the processing of language, and is supported by empirical data gathered through the use of PET and MRI scans, which can identify which parts of the brain are active during particular mental operations. Beyond these cognitive activities, however, certain researchers have proposed that neural network theory can also be applied to mental activity that involves abstract concepts. For example, neurobiologist Paul Churchland has advanced the proposition that moral behavior emerges from cognitive processes.¹⁰² His central contention is that moral knowledge is a set of skills that can be described using the connectionist modeling described above. In the model, an abstract neuronal space of potential activation is configured by weighted synaptic connections to create prototypical moral categories such as “morally good action” or “morally bad action”. Actual sensory input is assimilated to these categories with varying degrees of closeness as we make assessments of moral behavior. This analysis is supported by two clinical studies conducted by Hanna and Antonio Damasio in the 1990's. These studies showed that in two different subjects, moral behavior was different following trauma to a specific area of the brain.

¹⁰² Churchland 2000

Another example of the way in which the connectionist view of mental activity can assist us in understanding the workings of the brain is given by George Lakoff, who, drawing on the work of Sri Narayanan, supplies an accessible description of how models of neuronal activity can be used to explain the way in which conceptual metaphors arise:

In the neural theory, conceptual metaphor arises in childhood when experiences regularly occur together, activating different brain regions. Activation repeatedly spreads along neural pathways, progressively strengthening synapses in pathways between those brain regions until new circuitry is formed linking them. The new circuitry physically constitutes the metaphor, carrying out a neural mapping between frame circuitry in the regions and permitting new inferences. The conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP (as in "prices rose," "the temperature fell") is learned because brain regions for quantity and verticality are both activated whenever you pour liquid into a glass or build any pile. AFFECTION IS WARMTH (as in "She's a warm person," or "She's an ice queen") [is learned] because when you are held affectionately as a child by your parents, you feel physical warmth. Hundreds of such *primary metaphors* are learned early in life. *Complex metaphors* are formed by neural bindings of these primary metaphors. And metaphorical language expresses both primary and complex metaphors.¹⁰³

Experiences that repeatedly activate neural mapping between different brain areas create “directed” networks by establishing and reinforcing patterns of “weighted” synaptic connections. Through this process, we create cognitive connections between the different areas before we

¹⁰³ <http://www.americanscientist.org/bookshelf/pub/the-functionalists-dilemma>
accessed 1/5/10

create linguistic ones. It will be useful to bear both these features in mind later, when considering the concept of mental spaces in relationship to self and character.

These principles are also helpful in understanding the role of mimesis in acting and the creation of character. A description of the development of mimesis in human evolution is offered by cognitive psychologist Merlin Donald, who has taken a particular interest in the evolution of the human brain. In his analysis, outlined in his essay “Art and Cognitive Evolution”, he states that mimesis preceded the development of language as humans evolved: “Mimesis is an analogue or holisitc style of thought that is more basic to our uniquely human way of thinking than language or logic. Indeed, on present evidence language and logic evolved much later, from a mimetic platform.”¹⁰⁴ This statement is congruent with McNeill’s differentiation between written language and gesture, and proposes that gestural and postural action is actually a “style of thought”, further undermining the conceptual divide between physical and mental activity. Donald’s description of mimesis also indicates its centrality to the acting process:

The term mimesis describes a cluster of activities that were made possible by a single neuro-cognitive adaptation...The four central mimetic abilities are mime, imitation, gesture, and the rehearsal of skill ... Mimesis seems to have evolved as a cognitive elaboration of embodiment in patterns of action. Its origins lie in a redistribution of frontal-cortical influence during the early stages of the evolution of species *Homo*, when the prefrontal and parts of the premotor cortex expanded enormously in relative size and connectivity. The cognitive significance of this lies in the fact that, in virtually all social mammals, the frontal regions are concerned with the control of action and behavior...¹⁰⁵

Obviously, the control of action and behavior is a central feature in the process of acting, and the

¹⁰⁴ Donald,15

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* 15

fact that the evolution of mimesis is tied to the development of the prefrontal cortex also links mimesis to character, as this area of the brain is the one most strongly implicated in the creation and expression of personality. It would seem likely that the connection between physical action and conceptual thought occurs because there is neural circuitry from the premotor cortex to other, nonmotor domains, which allows the neural circuitry that controls movement to be used by conceptual domains such as emotion, sensing and thinking.¹⁰⁶

This interconnectedness is further confirmed by a comment that Vittorio Gallese made in the Philoctetes Center discussion on mirror neurons and acting. Gallese was one of the neurophysiologists who discovered mirror neurons, which are neurons in an observer's brain that fire in a similar pattern when an action is seen to be performed as when that action is actually executed.¹⁰⁷ This is a topic that I'll investigate in depth in chapter 4, as it links mimesis, empathy, and the imagination. Gallese describes the activity of mirror neurons as follows. (His use of 'act' as noun and verb is in the everyday sense, not the theatrical sense):

When I see a goal – directed motor act, not only the visual part of my brain is stimulated, but also a part of the motor brain. We discovered not only that the human brain behaves in a similar way – the motor strip is activated not only when we act, but when see other individuals acting –but [also that] the same mirroring mechanism is applied to other domains of social cognition, emotions and sensations.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ This connection is described by Lakoff in *The Neuroscience of Form in Art* in *The Artful Mind*, Mark Turner, ed. Lakoff summarizes Narayanan's hypothesis that the neural circuitry involved in controlling phases of motor action can also work to define 'aspect' in abstract concepts.

¹⁰⁷ Mirror neurons have been directly observed in monkeys, but ethical issues prevent the insertion of electrodes to duplicate the experiments in humans. Nevertheless, fMRI studies strongly suggest that humans also have a mirror neuron system. What is not yet clear is whether there are specific neurons that 'mirror' or whether this is a function that is carried out by neurons that also do other things. The discussion from which this comment is transcribed was predicated on the existence of a mirror neuron system in humans.

¹⁰⁸ Gallese's comments are transcribed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loB-Lg0X1qo&feature=Playlist&p=E42C219FA01A9888&index=0> accessed 12/21/09

In other parts of the discussion, Gallese was careful to point out that mirror neurons fire only in response to a goal directed motor act, so the connection to emotions and sensations in an observer arise via the part of the observer's brain that perceives and controls movement. The concept of a mirror neuron system in humans seems to confirm Narayanan's neural modeling and demonstrate further the way in which movement, the observation of movement, and the imitation of movement are cognitive activities that engage multiple features of experience.

Theatre practitioners and researchers are very fortunate to have a record of Gallese's contributions to this discussion – it is rare that eminent neurophysiologists comment directly on matters of theatrical practice. Gallese made this observation during a phase of the discussion that focused on the creation of character:

Your relationship with a character you're supposed to play is intrinsically relational, so you try to enter into the –metaphorically or even literally – into the body of someone else. In the body, in the gesturing, in the mind. So more than a mirroring mechanism, it's an *imagery* mechanism which partly impinges upon the same neurocircuits which are involved in action observation.¹⁰⁹

Gallese's conception of the character coincides remarkably well with the work of Michael Chekhov. Actor Adam Ludwig evidently notices this, for shortly after Gallese's comment, he describes the Chekhov exercise in the comment that I have quoted above. Given the features of the discourse about character that I've mentioned above, it is significant that Gallese identifies the character as "someone else" rather than "self in character." It is also instructive that body and image feature strongly in his description, and how the container metaphor of self is applied to the identity of the imagined character, not the actor. I suspect that when he distinguishes between

¹⁰⁹ see note 28

metaphorical and literal ways of entering the body of someone else, that “literal” means the assumption of physical characteristics, since there is an implicit understanding that the character is fictional.

Michael Chekhov’s conception of the relationship between actor and character bears a lot of congruence with the cognitive principles that I’ve outlined, and I’m going to trace the relationship of these more closely by looking at some of his exercises. Like Stanislavski he acted and directed at The Moscow Art Theatre, but while Stanislavski’s work and life have been extensively documented, Michael Chekhov’s is less well known. Nevertheless, his ideas have contributed significantly to actor training in the latter part of the twentieth century, with an emphatic resurgence of interest evident since the 1980’s.

Born in 1891, Michael Chekhov was the nephew of Anton Chekhov. At the age of nineteen he began working as an actor with The Maly Theatre in St. Petersburg, and was then invited to join the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre by Stanislavsky in 1912. In the following fifteen years, Chekhov achieved fame for his innovative and unusual performances with both the first and the second MAT, but as the new communist regime tightened its grip on artistic activity, his aesthetic principles and his interest in the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner made him a target for the hard line Marxists within his company. In 1928, his autobiography became an unexpected best seller, and the increased fame led to denunciations of him by Moscow newspapers as a mystic and a “sick artist” whose work was “alien and reactionary”, and the preparation of an arrest warrant. To escape imprisonment, he traveled first of all to Berlin, hoping to mount a German-language production of Hamlet.

Chekhov endured a nomadic existence for the next six years, working in Austria, France, Latvia and Lithuania. In 1934, at the invitation of impresario Sol Hurok, he and other MAT

emigrés formed a company called The Moscow Art Players, which toured the United States in 1934-5. They performed a repertoire of seven plays and an evening of adaptations of Chekhov stories and played on Broadway to full houses and highly favorable reviews. At this point Chekhov was invited by Stella Adler to join the Group Theatre, and also by actress Beatrice Straight to lead a theatre company and training studio at Dartington Hall in Devon, England. No doubt attracted by the school's links with the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, and the financial security afforded by its backing by the wealthy Elmhirst family, Chekhov chose to go to England. From 1936 to 1939 he taught at The Michael Chekhov Theatre Studio in Dartington, but moved back to the USA at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Based in Ridgefield, Connecticut, Chekhov started another studio, and staged some performances with an ensemble that included a young Yul Brynner that were poorly received. He created a production of Twelfth Night in 1941 on Broadway, however, that was favorably reviewed. His Ridgefield studio was forced to close in 1942 when the draft removed most of its male actors, and he moved to Los Angeles in 1943. He then began a film career as an actor that included an Oscar nomination for his role in Hitchcock's Spellbound in 1945, and resulted in a total of ten films. He continued to teach during this period, and actors who trained with him included Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Clint Eastwood, Leslie Caron, Anthony Quinn, Ingrid Bergman, Jack Palance, Mala Powers, Lloyd Bridges, and Yul Brynner. His book To The Actor was published in 1953, two years before his death from a heart attack.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Chekhov's biography is compiled from TDR, Vol. 27 no. 3 Fall 1983, p. 3, Franc Chamberlain's Michael Chekhov, Charles Marowitz's The Other Chekhov, and www.michaelchekhov.org.

During his time at MAT, Chekhov rejected certain elements of Stanislavski's system, notably his approach to characterization:

Stanislavski's viewpoint was that when an actor gets a part he has to imagine [that] the character he will play is, figuratively speaking, seated within himself-absolutely and completely occupying the actor's inner self-... In sum, the character dwelt within the actor, and the actor's voice and body expressed in a true-to-life manner what the character was supposed to think and feel and do...yet in such a way that it was also true to the psychology or inner life of the actor himself. ¹¹¹

This would be an example of Advisory Projection, where the actor's values are projected on to the character, since the values of the character have to be "true" to those of the actor. That Chekhov took a different approach, and favored Empathic Projection is clear from the following quote where he invites the student of acting to ask three questions about the character that is being approached:

- 1) What is the difference between my way of thinking and the character's way of thinking?
- 2) What are the differences between the feelings and emotions of the character and myself?
- 3) What is the nature of my will and inclinations against those of the character?¹¹²

The focus is constantly on becoming aware of differences, rather than the similarities that Stanislavski's approach favors, and which Chekhov believed led to "weary repetitions" of the actor's autobiography. This approach evidently invites the Subject (the student of acting), to

¹¹¹ Chekhov 1963, 49

¹¹² *ibid* 58

experience the life of the character with the character's values projected onto the Subject's subjective experience.

An endorsement of Chekhov's approach can be found in Fauconnier and Turner's (F & T) theory of conceptual blending, described in The Way We Think. Briefly, a conceptual blend is a mental construction, initially composed of at least three mental spaces, that occurs at the level of short-term, or "working" memory. Each of these contain aspects of meaning that, when integrated with the others, creates a fourth mental space and new conceptual material. The process starts when two concepts, or domains of experience, are framed together in linguistic or imagistic ways, making the mind scan automatically for underlying similarities. This is the process that occurs when an actor thinks of "self" and "character". In Chekhov's approach, these would be two domains of experience, framed together by the fact that they will share the same body. F & T posit that if the two domains have traits in common (in the example of actor and character, these could be personality traits), then the result of the scanning will be the recall from long-term memory of a third or "generic" space containing the outlines of these traits. This would justify Chekhov's statement that "the similarities take care of themselves." The presence of this generic space primes the mind to project or "map" connections, resulting in yet a fourth space, the blend itself. In Chekhov's process this would be the mental space in which the actor embodies the realized character. Stanislavski's concept of total identification between self and character is undercut by F & T's analysis, while Chekhov's description of his process in The Path of The Actor has remarkable similarities with it:

If an actor prepares his role correctly, the whole process of preparation can be characterized as his gradual approach to the picture of his character as he sees it in his

imagination, in his fantasy. The actor first builds up his character exclusively in his fantasy life, and then tries to imitate the character's inner and outer qualities.¹¹³

While F & T are describing a mental process that operates in many areas of activity, they do make mention of what they call "drama connectors". In the quote below they begin by describing the phenomenon of the blended actor and character from the audience's perspective, but nevertheless, the principles described are pertinent when addressing the process of the actor:

Dramatic performances are deliberate blends of a living person with an identity. They give us a living person in one input and a different living person, an actor, in another. The person on stage is a blend of these two. The character portrayed may of course be entirely fictional, but there is still a space, a fictional one, in which that person is alive. In the blend, the person sounds and moves like the actor and is where the actor is, but the actor in her performance tries to accept projections from the character portrayed, and so modifies her language, appearance, dress, attitudes, and gestures.¹¹⁴

It is clear from the last sentence that F & T also conceive of the character as someone different from the actor, but also living. One of the very significant factors for the consideration of theatre as a whole is that audiences are simultaneously aware of actor and character without losing their engagement with the fictional circumstances:¹¹⁵

While we perceive a single scene, we are simultaneously aware of the actor moving and talking on a stage in front of an audience, and of the corresponding character moving and

¹¹³ Chekhov 2005, 108

¹¹⁴ F & T 266

¹¹⁵ This information has many implications for theories of reception in theatre audiences, addressed by Bruce McConachie in [Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre](#)

talking within the represented story world. Common to the two frames are some language and action patterns.”¹¹⁶

While this simultaneous perception of “fictional” and “real” is something that F & T describe from an audience’s point of view, it seems reasonable to identify the same mental processes in an actor creating and performing a character. A core feature of Michael Chekhov’s approach to characterization is congruent with this principle, which Chekhov identified as “dual consciousness”. His assertion of this feature arose from an experience that he had while playing the character of Skid in a play called Artists¹¹⁷ in Berlin, directed by Max Reinhardt:

Skid was speaking, and it suddenly seemed to me that I really understood for the first time the meaning of his words, his unrequited love for Bonny and his drama. My exhaustion and calmness had turned me into a spectator of my own action ... I looked at Skid sitting down there on the floor and I was struck by it, as if I could “see” his feelings, his pain and agitation ... Now I was able to conduct Skid’s acting. My consciousness had split into two – at one and the same time, I was in the auditorium and standing beside myself ...¹¹⁸

While Chekhov describes this as a unique, even transcendental, experience, he links it to an ongoing phenomenon of his experience of acting: “Earlier it had been familiar to me in a somewhat less pronounced form”,¹¹⁹ and identifies it as an experience of inspiration. Having studied the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, he identifies inspiration as being a function of “the higher ego”, a part of consciousness that is creative, and distinguished from “the lower ego” which is

¹¹⁶ F & T 266

¹¹⁷ Originally called Burlesque, written by George Watters and Arthur Hopkins.

¹¹⁸ Chekhov 2005, 145

¹¹⁹ Chekhov 2005, 145

identified with ambition, passion and egotism: “A kind of division of consciousness occurs, with the higher ego acting as the source of inspiration and the lower ego as the bearer, the agent.”¹²⁰

In the context of the Subject-self system identified by L& J, Chekhov “observing” himself would be the Subject (experiencing consciousness), the “higher ego” would correlate with the “essential self”, the “lower ego” with another self, Skid as yet another. The simultaneous awareness of these selves correlates with F & T’s description of blended “mental spaces”. Chekhov saw dual consciousness as essential to an actor’s control; the higher ego

... observes and directs the lower ego from outside, guiding it and empathizing with the imagined sufferings and joys of the character ...although the actor on stage suffers, weeps, rejoices and laughs, at the same time he remains unaffected by these feelings on a personal level. Poor actors pride themselves on the fact that they sometimes succeed in having such “feelings” on stage to the extent that they forget themselves completely! Such actors break the furniture, dislocate their fellow actors’ arms and suffocate their lovers while on stage¹²¹

This was the root of Chekhov’s antipathy to “affective memory” – another significant difference between his practice and that of Stanislavski’s at that stage of his development. Chekhov played Skid in 1928, and while his communication with his former teacher is not known, Stanislavski acknowledged the existence of “dual consciousness” by the time An Actor Prepares was published in 1936, while maintaining his belief in the usefulness of “affective memory”. Before examining Chekhov’s approach to emotion, it is instructive to look at a key exercise in the creation of character, described in his To the Actor. This is the “imaginary body” exercise, partially described by Adam Ludwig in the Philoctetes discussion.

¹²⁰ *ibid.* 147

¹²¹ *ibid.* 147

Chekhov invites the actor first of all to pose the questions of difference mentioned above, and by answering them, identify those characteristics of the character that are different from the actor. In the hypothetical example that he gives, the character is “lazy, awkward and slow”:

As soon as you have outlined these features and qualities of your role – that is, compared with your own – try to imagine what kind of body such a lazy awkward and slow person would have. Perhaps you will find that he might possess a full, plump, short body with drooping shoulders, thick neck, long arms hanging listlessly, and a big heavy head ...

You are going to imagine that in the same space you occupy with your own, real body there exists another body – the imaginary body of your character, which you have just created in your mind.

You clothe yourself, as it were, with this body; you put it on like a garment. ¹²²

The differentiation, and then melding, of self and character through imagery offers a useful conscious and physical corollary of F & T’s mental spaces, which, by their analysis, would be present unconsciously in the creation of character. The “wearing” of the imagined body offers a corollary of the “blended” space of actor and character. Although Chekhov arrived at this exercise through the use of phenomenological experience, its process is congruent with both F & T’s analysis, and Gallese’s comment about character.

Chekhov also demonstrates an awareness of mimesis as a type of thought, as defined by Merlin Donald. According to Chekhov:

When really taken on and exercised, the imaginary body stirs the actor’s will and feelings; it harmonizes them with the characteristic speech and movements, it transforms the actor into another person! Merely discussing the character, analyzing it mentally,

¹²² Chekhov 1985 86-87

cannot produce this desired effect, because your reasoning mind, however skilful it may be, is apt to leave you cold and passive, whereas the imaginary body has the power to appeal directly to your will and feelings.¹²³

Chekhov displays an inclination that is opposite to the Cartesian separation of reason from body. I read his use of the phrase “reasoning mind” to suggest that reason is only a part of mental activity, not synonymous with it, while the rest of the statement makes clear that the body can stimulate experiences in response to the imagination.

A further example of this can be seen in a statement that Chekhov made while teaching actors in the MAT First Studio, making clear the link between his idea of character and the creation of emotion on stage:

Do not try to feel your own personal feelings. It is the character who has to feel, not the actor, and the actor must only sacrifice himself to the character ... In imitating and depicting what my fantasy gives me, I don't have to try to appear inside the character, because then the actor ceases to be an artist and becomes a madman.¹²⁴

Once again, the notion is that character is different from actor, and the statement adds the element of emotion to what we have been investigating so far, implying that emotions are part of the character, and not of the actor. Paul Ekman's findings about facial expression and emotion (mentioned above) suggest a process by which this could happen. I'll investigate this phenomenon in detail in Chapter 5, but for now the basic principle is that consciously directed muscular activity can affect the autonomic nervous system, and thence our experience of emotion. Chekhov displays an awareness of this phenomenon in another exercise:

¹²³ *ibid.* 87-88

¹²⁴ Kirillov 2004: 506-7, 51, quoted in *The Path of the Actor*, 216

Lift your arm. Lower it. What have you done? You have fulfilled a simple physical action. You have made a gesture. And you have made it without any difficulty. Why? Because like every action, it is completely within your will. Now make the same gesture, but this time color it with a certain quality. Let this quality be caution. ... Your movement made cautiously, is no longer a mere physical action, it has acquired a certain psychological nuance. What is this nuance? It is a *Sensation* of caution which now fills and permeates your arm. It is a psychophysical sensation. Similarly, if you moved your entire body with the quality of caution, then your entire body would naturally be filled with this sensation. ... Now ask yourself if you forced your feelings. Did you order yourself to “feel caution”? No. You only made a movement with a certain quality, thus creating a sensation of caution through which you aroused your feelings.¹²⁵

Again, physical activity is experienced with conceptual thought in a form of “moving as thinking”. The activity stimulates the imagination through the neuronal links between motor activity and conceptual thought. Trying the exercise as I sit and type, I feel a distinct difference between my state of being simply thinking the word “caution” without movement, and my state of being as I move my arm cautiously. I also notice retrospectively that as I moved my arm, my eyelids narrowed and my eyes darted from side to side, without any conscious command. I can only guess that this activity is a result of neuronal links.

Perhaps the most widely known, and simultaneously least understood, of Chekhov’s exercises is the Psychological Gesture (PG). A common feature of the misunderstanding is that the PG is shown to the audience and that this leads to stylized or contrived behavior in the actor. Chekhov intended this exercise to be both a preparation for performance and also an image that

¹²⁵ Chekhov 1985, 59

was held in the imagination, but not shown to the audience; "...the PG itself must never be shown to the audience, no more than an architect would be expected to show the public the scaffolding of his building instead of the completed masterwork."¹²⁶ The root of the PG is in the actor defining what the character's strongest wish is. This bears a lot of resemblance to the idea of Stanislavski's "super-objective". While Chekhov asserted many differences between his approach and that of Stanislavski, he offers a ringing endorsement of "units" and "objectives" as tools of script analysis. The distinctiveness of the PG is that it expresses the character's strongest wish in a physical and imagistic way. Chekhov's description of the process in To the Actor is too long to quote here, but involves making a gesture with hand and arm that expresses the wish, and gradually developing the gesture to include the whole body, so that the final expression is both postural and gestural. This is done repeatedly through a rehearsal period, with adjustments and refinements as the actor's understanding of the character develops. In this way, a muscular memory of the image of the wish is developed, so that a recall of the image of the gesture during performance informs the character's physicality. Subsidiary PGs can be created to reflect the strongest wish of the character in each scene –akin to Stanislavski's scene, or "beat" objectives. As with his other exercises, the imagination is stimulated through physical activity.

In this chapter I've outlined some of the research in the field of cognitive studies that informs an understanding of what is happening as an actor conceives of, and embodies a character. This research shows that the prevalent conceptual dichotomy of "internal" (psychological) versus "external" (physical) approaches to characterization is mistaken, because it is based on an idea of mind separate from body. The research that I've described shows that mental and physical activities are both ways of thinking, or "minding", that they are frequently

¹²⁶ Chekhov 1985, 82

linked, and that our conceptual thought is based on physical experience. Because of the way that we represent different aspects of our personalities to ourselves (the Subject-self system), we have a metaphorical system of multiple selves that forms the framework for discourse about the relationship between actor and character. Much of this discourse associates successful acting with the investment of the “essential” self in the character. Chekhov’s approach, however, identifies a character as one of many “selves” whose actions are controlled by his experiencing consciousness, an approach that is congruent with the model of conceptually blended mental spaces proposed by F & T. That his approach was successful is indicated by the high praise that he received as an actor, and also as a teacher.

A central feature of the “internal/external” dichotomy is a metaphorical conception of the self as a container. While Chekhov was not immune to this, he seemed to have an imaginative conception of the container as permeable and malleable, as demonstrated by many of his exercises.¹²⁷ He also incorporated work on physical actions that led to primary metaphors, such as expand/contract, grasp, push/pull, throw etc., in much the same way that Lecoq did. These features of his approach constantly link physical with mental activity in ways that fit with the role of mimesis in art described by Merlin Donald, and usefully bridge the difference between written and spoken language described by David McNeill.

As Franc Chamberlain acknowledges, Chekhov was prescient in the way that he structured To The Actor; of the key figures in early twentieth century theatre (Stanislavsky, Brecht, Copeau, Craig, Artaud, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Craig) he was the first to include practical exercises for the actor to follow, rather than describing them in narrative form or as general principles. His opening sentence was also prescient: “It is a known fact that the human

¹²⁷ These include the ideas of radiating light from the body, and “molding” the body to make shapes in the surrounding air. I have not described these for reasons of space, but they are included in To the Actor.

body and psychology influence each other and are in constant interplay.”¹²⁸ The statement has the bravado of the autodidact; when he was writing, the concept was neither well known nor widely believed. Empirically derived proof of the statement is only now finding its way into discussions of acting, but as the practitioner most associated with the term “psychophysical” in connection with acting, Chekhov deserves credit for creating exercises that are in sympathy with the current understanding of the body/mind.

¹²⁸ Chekhov 1985, 1

5.0 HOW DOES THE ACTOR IDENTIFY WITH THE CHARACTER?

In the previous chapter, I proposed that the internal/external dichotomy is much less significant in actual cognitive terms than current discourse on acting suggests, and also that the idea of bringing one's "true" or "essential" self to a role is a metaphorical construct that reflects the transposition of values rather than a difference at a cognitive level. Whether one conceives of "self in the role" or "role in the self" it would seem that the same process of minding is engaged - the blending of mental spaces that connote concepts of self and character. In this chapter I'm going to talk about how the process of melding might operate in the preparation of a role for performance. In theatre parlance, this tends to get called "identification with the role", and sometimes "investing", although this term is also used to mean "to make emotionally significant".

In considering this phenomenon, another duality arises – that of "persona" acting versus "transformational" acting. (Also known as "personality" acting and "character" acting"). Once again, this is a slippery subject to discuss-much of the discourse about it is expressed from a subjective point of view, in terms that mean one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. My understanding of the distinction is that the "persona" actor maintains a more or less constant personality from one role to the next, while the "transformational" actor embodies varying personalities according to role. I avoid the use of the term "character actor" to

describe the latter, because that term is also used in “typing” to distinguish actors who play secondary roles from those who play leads.

A number of issues are tied in with the “persona/transformational” dichotomy. While the difference is often understood in terms of finding one’s “essential self” in a role, a more empirically reliable way to define the difference is to look at the range of actions that an actor uses to portray the character. The persona actor uses behavioral communicators that stay within a range that identifies his or her personality, which remains more or less constant from one role to the next. The transformational actor displays a variety of behavioral communicators according to the demands of character. Their actions link them to the fictional circumstances and demonstrate the personality of the character. In the case of the persona actor we see the more or less constant personality responding to the fictional circumstances with reasonably predictable results –we don’t expect characters played by Tom Cruise or Harrison Ford to meekly surrender to adversity, for instance. We see a greater variety of behavior in actors like Philip Seymour Hoffman and Daniel Day Lewis in different roles, but in neither category can we state from observation that the actors are, or are not, identifying their concepts of their “essential selves” with the roles that they play. Consequently, the distinction that is based on behavioral action is more empirically useful.

If one accepts that the range of actions that they perform defines the distinction between persona actor and transformational actor, it is also useful to distinguish between narrative action, and behavioral actions that communicate meaning. It has become a commonplace to say that character is expressed by action, but what is often unconsidered is that action (in the sense of narrative development) is in itself communicated by gestural *actions*, and that these have meaning that communicate personality: The hero is presented with an opportunity to kill the

villain. He chooses not to. The choice is at the level of narrative action. At another level, the actor can choose whether this is done out of cowardice, indecision, altruism or a malevolent desire to exact a more cruel punishment in the future, and this choice is communicated by the gestural actions of the actor/character in delivering the language of the text. At this level, the actions communicate the values of the character, and hence, his or her personality. It is at this level that we talk of the “interpretation” of a role.¹²⁹

It is useful to recall Lecoq’s work on extending the range of an actor’s behavior. The larger an actor’s repertoire of behavioral actions is, the greater the range of personality he or she can play. It is also instructive to recall the neuronal links between motor activities and conceptual thought, and the reflexive relationship between muscular activity and the experience of emotion. A variety of actions will also generate the experience of a variety of conceptual thoughts and feelings in the actor. This is a proposition that is supported by emerging research about proprioception and a sense of self, which I will describe later in this chapter. (Proprioception is the physiological process by which information about where the body is and what it is doing is relayed back to the brain). So it could be said that not only is character expressed by action, but also that *actions create character*.

While I would propose that this is true to varying extents in all types of performance, and will investigate traditional scripted drama later, an explicit example of this phenomenon can be found in Anna Deveare Smith’s accounts of her work in creating Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities. This was a solo show created by Smith from interviews that she conducted with residents of a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York that had

¹²⁹ My focus is on the process of an actor in creating character, but this approach could have significant benefits for the comparison of existing performances. For example, a patient analyst could identify the range of types of actions used by Olivier/Hamlet, and compare them to those used by Gibson/Hamlet, and consequently specify how each actor’s conception of the character’s personality is communicated to the audience.

experienced rioting and conflict between Hasidic Jews and Afro-Caribbean Americans. Smith created her material by precisely imitating portions of the recorded interviews, providing an example of total imitation that is rare in contemporary theatre. First performed in 1992, the show was extremely successful, winning a Drama Desk Award, and nominations for a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Much of the critical response to the play focused on socio-political issues and the implicit commentary on identity afforded by Smith's impersonation of people of a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds. My focus, however, is on her process of embodying characters; the relevance of the piece for this discussion lies in Smith's coherent and explicit commentary on how the gestural actions of speech affected her.

In her introduction to the play text, Smith talks about the difference between persona acting and transformational acting:

A character from a play does not have a visible identity until the actor creates a body for that character. The self-oriented technique involves rendering characters who looked and acted like the actors. What are the subtleties in real-life behavior that could be used in the creation of characters? There are linguistic as well as physical details that make a person unique.¹³⁰

The issue of process was very clearly in her mind, as she describes attempting to teach students to imitate interviewees, and encountering resistance:

They believed that they couldn't be someone else until they knew themselves. My argument was, and still is, that it doesn't have to be either/or, and that neither comes first. The discovery of human behavior can happen in motion. It can be a process of moving

¹³⁰ Smith 1993, xxx

from the self to the other and the other to the self ... I knew that by using another person's language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual.¹³¹

Smith's description has a lot in common with the principles that I've outlined of a reflexive relationship between self and character. Her comment on language, when seen in context, is about the gestural activity in speech patterns as well as the verbal content.

Smith's interest in the potential of speech to evoke somatosensory sensations stems from her first experience of speaking Shakespeare; "In the first class we had to take any 14 lines of Shakespeare and say them over and over again to see what happened... I knew nothing; it was my first acting class ever and I had some kind of a transcendental experience."¹³² Smith expands on the description of this experience in her book Talk to Me:

Everything happened. Not only did I feel as though I had become Queen Margaret, but I had what in the seventies we would have called a "transcendental experience," fully unaided by chemical substances of any kind. I, in fact "saw" Queen Margaret – she was a small vision, standing in my apartment. She came from the same place that the tooth fairy came from when I was a child. She came from my imagination. She was concocted somehow from the words. Words, it seemed me, from then on were truly magical, not only by their meaning but by the way we say them, how we manipulate them.¹³³

Similarly to Chekhov's experience when performing Skid, Smith finds her everyday perception altered through performance, and also has an experience of dual consciousness - sensing herself as Queen Margaret while also seeing a vision of the character. While the experience may sound mystical, my guess is that the breathing pattern necessitated by the multiple repetitions of the

¹³¹ *ibid.* xxxii

¹³² Martin 55-56

¹³³ Smith 2000, 37

line, coupled with the rhythm of speech dictated by the verse linked with the linguistic content to stimulate the imagination. Neither in the book nor the interview does Smith attempt to explain *how* she thought this happened, although the experience forms a cornerstone of her practice thereafter. She takes a pragmatic, functional view of the phenomenon, as is revealed later in the interview when she describes working on Leonard Jeffries as a character for Fires in The Mirror:

... the point is simply to repeat it until I feel it and what I begin to feel is his song and that helps me to remember more about his body... My body begins to do the things that he probably must do inside while he's speaking. I begin to feel that I'm becoming more like him. ¹³⁴

Smith is saying, that for her, direct physiological re-experiencing of the character occurs because of the repeated imitation of his speech patterns and vocal gestures; his “yawning, ... [his] way of lifting his soft palate”. ¹³⁵ By doing this, she feels she is able to “become the ‘them’ they present to the world.” ¹³⁶ Her experience supports the idea that behavioral communicators play a part in defining personality, and also calls to mind Paul Ekman’s observation that the consciously chosen use of the vocal characteristics of an emotion can generate the experience of that emotion.

Smith also talks about how her approach differs from the common understanding of Stanislavskian-based “psychological realism”.

Psychological realism - this is a real over-simplification of Stanislavsky - saying: Here’s Leonard Jeffries. You have to play Leonard Jeffries now. Let’s look at Leonard. Let’s look at his circumstances. Let’s look at your circumstances. How are you two alike? How

¹³⁴ Martin 57

¹³⁵ *ibid* 57

¹³⁶ *ibid.* 57

can you draw from your own experience? Contrary to that, I say, this is what Leonard Jeffries said. Don't even write it down. Put on your headphones, repeat what he said. That's all. That's it.¹³⁷

Smith's perspective is tied to her own creative process of recording interviews, and doesn't concern itself with the more common challenge that faces the actor when approaching an existing script. Nevertheless, her experience and her stance tie in to the issues that become apparent when one considers McNeill's analysis of the difference between written and spoken language. It is significant that she says "Don't even write it down." In her personal process, she is experiencing the sensual impact of spoken language without going through the distancing of written analysis that she characterizes as Stanislavkian. At a phenomenal level, Smith is very aware of the difference between spoken and written language: "This project is at its heart about the act of speech, the physical action of dialogue, and was not intended for the printed word."¹³⁸ This awareness of a distinction between the two is surely involved in her choice to repeat several times during an interview that: "My grandfather said if you say a word often enough, it becomes you."¹³⁹

Further comments by Smith echo Chekhov's belief in identifying a difference between self and character:

What has to exist in order to try to allow the other to be is separation between the actor's self and the other ... I can learn to know who somebody is, not from what they tell me, but from *how* they tell me. This will make an impression on my body and eventually on my psyche. Not that I would understand it but I would

¹³⁷ *ibid.* 56

¹³⁸ Smith 1993 xxix

¹³⁹ Martin 51

feel it.”¹⁴⁰

Once again, Smith is drawing a distinction between language and speech, and stressing how the physical activity of speech crosses the space between the character’s personality and that of the actor.

While Smith adamantly espouses imitation as the process by which she embodies a character, this has not prevented her from gaining work in popular naturalistic television dramas such as The West Wing, and The Practice, where, presumably, she has to work from a script. In search of more recent information on her views about character that might reveal her approach to this situation, I came across a 2007 interview, entitled “How do you get into character?”¹⁴¹ The interview reveals no development or change in the methods already described, except for a general comment about the importance of imagination for the actor. Perhaps Smith uses the repetition technique that she describes in her work on Shakespeare, although the short speeches typical of television drama would seem to limit the effectiveness of this approach. Another possibility would be that she simply employs her own everyday mannerisms, although these would have to be modified. In this interview they include abrupt turns and tilts of the head, and sharply leaning sideways and forwards from the waist –all movements that would take her out of a camera’s focal setting in everything except a long shot. Whatever process she uses, it is inevitable, given what we know from cognitive science, that some degree of imagination has to be involved to engage with the fictional circumstances.

The way in which Smith’s process of imitation can generate a sense of character can be better understood by an examination of the role of proprioception. Actors are generally more familiar with this faculty as “kinaesthetic sense.” I prefer to use the former term, because the

¹⁴⁰ Martin 51

¹⁴¹ <http://bigthink.com/ideas/5428> accessed 1/15/10

phenomenon has greater implications than simple awareness of movement. Initially, proprioception gives us information about muscle tone, effort and balance. Nerve endings in our muscles, fascia, tendons, ligaments, joints, and skin send signals to the brain about the deformation of tissue. This includes information about a number of features: the degree of pressure, which indicates stretching and placement; the speed of movement, and the rate at which the speed is changing; the direction of movement, and, in cases of extreme tissue deformation, pain. Large amounts of information from sensory nerves embedded in muscles and joints are carried through the spinal cord to the subcortical and cortical parts of the brain. This information is integrated through many neural pathways that synapse at various levels of the nervous system to give us a sense of where we are, and how we are moving, both at a conscious and unconscious level.

It is proprioception that enables us to move in the dark, that is involved as we learn and execute a dance step or tennis stroke, and also allows us to walk or run without exerting conscious control over the activity. It is also a crucial feature in our sense of self, and this quality makes it of particular interest in considering the relationship between physical activity and the actor's creation of character. Philosopher Shaun Gallagher and psychologist Andrew Meltzoff investigate this aspect of proprioception in a paper that argues that it is more innate than previously thought. They state that all accounts of proprioception agree that "the organized and meaningful perception of self and others depends on a proprioceptive system of a developed body schema organized to allow for an intermodal translation between external and internal senses."¹⁴² This description again challenges the "inside/outside" dichotomy of acting discourse,

¹⁴² Gallagher 211-212

because the body schema depends on both internal (proprioceptive input) and external (visual and tactile) senses in combination.

The body schema is one part of proprioception, and Gallagher and Meltzoff take care to point out the difference between it and body image. The body image is the mental representation of the varying levels of conscious awareness of the body, and includes perceptual and conceptual understanding, along with emotional attitude. The body schema is

a system of motor functions that operates below the level of self-referential intentionality, although it can enter into and support intentional activity. It involves a set of tacit performances, preconscious subpersonal processes that play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement. In most instances, movement and the maintenance of posture are accomplished by the close to automatic performances of a body schema, and for this reason the normal adult subject neither needs nor has a constant body percept. To the extent that one does become aware of one's own body in terms of monitoring or directing perceptual attention to limb position, movement, or posture, then such an awareness helps to constitute the perceptual aspect of a body image.¹⁴³

The definition of the body schema helps us further understand the distinction between persona acting and transformational acting. As I mentioned earlier, I define persona acting as a style in which the actor maintains a more or less consistent personality from role to role. In transformational acting, the actor embodies varying personalities according to role. It seems likely that the persona actor is working more closely with the unconscious body schema than the body image, which is more conscious, because he or she is not attempting to alter physical activity to express a character. In transformational acting, the actor is working consciously to

¹⁴³ Gallagher 216

control aspects of physicality, and is therefore working more in the realm of body image. Of course, both aspects of proprioception are involved in all activities, so it is a question of emphasis rather than exclusivity. Nevertheless, the body image is more involved in intentional action, which is at the core of the acting process: “The body image, consisting of a complex set of mental representations of the body, involves a form of explicit and self-referential intentionality.”¹⁴⁴

Studies of body image often distinguish three elements of intentionality:

- (a) the subject’s *perceptual* experience of his/her own body;
- (b) the subject’s *conceptual* understanding (including mythic and/or scientific knowledge) of the body in general; and
- (c) the subject’s *emotional* attitude toward his/her own body¹⁴⁵

When the actor consciously directs attention to postural or gestural actions, all three elements are involved, but at varying levels of conscious awareness. For example, when Smith sought to imitate Jeffries, (a) is involved as she adjusts the movement of her soft palate. Smith’s conceptual understanding of her body, (b), includes the notion (among many others) that her body is different from the character’s body and that, although female, she can successfully embody a male character. While her writing gives no explicit indication about her emotional attitude, (c), it seems likely that she has a degree of comfort with her body, given her success in making it follow her conscious promptings, and her willingness to experience public scrutiny in performance.

There are distinctions between the process of the actor and the experience of daily life; (b) and (c) are not always at the level of conscious awareness in daily life, but are more likely to

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* 216

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* 216

be considered by the actor at some stage of training. One of the goals of this dissertation is to make theatre people more aware of what their conceptual understanding of the body is, and to include more scientific knowledge in that understanding. The conceptual understanding of the body will influence what one believes it to be capable of. Clearly, activities such as Lecoq's Neutral mask work, by extending the range of behavioral expression, alter one's concept of what one's body can do. Even something as basic as the neutral posture can have an effect.

I received a vivid illustration of this during a movement course that I taught recently. In the early part of the course, I encouraged the students to heighten their awareness of nonverbal communication (nvc) by observing behavior as they moved around campus. One impassioned report came from a female student focused on the behavior of football players whose demeanor on campus walkways forced other students to change course to avoid collisions. A few weeks later, after intensive work on the neutral posture and the neutral walk, the same student, enthused by the sense of confidence that she had gained from her altered physicality, proposed to her classmates that they walk across the quad in a group, maintaining neutral posture. They set off, still wearing their movement clothing and barefoot, and returned ten minutes later, whooping with laughter. Apparently two football players had stood aside to allow the group to pass.

Of course, increased self-confidence is not the only quality to be gained from work with the Neutral mask. Embodying a variety of organic rhythms, for example, will provide the actor with proprioceptive input that is significantly greater, and more differentiated, than the range of that is encountered in daily life. Given that proprioception is linked to conceptual thought and emotional attitudes, it follows that the execution of postural and gestural movements that are different from those that we employ in everyday life are likely to give us an altered sense of self.

The emphasis that both Chekhov and Smith place on physical action in the creation of a character is validated by another study that shows that the proprioceptive system is more active in response to movement, and that this feature is linked to one's awareness of self through the agency of one's actions.¹⁴⁶ While Smith's actions come from observation of the interviewed subject, Chekhov's arise from the imagination, stimulated by a play text. I've used Chekhov and Smith as examples because the work that they describe offers well-defined activity that is congruent with the cognitive principles that I've described. This is not to say that other practitioners are not congruent in this way – but simply that Chekhov and Smith provide explicit examples of processes that underlie performance. To further understand these processes needs more examination of concepts of self, the activity of the imagination, and how actors can respond empathetically to fictional material.

Much of the current discourse about acting uses William James' idea of multiple selves to link everyday behavior to the task of creating a character. Uta Hagen's widely used Respect for Acting offers this comment:

You spontaneously play a variety of different roles in life. Imagine yourself attending a cocktail party given for producers, agents, directors, all in a position to employ you. How you feel, how you dress, how you behave will be a you that is different from the you who goes to a party of friends and colleagues in a loft where you sit guzzling wine and beer, and munching on pretzels. Or the you who attends a children's birthday party, or a party given by your parents for your friends. In each situation your very idiom changes, your self-image changes.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Balslev et al. 2007

¹⁴⁷ Hagen, 25

Hagen focuses on feeling, dress and behavior as the features that vary from situation to situation. Dress doesn't need a lot of investigation in this context, and as I'll show in the next chapter, the current understanding of emotional activity indicates a reflexive relationship between feelings and behavior. Hagen goes on to explain how she relates these different selves to the "essential self" by stating that each situation provides the actor with different "behaviorisms" and that recognizing these helps the actor in the "continuing job of learning to find out who you *really* are..."¹⁴⁸ The sense is that there is a self that one "really" is, and that the multiple selves, defined by behavior and feeling, demonstrate different aspects of this self. This self is then used as "the source for the character"¹⁴⁹

Robert Benedetti puts a similar view forward in The Actor at Work, another popular acting text:

You play a role every time you enter a social situation ... It is this interaction with your world - this give and take of acting and reacting, this adjustment of your behavior to fit your circumstances and those with whom you interact - that shapes and expresses your personality, your character, in everyday life ... William James's idea [is] that human personality contains various 'me's' that one adopts in various situations but that are all versions of one's central identity, the "I."¹⁵⁰

Benedetti's view of how this understanding applies to performance has a different emphasis than Hagen's. While Hagen defines the situational selves as aspects of the "essential self", Benedetti talks about a character as "...a new version of yourself, perhaps quite different from your

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.* 26

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* 27

¹⁵⁰ Benedetti, Robert, 79

everyday self...”¹⁵¹ He also summarizes this section by saying that character grows out of action, which is very close to the principle that I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, and congruent with the cognitive principles that I’ve been describing. Interestingly, Benedetti proposes an exercise in which the actor repeatedly performs an expressive physical action in order to discover an altered sense of self, which echoes Chekhov’s and Smith’s approaches. The difference between Hagen’s and Benedetti’s conceptions of character and self perhaps reflects the change in understanding of Stanislavski’s theory that has occurred in the period between the writing of the two books (Hagen published in 1973, the latest edition of Benedetti’s book dates from 2005), and this is something that I’ll investigate later in this chapter. Both, however, refer to everyday experiences as the source of the actor’s repertoire of experience and behavior, which, in comparison to Lecoq’s work, limits the actor’s expressive range. There is also a lack of distinction between narrative action and behavioral action in both of their books.

A further feature of the examples above is that they deal only with conscious awareness of the self, whereas approaches like Chekhov’s and Lecoq’s, that place particular emphasis on stimulating the imagination through physical activity, might well be more successful at sparking unconscious metaphorical connections. Some light can be thrown on this aspect by Joseph LeDoux’s survey of neuroscientific research in Synaptic Self: How our Brains Become Who We Are. Current thinking on self in the field of cognitive studies distinguishes between those aspects of the self that we are, or can become, aware of, and those aspects that exist outside of conscious awareness. LeDoux’s position (in common with most working in this field) is that consciousness depends on unconscious cognitive processes, and also that it is possible to synthesize the various theories of personality. He defines those things that we are conscious of as *explicit* aspects of the

¹⁵¹ *ibid.* 79

self. This category would include the multiple situational selves posited by Hagen and Benedetti. The *implicit* category includes those aspects of self “that are not immediately available to consciousness, either because they are by their nature inaccessible, or because they are accessible but not being accessed at the moment.”¹⁵²

The categories of *explicit* and *implicit* also apply to types of memory, and this is especially significant for the discussion of self and character in acting. As LeDoux points out: “To the extent that our life’s experiences contribute to who we are, implicit and explicit memory storage constitute key mechanisms through which the self is formed and maintained.”¹⁵³ In referring to “life’s experiences” he is talking about those aspects of self that are learned rather than the result of genetic heritage. It is those learned aspects that the actor is concerned with, because they are, to varying extents, malleable, while genetic heritage is not.

Explicit memories are, naturally, those that we are conscious of, and would include the everyday experiences in different situations that Hagen and Benedetti regard as the actor’s repertoire of behavior. In the approach that their writings characterize, it is this aspect of self that is considered to include the “essential self” whose application to a role is necessary for authenticity. This approach does not take account of those aspects of self that are not available to consciousness, but these implicit memories are operating all the time: “The way that we characteristically walk and talk and even the way we think and feel reflect the workings of systems that function on the basis of past experience, but their operation takes place outside of awareness.”¹⁵⁴ The majority of factors that go to make up the self are not conscious.

Consequently, the idea that we can achieve authenticity in a role by identifying our essential “I”

¹⁵² LeDoux 27-28

¹⁵³ *ibid.* 28

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.* 28

with it is misguided. It does not reflect current convergent opinion about the nature of the self. To whatever extent that we can know what our essential “I” is, it seems unlikely that we can consciously make it be part of one of our situational selves. It seems to make sense to acknowledge that what we are doing in creating a character is expressing a range of behavior that reflects our understanding of an author’s intent, that seems credible in the fictional circumstances, and that forms a temporary situational self through the imagination, with feelings that arise through a combination of physical actions and empathetic stimuli in the fiction.

Both Chekhov and Smith acknowledge the difference between “self” and “other”, and in some senses are both imitating the “other’s” gestures –Smith is using the perceptual stimuli gained from sight and hearing, while Chekhov responds to what is “seen” in the imagination. Both Smith and Chekhov explicitly differentiate their approaches from that of Stanislavski: Chekhov challenged Stanislavski’s conception of the relationship between self and character, and while Smith also opposes an approach that focuses on similarities between character and self, it seems that she is resistant to analysis in general. Her experiences provide a vivid example of the physiological effect of imitation, but her approach of imitating interviewees has limited application. How can actors use actions to stimulate the imagination in other forms of performance? In the case of written drama, the narrative action is already determined, so the actor’s choice is operating at the level of behavioral actions. What is the imaginative process that operates when these choices arise in response to written fiction?

Much discourse about the role of the imagination in contemporary acting derives from Stanislavski’s concept of the “magic if”. This involves the actor behaving “as if” they are themselves in the fictional situation of the character. Information about this idea was originally included in An Actor Prepares. As Sharon Carnicke has pointed out, Elizabeth Hapgood’s

translation often distorted the meaning of the work, so I quote from the recent translation by Jean Benedetti: “The word ‘if’ is a spur, a stimulus to inner and outer creative dynamism. All you have to do is say ‘What would I do, how would I handle it if the story of the madman turned out to be actually true?’ and immediately you are dynamic and alive.”¹⁵⁵ In light of the features of self that I’ve described, this process seems to encourage the actor to respond from his or her own personality, to use what L & J call “Advisory Projection.” While this links the actor imaginatively to the fictional situation, the actor’s personality defines the character’s response. This has always seemed illogical to me. My personality is not the same as that of Lear or Leontes, and I would not respond to their fictional circumstances in the way that they do. This is true both at the level of narrative and behavioral action. While it is understandable that Stanislavski sought to promote credible behavior in actors, the legacy of this particular idea seems to limit the activity of the imagination in preparing a role.

Recent research has given us a more sophisticated understanding of imagination than was available to Stanislavski. L & J show that the imagination is not a discrete or specialized function, as is often thought, but that it is a feature of cognition that is woven through much of our mental processes as metaphoric activity. Beyond this, researchers in the field of cognitive studies point to the role that the imagination plays in interpersonal communication. This is described by what is known as Theory of Mind –our capacity to understand and sometimes predict the behavior of other people. We do this by attributing to them mental states that include beliefs, desires, and intentions, which requires a degree of imaginative activity. This is another feature of mental activity that is central to acting. Clearly, it is in operation when actors interact

¹⁵⁵ Benedetti, J. 2008, 51

with one another as characters, and it is also active in the individual actor as he or she reads and responds to a script, which is more the focus of this discussion than the former activity.

Examining recent research into the nature of empathy assists an understanding of this imaginative response to written material. As McConachie and Hart point out in Performance and Cognition:

[P]sychological and philosophical investigations have altered and broadened the conventional definition of empathy. Although empathy still involves seeing the world ‘through another person’s eyes,’ many in cognitive studies have decoupled empathic projection from emotional identification.¹⁵⁶

This position arises from both theoretical hypotheses and experimental approaches. Philosopher Robert Gordon was the first to propose that we simulate the mental states of others in order to understand their behavior, or to predict their decision-making. This proposition, known as simulation theory (ST), holds that if our brains are able to use their own processes to represent those of others, then it is not necessary to hold a mental store of knowledge about other people’s behavior, a position known as “theory” theory (TT). Gordon’s proposition would mean that one imaginatively places oneself in another’s situation in order to understand them. McConachie points out that that this is similar to Stanislavski’s “as if” question. However, in contrast to Stanislavski, Gordon’s position allows for a continuum of adjustments that adapt to the other’s situations. The default position would be one in which no adjustments are necessary, occurring at an unconscious level. Adjustments to take account of difference can be unconscious or conscious, and could include character traits, thus moving beyond the Advisory Projection of Stanislavski’s approach.

¹⁵⁶ McConachie 5

As a theoretical model, ST has been strengthened by the discovery of Mirror neurons (MNs). These are neurons that fire in the pre motor cortex when one executes a goal-directed action, and also when one observes a similar action executed by someone else. MNs were originally discovered in macaque monkeys by a team of scientists including Vittorio Gallese who, with Alvin Goldman, built on this discovery to identify a mental mechanism in primates by which an observer mimics, resonates with, or re-creates the mental life of others based on direct observation of their movements. In a paper published in 2004, Gallese and others lay out the evidence that mirror neurons are also active in humans, both for action and emotions. They choose to call this process of internal replication “simulation”, linking it with Gordon’s theory but modifying the concept:

... the fundamental mechanism that allows us a direct experiential grasp of the mind of others is not conceptual reasoning but direct simulation of the observed events through the mirror mechanism. The novelty of our approach consists in providing for the first time a neurophysiological account of the experiential dimension of both action and emotion understanding.¹⁵⁷

Obviously, we are able to reason about the actions and emotions of others at a conscious level when we choose to, but Gallese argues that mirror neuron system responses occur without any reflective mediation, without passing through the phase of conscious cognition. Thus, to a certain degree, we are actually experiencing the actions and emotions of others as we watch them.

Some everyday examples will help to illustrate the phenomenon in the case of actions: I notice that when I play tug-of-war with my dog, I clench my jaws and teeth tight, even though I’m holding whatever we’re tugging with my hand. I notice that when watching a game of rugby

¹⁵⁷ Gallese et al 2004, 397

on tv, I brace myself for impact as a player is about to be tackled. I also notice that I move my body to the side (a swerve) as a player attempts to evade a tackle. (This was brought sharply to my attention when running on a treadmill as I watched a game.) These responses are probably more marked in me as a former rugby player than if I had not played rugby; I have executed these patterns of movement repeatedly of my own volition in the past. An fMRI study of dancers from the styles of ballet and capoeira showed that they displayed more neuronal activity when watching dance in their own style than the other, and that both groups of dancers exhibited more neuronal activity than a control group of non-dancers.¹⁵⁸ This suggests that the establishing of neuronal patterns through training and repetition plays a significant part in the activity of mirror systems, in that they are more likely to fire in response to observed action that is already patterned in the observer.

Clearly this discovery has significant implications for acting theory, but a significant step needs to be made between these effects in daily life, where individuals respond to other individuals, and the way actors might be employing these mechanisms in response to reading about, imagining, or improvising a fictional character. Might the same mechanism be involved in imaginative responses to a piece of writing? Gallese reports that it does:

There is a part of your brain which is active when you do something, when you see someone else doing something, or when you are imagining either yourself doing something, or someone else doing something. The overlap is not perfect, so in other words, not all the same regions in your brain which are activated when you imagine

¹⁵⁸ Calvo-Merino, B., Glaser, D.E., Grèzes, J., Passingham, R.E. and Haggard, P. (2005). Action observation and acquired motor skills: An fMRI study with expert dancers. Cerebral Cortex, 15(8), 1243-1249.

doing something are activated when you imagine the same thing being done by someone else.¹⁵⁹

Imaginative responses to fiction, then, are to some extent the actual experience of what fictional characters do. The degree of intensity varies, presumably, from individual to individual, and probably from experience to experience within the same individual. It has been shown, though, that the amount of neuronal activity involved in mirror systems is increased when one physically duplicates the activity that is observed.¹⁶⁰ When viewed from this perspective, Chekhov's work of imagining the character, and duplicating the physical activity that one sees, would seem to intensify the actor's imaginative experience.

Another significant feature of the imagination's response to fiction is that it uses a very similar pathway in the brain to perceptual responses to external stimuli:

There is no distinct anatomical region of the brain used for representing the merely imaginary; nor is there a distinct set of nerve fibers carrying information exclusively about the merely imaginary; nor does there seem to be a special affective, or, for that matter, motor region designated for receiving input about the merely imaginary.¹⁶¹

This information further destabilizes the "internal/external" dichotomy that is prevalent in conceptions about approaches to character, but also provokes an intriguing question: If imaginary stimuli use the same pathways as perceptual stimuli, why do we not carry out actions as a result of fiction? And what is it that inhibits physical action as a result of mirroring mechanisms? As my bruising encounter with the treadmill shows, the inhibition of motor activity in response to observed action is not complete. Schroeder and Matheson offer a possible answer

¹⁵⁹ Gallese's comments are transcribed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loB-Lg0X1qo&feature=Playlist&p=E42C219FA01A9888&index=0> accessed 12/21/09

¹⁶⁰ Iacoboni et al. 1999

¹⁶¹ Schroeder 28

to the first question: "... actions are influenced more by belief than by mere representation in general, while feelings tend to be much more powerfully influenced by representation without regard to belief, regardless of whether the imagination is involved or not." ¹⁶² If this is true, our belief that what we are reading or improvising is a fiction will inhibit our actions, but not our feelings. On the other side of the footlights, this goes a significant way towards explaining why an audience can be moved by something an actor does, while knowing that it is a fiction.

The combined import of these interlocking pieces of theory and experimental evidence suggests that an actor is more likely to create a vivid embodiment of a character by using the imagination to stimulate an image of the character as an other, using physical actions to duplicate the imagined actions of the character, and by allowing feelings to arise from these activities without questioning whether they are "authentic" expressions of the "essential self". For actors, then, it makes sense to train physically in the mechanics of behavioral expression to establish neuronal patterning that will facilitate these responses. If one is a mild-mannered person, for example, the neural patterns associated with the facial expression of anger, might not be very well established. Daily practices of the configurations of the facial expressions associated with primary emotions would provide a wider range of neuronal patterns that will respond more effectively to imaginary stimuli. In my experience, this sort of work is rarely done in actor training programs because it doesn't fit with the prevailing concepts of authenticity and naturalness as "internal" qualities that would be contaminated by "technical" exercises.

A further piece of information leads the discussion back to Stanislavski. Psychologists Jonathan Schooler and Tonya Engstler-Schooler have conducted experiments at the University of Pittsburgh that show that verbal descriptions of visual stimuli impair one's ability to

¹⁶² *ibid.* 33

subsequently recognize what had been seen.¹⁶³ They have called this phenomenon “verbal overshadowing”, since it seems that the verbalization of a visual memory overshadows, but does not eradicate, the original visual memory. Some experiments worked with memories of faces, but the principle seems to apply to other perceptual stimuli such as taste and hearing. The connection with Stanislavski arises because of his use of “table analysis” – a process where actors sit with the director at a table and verbally analyze the script, identifying motivations, objectives and actions. Schooler’s findings suggest that this process would inhibit unconscious imaginative responses to the fictional world of the script, since it replaces the potential perceptual stimuli that might arise in the imagination with word-based, largely conscious thinking. The process of table analysis would also influence subsequent rehearsal, since actors would be likely to mentally refer back to the verbal analysis of the script, rather than images or sensations it provokes. In the terminology that Schooler uses, this would be “recoding interference”.

This hypothesis of what happens in verbal analysis of a script seems to be congruent with both McNeill’s analysis of the difference between speech and gesture, and Merlin Donald’s proposition that mimesis is an earlier evolutionary development than language: Mimesis is gestural, gestures are processed as visual image in the brain. Images that arise through imaginative activity are more like perceptual stimuli than language. An approach that encourages the imaginative development of visual stimuli in response to a script will more readily provoke gestures and feelings in an actor than an approach that supplants imagery with verbal description. That is not to say that fine performances cannot arise from a process that includes table analysis; it is a question of emphasis and sequencing. If the emphasis in a rehearsal is solely on conceptual ideas, the actor will have a significant jump to make when he or she gets to the gestural phase -

¹⁶³ Schooler 1990

embodying the character in action. If, however, the investigation of the script's meaning includes gestural activity alongside conceptual analysis, the meld is more akin to what the actor does in performance, where meaning is communicated both by words and gestures.

Stanislavski seems to have come to an intuitive realization of these principles over the course of his life. As he developed his ideas, he turned from table analysis to "active analysis", a process that became the cornerstone of his later work, which he called the Method of Physical Actions. This phase of Stanislavski's work is much less well known than his earlier approach; given the influence that his ideas have on actor training in the U.S., it is important that the Method of Physical Actions, and the principles that explain its effectiveness, become better known.

An understanding of Stanislavski's work is complicated by three factors; the development and change of his ideas over his lifetime; the history of translation and publication of his work; and the partial application of his principles by Lee Strasberg that became known and popularized as the Method. During the period that Chekhov was working with Stanislavski (1912-1928), key features of his work included Emotion Memory, "Inner" psychological drives, and, as Chekhov noted, the idea that character and actor should be the same. The approach that is recorded in Vasily Toporkov's Stanislavski in Rehearsal shows significant differences, which I will address later.

Stanislavski made several attempts to record his system, but only settled on the diary format in the late 1920's, beginning work in 1928 after a heart attack that prevented him from continuing to perform. What was intended to be one book, The Actor's Work on Himself, was eventually published in Russian in two parts in 1938 and 1953. The English publication of the first part as An Actor Prepares was in 1936, and of the second part as Building a Character in

1950. The first part of his book dealt with “internal” aspects, while the second focuses on physical and technical features of performance, although it remains unfinished because of Stanislavski’s death in 1938. In the opinion of Jean Benedetti, who has translated the entire work and related fragments, the intended result is “a unified, coherent psycho-physical technique.”¹⁶⁴ Benedetti acknowledges the way in which the splitting of the work has resulted in misunderstanding, and reports that Stanislavski feared that by printing just the first part, his system would be considered purely psychological, and a form of “ultranaturalism”. Additionally, as we know from Sharon Carnicke’s analysis in Stanislavsky in Focus, numerous distortions arose from confusions in the oral transmission of the system, and from Elizabeth Hapgood’s translation.

Carnicke also addresses the way in which Stanislavski’s system became distorted by Lee Strasberg as “the Method”, describing how the founders of the Actors’ Studio (Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis and Stella Adler) favored the later version of the system, as described by Stella Adler following her sojourn in Paris with Stanislavski in 1934:

When Adler spoke to the Group Theatre that summer about then unfamiliar aspects of the System, she split the group into camps and challenged Strasberg’s sole authority. She specifically opposed his take on affective memory with new information on how the play’s given circumstances shape character, the power of the actor’s imagination and what would come to be known as the Method of Physical Actions.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Benedetti, J. 2008 xvi

¹⁶⁵ Carnicke 60

Strasberg reacted angrily to her description, and asserted the value of “his” method, and by 1951 had gained complete control of the Studio. Benedetti describes the difference between Stanislavski’s system and the Method as follows;

In the “system” the primary emphasis is on action, interaction and the dramatic situation which result in feeling with Emotion Memory as a secondary, ancillary technique. In the Method, Emotion Memory is placed at the very centre; the actor consciously evokes personal feelings that correspond to the character, a technique which Stanislavski expressly rejected ... Strasberg’s main concern was to enable the actor to unblock his emotions. ¹⁶⁶

This analysis is generally concordant with other accounts of Strasberg’s emphasis, but Benedetti glosses over the question of how Stanislavski’s ideas changed over time, and consequently overstates the intended coherence of his system. As is clear from Chekhov’s comments that in the 1920’s, Stanislavski believed in the character and the actor being the same. This advisory projection is confirmed by the passage about the “magic if” that I’ve quoted from the Benedetti-translated The Actor’s Work. Another quote from a piece of Stanislavski’s writing that preceded this work ¹⁶⁷ makes clear his belief that authenticity lies inside the actor: “Scenic action is the movement from the soul to the body, from the center to the periphery, from the internal to the external, from the thing an actor feels to its physical form.” ¹⁶⁸ So it is not only the splitting up of the original volume that led to the belief in the West that Stanislavski’s work focused only on the self of the actor, but also the change and development of his ideas over time.

Evidently, Strasberg resisted the changes in thinking that were reported by Adler. Despite the internal politics within the Studio, Strasberg’s Method became associated with

¹⁶⁶ Benedetti, Jean xx

¹⁶⁷ “Inner Impulses and Inner Action; Creative Objectives” (1916-1920) reprinted in Richard Drain’s Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook

¹⁶⁸ Drain, 253

Kazan's success as a director, and the success of Studio-trained actors like Brando -who, ironically, had been Adler's student. The fact that An Actor Prepares was the only available written information about Stanislavski's system until 1950 further assisted in the conflation of Stanislavski's system and the Method as an acting process that prized subjectivity and self-expression.

In addition to the historical accidents that led to this conflation, the growth in popularity of this concept of acting also reflected wider socio-cultural factors. In American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962, Bruce McConachie investigates the way in which the concept of containment manifests itself as a social metaphor in a variety of ways during this period. Of particular interest to this discussion is the way in which the container metaphor of self operates in the appeal of Method acting to the Cold War generation: "... the model of self embedded in Method performance conformed to the contained, psychologized self of cold war culture." This self is seen as "an authentic inner essence trapped inside a repressive outer shell."¹⁶⁹ In this conceptualization, the boundary of the body creates a rigid distinction between the internal and the external; the interior authenticity can only partly be seen through the activities of the body, and any notion of a two-way relationship between thought and feeling and gestural activity is absent.

The way in which Stanislavski developed his work over his lifetime makes his ideas about character and process significantly different from the Method approach. The Method of Physical Actions, described by Adler and rejected by Strasberg, relates character to situation, emphasizes the actor's imagination, and discovers meaning in physical activity. In this conceptualization, the body becomes a conduit of meaning –from the fictional environment to

¹⁶⁹ McConachie 2003, 99

the actor, and from the character to the audience. In the last production Stanislavski worked on, Moliere's Tartuffe, he replaced "analysis of feelings" with "active analysis", after complaining that "after long discussions 'at the table' and individual visualizations, 'the actor comes on stage with a stuffed head and an empty heart, and can act nothing.'" ¹⁷⁰ This experience could be seen as an example of verbal overshadowing, where verbal reasoning replaces the imaginative stimuli that follow perceptual pathways. To engage the actors in the fictional environment of the play, and to stimulate a shared imaginative response to the play, Stanislavski put the actors on their feet from the beginning of rehearsal, improvising the situations of different scenes, paraphrasing the dialogue, and discovering the spatial elements of Orgon's house, creating what Carnicke calls "collective fantasy". ¹⁷¹

Vasili Toporkov's book Stanislavski in Rehearsal provides individual examples of how rehearsals were conducted at this stage of Stanislavski's life. Toporkov describes his own journey from joining the Moscow Art Theatre in 1927 to the production of Tartuffe on which Stanislavski was working when he died in 1938. Toporkov is frank about the challenges that he encountered in understanding Stanislavski's way of working, providing fascinating details about rehearsal process, and his account is sensitively translated by Jean Benedetti. Toporkov recounts his first rehearsal in a play called The Embezzlers, in which he plays a cashier. Stanislavski watches his first attempt at a scene, and then questions him about the cashier's office. Toporkov has not given any thought to this, and Stanislavski proceeds to give a lengthy description of the imagined office that begins: "Here we have the cashier, Vanechka, a mild, modest young man. His office is his home. It is his holy of holies. It is the best thing in his life. Everything about it

¹⁷⁰ Carnicke 2000, 32

¹⁷¹ *ibid* 32

reveals the nature of his concerns...”¹⁷² The description continues to include details such as the cleanliness of the office, the well-oiled hinges of the safe, the cashier’s pencil, how banknotes are arranged in the safe and so on. It is intriguing to note how Stanislavski’s elaborate word picture moves from physical details to the way in which they reflect aspects of the character’s personality: “Vanechka can always tell how much is in there at any given moment. He loves the process of paying in and paying out. Issuing and checking money in the department is a holy ritual, a work of art for him.”¹⁷³ The sense is that he uses perceptual information to stimulate Toporkov’s imagination, and then relates the physical environment to the values and traits of the character, by encouraging the actor to engage imaginatively with his fictional environment.

The process becomes more explicit when, in rehearsing another scene from The Embezzlers, Stanislavski instructs actors to focus on the physical circumstances of the fictional scene, repeatedly refusing actions that were illogical or contrived:

Go on working, don’t force anything, cautiously make your starting point the most simple, living, organic actions. Don’t think about the character. *The character will emerge as a result of your performing truthful actions in the given circumstances.* You have just seen, in this example, how you can build a pathway by going from one small truth to another, testing yourself out, releasing your imagination and so achieve a vivid, expressive character.¹⁷⁴

The injunction not to think about the character shows Stanislavski’s intent to place the attention of the conscious mind on the fictional circumstances, and physical actions within those circumstances. The imagination is stimulated through perceptual information, and the character

¹⁷² Toporkov 17

¹⁷³ *ibid.* 17

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.* 85, my emphasis

results from an unconscious combining of these elements. In Toporkov's report, Stanislavski frequently distinguishes between behavior, and "playacting", with behavior favored. Toporkov writes of his own response:

At that time I still had not grasped the full significance of this type of work. I didn't know the meaning of Stanislavski's secret, that by truthfully performing physical actions and following the logic and sequence you can achieve the most complex feelings and experiences, those qualities which we had tried unsuccessfully to achieve in the first period of our work. ¹⁷⁵

This process creates an environmental fictional situation, provoking the development of character as a situational self through physical responses to the imagined circumstances.

While Stanislavski did not relinquish the concept of "internal" and "external" to describe the actor's relationship to character, the metaphors he uses at this stage of his work suggest an interlinked whole. He saw the three basic drives behind creativity – "mind", "will", and "feeling" – as being "inextricably linked to each other in a tightly bound 'knot' or 'bundle'." ¹⁷⁶ This bundle is not experiencing a struggle between its internal essence and its external container, but rather is "blended and interdependent!" like a 'harmonious' musical chord." ¹⁷⁷ In Stanislavsky's later practice one can see a holism that is absent in a great deal of current acting training, and which achieves the development of character in a way that is sympathetic to what we now understand about the processes of imagination and empathic responses to fiction. There is no insistence on authenticity through the transposition of the "essential I" to the character, but a development of a "self" who behaves in a way that is credible within a set of fictional

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.* 50

¹⁷⁶ Carnicke 2000, 33

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* 33

circumstances –a situational self. This process fits with the current convergence of opinion about self in daily life, summarized in this comment by psychologist Jerome Bruner:

There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future.¹⁷⁸

In the rehearsal process that Toporkov describes, the character emerges from a similar process, and feelings arise without conscious bidding through a combination of physical actions and empathetic responses to a fiction that is embodied from early on in a rehearsal, and thus more likely to stimulate the imagination.

¹⁷⁸ Bruner 64

6.0 HOW DOES THE ACTOR EMBODY EMOTION IN FICTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES?

As with the other areas that I have covered, there have been significant advances in the understanding of emotion in the last thirty years. This has arisen through a shift of emphasis in scientific research from a psychological to a biological approach that has been facilitated by the ability to study the human brain in operation with technologies such as functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Magnetoencephalography (MEG), and Positron Emission Tomography (PET). Neuroscientists conceptualize brain functions as patterns of nerve cell activity; in fMRI, MEG, and PET studies, these patterns can be identified and traced. This process originated from work on the visual system, where objects in the environment have an effect on retinal receptive cells, with patterns of activation in the brain corresponding to external stimuli. The evidence from such studies, coupled with experimental research on animals, has allowed neuroscientists to offer empirically based descriptions of emotional processes.

However, concepts of emotion in actor training are still largely derived from variations of Stanislavski's approach, which was inspired by his reading of the work of nineteenth-century psychologist Théodule Ribot. Sharon Carnicke points out in Stanislavski in Focus that Stanislavski's approach bore little relationship to Ribot's findings. The feature of Ribot's work that Stanislavski focused on was his research into the memory of emotions. Ribot distinguished between "concrete" and "abstract" memories. "Concrete" memories would be felt in the body in

the same way as the original emotion, while an “abstract” recollection would be “intellectual”. Although Ribot concluded that “[t]he emotional memory is nil in the majority of people”¹⁷⁹ Stanislavski decided that actors could develop their ability to recall “affective memory” by becoming more attuned to the feelings of the senses: “Once you can grow pale or blush at the memory of something you have experienced, once you are frightened to think about something unhappy that you lived through long ago, you have a memory for *chuvstva* (feelings, senses) or a memory for emotion.”¹⁸⁰

Stanislavski seeks to explain the application of “affective memory” in An Actor’s Work.¹⁸¹ Ironically, his choice of example demonstrates the effectiveness of imagination more than that of memory. In an exercise designed to stimulate the “as if” phenomenon, Stanislavski’s fictional alter-ego, Tortsov, asks his students to behave as if a violent madman were at the door. The actors improvise a scene where they blockade the door with furniture, hunt for potential weapons, and hide themselves. Tortsov is satisfied with the reality of their behavior. Some time later, he asks them to repeat the improvised scene, only to be disappointed with the lack of “internal” truth. As the narrator recounts: “Tortsov and Rakhmanov told us that while our earlier efforts had been direct, sincere, fresh and true, what we had done today was wrong, insincere and contrived ...”¹⁸² The distinction between the two outcomes is described by Tortsov as follows:

If, the first time, your actions were prompted by your feelings, your intuition, your everyday experience, today you followed a well-beaten track blindly, almost

¹⁷⁹ Carnicke 1998, 133

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* 133

¹⁸¹ As in previous chapters, I quote from Jean Benedetti’s translation, believing it to be more accurate than Hapgood’s

¹⁸² Stanislavski 2008,195

mechanically. You repeated the first, successful version, and didn't create a genuine, new life belonging solely to today.¹⁸³

In response to questioning, Tortsov explains that this arose because the group “displayed an excellent memory for externals. But as for memory of feelings, that was not evident today.” He goes on to explain that he has replaced Ribot's term “affective memory” with “Emotion memory”, and that recalling emotions is crucial to giving the scene life. Evidently, at this stage of Stanislavski's work, there is a pronounced emphasis on the concept of difference between “inside” and “outside”, and a belief that emotion in fictional circumstances needs to be accessed through memory, as a further included in Carnicke's book emphasizes:

“Actors can experience only their own emotions” Stanislavski explains. “They can understand, empathize, put themselves in their characters' shoes, and begin to act as the characters do. This creative action calls forth experiences analogous with the role ... You never lose yourself on stage. You always act in your own person as artist. There's no walking away from yourself.”¹⁸⁴

In the literal sense, there is some truth to the statement that actors can only experience their own emotions; however the cognitive research on empathy described in the previous chapter shows that one's own emotion can arise through the mirror neuron mechanism when observing another's emotion. Similarly, Stanislavski's statement that “creative action” can only call forth “analogous experiences” from the actor's own life does not sit well with contemporary cognitive theory. As Patrick Colm Hogan points out:

It is well-established that when we concretely imagine an object, our brains behave in much the same way they do when we actually perceive the object...

¹⁸³ *ibid.*197

¹⁸⁴ Carnicke 1998, 111

Thus it would seem that the imagination of emotion triggers operates in the same general way as the direct perception of those triggers. The intensity may be less.

But that no doubt depends on the vivacity of the imagination.¹⁸⁵

Hogan draws on information that makes it clear that emotion, like empathy, can be triggered from fictional sources, something that will be considered in more detail later in this chapter. Stanislavski's insistence on Affective Memory as the resource for emotion in the early and middle parts of his career gave way in the latter part of his life to his work with physical actions as he came to recognize that emotions cannot be controlled in the same way that the body can, but that control of the body can bring forth emotion.

Nevertheless, the use of Affective Memory exercises in actor training in the U.S. has become widespread through the influence of Lee Strasberg, who took up this concept from Richard Boleslavsky, and, as described in the last chapter, placed emotion memory at the center of his "method". This decision correlates with the emphasis on the biographical experience of the actor as the primary resource in creating a role. In Strasberg's conception of acting, the actor can only create "truth" in performance through the recall of lived experience:

Affective memory is the basic material for reliving on the stage, and therefore for the creation of a real experience on the stage. What the actor repeats in performance after performance is not just the words and movements he practiced in rehearsal, but the memory of emotion. He reaches his emotion through the memory of thought and sensation.¹⁸⁶

This formulation of what an actor does to successfully embody a character is notable for its lack of acknowledgement of imagination or craft, or of an awareness of the way physical

¹⁸⁵ Hogan, 181

¹⁸⁶ Strasberg 1987 113

activity can stimulate emotion. Strasberg's commentary on the subject of emotion is frequently contradictory. For example, in an interview with Richard Schechner published in 1964, Strasberg first of all states that affective memory "is the basic element of the actor's reality",¹⁸⁷ but then that the "basic idea of affective memory is not emotional recall but that the actor's emotion on the stage should never be really real. It always should be only remembered emotion."¹⁸⁸ Clearly, Strasberg has some idea of differences between "reality" and the "really real", and "emotional recall" and "remembered emotion", but what they are remains unclear. Even those who advocate for the effectiveness of the process fail to provide any meaningful criteria about the distinction between "real" emotion and "remembered" emotion. Wendy Smith attempts to explain one related exercise as follows:

The actor [does not] try to recall the feeling directly, but rather to re-experience the sensory impressions surrounding it ... Then the actor went over the exact sequence of events, concentrating on re-creating as precisely as possible the physical reality of the moment. When done properly with a strong situation, the exercise almost invariably brought the emotion flooding back to the present. The actor could then play the scene with the appropriate feeling.¹⁸⁹

If, as Smith states, the exercise can bring the emotion "flooding back to the present", how can one distinguish this from a "real" emotion?

Further inconsistencies arise in David Krasner's attempt to defend the practice against the critiques of writers such as Robert Brustein, Richard Hornby, and Colin Counsell. Krasner states that

¹⁸⁷ Strasberg 1964 131

¹⁸⁸ Strasberg 1964 132

¹⁸⁹ Smith, W. 38

the feelings evoked during an episode of affective memory may surprise the actor (you may laugh when you thought you would cry), and that is significant –the performer has created a true, original and spontaneous sense or feeling in response to scenic events.”¹⁹⁰

Again, the avoidance of acknowledging the role of imagination in the process leads to a contradiction –the “spontaneous response” is to the memory, not to the fictional circumstances of the “scenic events”. Since the exercise is intended to generate emotions appropriate to the fictional circumstances, unexpected responses would appear to be counterproductive to the intended result, although Method practitioners would prize them for their apparent spontaneity.

Strasberg’s insistence on biographical experience as the source of “truth” in the actor requires a belief that it is memory that provokes the experience of emotion in that actor. The convoluted and contradictory attempts to explain the usefulness of affective memory are based on concepts of self, consciousness and emotion that L & J call “Folk Theories” - ideas of how we function that originate from the limited conscious awareness that we have of processes that are largely unconscious. The current understanding of the brain derived from neuroscience and experimental psychology points in a very different direction from the notions propounded by Strasberg. Patrick Colm Hogan, drawing on the work of experimental psychologist Daniel Schacter points out that memories

are not like little videotapes stored in our heads. [...] our minds reconstruct remembered events in relation to current concerns, experiences, and so on. Thus my recollection of a past event may change significantly, depending on the situation in which I am asked about it ... The reconstruction of memories is affected by current emotional states as well

¹⁹⁰ Krasner 137

... Thus I remember a past event differently if I am now sad than If I am angry, fearful, or whatever. ¹⁹¹

This suggests that Strasberg's activity of encouraging sense memory in order to stimulate emotional memory is as much an imaginative exercise as it is one of recall. As such, it is affected by the current circumstances in which the activity is undertaken. Hogan also explains that:

...it seems that our memory storage is in fact very fragmentary and discontinuous. We have partial and isolated memories of past events ... [i]n fact 'retrieving' a memory is a highly elaborate and constructive process. We access fragments from the relevant time period and link them together, often using broad schemas. In other words, we do not really remember the past, we reconstruct it – often in a way that reflects our present concerns as much as our past experience, sometimes in a way that does not reflect our past experience at all. ¹⁹²

Joseph LeDoux describes the way in which this phenomenon arises in Synaptic Self: How our Brains Become Who We Are. The book is an examination of the brain mechanisms that create personality and self. LeDoux refers to a wide range of clinical research on the synaptic processes of features such as perception, memory and emotion. In a section titled “Reliving the Emotional Past”, LeDoux describes the way in which a part of the brain called the amygdala is involved in both the storage and retrieval of memories that have a strong emotional component. The information gives us a clearer understanding of what is happening when an actor tries to use “affective memory” to generate emotion. LeDoux points out that “Explicit memories established during emotional situations are often especially vivid and enduring...” ¹⁹³ which probably

¹⁹¹ Hogan 182

¹⁹² *ibid.* 161

¹⁹³ LeDoux 221

explains the initial attraction of “affective memory” for Stanislavski, Strasberg and others. Experiments by psychologist Paul Ekman also describe the potential that the memory of an event has to generate emotion in the present. In his experiments, subjects responded emphatically in a physiological manner to the invitation to remember an emotion-inducing event:

For example, to call forth sadness we asked people to remember a time in their life when someone to whom they were attached had died. We asked them to visualize a moment when they had felt the most intense sadness and then to try to experience again the emotion they had felt when the death first happened. ¹⁹⁴

Instruments measuring heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, sweating and skin temperature showed that “the changes that occur when emotions are remembered actually resemble the changes that occur when emotions begin by other means...” ¹⁹⁵

These physiological indicators suggest that memory can stimulate emotion.

LeDoux also describes how this phenomenon arises at the neurological level when the emotion of fear is engaged:

During emotional arousal, outputs of the central amygdala trigger the release of hormones from the adrenal gland that return to the brain. ... By way of its connections with the hippocampus and other regions of the explicit memory system, the amygdala then modulates (strengthens) the consolidation of explicit memories being formed during emotional arousal. ¹⁹⁶

So far, this description would seem to support the idea that memories of emotional events would be useful resources for the actor. However, LeDoux concurs with Shacter in saying that

¹⁹⁴ Ekman 2003 33

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.* 33

¹⁹⁶ LeDoux 222

“memories are more easily retrieved when the emotional state at the time of memory formation matches the state at the time of retrieval.”¹⁹⁷ This poses a problem for the actor engaged in an affective memory exercise, since the conditions of a workshop or rehearsal are unlikely in themselves to provoke an emotional state that matches that of the memory – and if they did, the affective memory exercise would be redundant. LeDoux points out that “[t]he unreliability of remembered emotion... may be related to the fact that the emotional state at the time of retrieval will by necessity be somewhat different from the state at the time of the original experience.”¹⁹⁸ In common with LeDoux’s analysis, Ekman points out that “[w]e may replay the emotions we felt in the original scene, or we may now feel a different emotion.”¹⁹⁹

A further complication in the use of emotional memory arises from the degree of emotional arousal that occurred in the formation of the memory: “[A]s long as the degree of emotional arousal is moderate during memory formation, memory is strengthened. But if the arousal is strong, especially if it is highly stressful, memory is often impaired.”²⁰⁰ So on two counts, current, empirically based knowledge about the brain’s activities qualifies Strasberg’s notion of the effectiveness of affective memory. As I will show later, the use of memory is just one of several potential pathways for generating emotion, and Strasberg’s belief that it is the actor’s sole route to emotion needs to be recognized as outmoded by theatre practitioners. His insistence on its usefulness and on autobiographical material also disregarded the changes in Stanislavski’s thinking that were reported to him by Stella Adler and others.

As Stanislavski moved towards developing the Method of Physical Actions, he grew increasingly impatient with actors who indulged in private emotions:

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* 222

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* 222

¹⁹⁹ Ekman 2003, 32

²⁰⁰ LeDoux, 222

What's false here? You're playing feelings, your own suffering, that's what's false. I need to see the event and how you react to the event, how you fight people – how you react, not suffer ... To take that line ... is to be passive and sentimental. See everything in terms of action! ²⁰¹

Implicit in the exhortation is an endorsement of the idea of imaginative engagement with the fictional “event”, something that Strasberg’s emphasis on biographical “truth” disregards. Also implicit is the notion that the action that evolves from imaginative engagement can stimulate emotion, a concept that became the foundation of the Method of Physical Actions. As with other practitioners that I have mentioned, this phase of Stanislavski’s work displays a certain prescience of the current understanding of the nature of emotion, imagination, and action, which of course, has advanced considerably since Stanislavski’s time.

Antonio Damasio has been one of the most prominent researchers and articulators of a neuroscientific understanding of emotion, disseminated through numerous research papers and articles, and the best-selling books Descartes’ Error, The Feeling of What Happens, and Looking for Spinoza. In The Feeling of What Happens, Damasio draws on his experience as a clinical neurologist to investigate the nature of consciousness, and, in the process of doing so, considers the nature of emotions. This is important information for theatre practitioners who seek to better understand emotional processes, which, in daily life, often seem to have no relationship to cause or conscious intent, and are not directly controlled by the will. Understanding how emotions occur is a useful foundation for developing an approach to stimulating emotion in performance.

Damasio’s research shows that emotions are brain representations of body states. He suggests that while the senses of vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell function by nerve

²⁰¹ Benedetti, Jean 1988, 271

activation patterns that correspond to the state of the external world, emotions are nerve activation patterns that correspond to the state of the internal world. These patterns have a biological basis and have evolved as bioregulatory devices that support survival:

For neuroscience, emotions are more or less the complex reactions the body has to certain stimuli. When we are afraid of something, our hearts begin to race, our mouths become dry, our skin turns pale and our muscles contract. This emotional reaction occurs automatically and unconsciously. Feelings occur after we become aware in our brain of such physical changes; only then do we experience the feeling of fear.²⁰²

The stimuli that activate these patterns can occur in the external environment, or within the body: “Representations of either the exterior or the interior can occur underneath conscious survey and still induce emotional responses. Emotions can be induced in a nonconscious manner and thus appear to the conscious self as seemingly unmotivated.”²⁰³ Thus, while we might be consciously aware of an event (external or internal) that stimulates an emotional response, it is also possible that we can have an emotion without being aware of the cause. Emotions use the “internal milieu” – the interstitial tissue and fluid in which cells exist, - and visceral, vestibular and musculoskeletal systems, which affect “a fairly restricted ensemble of subcortical regions, beginning at the level of the brain stem and moving up to the higher brain ... [T]he collection of these changes constitutes the substrate for the neural patterns which eventually become feelings of emotion.”²⁰⁴ As we know from our own experience, different emotions can entail varying levels of conscious awareness about their causes, and Damasio offers a further level of specificity by identifying three categories of emotion:

²⁰² Damasio, Antonio. Interview. Scientific American Mind, Vol.16, No. 1

²⁰³ Damasio 1999 48

²⁰⁴ *ibid.* 51-2

The primary or universal emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, or disgust [;]...secondary or social emotions, such as embarrassment, jealousy, guilt, or pride; and what I call background emotions, such as well-being or malaise, calm or tension.²⁰⁵

Each of these categories of emotions has a biological core, but they vary in the degree to which they are influenced by culture. For instance, "... several secondary emotions begin to appear later in human development, probably only after a concept of self begins to mature – shame and guilt are examples of this later development; newborns have no shame and no guilt but two year-olds do."²⁰⁶ Background emotions are what would commonly be called "moods" in daily life – emotions that recur frequently or are sustained over significant periods of time. Damasio, however, distinguishes between the two in his terminology; "a particular background emotion can be sustained over time to create a mood."²⁰⁷

The aspect of time is another helpful indicator of differences between emotions: certain primary emotions (fear, anger, surprise and disgust) have a rapid onset, a peak of intensity, and rapid diminishment. Other emotions, such as sadness, and all of the background emotions have a more "wave-like" pattern of gradual onset and gradual diminishment. Identifying the temporal pattern of emotions allows actors to relate them to the temporal components of Laban's Efforts, "sudden" or "sustained", and thus to integrate them into a vocabulary of action. For example, the gestural action of "punch" (sudden, direct, and heavy) is easily associated with anger, and can be used as a metaphorical action applied to speech.

²⁰⁵ *ibid.* Damasio 1999 51

²⁰⁶ *ibid.* 342

²⁰⁷ *ibid.* 341

Another intriguing feature of the distinctions between primary and background emotions is the source of the immediate inducer of an emotion. In the primary emotions, this is usually external, or a representation of an external event. In background emotions, it is internal, frequently the result of mental conflict. Being aware of this distinction can help actors with understanding the emotional life of their characters. For example, Hamlet can legitimately be said to be melancholic at the beginning of the play as he broods over the death of his father and the rapid remarriage of his mother (internal, sustained process), but when he encounters the ghost of his father (external event provoking sudden responses) his emotional state evidently changes, and he is propelled into action.

All three categories of emotion are expressed physically. Primary and social emotions are mostly expressed through differentiated, explicit facial expressions, and although background emotions initially target the internal milieu and viscera, they also have effects on the musculoskeletal systems which are evident to observers: “We detect background emotions by subtle details of body posture, speed and contour of movements, minimal changes in the amounts and speed of eye movements, and in the degree of contraction of facial muscles.”²⁰⁸ It is important to remember that Damasio demonstrates that the conscious experience (feeling) of emotion (using the word in its everyday sense) is actually dependent on physical symptoms. The implications for the actor are that consciously controlled physiological actions, such as altering the rate and tempo of breathing, changing muscular tension, adjusting body posture, controlling eye movements and facial expressions not only communicate emotion to the audience (through the activation of mirror neurons) but can also generate an emotional experience for the performer. These findings challenge the conceptual foundation of one of the perennial dualities

²⁰⁸ *ibid.* 52

in acting theory – does the actor have to feel an emotion in order to express it, or does he or she simply reproduce the physical signs of the emotion? It is clear from Damasio's research that it is not an either/or situation. Since physiological indicators are the stimulators of feeling in many emotions, the willed reproduction of those symptoms can provoke the affective experience of emotion in the actor.

Damasio's findings are confirmed by Joseph LeDoux, who offers a clear account of the relationship between perception and emotion. In The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life, LeDoux describes his belief

that emotion and cognition are best thought of as separate but interacting mental functions mediated by separate but interacting brain systems The perceptual representation of an object and the evaluation of the significance of an object are separately processed by the brain.²⁰⁹

However, in the cases of some emotions, conscious evaluation is preceded by an automatic response:

The emotional meaning of a stimulus can begin to be appraised by the brain before the perceptual systems have fully processed the stimulus. It is, indeed, possible for your brain to know that something is good or bad before it knows exactly what it is.²¹⁰

This explains the phenomenon that most of us have experienced of physically starting in response to a potential threat before consciously realizing that the stimulus is not a threat - a snake in the grass that turns out to be a stick, an intruder in the house who turns out to be an unexpected family member. Generally the lag time between the physical response and the conscious appraisal is minimal, a matter of microseconds. Obviously, not all stimuli of emotional

²⁰⁹ LeDoux 69

²¹⁰ *ibid.* 69

responses are as dramatic as this, and this phenomenon is more apparent in the evolutionarily earlier emotions (fear, anger, surprise, disgust). But these examples demonstrate an important principle:

The linkage of appraisal mechanisms with response control systems means that when the appraisal mechanism detects a significant event, the programming and often the execution of a set of appropriate responses will occur. The net result is that bodily sensations often accompany appraisals and when they do they are a part of the conscious experience of emotions. Because cognitive processing is not linked up with responses in this obligatory way, intense bodily sensations are less likely to occur in association with mere thoughts.²¹¹

So Strasberg's insistence on emotional memory as the actor's sole pathway to emotion is further discounted; thinking of a past event is less likely to produce the sensations that are identified as feelings when they are consciously perceived. Given that many of these sensations occur in physiological mechanisms that are subject to conscious control as well as involuntary impulse, such as breathing and the level of muscular tension, it would seem to make sense for the actor to use these as pathways to emotion. The viability of such an approach has reliable empirical backing in the work of Paul Ekman.

Ekman has proved that consciously chosen muscular actions affect emotional state. While researching the configuration of facial muscles used in expressions of emotion, Ekman and his assistant discovered that they began to experience the conscious affect of the emotion as they controlled the arrangements of their facial muscles to denote primary emotions such as fear, anger and surprise. Following this experience, Ekman devised a set of experiments to see if the

²¹¹ *ibid.* 70

phenomenon could be reliably reproduced. In a paper published in 1990, Ekman, Wallace Friesen, and Robert Levenson reported the findings of experiments conducted to determine “whether voluntarily produced emotional facial configurations are associated with different patterns of autonomic activity.”²¹² Subjects were invited to create facial expressions through muscle-by-muscle instruction and then were asked to report on their feelings as well as having their autonomic activities monitored. These included heart rate, skin conductance, finger temperature and muscle activity. The facial expressions were ones that had previously been identified by Ekman and Friesen in their Facial Action Coding System in the late seventies. These muscular configurations each represented a universal emotional facial expression based on cross-cultural studies of both the recognition and expression of emotion. The configurations indicated emotions of anger, fear, hatred, surprise, happiness, and sadness, but when the subjects were invited to produce particular muscular configurations, they were not told what emotion was being targeted. The experiments showed that the subjects did indeed experience the emotion associated with the facial expression as a result of simply organizing the muscles of the face in a certain way.

Although it is now twenty years since this paper was published, there is little evidence to suggest that its findings are being employed on a consistent basis in actor training programs. Lecoq’s training program, which consistently places focus and attention on the body, does not specifically address facial expression or emotion. Popular acting texts, such as Robert Cohen’s Acting One, Uta Hagen’s Respect for the Actor, and Jean Benedetti’s The Actor at Work do not offer any exercises for the recognition or generation of facial expressions. Most practitioners agree that the emotions cannot in general be consciously controlled. Muscular activity, however,

²¹² Ekman 1990 363

can, and so it would seem to make sense to incorporate Ekman's findings into actor training programs. The simple task of consciously arranging one's facial muscles in certain configurations would not only develop facility with facial expressions, but also offer a route towards the generation of the experience of emotions. The process would seem to be more time-effective and specific than Strasberg's affective memory exercise, and could be linked with other controllable features such as breathing patterns and levels of muscular tension – activities that will be addressed later in this chapter. In the same way that repeated practicing of scales gives a pianist increased dexterity through confirming neuronal patterning, practicing the controllable physiological features of specific emotions would increase the actor's ability to express emotion in response to fictional circumstances, either through conscious choice or through a response to an imaginative stimulus.

Ekman, in common with Damasio and other psychologists, initially identified six primary emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. Over a long career, his research has shown that these emotions are identifiable in a variety of different cultures, concurring with Damasio's view that they are biological in origin, and not culturally determined. His Facial Action Coding System identifies the different muscular configurations that are associated with each of these primary emotions. For example, anger is expressed by the pressing and narrowing of the lips, the inner corners of the eyebrows going down towards the nose, the eyes opening wide with the upper eyelids pushing against the lowered eyebrows, and the chin being pushed forward. In some cases the lips may be open, and attempts to suppress the emotion may result in only some of the signs being present. This specificity of description offers one the opportunity to experiment with the generation of emotion through the conscious arranging of the muscles in to this configuration.

In a number of experiments, Ekman has demonstrated that this activity produces the felt experience of emotion. For example, in working with the facial expression of enjoyment that communicates happiness, Ekman found a distinction in the brain activity that is provoked by related but different expressions. He proposes that spontaneous enjoyment is expressed by a smile activated by the *zygomatic major* muscle that extends from the cheekbones to the corner of the lips, and also by the contraction of the muscle that surrounds the eye, the *orbicularis oculi*. Part of this muscle is hard to contract voluntarily, and therefore its lack of contraction in an expression of enjoyment generally demonstrates that the subject is consciously attempting an expression of enjoyment, rather than involuntarily expressing enjoyment. These differences are visible in the patterns of brain activation provoked by the expressions. Smiling with both the eye muscle and the lips activated the left temporal and anterior regions, while smiling only with the lips did not.²¹³ One can test the phenomenal experience of the distinction oneself, by smiling with the lower part of the face only (raising the corners of the mouth), and then by smiling in a way that involves the upper part of the face (cheeks and eyes) as well as the mouth. The difference in affective experience of the two types of smile is often quite significant.

In addition to the primary emotions mentioned above, Ekman identifies a number of other distinct emotions, such as contempt, pride in achievement, embarrassment, and sensual pleasure. These correlate with Damasio's category of secondary or social emotions. Valuable information for the actor lies in a particular set of findings that suggest that many of these emotions can be thought of as groupings or "families" of emotions:

[O]ur findings suggest that all of the positive emotions (amusement, sensory pleasure, pride, etc.) share a single expression, a particular type of smile ... An observer

²¹³ Ekman et al. 1990

distinguishes which of these positive emotions is evident, not so much from the expression itself (although the timing and intensity of the expression may provide clues), as from the context, from knowledge of what emotion is likely in a given situation for a given person. ²¹⁴

Similarly, there is an “unhappiness” group of emotions - disappointment, sadness over loss, remorse, shame and guilt - that share an expression, which Ekman describes as one in which “the corners of the eyebrows are raised, the cheeks slightly raised, and the lip corners are pulled downward.” ²¹⁵

This level of empirically derived specificity about the facial expression of emotion gives the actor the ability to confidently research emotion and its expression in training, so that the activities of expressing emotion in performance can be fluid and responsive to the imagination. It would seem to make sense for actors to develop facility in voluntarily creating the facial expressions of each of the six primary emotions. Given that many of the wider range of secondary emotions share the facial expressions of the primary expressions, the ability to create the primary expressions would also extend to a communication of secondary emotions.

In addition to the potential for practical application that this information has for actors, cognitive science presents a significant challenge to the concept of “real” emotion that is used with such frequency by Strasberg and other practitioners. The research of Ekman and others shows that the brain activation patterns of emotions can be provoked in a number of ways, not just by memory. Most of us would consider a spontaneous response to a real-life event as the most “real” experience of emotion, but neuroscientific research shows that emotion that is stimulated by memory, imagination, or by the conscious control of physiological processes uses

²¹⁴ Ekman 1993 389

²¹⁵ *ibid.* 389

the same neural pathways to create activation patterns, but with less intense results. This suggests that, rather than attempt to define what is “real” or not “real” in the experience and expression of emotion, it is a more useful approach for actors to consider the origin and pathway of an emotion-inducing event. By doing this, and experimenting with different activities, they will be able to identify which pathway, or combination of pathways, works best for them in creating the expression of emotion.

That actors should focus on the expression of emotion, and not on the idea of creating “real” emotion is supported by a comment of Antonio Damasio. He confirms that “we cannot control emotions willfully”²¹⁶ and, as mentioned earlier, that we are often unconscious of what events or images have provoked an emotional state. Aspects of the emotional process that we can control include whether an emotion-inducing image remains the target of our thoughts once noticed, and also, to some extent, the expression of our emotions:

We can also control, in part, the expression of some emotions –suppress our anger, mask our sadness –but most of us are not very good at it and that is one reason why we pay a lot to see good actors who are skilled at controlling the expression of their emotions...²¹⁷

What seems especially significant here is that Damasio talks about actors controlling expression, rather than experiencing “real” emotion.

Identifying which aspects of emotional expression are controllable, and therefore of interest to the actor seeking to create authentic expressions of emotion in performance is assisted by another feature of Paul Ekman’s research. Ekman identifies nine pathways that generate emotion.²¹⁸ The first, and most common, is through *automatic appraisal*, an unconscious

²¹⁶ Damasio 1999, 47

²¹⁷ *ibid.* 48

²¹⁸ Ekman 2003

scanning of the environment for events that are relevant to our survival. Our identification of what these events are is developed through a combination of biology, evolutionary natural selection, and individual experience. This process continues through life, with new stimuli that seem relevant to what we care about added to an unconscious database.

The next pathway is *reflective appraisal*. This “deals with ambiguous situations, situations to which the automatic appraising mechanisms are not already tuned.”²¹⁹ At the point where the reflective appraisal results in the recognition of an emotion-inducing event, the automatic appraisal mechanism takes over to generate feelings. Ekman then identifies *remembering* an emotion-inducing event as a pathway to generating emotion, followed by *imagining* an emotional event, *talking* about past emotional experiences, and *empathy* – the provocation of one’s own emotions by witnessing someone else’s emotion. This occurs in real life situations, but also in response to fictional representations, using the mechanisms described in the previous chapter.

The seventh pathway that Ekman identifies is *being told what to be emotional about*, and this tends to occur in early life in response to a caregiver or significant person. *Violation of social norms* is the eighth pathway – the emotions that we might feel in response to different violations will vary, of course, in type and intensity according to our individual opinions about the norm being violated. Ekman’s final pathway derives from his experience of creating facial expressions – *voluntarily assuming the appearance of emotion*. While Ekman focuses on the facial expressions of the primary emotions, Damasio’s work shows that breathing patterns, eye movement, and musculoskeletal activity are also involved in the expression of emotions.

²¹⁹ *ibid.* 31

Of these nine pathways, three would seem to be of especial practical use to the actor in the intentional generating of emotion – memory, imagination, and voluntarily assuming the physiological signs of emotion. The topic of memory has been addressed earlier in this chapter, and imagination in the previous chapter, although it is probably valuable to reiterate that when an emotion is stimulated by imagination, it follows the same neuronal pathways as one that is stimulated by an event in lived experience. As Shaun Nichols points out in his introduction to The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility and Fiction; “research suggests that the affective response to imagining a scenario closely tracks the affective response that would occur if the subject came to believe that the scenario was real.”²²⁰ The neural scaffolding of this phenomenon is described by Vittorio Gallese:

The data reviewed here show that in the anterior insula, visual information concerning the emotions of others is directly mapped onto the same visceromotor neural structures that determine the experience of that emotion in the observer. *This direct mapping can occur even when the emotion of others can only be imagined.*²²¹

This phenomenon seems to be true for the six basic emotions, and recent research indicates that it is also true for social emotions. In a recent fMRI experiment, a group of Italian neuroscientists conducted a study to “investigate whether the same neural mechanism is activated both when experiencing and attending complex, cognitively-generated, emotions.”²²² The emotion that they focused on was regret and their results showed that:

...observing the regretful outcomes of someone else's choices activates the same

²²⁰ Nichols, 8

²²¹ Gallese 2004 399, my emphasis.

²²² Canessa et al. 2009

regions that are activated during a first-person experience of regret, i.e. the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex and hippocampus. These results extend the possible role of a mirror-like mechanism beyond basic emotions.²²³

Linking the two sets of findings suggests that a mirror-like mechanism for the activation of emotion through imagination is in operation for both primary and social emotions.

The ways in which actors are involved in imaginative responses to the fictional world of a drama are varied; a response to reading a script; an intentional act of the imagination such as Chekhov's visualization exercises; an imaginative engagement in an improvisation. In all these processes, however, the material about the cognitive aspects of emotion that I have surveyed here strongly suggests that physical activity intensifies and particularizes the way in which the imagination can stimulate emotion.

As described in the previous chapter, Stanislavski's Method of Physical actions sought to provide the actor with a physical pathway into the fictional world. Jean Benedetti, his biographer, describes the aim of the Method of Physical Actions as follows:

What Stanislavski wanted to provide was a method for actors to explore the play, the events as they unfold, in terms of what they would do in the various situations the author provided, using exercises and improvisations. It is active analysis on the rehearsal-room floor, as opposed to the reflective, formal analysis that takes place in the study; it first asks what happens, rather than what the dramaturgical structure is.²²⁴

Vasili Toporkov, reflecting on his work after Stanislavski's death, wrote;

Stanislavski drew our attention to what is most tangible, most concrete in any human action: its physical aspect. In his directing and teaching, especially in his

²²³ *ibid.* 1

²²⁴ Benedetti, Jean 1998, xv

final years, he laid the greatest significance on this aspect of the life of a role when organizing the beginning of the work. Splitting off the physical aspect of human behavior from its other elements is, of course, artificial, but he used it as a teaching strategy. By diverting actors' attention away from feelings and the psychological, and directing them towards the fulfillment of 'purely physical' actions, he helped them gain access to their feelings in an organic, natural manner as they performed them.²²⁵

As described in the previous chapter, Stanislavski worked with his actors through close and detailed stimulation of the imagination through constant insistence on features of the fictional environment and their physical behavior in response to it. The "organic" nature of the results that Toporkov describes would seem to arise through the stimulation of emotion by a combination of imaginative engagement and physical behavior – the "symptoms" of emotion that provoke feeling.

The final part of this chapter gives examples of practitioners from different traditions who can be seen to have employed these principles in their work. I should stress that most of them have arrived at their exercises through trial and error in the rehearsal studio, and that their work precedes the cognitive research that I have outlined. The exception is the work of experimental psychologist Susan Bloch, which originated in experiments conducted in the Universidad de Chile from 1971 to 1973.

Jerzy Grotowski is probably the best-known successor of Stanislavski's physical approach to training and directing. While Grotowski's work is widely recognized as "experimental", with the many connotations that this has in twenty-first century Western theatre, the rigor of his approach, and its close connection to Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions

²²⁵ Toporkov 160

is perhaps less widely understood. The different phases of Grotowski's work have been well-documented by Richard Schechner, Lisa Wolford, and others, and have aroused their fair share of controversy, but in citing examples of Grotowski, I'm going to focus on the legacy of the actor training that he developed in the 1960's, and introduced to American theatre practitioners in the latter part of that decade.

In his book At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions, long-time collaborator Thomas Richards quotes from an essay that Grotowski wrote about his studies at the State Theatre Institute in Poland:

When I was a student in the school of dramatic arts, in the faculty for actors, I founded the entire basis of my theatrical knowledge on the principles of Stanislavski. As an actor, I was possessed by Stanislavski. I was a fanatic. I retained that it was the key that opens all the doors of creativity. I worked a lot to arrive to know all possible about that which he said or what was said about him.”²²⁶

Richards goes on to describe his own experience in a workshop with Ryszard Cieslak, the actor who Grotowski felt most understood his approach. In an exercise where Cieslak was working with a student to discover the way that he touched his (visualized) girlfriend's face, Richards observes Cieslak continually direct the student to focus on the physical details: “Don't act. What was the touch of her skin like? At what moment precisely do you touch your girlfriend's face? Is her face warm or cold? How does she react to your touch? How do you react to her reaction?”²²⁷ The process echoes Toporkov's descriptions of Stanislavski's work, and Richards recognizes this as his “first insight into Stanislavski's ‘method of physical actions.’”

²²⁶ Richards 6

²²⁷ *ibid.* 13

Richards also describes a moment in the workshop when Cieslak asked if any one could cry like a child:

A girl lay down on the floor and tried. He said ‘No, not like that,’ and taking her place on the floor, transformed himself into a crying child before our eyes. Only now after many years, do I understand the key to Cieslak’s success in the transformation. He found the exact physicality of the child, its alive physical process which supported his child-like scream. He did not look for the child’s emotional state, rather with his body he remembered the child’s physical actions. ²²⁸

This concentration on physical activity is also emphasized by Stephen Wangh, who, like Richards, studied with Grotowski, and now trains actors at the Experimental Theatre Wing of New York University. Wangh describes how, when he first encountered Grotowski at a workshop at NYU, he thought that “his approach was baffling, for he seemed to work differently with every actor in the group.” ²²⁹ Wangh details the work that Grotowski did with a pair of actors on a scene from Antony and Cleopatra, indicating his amazement at the attention to physical detail:

he led Tom through a long exploration of two sides of himself, *le petit* Tom and *le grand* Tom, an exploration that depended on Tom’s control of his facial muscles! The requisite emotions, Grotowski explained, would arrive on their own if Tom would just pay attention to physical details. “Emotions come; they happen to us; they are not voluntary.” ... Making a technical, physical choice, Grotowski insisted, could produce emotional truth. ²³⁰

²²⁸ *ibid.* 12-13

²²⁹ Wangh xxi

²³⁰ *ibid.* xxi

Familiarity with the findings of Damasio and Ekman indicates the physiological way in which emotions arise from facial expressions; to actors in the sixties habituated to the Method, the process must have been very startling. Wangh has since developed a training program based on Grotowski's work, (described in An Acrobat of the Heart); he recognized that a gap existed between his physical training exercises and their application to a script.

Another example of a theatre practitioner approaching the physiological symptoms of emotion lies in the work of Jacques Lecoq. As described earlier, Lecoq's approach to training actors is fundamentally physical, and much of the work that a student encounters in his school is likely to stimulate emotion for that reason. One specific example demonstrates the way in which his training can assist the actor in developing control of a feature of emotional expression. This is a group of exercises known as the Seven Levels of Tension, which identify and discriminate among different levels of muscular tension. The initial concept is introduced in a single session, and returned to and elaborated on throughout a student's training. In the initial session, students are instructed to progressively adjust their muscular tension to each of the successive levels listed below. At each level, they are invited to experiment with the dramatic potential of the seven states through improvised movement and vocalization, and also to briefly reflect on their sense of self after each period of improvisation.

The following table describes the seven levels, together with the acting style most commonly associated with it. These links are not proscriptive, and the characterizations of each different state varied over the years that Lecoq taught—for example Level two was for a time referred to as “Californian.” The term “Focus” was used variably to describe both visual and mental targets of attention. This information is not recorded in any of Lecoq's writing, but is drawn from my own training experience and conversations with Lecoq graduates. Given the

variable nature of oral transmission, and the evolving nature of Lecoq’s teaching, students of different eras might take issue with some of the descriptions, but the principle should be evident –that different levels of muscular tension have definable application to dramatic activity. Although Lecoq did not mention emotion specifically in relation to this exercise, the specificity of physical behavior that it engenders can assist the actor in making voluntary choices that affect the physiological symptoms of emotion.

Table 4. Lecoq’s Seven Levels of Tension

<p>LEVEL I “WITHOUT CONTRACTION” MOVEMENT: As if you had no spine, falling down, trying to get up, staggering. FOCUS: None. VOICE: Groan, grunt.</p>
<p>LEVEL II “RELAXATION WITH A SMILE” MOVEMENT: Arms swinging, feet as if gently kicking a soccer ball with each step. FOCUS: Wandering. VOICE: Slang, minimal energy. “Hey.”</p>
<p>LEVEL III “ECONOMY OF MOVEMENT” MOVEMENT: Just enough energy to accomplish a task, no more, no less. Minimal swinging of arms when walking. Efficient, but not robotic. FOCUS: On the goal. VOICE: Efficient and complete. “Hello.”</p>
<p>LEVEL IV “DECISION” MOVEMENT: Deliberate. Urgent. FOCUS: Intensely on the task. VOICE: Command. “Go!” “Stop!” “Move!”</p>
<p>LEVEL V “ALERT” MOVEMENT: A quality of Suspension. Symmetrical. Arms suspended away from body. Even stride. Grounded. Responding to the empty space as if it were another player. Awake. Hyper-aware. FOCUS: The space, the horizon, the emptiness. VOICE: Questioning. Listening to the echo. Calling out to the empty space. “Hello?” STYLE: Neutral Mask.</p>
<p>LEVEL VI “COLORFUL ACTION” MOVEMENT: Asymmetrical. Unpredictable. Impulsive. Cartoonish. Intensity. Surprise. Quick changes of rhythm. FOCUS: Intense. Quickly changing. VOICE: Extreme. STYLE: Commedia Del Arte, Italian Comedy, Farce</p>

LEVEL VII “ASPHYXIATION”

MOVEMENT: Maximum muscular tension.

FOCUS: Intensely fixated on one target for a sustained period.

VOICE: Beyond speaking.

STYLE: Tragedy.

The links to dramatic styles are not intended to mean that all action in this style must have this specific level of tension, but to indicate connections. As mentioned above, the identification of the different levels is the foundation for ongoing work in different styles, both conceptually and physically. In the context of this discussion on emotion, an actor who can adjust his or her level of muscular tension with facility has the ability to control one of the physiological features that both stimulates feeling and communicates emotion to an onlooker.

These features have been investigated in a more explicit fashion by Susana Bloch, an experimental psychologist whose experiments on the effector patterns of emotions led her to propose a psychophysiological process to teach “acting behavior”.²³¹ Her earliest experiments were conducted in the 1970’s and therefore preceded the majority of cognitive research referenced here, but have a congruity with Ekman’s findings on the reflexive relationship between facial expression and emotion, and with Damasio’s explanation of the way in which the subjective experience (feeling) of emotion arises from physiological symptoms.

Bloch defines the effector pattern of an emotion as “a particular configuration of neurovegetative, hormonal and neuromuscular reactions”²³² from which she extracts those elements that can be consciously controlled; breathing, muscular tension and activity, and facial expression. She proposes that:

...each basic emotion can be evoked by a particular configuration composed of:

²³¹ Bloch et al. 1994

²³² *ibid.* 221

- (1) a breathing pattern, characterized by amplitude and frequency modulation;
- (2) a muscular activation characterized by a set of contracting and/or relaxing groups of muscles, defined in a particular posture;
- (3) a facial expression or mimicry characterized by the activation of different facial muscle patterns.²³³

The subjects of her experiments were a group of actors who had recently completed their training at the Theatre School of the Universidad de Chile and who, prior to the tests, were trained in techniques of controlling aspects of behavior such as tension in different muscle groups, respiratory rate, facial expression, and physical and vocal inhibition. Once this training was complete, subjects were asked to voluntarily adopt the breathing patterns, muscular configurations and facial expressions of emotions without being told which emotion was being targeted. Electrocardiogram (ECG), pneumogram, and electromyogram (EMG) recordings were used to identify physiological changes and for comparison against control recordings of what Bloch calls “natural” emotions. The scope of Bloch’s work in these experiments was ambitious, and several aspects of her approach would probably be considered questionable by other experimental psychologists; for example, the control recordings of “naturally” occurring emotions were derived from subjects under hypnosis, and there is no description in her article of how the effector patterns were originally defined. There is no clear single hypothesis that is being tested, and the measurement of the degree of success of the training is unclear. There is mention of self-reporting from the subjects, and also of a test where a group of directors were asked to rate two performances of a scene, one prepared using a Stanislavskian approach, the other using a “melody” of effector patterns. Additionally, Bloch’s definition of the six “basic” emotions is different from the current consensus; she substitutes “tenderness” and “eroticism” for

²³³ *ibid.* 221

surprise and disgust in the group described earlier. While these are undoubtedly useful for the actor, there is a lack of procedural rigor in making these substitutions without explanation or justification.

Given these, and other methodological issues, the standards of proof in these experiments do not come anywhere near the other cognitive data that I have described. Consequently, it seems best to consider Bloch's work as theatrical practice that is informed by a scientific perspective, rather than as empirically derived data. Viewed in this light, there is much that is of use to theatre practitioners, and Bloch's motivating impulse is certainly in accord with the central argument of this dissertation:

What in our opinion is lacking in the curricula of most drama schools are instrumental techniques for learning how to express emotion. While the Gnostic-verbal (literary) and the body –expressive (physical) aspects of acting behavior are quite well covered pedagogically, the emotional expressive (psychophysiological) aspects are almost entirely left to the intuition, life experience or “emotional memory” of the student actor, with little or no technical support.²³⁴

The idea that technical training in communicative behavior is desirable is certainly something that I agree with, but as the information in the preceding chapters has indicated, the potential scope of such a training is far greater than emotion alone.

Bloch designed a training system (now known as “Alba Emoting”) that instructs actors in the physiological expressions of emotion. Many of the aspects of this system resonate with the work of other practitioners that I have described. For example, the spatial expressions of

²³⁴ *ibid.* 220

different emotions are charted on “approach/avoidance” parameters, and postural expression in terms of muscular “tension/relaxation.” Bloch contends that the configurations that she describes are more effective in triggering subjective emotional state than the use of Ekman’s findings on facial expression. This assertion rests on the fact that these configurations incorporate breathing patterns and postural activity in addition to facial expression. Given the consensus of opinion among current research about the way that emotions create feelings, this would seem to be true, but the comparison with Ekman’s work points up a major flaw in Bloch’s approach that is apparent in the description of the configurations.

This flaw lies in Bloch’s conflating of different levels of emotion into one pattern. For example, the configuration of behavior that she associates with happiness is described as follows:

Happiness –laughter. The breathing is characterized by a deep and abrupt inspiratory movement followed by a series of short saccadic expirations which may even invade the expiratory pause. The posture is relaxed; the distribution of the phasic muscular tonus is quite particular, with a tendency to diminish in the extensor muscles, especially in the antigravitational groups. As a consequence, during laughter, the subjects tend to sit or even fall. The mouth is open, and the contraction of the *musculus caninus* and *m.zygomaticus* results in the exposure of the upper teeth. The eyelids are relaxed, and the eyes are semi-closed. ²³⁵

As is evident from experience in daily life and in performance situations, the emotion of happiness can exist at lower levels of intensity than those that provoke laughter. By proposing the behavior of laughter as the expressive configuration of happiness, Bloch ignores the concept of progression and scale in behavior. It would obviously be inappropriate for an actor to laugh on

²³⁵ *ibid.* 223

every occasion that a character feels happiness –at some moments the facial expression alone would suffice.

Similar inconsistencies exist in the other configurations, and arise both from conflating different levels of intensity (for example, sadness does not always entail crying), and from combining primary and background emotions (fear and anxiety are generally considered to be distinct from one another). Bloch also makes a distinction between “real” emotion and that provoked by her configurations. As described earlier, this distinction does not have much significance in affective experience since the neurological pathways of emotion seem to be the same no matter what the origin of the inducing event is. The significant distinction that arises from different types of inducing event seems to be that of varying intensity levels.

Despite these inconsistencies, Bloch’s work offers valuable pointers about the ways in which the conscious control of behavior to communicate emotion can be integrated into actor training. A particularly useful feature is the “step out” technique, in which subjects assume a neutral posture and facial expression and adjust their breathing to reduce the affective experience of the emotion that they have been working on. This offers actors who may feel apprehensive about experiencing emotion reassurance that the effects are temporary and within their control. It also facilitates rapid transitions from one emotion to another, something that is often required within performances, and which might be delayed if an actor were to await the organic diminishment of subjective feeling. Bloch observes that “by the systematic repetition (initiation and interruption) of the effector pattern, the subject may retain the expressive components of the emotion with very little of the subjective involvement.”²³⁶

²³⁶ 221

A description of the co-existence of Alba Emoting with Method Acting is offered by Pamela Chabora, an actor who has attained a “level 3” certification in Bloch’s licensing system of the technique. Her article in Method Acting Reconsidered is largely descriptive –first of her work with Lee Strasberg and his assistants, and secondly of Bloch’s approach. Chabora uses both Emotion Memory and Alba Emoting in her work, but sees the two approaches as significantly different and does not identify any links between them. Indeed, there is an implicit favorable comparison in some of her remarks:

Alba Emoting provides an additional tool, a physiological and organic one, for creating genuine feeling onstage. Knowing how to express a specific emotion and which emotion it is brings actors one step closer to ideal self-use with an informed response to expressive use. Actors have a firmer grasp on the outcome of a role instead of having to depend on the director’s guidance and/or the caprice of their feelings.²³⁷

The passage suggests that Strasberg’s technique does not provide this level of specificity or control. Chabora also points out that sustaining emotion over extended periods is more easily achieved by using the Alba configurations:

The role demanded that I portray high-pitched emotions for the entire day Had I relied solely on my Method training (ie., emotional memory and personalization), I probably would have collapsed halfway through the day. However, because I was able to utilize Alba Emoting patterns for fear, anger and sadness, I was able to sustain genuine emotional commitment for the duration of the performance and suffer no emotional hangover.²³⁸

²³⁷ Chabora 239

Chabora also considers the Alba technique useful in her teaching, enabling her to offer accessible and achievable methods of inducing emotion to student actors.

The final practical activity that I will describe involves the movement of the eyes and their role in expressing thought and feeling. These exercises are ones that I have developed myself and taught over the last fifteen years in a variety of training courses in England and America. In common with most of the other exercises that I have mentioned, they were first developed without knowledge of the cognitive research that I have described, and in response to a practical training need. As I have learned more about eye movements through studying the work of cognitive researchers, I have adapted and refined the exercises. Their inclusion here will hopefully demonstrate how it is possible to integrate studio techniques with scientific knowledge to provide effective training in the specifics of psychophysical behavior.

The eyes occupy a unique position in the body's cognitive mechanism. As psychologists Daniel Richardson, Rick Dale & Michael Spivey describe:

Eye movements are uniquely poised between perception and cognition. They are central to the function of the visual system, but for such scanning to be efficient, it cannot be simply a random sample of the visual world. To be useful, eye movements must be related to an organism's memories, expectations and goals.

Consequently, eye movements are driven equally by bottom-up perceptual properties of the world and top-down cognitive processes.²³⁹

In considering the eye's expressive qualities, this knowledge equates with the everyday understanding that eye movements respond to both the external physical environment and to the internal environment of thought. Additionally, Richardson and his colleagues refer to a number

²³⁸ *ibid.* 241

²³⁹ Richardson 2

of experiments that demonstrate that we create a form of spatial indexing of information, whether that information is present in the physical environment or not: “Eye movement data thus reveal a powerful demonstration of how language about things not co-present is interfaced with perceptual-motor systems that treat the linguistic referents as if they were co-present.”²⁴⁰ For the actor, this information confirms the usefulness of the common practice when speaking monologues of “placing” imagined people and events in the physical environment.

The importance of eye movement in communicating thought is further highlighted by the findings of an fMRI study that were published in 1998.²⁴¹ These experiments investigated the relationship between eye movements and attention. This has long been a contentious topic, since eyes move in response to objects of attention in the physical environment, but it is also possible to pay attention to something that is at the periphery of one’s visual field. This behavioral information suggests that different parts of the brain are used in the two activities, while other data suggested that the two activities are linked in the brain. The study conducted by Corbetta and his colleagues showed that visual attention and eye movement systems share the same areas of the brain and probably use similar neural mechanisms, indicating that common processes are involved in moving the eyes and shifting attention.

Prior to discovering the information above, I had recognized that many of my students made unconscious eye movements that were contradictory to their intended meaning, and also that that eye movements were significant communicators in interpersonal status interactions. I sought to identify different types of eye movement so as to have a vocabulary that would enable students to make conscious adjustments, and was aided in this by Phelim McDermott of Improbable Theatre, who mentioned the term “The Five S’s” as a mnemonic for different eye

²⁴⁰ *ibid.* 13

²⁴¹ Corbetta et al.

movements. I have not been able to find any documented source for this way of categorizing eye movements, so it needs to be considered acting lore. The mnemonic refers to the following activities: 1) “Search.” In this movement, the eyes move constantly, not resting on any one location any longer than another. 2) “Select.” In this movement, the eyes come to a rest on one particular point. 3) “Shift.” This involves moving the eyes directly from one Selected point to another, without any intervening Searching. 4) “Sustain.” Here, the eyes sustain their focus on one point. 5) “Shut,” in which the eyelids close briefly.

Exercises that isolate these movements of the eyes give students a vocabulary for movements that are generally conducted unconsciously in daily life. Like other activities of the body such as breathing and muscular tension, they are also subject to conscious control. For the actor, awareness and control of the eye’s movements are an invaluable part of the psychophysical process, since they are not only expressive features but would also seem to provide neurological feedback, assisting the intentional evocation of affective state. Despite the crucial importance of the eyes in a performance, I have not discovered a specific approach to training actors in eye movements in any published acting text.

Students are introduced to these activities in a session in which groups execute the different movements in response to instruction, while others observe, so that each student has the experience of making the controlled movements, and also seeing them in action. This stage identifies the terms, and allows the students to correlate the terms to the activities both in action and through observation. I explain that these are all activities that we carry out unconsciously in daily life, and that by becoming aware of them, actors can gain greater control over their non-verbal expression and give greater definition to their acting. For this preliminary step, the students should concentrate on moving the eyes only. They will notice that it is instinctive to

move the head to increase the range of vision. I ask them to resist this impulse for the moment, so as to place attention on the eyes alone, explaining that subsequent stages of the exercise will incorporate the movement of the head. This part of the progression is designed to focus the students' attention on individual experience, to achieve clarity in definition of the activities.

Discussion after the exercise can lead to the simple observation that movement of the eyes indicates mental activity as well as responding to external stimuli. For the onlooker, determining which of the two is in operation generally depends on correlating the eye movements to the physical environment. If there is no visible reason for the eye movements, the onlooker assumes that thought is prompting the movement, or that the individual being observed is deranged in some way. Thus a pattern of "Search," "Select," "Switch," if not related to events in the subject's physical environment, can suggest the searching of thoughts, a decision, and then a change of mind. "Sustain" tends to suggest focused mental attention, and "Shut" can suggest several things, depending on the duration of the closing of the eyelids. If this is slightly longer than a blink, it can suggest a pause for thought, or disagreement. Held a bit longer, it can suggest the thought "I can't believe my eyes," or intensify the expression of an emotion.

In the second stage of the sequence of exercises, I set up improvisations that demonstrate the application of the eye movements in relationship to other people and space. In the first part of this stage, pairs of students are invited to have an "eye conversation" with one another, experimenting with turn-taking, proposition and response. This is done seated, and the students are encouraged to allow expression of other physiological processes that are stimulated by the interaction – breath, gesture, posture –but not language. This step introduces the effects of social interaction, and alerts the students to the potential for communication through direction of eye movement. For example, A might "Sustain" on B's eyes, while B "Switches" rapidly between

A's gaze and his own hands. Following reflective discussion of the experience of this activity, students are invited to move in the space in response to the impulses generated by consciously chosen eye activities. For example, three players might enter the space "Searching", allowing their physical activity to follow the eye movements, and their imaginations to provide the fictional circumstances that have prompted this activity. If two players then "Select" the third and "Sustain" on him or her, an interpersonal narrative dynamic is established that provokes the imaginations of the players and observers alike. This frequently has an effect on the subjective affective states of the players. In reflective discussion after the exercise, students that "Sustained" often reported that they felt accusatory, suggesting a low intensity of aggression, while students who were the object of the "Sustain" frequently felt intimidated, suggesting a low-intensity level of fear.

This stage of the sequence of exercises is purposely conducted without language so as to heighten the students' awareness of the communicative potential of eye movements and nvc in general, and also to assist them in identifying their subjective affective states without distraction. The example described above is just one of many potential activities and scenarios.

The third stage moves on to incorporating language, initially in improvisations that are prompted by consciously chosen eye activities, and then in short scripted "open" scenes (scenes without identifiable given circumstances in which dialogue can be interpreted in a variety of ways). As in the second stage, I invite the players to use consciously selected eye movements from the Five S's as the initial impulse when working with the script, and to improvise their interpretation of the dialogue in response to the imaginative impulses generated by the eye movements, and in response to the actions of their scene partner. The developmental progression of these activities is intended to demonstrate the potential of consciously chosen eye movements

to communicate meaning and affect feelings, and to gradually integrate them into the more familiar processes of choice-making in the acting process. In classes I stress that this process is complementary to the work of identifying objectives and choosing actions. Depending on the time available, improvisations can also be used to demonstrate aspects of interpersonal status and also to demonstrate the relationship between mental focus, visual focus, and dramatic focus.

Clearly, the self-reported changes in affective state that I have described do not have the status of scientifically derived information about emotional process. However, given the empirically proven relationship between physiological symptoms of emotion and subjective feeling, it is not unreasonable to suppose that consciously chosen eye movements, like consciously chosen facial expressions, can stimulate affective states.

The fact that practitioners from varied backgrounds have each arrived at ways of using physicality to stimulate emotion underlines the biological foundation of the process. When viewed in the context of the neuroscientific information and the performance practices mentioned, Strasberg's insistence on emotion memory as the actor's sole path to authentic feeling seems limited in the extreme. It is evident that the actor can use control of respiratory patterns, muscular tension, facial expressions and eye movements to evoke specific affective states. It is also clear from the examples of the practical activities that I've described that it is possible to integrate these activities into training, rehearsal, and performance in ways that stimulate and strengthen the actor's imaginative engagement with fictional circumstances. There is some indication that over time, habituation with the conscious control of the physiological symptoms can lead to their embodiment without the subjective affective experience for the actor. If the expressive components are well judged, however, they stand a good chance of evoking

emotion in audience members through mirror mechanisms, whether or not the actor experiences feelings.

7.0 CONCLUSION

All acting is embodied. The actor uses his or her body to communicate meaning to an audience. This is accomplished by language, by nonverbal communication (nvc), and by mirror mechanisms that support empathy. However, most actor training programs in the West offer little or no explicit tutoring in the techniques of behavior that communicate embodied meaning. Dualistic concepts of mind/body, self/character, reason/emotion, and knowledge/imagination have led to a situation in which approaches to acting are characterized as either physical or psychological. The notion that meaning is expressed through language alone is predominant, and influences both training approaches and theatrical styles. However, a focus on the structure of the body, its actions, and its cognitive mechanisms identifies principles that underlie a variety of training methods and performance styles. When this understanding is allied to the perspective of cognitive science regarding the way that the body and its activities shape conceptual meaning, it is possible to identify foundational principles of activity that link the three elements of theatre; Story, Space, and Time. The three meet in, are defined by, and expressed through the actor's body, since bodily experiences in space provide the source domains of metaphors that shape our concepts, including those of time and narrative.

The material that I've presented offers empirically derived descriptions of the cognitive activities involved in key aspects of the actor's process; non-verbal communication; the relationship between thought, speech and gesture; self and character; empathy; imagination; and

emotion. In all of these areas, cognitive science shows that dualistic concepts of process are inaccurate. Approaches to acting that are based on those dualistic concepts reduce the potential of the actor rather than expanding it, and narrow the possible scope of meaning in performance. An approach that acknowledges the holistic and inter-related nature of the expression of meaning would support the actor in integrating all the cognitive and expressive features of the body.

A training course based on such an approach could be integrated with current script-based programs by incorporating a foundational phase prior to the approach to play texts. This phase could start with games and ensemble activities that alert the student to the communicative potential of nvc, and offer training exercises that would develop expertise in Kinesic communication (facial expression, eye behavior, gesture and posture), Proxemics (the use of space, distance between individuals, and the idea of territory) and Vocalics (the gestural features of vocalization). Following this, some of Lecoq's exercises could be used to heighten awareness of the physical source domains of primary and complex metaphors, and the relationship between thought, speech, and gesture. By developing an awareness of, and facility with the sensorimotor origins of certain words, actors can strengthen and define the links between thought and physical expression. Depending on time, work with the Neutral mask could be incorporated to increase the range of available source domains, and develop skill in physical expression and characterization.

As students begin to work with text, the following model of the dramatic act could complement the widely practiced process of identifying given circumstances, objectives, and actions:

Drama depicts change

Change is effected through action

Action is expressed through words and gesture

Words and gesture arise from impulse

Impulse is a neuronal process

Neuronal processes follow the same pathways for fiction as for daily life

Words and gesture are the bridge between thought and action, between the invisible and the visible. Since words are the end result of impulses, reading a script is reverse-engineering, discovering the impulses that provoke communication. The process by which an actor does this is more likely to engage the imagination and emotions when it incorporates physical action and gesture. Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions, and Michael Chekhov's character work offer coherent and accessible ways of doing this.

Within this phase of work, students can be introduced to concepts of performance that are holistic and integrative, rather than oppositional dualities. For example, action can be seen to have different, but connected expression, ranging from behavioral (push, pull, stroke, dab, wring, etc.), through conceptual (persuade, intimidate, seduce), to narrative (events that change people, relationships and situations). The eight Laban efforts provide a good example of defined behavioral actions that can have metaphorical expression. An actor can *punch* a line, for example, as a way of expressing the conceptual action of "intimidate", or *stroke* it as a way of expressing the conceptual action of "persuade". Concepts such as *balance*, or *rhythm* can be used to describe interconnecting features of the drama. In narrative, for example, the status quo is metaphorically in *balance*, which could be visually depicted on stage by compositional *balance*. The inciting incident *tilts* the *balance*. The *tilt* causes a narrative chain reaction of cause and effect, a concept that is based on the source-path-goal schema. The events of this narrative have a temporal pattern that can be thought of as *rhythm*.

Students would be encouraged to think of character in terms of situation and action, rather than in terms of identification with the “essential self”. The process of characterization would be conceived of as forming a temporary situational self through the stimulation of the imagination, with feelings that arise through a combination of physical actions and empathetic stimuli in the fiction. This is achieved by discovering a range of expressive behavior that; a) expresses action in pursuit of a goal, b) is credible in the fictional circumstances and c) is congruent with the theatrical style. The accumulation of specific action choices defines the personality of the character. The discoveries of behavior can arise both from spontaneous responses to the imagination and from voluntary control of muscular activity, acknowledging the reflexive relationship between the two. This concept of character provides a coherent model that supports the activity of characterization in a range of styles. It is accurate for the actor who adopts the traditional posture and mannerisms of Pantalone in *Commedia*. It is also accurate for the actor who plays a character close to herself in age, experience, and personality in the style of psychological realism. The model is also applicable to both scripted and improvised material.

A similarly holistic understanding of emotion would inform this cognitive approach to actor training. Students would learn about the current neuroscientific understanding of emotion as a physiological activity that, when consciously registered, produces feelings. Information about the three categories of emotions (primary, social, and background) would help to define both behavioral and narrative action as well as character. Information about the nine pathways to emotion would inform exercises that developed facility with the three most controllable of those pathways; memory, imagination, and consciously chosen muscular activity. The latter would include work on eye movements, facial expression, muscular tension, postural attitudes, and respiratory patterns. Empathetic links between the actor’s imagination and the character could be

established through the use of the physiological configurations of relevant primary, social, and background emotions in the context of the fictional environment.

I hope that these brief examples illustrate how actor training can be conducted in a way that is consistent with the relevant findings of cognitive science. The information that I've described undercuts some of the basic dualities that have informed acting theory in the twentieth century, and offers a new approach to training that can nevertheless integrate some existing practices. A significant part of the goal of this dissertation is to adjust actors' conceptual understanding of their bodies. This is an important issue –one's conceptual understanding of the body defines what one believes it to be capable of, and this has implications for theatrical style. The ubiquity of the style of psychological realism in Western theatre leads to a literalism that encourages actors to "type" themselves in order to gain work, which is necessarily restricting. I hope that, as more practitioners become aware of the ways in which meaning can be communicated through embodied metaphor, a greater diversity of styles can flourish.

When I began researching the material that I've described, I feared that cognitive science would remove the magic from theatre. But now, I think that it will enable theatre practitioners to be better magicians. One way of describing magic is to say that we experience a result without being aware of the mechanisms that produced it. The actor's job is to understand and employ the mechanisms that create embodied life on stage. Given that at least 90% of the mental operations that create embodied life are unconscious, cognitive science gives actors valuable information about processes that are not available to conscious reflection. Transformation of the actor occurs when she engages with a fiction to the extent that it affects unconscious neural patterns of empathy, of imagination, of emotion. When audience members, through empathic processes, experience the actor's emotional state, it is a lived experience because of a mirror mechanism

firing in one part of the brain. At the same time they know with another part of the brain that they are witnessing a fiction. This is an embodied paradox, a sensually experienced paradox, a paradox that feels magical.

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