

THE ACTOR'S BODY – Deconstructed and Reconfigured

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*“The shape of you, the shape of me, the shape of everything I see ...a bug...a balloon, a bed, a bike. No shapes are ever quite alike. Just think about the shape of beans and flowers and mice and big machines! Just think about the shape of strings and elephants...and other things. The shape of lips. The shape of ships. The shape of water when it drips. And the shape of camels...the shape of bees and the wonderful shapes of back door keys! And the shapes of spider webs and clothes! And, speaking of shapes, now just suppose...! Suppose YOU were shaped like these.....or those!...or shaped like a BLOGG! Or a garden hose! Of all the shapes we MIGHT have been...I say, “HOORAY for the shapes we're in!”**

We are all containers. The workings of our bodies are primarily contained within the confines of our tangible boundaries. We have openings: ears, eyes, nostrils, mouths, anuses, genitals and pores; in very different ways, these openings connect us to the outside world. We perceive through these openings and receive stimuli that leave impressions upon our insides and our outsides. For the most part, we feel as if we have control over the openings and closings, the ebbings and flowings, the exchange of life forces, the inhale and exhale that constitute homeostasis. At other times, we have the sense that the reception and the processing of outside world within the container of the self is completely out of our control. Our bodies have minds of their own. The transaction of inner and outer doesn't always make sense. It feels out of our hands. We think perhaps that we've gone out of our minds, lost our senses. We feel discomfort, disconnection, even dysfunctional. Yet, for the most part, and assuming we aren't completely dissociated from what is taking place within our containers, we maintain the belief that we exist efficiently, if not miraculously, within our fleshy exterior with our skin functioning as the interlocutor between self and other.

Actors are trained to be in touch with what is taking place inside their containers. Character actors have much in common with masters of yogic disciplines. Though we don't raise or lower body temperature at will, when we become characters, we work to mediate

and achieve mastery over all the forces at play within our containers. From there, we enter into the symbiosis that exists between our containers and other containers within the larger container of theatre, and inside the metaphoric container of the play. We are trained and expected to exert virtuosic control over our corpus, to manipulate, to maneuver, to reconstruct the material of our bodies, altering pathways and relationships between systems within and without. Though we are all finitely limited from a time-space perspective (in other words, we die at some point in time and disintegrate and change form in space), we strive to be infinitely expressive in the here and now.

"The whole being of the actor keeps, in this human world, traces of otherworldly dealings. He seems, when he comes back among us, to be leaving another world." Jacques Copeau

Leaving the safety of one's home body to embody a character is an unnatural process. And to earn one's living by deconstructing and reconstructing is a metaphor of a phenomenon we'd just as soon forget -- our life (and death) story. The characterization process begins with the act of dying, a destroying of self. Embodying an other obligates the actor to disintegrate the patterns of self and to reconfigure those patterns in alignment with the patterns of a given character. From a director's standpoint, we spend the rehearsal process re-hearing. From the actor's standpoint, however, we spend it *rehears[e]ing*, carrying away the construct of our old self so that we can reincarnate and reshape in accordance with the construct of the character.

In actor training, we develop responsibility of self. We become respondents to our moment-to-moment story and to the moment-to-moment story of other. Through being with self and other in the here and now, we come to understand our self. We come to know what in the there and then has led to our here-and-now construct of self. We come to acknowledge all the forces and all the people that inhabit and hold "us" together, for each of us is an "us", peopled by all the people who have impacted our inner terrain. In this

process, the chain of our environmental pattern is unlocked and we become less imprisoned by our individual histories. We begin to resonate to the larger rhythms, to subtle and violent forces, to universal struggles that reverberate beyond the limited self of here-and-now life. As we ignite in reaction with an other on a stage, we transmute the local drama of idiosyncratic selves into a universal struggle between archetypes. As actors, we take action to elicit chemical reaction in an other. But as unique vessels conveying universal truths, our interactions become alchemical. They heal. Under the surface of the dramatic conflict, we are all involved in a healing process of sorts. Beyond the world of the play, the character actor is modeling transformation for the audience. In other words, through our identification with the actor who can transform, we are all temporarily stripped of the defenses that makes us opaque and we become transparent, open to the vicarious journey. We become part of a collective protagonist, collectively transformed. Actors, of course, transparent and opaque themselves to align with a character's inherent construct. As a result, they learn to see and feel communication as sound and light vibration moving within and between containers. This may sound impossible (and why shouldn't it -- the whole art form of theatre is predicated on the unreal), but the first step in actor process is a disintegration of one's corporeal being, a standard *modus operandi* for the character actor. Prior to this ritualized stripping of self, however, a process of owning, digesting, learning from, and then leaving behind one's history takes place. The matter of the past that has taken too concrete form within us must be annihilated, ground up and replenished through a crop rotation from one character to the next and the next and the next. That's the only way for an actor to stay fertile -- by razing the played-out character and replanting in the bed of self a playwright's seed of character. It's about maps and boundaries, landscapes and geographies, insides and outsides.

We carry our histories in our bodies. They more than inhabit us, they in-form us. If we don't learn from those histories we are condemned to repeat them. If we keep repeating them, mass-producing them, we grow more and more limited, more and more finite on a

narrow road to that place at the end of the road where we all end up. Transformation expands time and alters space, widening our span of awareness on a plane that unfolds to parts of ourselves unknown. The choice not to transform, to stay the same, is like living on residuals in recycled selves, like feeding oneself on the fruits of a life lived back there, back then. Our culture has as its ethos "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". However, we can't live freely, pursue happiness or exercise our right to life unless we are liberated from the pattern of repeating our history over and over again. This concept is no less revolutionary now than it was back then.

"The actor's deep conscious or unconscious desire to be something other than what he is in daily life – 'to become' another – permits him to live an intense human reality and to penetrate into an unknown world." Jean Daste

As for me, the theme of my childhood was adaptation. To escape the confines of my family's history, I struck out into the melting pot of New York City, a place lit up by the collective hope of peoples seeking to rewrite their histories. Every weekend, I ventured by subway map to alien lands, deconstructing and reconstructing myself in response to cultural codes deciphered from neighborhood to neighborhood. To do this, I had to tune myself to expressive cultural bodies on the unconscious playing field of the streets. Survival meant not just reading bodies, but taking into my body the collective expression of the subcultures that surrounded me. This meant pulling into my body life outside of my body, and consuming, metabolizing and manifesting other bodies in and through my own. This isn't really a radical concept. We all consume and are consumed by our human experience. We all eat the stuff of other (metaphorically) and it becomes a part of us. As actors, however, we then turn the matter of self into the matter of other to reveal the essence of other. The character is seen and heard by the audience as light and sound vibration. The interplay on the stage and between the stage and the audience burns energy and this energy is circuited and resonated between the chambers of all the constructs in the shared network. On an

affective level, the audience breathes with the character, feels the expression of life force in the character. Beneath the character's facade, the actor's life force is inspired by the hope of inspiring a responsive chord in the audience to the universally shared predicament of living and dying. Perhaps that's the actors' existential job description. Our field of study is the human body. We do research by continually extricating the self from the prison of the body in order to be at one with another body. It's more than a job. It's a living. The primary prerequisite is a willingness to work out of our own home. And though our actors' houses are always in a state of continual renovation, we are too consumed with the alteration of self to become permanent fixtures.

As audience, we see the same actor transform night after night after night, in construct after construct, in play after play, in any space, time and time again. The actor makes us feel less finite, less victimized by our inherent finiteness. In moments of dramatic catharsis, we are suddenly struck by the revelation that our finite pain needn't exist in isolation within our finite body. We feel that it is vibrating beyond our containers and in accord or discord with others in an ever-changing music that carries us on our shared dance into the unknown. The actor informs us that by learning and relearning to be with both life and death, the finite and infinite, the heaven and hell of life, in each moment, we can combine the binaries and, in so doing, leave behind the limited enactment of repeated selves for parts unknown.

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