

MY BODY TAUGHT ME HOW TO ACT: TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF ACTOR LEARNING AND APPRENTICESHIP¹

SAUMYA LIYANAGE

My body was remembering my father ...

ANONYMOUS DANCER²

The actors must be carried along by their physical intelligence; it is the entire body which does the thinking and these thoughts are already actions, reactions.

EUGENIO BARBA³

The inception of this article comes through my own apprenticeship as an actor in Sri Lankan theatre. It is inevitable that Sri Lankan traditional performance praxis consists of diversified dance dramas and rituals, similar to those of other countries in the region. Sri Lankan pre-modern theatre eventually germinated through a hybrid practice of such traditions, melodrama, and the European influence of the proscenium theatre.⁴ When I started my acting career in 1994, I stepped into the same proscenium theatre where the building, the director and the text were predominant. Without following such traditional or contemporary actor-training pedagogy, we – as a bunch of theatre enthusiasts – got together and decided to start a self-exploratory journey. Not having theatre companies or schools, we started learning as ‘epigones’. ‘Theatre was our personal Malaria; our endemic necessity’, as Barba has said.⁵

On-the-job apprenticeship was the prime source of actor learning, not only for me but also for generations of actors in Sri Lanka. It is a complex learning process which consists of playing, observing, moving, repeating, imitating, impersonating



and many other things. After years of 'doing' acting and achieving professional goals, I began to think about how my body had been trained as I had never followed any actor-training pedagogy. What is the role of my body in on-the-job apprenticeship training? Are there any unexplained epistemological pathways of actor learning? These questions led me to thinking towards an epistemology of actor learning.

In this article, I allow my body to be 'spoken' through a journal which I maintained during my early stages of learning acting. Along with this, I draw upon some selected theorists to juxtapose their ideas so as to illuminate my journal entries. In this way, I illustrate how on-the-job apprenticeship actor training has become an 'embodied' way of actor learning.

THE ACTOR'S BODY AND BODY-MIND SPLIT

Acting theorist Phillip Zarrilli explains that every time an actor performs, 'he or she implicitly enacts a "theory" of acting' which explores different paradigms of body-mind relation.⁶ Whether we are rooted in Eastern or Western performance traditions, this understanding of the body as a 'thing' and the mind as a separate entity, or a 'spirit', is a long-standing problem for actors who are entrapped in a body-mind metaphysics. As highly rational, verbally centred human beings, we have neglected our own bodily functions and impulses due to the mechanical life.⁷ Furthermore,

living in an ocular-centric world saturated with visual materials, we are forced to think that our sense of sight dominates our perceptual world. This Cartesian gaze always 'refers to the intellect and [is] separated from the lower, non-intellectual senses: tactile, smelling, tasting and hearing',⁸ therefore, we have forgotten to listen to our own primordial bodies as a total chiasm. 'Our bodily impulses are hidden shamefully like relics of our humanities.'⁹

At the beginning, I did not have an acting guru from whom to learn. As a result, I instinctively started listening to my own body as a way of learning, rather than being subjected to a particular 'exercise regime'. I would now like to share some moments of my early stages of apprenticeship learning. These descriptions are taken from a journal which I maintained during my rehearsals for Harold Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter*. The play was translated into Sinhala and produced in 1994 for the first time in Sri Lanka; I played Gus and Gihan Fernando played Ben. It was directed by an amateur director, Piyal Kariyawasam, at the University of Colombo. We were all in the first year of our university studies and none of us was studying theatre or drama at undergraduate level: Piyal was doing a law degree, while I was doing a general degree in arts.¹⁰ Part of my journal now follows:

How do I start? I have learned my lines so far. But there should be a starting point. Do I have to wait until I get inspired? How do I get myself to be inspired? What is the first movement of my action? I am thinking ... There is a moment of silence.

Two beds on the stage ... I go to the second bed placed on stage left. I sit on that bed for a while ... stand up ... again sit down ... I walk around the bed and the chair ... I go to the right side of the stage ... walking around ... looking at Ben who is reading a newspaper while sitting. He looks at me and keeps his eyes on me while I am walking ... I also try to connect with his eyes and disconnect. The tension of the body increases as I am panting and sweating. Suddenly a line of dialogue slips through my lips: 'I want to ask you a question'. 'What are you doing out there?', Ben asks. 'Well ... I was just ...'; my words stop. My body wants to feel the props and objects. I walk through the props and the stage set exploring the space. I lay down on the bed for a couple of minutes ... roll over the bed and come up again. I climb on the bed and start walking ... jump to the floor ... try to touch the metal of the bed and the chair with my body. My skin touches the textures of these objects. I go to Ben ... touch his face ... hug him

for a while ... and push him back ... The metals of the bed ... I feel a cold sensation ... I try to feel it with the skin of different parts of my body, starting from the back of my palm. I keep touching the floor and the other objects on the stage ... I ... taste the bed linen ... I feel the smell of the linen. I creep under the bed ... and come up and stand ... I feel that I am a body which has tentacles connected to other objects – chairs, beds and bodies. Without them, I feel that I am lost on the stage. I love them, I caress them ... they are becoming a part of my body.

EMBODIMENT AS EMBEDDEDNESS

One of the ways that we should understand the notion of 'embodiment' is that we need to think about our bodies as the centre of 'being' in the world. It is important to think that my body is not only an object like other objects surrounding me; it is a 'conscious body' which has its own way of perceiving and embracing the world. According to Block and Kissell, embodied knowing is an ability to engage with experience and thoughts holistically.¹¹ However, actors always ignore or marginalise their own bodies and their centrality to the perception of the lived experience. Merleau-Ponty said that 'it is our body, the lived and conscious body that opens the world to us. It is simultaneously both the means and the centre of our existence. Bodily, we are tied to the world in time and space.'¹²

We are entrapped within the idea that human cognitive process functions through an input–output model; accordingly, perception is also seen as passivity. The notion of embodied knowing offers us a paradigm which favours 'perception as enactment'.¹³ As a trainee actor, allowing my body to be trained through 'performing', I began to experience that it is my language and reasoning which always try to separate me from my body and knowing. Therefore it was not 'me' as a separate 'self' who commanded my body to learn and act: 'I was my body', which is embedded in the lived experience. Here is my journal again:

The set is ready on the stage. Today our task is to find physical actions for the first scene of the play and to develop a score. I need to find an inspiration to start improvising something. I go on to the stage. Now my body knows what is on the stage: the warmth or the coldness of these objects placed for us. My body knows the other actor's body, texture, movements, strengths and weaknesses. I know the textures, smells, distances of these objects and their relationships to my body. I know all these things through my body, being with them for days, and hours, interacting and embedding them into my body; into my senses

and veins. It is not only an intellectual awareness I have developed but it is ... I would say a sensual awareness which penetrates through my own skin day by day. This sensual awareness sediments everything in and through my body. This is a flesh embedded within a flesh; it is a flesh-to-flesh intercourse.



**THE DUMB WAITER REHEARSAL, 19 MARCH 1994.
PHOTO: GAYA NAGAHAWATTE.**



**THE DUMB WAITER REHEARSAL, 22 APRIL 1994.
PHOTO: GAYA NAGAHAWATTE.**

For me, improvisation comes as a result of being attentive to my own 'internal impulses' generated through constant embedding of corporeal faculties with the outer world. Taking these impulses as a springboard, the body develops an endless, corporeal journey. Rather than rationally thinking 'what to do next' and 'how to do things', I allow my body to be active and to be illustrative through endless, colourful corporeal movements. My body sketches the movements. It is the corporeal tapestry which is woven through interaction with the world. Commenting on actors' enactment, Zarrilli also explains how the 'score constitutes a form of embodied sensorimotor knowledge for the actor'.¹⁴ Accordingly perceptual knowledge does not come through or 'present' somewhere in the actor's brain, but it is 'virtually' available as the actor embodies the score.

As I have illustrated in my journal entries, I started experiencing the 'wholeness' of my bodily being in the enactment as it was developing through my physical score. In the process, my body became my 'point of view upon the world instead of an object.

Experiences and memories are not something we have; they are also something we are: they constitute how we exist humanly in the world.¹⁵ I return to my diary entry again:

Every day I start learning my lines while I move my body accordingly. What do I mean by that? Every single word that comes through my lips has a bodily rooted connection. Of course the voice is always generated through the body; but this is not what I mean. I feel that every dialogue has a corresponding postural, bodily connection. As I started rehearsing and developing my physical score, this 'physical narrative' was starting to interlace with the vocal faculties. I don't deliver a dialogue and 'think' what my next 'move is'. Instead, my whole 'vocal score' is bound up with my 'physical score'. It is now embedded in my blood. It is surprising when I go to a particular position; this movement triggers the corresponding dialogue. During this rehearsal, I sometimes lose my lines. In this case I don't bother or rush to remember. What I do is I position my body where I deliver my dialogue. Surprisingly, that is really functioning. With this postural schema, my body remembers the line.

Sometimes I think, how many times have I rehearsed or repeated a single movement? For the last few days we were trying to choreograph an action where Gus and Ben correlate with each other. Then as the argument goes to a high level, Ben grabs me and hits me. I throw myself backward and fall on the chair. The tricky thing was, I throw myself backward until I touch the chair with my back. The only moment I see the chair is the moment when Ben grabs and hits me to my left chest; in that moment, I have only half a second to glance at the chair. This was a tough movement; a difficult operation. We tried different actions, different ways of hitting and rolling. I don't remember how many hours we have spent to perfect this action. There are many opportunities and variations our bodies offer us. These physical movements we tried and invented seem to be sedimented in my flesh day by day. It remembers every subtle move I invented earlier but offers the best one for us. The process was not easy; the body expresses the pain ... tiredness ... sometimes laziness ... Sometimes my body goes blank ... it was like a blackout you experience for a few seconds. Nothing is possible at this time. It

was like shutting down all your senses. It was like your whole skin was removed from the skeleton. Your ears were clamped and your eyes were pulled off. It is completely a blackout.

French philosopher Denis Diderot first argued that the actor's musculature has a capacity to store and retain corporeal memories.¹⁶ Illustrating the body's memorial ability, Merleau-Ponty asserts that it is not our 'brain' which is central to



**RUN-THROUGH OF THE DUMB WAITER, 10 JUNE 1994.
PHOTO:GAYA NAGAHAWATTE.**

the memory; rather, it is the body-subject which remembers. 'Body memory consists in a memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own way of remembering: the way we remember in and by and through the body. The body memory is located in the lived body, the phenomenal body, not the objective body as a neuro-physical structure.'¹⁷

LIVED BODY AS A KNOWING BODY

There are two ways by which we know our bodies. While we *experience* our bodies as objects – consisting of muscles, limbs, organs and skeleton, which is known as the physical body – we *perceive* the body as it is experienced, which is the 'lived body'. Merleau-Ponty's insightful study into this 'perceptual body', famously known as 'body-subject', provides the basis to understand the actor's knowing body.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a material object or a purely spiritual subject; instead, he insists that the human 'body has a mode of being-in-the-world'.¹⁸ The 'lived body' thus represents this particular being-in-the-world. This nature of bodily being-in-the-world is believed to be intrinsically primordial and pre-reflective. Dance theorists posit that this state of being-in-the-world and sensing the primordial agencies of the body is a part of a dancer's performance process. Sheets-Johnston says that meanings of the dance come to us not after or through reflective efforts but through lived experience.¹⁹ Through an embodied practice of 'doing acting', an actor

thus develops a conversation with her 'perceptual body'; eventually she is capable of establishing an 'embodied knowing process' involving an 'integrated power network' of the total body. This 'power network' includes neural elements, efforts, memory, language, perception, and attunement found throughout the actor's body.²⁰ In line with this, I finally invite readers to see what my body has to say about my knowing subject, again via my diary:

I remember the final moment of the third bell.²¹ So ... I am ready to go. It is a burning sensation. You hear the third bell ... I am on the stage. The murmuring sound of the audience is gradually declining. Inside the theatre, it is still very dark. The front curtain has not been lifted up yet. It will be opened in a few seconds ... I sense that my friend (Ben) is sitting beside me with a paper. I don't recall anything that I would do within the one-and-a-half-hour performance. But I only sense the first moment of the whole performance. This first moment is so important for me. I do remember ... I am tying up the lace of my right boot. That is it. This movement of using my fingers with the lace and my focus towards my boot ignites the tiny flame that will be developing as a fire going through my whole body. It is the moment of the celebration of 'my body'. This is the moment of full attunement with the whole theatrical environment and the body. It is a holy moment I don't want to be contaminated. At any time in this process, there is a chance that this existence can be interrupted or disturbed. This is a very precious moment all actors wish to experience. I still believe that that is why I still love to act. This is the moment that my body transcends ... and celebrates its utmost freedom.

CONCLUSION

Without having an actor-training pedagogy, actors in the Sri Lankan theatre industry have employed on-the-job apprenticeships as their informal actor learning system for fulfilling their acting needs. My acting career and apprenticeship has also been developed through on-the-job training as one of the prime sources of learning. Embodiment and knowing are not homogenous concepts. Gender and ethnographical investigation of embodiment and knowing in actor learning needs to be conducted to elaborate further developments in this subject: this study is limited to Sri Lankan theatre and its actors' embodied knowing – without considering any specific gender or ethnographical concerns. I have argued here how embodied knowing plays a significant role in the actor's on-the-job apprenticeship learning. Considering the actor's conscious-body and its being-in-the-world, I have further argued that on-the-

job actor learning can be considered as one of the epistemological gateways of an actor's learning.

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NOTES

- 1 The first version of this paper was presented in March 2011 to the Theatre and Drama Program at La Trobe University with the guidance of my supervisor Dr Rob Conkie. Dr Rand Hazou also helped me to refine my thoughts during the process of writing this paper. A later version was presented at the ADSA conference at Monash University in July 2011. My gratitude goes to these mentors and other Australian colleagues who have assisted in this project.
- 2 Betty Block and Judith Lee Kissell, 'The Dance: Essence of Embodiment', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 22.1 (2001).
- 3 Eugenio Barba, *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt* (Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 1999).
- 4 According to Professor Sarachchandra's seminal study of Sri Lankan Folk Theatre, the pre-modern theatre was developed through the extension of an old melodramatic form named *Nadagam* and the influence of frequently visiting Parsi mobile theatres from southern India in the early nineteenth century. Apart from that, the English dramas produced in Colombo during the English colonial period have had a great impact on 'theatre craftsmanship' for the development of pre-modern Sinhala theatre practice.
- 5 Eugenio Barba, 'The Essence of Theatre', *The Drama Review* 46.3 (Autumn, 2002): 13.
- 6 Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Acting (Re) Considered: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 3.
- 7 Block and Kissell 5–15.
- 8 Janna Parviainen, *Bodies Moving and Moved: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Dancing Subject and the Cognitive and Ethical Values of Dance Art* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1998) 20–1.
- 9 Block and Kissell 6.
- 10 Theatre as a discipline was not very fashionable for us to study at University level in the 1990s, since these subjects were taught as a part of literary studies attached to Sinhala, English or Fine Arts departments at the time. Theatre and drama components were taught as a part of their degree programmes.
- 11 Block and Kissell 6.
- 12 Tim Klemola, 'Dance and Embodiment', *Ballet International* 1 (1991): 2.
- 13 Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge [Massachusetts], London: The MIT Press, 2004).
- 14 Phillip B. Zarrilli, 'An Enactive Approach to Understanding Acting', *Theatre Journal* 59.4 (2007): 635–47.
- 15 Parviainen 34.
- 16 Saumya Liyanage, *Body Mind Dilemmas in Acting: A Study of East West Traditions* (Saarbrücken: LAP Publishing, 2011) 19.
- 17 Parviainen 54.
- 18 Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963) 14.
- 19 Maxine Sheets-Johnston, *The Phenomenology of Dance* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).
- 20 Block and Kissell 6.
- 21 It is a Sri Lankan theatre custom to ring a bell three times before a show starts. The third bell is the final indication to actors, crew and the audience that the performance is about to begin. A long time ago, we went to stage a play in the very remote village of Velikanda in Eastern province. Just before the play began, we realised that this small theatre did not have a bell installed. However, the lighting technician went back to the hall and brought a push bicycle to the back of the stage. Then he rang the bicycle bell and luckily we managed to start the play.