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“Body Image and Somatic Learning: cultivating bodymind in actor learning at UVPA¹ theatre program in Sri Lanka”

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Introduction:

This research idea was germinated soon after I witnessed an emotional catharsis of my student actors who were attending my undergraduate acting class in 2010. At the time, I was working at the Department of theatre and drama of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

One day, soon after I finished my morning acting class, I saw that some of the actors were in tears and some, full of emotional torrents. One student came up to me suddenly and held me tightly. I felt that he was crying for a few minutes. Another girl ran out with tears. No one wanted to speak about what they had gone through during the actor training session; but they all wanted to share their feelings by hugging and consoling each other. I did not want to interrupt their cathartic experience but remained silent as an observer.

This unexpected experience however made me think about the role of the ‘body image’ in my own actor learning and my students’ knowing process. However, using

¹ UVPA stands for the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. The Department of Theatre and Drama, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka is one of the few drama departments where a four year special degree in theatre craft is offered. It includes an overall combination of theatre making including script writing, acting and directing.

my students' testimonies and my own tacit knowledge I argue that through performing and sensing postural body image, student actors cultivate unified experience of the body. This unified experience of the body further opens up to embrace the other bodies.

In order to support this claim, I further use some ideas related body image developed by Nagatomo Shiganori and Merleau-Ponty.

Body image and myself:

I started my acting career as a self-taught actor. I learned the craft of acting by accumulating various skills and knowledge by watching other actors and "doing acting." There were two basic presumptions that were really important in my self-taught learning career: One was the "image of my own body. The idea of the "bodily image" was really important for me to understand my body and its functionality. Secondly this image was very important in order to relate to the other bodies in acting. As an acting teacher, my challenge then was to re-produce that tacit knowledge and pass that knowledge to the emerging new actors.

Phillip Zarrilli also argues how this bodily accomplishment can be achieved through an assiduous daily practice. In my case, this accomplishment is achieved through the engagement and practice I gained in relation to the physical 'scores' (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 191). This accomplishment is the inter-involvement of the performer's body with its ambience (Nagatomo, 1992).

'Engagement' and the body image:

Without having any pedagogical training, I gained my informal training through engaging with the scores I practiced as a learner. The cultivation of bodymind in acting is thus achieved by my internal and external bodily 'engagement' with a particular score. Similarly I wanted my student actors to experience the same somatic journey that my body went through. I also believed that student actors were capable of enhancing and altering bodily image while attuning their bodies with the physical scores.

Asian phenomenologist Nagatomo Shiganori provides the notion of bodily "engagement" in relation to the notion of "Intentionality" and argues how body is attuned through the "engagement." This engagement is a pre-conscious activity that links the body to the world and provide the "attuned engagement" (Nagatomo, 1992, p. 188) He asserts that "engagement" is a manner through which the living personal body relates itself to the ambience through its activities or just being in the ambience (ibid, p.188).

Many bodies many images:

Generally speaking, the body image is an ambiguous concept. It is ambiguous because it generates multiple meanings to us. Because of this multitudeness, various approaches have sought to understand the complexity of the notion of body image (Preester and Knockaert, 2005, p.2).

Merleau-Ponty understands the body image as a reflection of the primordial knowledge of the body. This bodily image is thus the recollection of bodily animation that is primordial to the human body. Merleau-Ponty argues that this intentionality

of the body (intending body/directedness) is fundamental to the bodily knowledge and its being-in-the-world (Liyanage, 2012). Before we gain our rational, analytical knowledge of our body and its environment, the body image reflects our pre-reflective bodily knowledge at work. Phenomenologist Sheets Maxine-Johnston shows us how these bodily images represent bodies' kinetic proprioceptive as well as interoceptive animation (Prester & knockaert, 2005, pp.217-218). Understanding the human body as a cluster of animation and its primordially as moving, she concludes that body image is the "animation" of the human body.

Postural body image:

As we know, our bodies come up with different qualities and capacities. Regimentation or disciplining these bodies has always been a difficult and a controversial issue in actor training pedagogies. Therefore, I decided to start with the basis.

This is one example of 'postural body image work' I practiced with my students. I prefer to call it 'postural body image'. Actors sense their body images through performing "somatic narratives." Somatic narratives are 'scores' that actor explores with her own body. Now I briefly describe an example of the 'somatic narrative' that I have conducted with my students.

First Stage:

- This 'postural body image work' start with the posture called 'foetal body image.' The actor lies down on the floor while facing up. All the limbs lift up

from the floor the actor is asked to close the eyes to perform the somatic narrative. These somatic narratives are performed with various vocal sounds.

- The acting teacher can guide the actor learner to move through the somatic narrative by giving instructions such as “your body is beginning to move slowly; first start with moving your fingers.” Thus, the actor is asked to isolate their body parts and observe and sense the movements she creates.
- Bodily movements are repeated until the actor gets the sensory motor awareness of those somatic movements.

Second Stage:

- The actor gradually comes up on her foot. This process also takes several minutes to complete as it happens very slowly. This postural body I would like to call “primate body image.”
- Then the actor stands still and starts moving. She moves again very slowly and the actor concentrates on her body movements exploring different somatic variations while walking.

Third Stage:

- The Actor moves with the full physical movements and begins to interact with another actor. First they connect through the eyes. They both move around the rehearsal room, being conscious about their physical movements and being connected with eyes.

- In the next phase, actors need to decide when and how they want physically be related with each other. At this stage the actor immigrates from her own bodily image to immerse with the other's body image. In this final stage, actors touch their bodies and find a common ground to interlace their bodies.

Students' testimonies:

Before I conclude I would like to bring your attention to some of the voices of student actors' and how they talked about their experiences of performing 'postural body image' work. I asked them to reflect what they had experienced.

Acting student Buddhi Randeniya commented:

While I was doing the actor training session, my image of the body seemed to be changing. But it is difficult to describe how it was happening. Even during the session, I felt vomitish and went outside and cried a lot. Then I felt more relieved (Buddhini R 2012 Pers. Comm. March).

Another actor named Stephan Tirimanna reflected his experience thus:

The exciting thing about the acting session was that I was able to develop a very intimate relationship with the actor I was working with. It was a relationship that built without being physically attached. It was so emotional being connected with the other actor. I still remember that we embraced each other for a long time and no one wanted to speak about the tranquillity and intimacy we felt during the session. If I can replicate and maintain this intimacy on the stage with actors, I am sure that I will be able to execute a good performance (Stephan T. 2011, Pers. Comm. March).

These two comments specifically point out first, the sensation of the changing nature of the "bodily image" and its impact on actor knowing. Secondly it reflects the

importance of the “inter-corporality” between actors. As I believe, uninterrupted work of ‘postural body image’ work could bring a whole set of bodily sensation and dilated bodily experience for the actor. Further this dilated body could expand its tentacles and embrace the other bodies as well.

Conclusion:

I began this project with the idea in my mind that “actors learn to act through body image.” The underline assumption of the research project was to re-claim the marginalized role of the actor’s body as an epistemic gateway of knowing. It focuses on how the actor learner cultivates² somatic awareness³ and attuning to a performative body through performing and sensing “postural bodily images⁴.” What

² The term “cultivation” I borrow from the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo’s analysis of the body. Yuasa’s theorization of the notion of the self cultivation derived from Asian Buddhist philosophy. As Yuasa argues, the term “cultivation” does not directly refer to the Western notion of “praxis.” Instead “cultivation” in Asian context applies to different modes of embodiment of somatic practices and achieves the bodymind unity ranging from Buddhist meditation to Artistry such as No acting and Waka poetry writing. What I prefer to use “cultivation” is that it does not directly imply the physical nature of training similar to athletic training in western context. It is the disciplining and enhancing both the psycho/physiological agencies of the practitioner by means of the body.

³ The term “somatic awareness” carries certain meanings in this discussion as well as soma-aesthetics studies. Somatic awareness contains the notion of body mind integration that is achieved through Samadhi meditation in Asian Buddhism. In Nagatomo Shigenory’s theory of “attunement” he refers the notion of “Samadhi awareness.” He understands the “Samadhi” awareness as the ultimate goal of a somatic practitioner who experience the overlapping of body mind and attuning the wholeness of the body. Soma- Aesthetic is an emerging field of study that focuses the lived body and the first person perspective of the somatic experiences and understanding the human body as a unified whole in relation to the teaching derived from Buddhist meditation, various Yogic practices, Thai chi Chuan and various contemporary self use practices such as Alexander techniques and Feldenkrais Method are a few to note.

⁴ Postural bodily image here refers to the changing bodily postures and gestures that an actor executes during a physical score. As the above mentioned experiment suggests, these physical scores are improvisational developed by the actor with the verbal command of the acting educator. Starting from a particular physical position, actors are asked to go through a chain of movements stimulating

I present today is not an end result of a project but an ongoing process and experience I have gained through working with my student actors. These ideas further need to be explored and expanded with more practical and theoretical analyses.

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from each memento of bodily gestures. This method can be finding as a similar practice of the dance practice known as "spot improvisation" coined by Sheets-Maxine Johnston.