

*Leaping Into the Void:
An Actor's Guide to Chaos*

Using Chaos Theory as a Means for Exploring
An Actor's Encounter with the Performative Moment

by

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"so many people judge the value of their actions not on the basis of the action itself, but on the basis of how the action is accepted. It is as though one had always to postpone his judgment until he looked at his audience . . . Thus we tend to be *performers* in life rather than persons who live and act as selves."

- Rollo May, Ph D, *Man's Search for Himself*

Introduction: The Void

"This is a matter of being able to accept chance. . . Chance, or what might seem to be chance, is the means through which life is realized. The problem is not to blame or explain but to handle the life that arises."

- Joseph Campbell

In the experience of life there exists a void; an absence. It is the black hole of the future, the events yet to come; the in-completed action. It is also the gap between people; a silence; the inability to put into words our feelings of isolation, and our deep inner need to know that what we understand to be our experience in life can be shared and understood emotionally and mentally with those who share our physical spaces.

At the edge of the void is a tension. It is what you feel sitting at a bus stop in the freezing cold morning while a stranger sits two feet away on the same bench. 'What time is it? Is the bus going to be late again? Am I going to freeze to death? Who is that man/woman? Can he/she harm me?', etc. It is also the black hole of silence before lights-up or the rise of a curtain. It is the heartbeat of an actor as the attempt is made to clear one's mind of the endless barrage of stimuli and focus upon the select few actions with intensified clarity before a few hundred people (if you're lucky). It is the horror, fear, joy and anticipation that arrives at the moment where that which you have rehearsed and explored for weeks meets with the reality of performance. For no matter how much practice and preparation and sweat have gone into the production, the actor must remain open-minded enough to re-create each performance fresh. An actor must create a chain-reaction of impulse and action so that his/her body, while remaining true to the words and gesture of the performance text, is responding to stimuli in a spontaneous, lively manner.

In the acting classroom, the teacher must help to foster in the students a flexible vocal/physical instrument, creative imagination, and sense of trust to enable them to go willingly to that risky and exciting place called performance. As an actor, I have spent the last three years learning how to trust my body to do what it can do naturally, wonderfully when I let it. In the position of Teaching Assistant, I had to turn to my students and encourage in them the same kind of skill and trust I was in the process of finding myself. I have walked the parallel tracks of actor and teacher in an attempt to answer the questions "How do I as an actor come to understand what I do in a performative moment?", and "How can performance be translated into words that can describe it, and give ideas and freedom that will motivate students?"

Academic survival requires me to walk the parallel tracks of experience and analysis; it is the dynamic interplay between these two states that allows us to learn. But the view of one state from the camp of the other is hazy, like two armies from different countries that do not have the same customs. In the moment of doing, thinking can censor true impulse and hinder experience; afterward, the emotional and physical thrill of doing is often beyond the grasp of the words of analysis. As I look toward the future, with the intention of teaching and directing more, this dynamic interplay takes on a greater significance. For, as an actor one can survive by one's wits and skills and what people care most about is what they see and hear; how it got there is beside the point. Success as a teacher or director, however, depends upon translating those wits from your body into someone else's, someone who is infinitely different from you, perhaps.

Though experience can be fulfilling, one is constantly asked to justify it academically in publishable form. In *The Secret Art of the Performer*, Nicola Savarese expresses this academic paradox: "In any case, a divided organism never regains its former life. Neither is it the task of the anatomist to recreate life. Can the life of a performer on the stage emerge from the pages of a book? . . . In a performance

- which is not made of paper - movement, distance, wetness and dryness, life and death, do exist, but as a reflection of a fiction" (pg. 24). So, with a myriad of experiences, in classes as student and teacher, in the rehearsal hall and on the stage as performer and director, and as a daily observer of Nature, I sought to find a collective vocabulary that could come to grips with the ethereal, the unthinkable totality of human experience. How could I possibly explain the complex, interweaving pattern of events that has led me to this place? What words could I use to engage minds in a process during which, ideally, my own mind is not fully engaged but rather I am expressing and experiencing life with a quality of energy that is not usual in everyday living? Life is, after all, chaotic; I began to search for my language among the words of those who try to explain the randomness of natural events around us, and found a vocabulary in the realm of scientific inquiry known as Chaos Theory.

Although this thesis is indeed a reflection of patterns and progress that reach far into my past, we might say that its true birth was recent; Monday, December 7th, 1992 to be exact. On that day, my friend and peer, David Romankow, defended his Masters Thesis, and I attended to offer my attention and support. Dave's research focused on the work of Samuel Beckett with the intention of finding a fresh new basis for analysis. To do this, Dave, being a scientist at heart, applied new scientific methodology known as Chaos Theory. One of the plays he analyzed was *Act Without Words*, in which a character is manipulated by an unseen force: he is flung on stage, objects are flown in magically, trees open like umbrellas to provide shade. What Romankow pointed out was that the character was shifting from moments where he consciously chose actions, in an effort to understand what was happening to him, to moments where he was being acted upon. There were moments when the body of character was experiencing and then a moment of reflection where the mind processes what it has learned.

In Romankow's thesis I saw the dawn of a new age: science and art. It made sense; art had the catharsis and awe of true, live experience, while science had the terminology and technique to ground that experience with our conscious mind. This is, after all, how Freud started out: applying varying terminologies and concepts from different disciplines in order to explain the action of the human psyche as was never done before; there had never been a language to do so.

Chaos Theory is not implemented as a replacement for traditional methods of training, rather as a means to explain what I feel those various methods do for the actor in his/her attempt to create a performance. American Method Realism is still a very valuable tool, under most conditions, but its language must be augmented with terms that match the modes of scientific understanding of the era. Theatre has always been an extension of a culture's attempt to examine itself. It must therefore keep pace with the scientific enquiry of the age.

Our modern world view is changing just as swiftly as our scientific understanding of the forces around us. This shift is evident in the dramatic structure of newer texts; as we head toward the next millennium, playwrights are using fragmentation and stagecraft 'slight-of-hand' to recreate the fast-paced, overwhelming velocity of life and change around us: Tony Kushner's epic *Angels in America*, José Rivera's *Marisol*, and Stuart Greenman's *Silence, Cunning, Exile*, are a few examples. In performance, these newer texts offer the actor fewer realistic, complete scenes; instead, the actor is presented with the challenge of changing gears rapidly, moving from event to event, and relying on the audience to contemplate the overall effect of events upon the character's emotional life and upon their own.

At the same time, the very word "character" has become suspect. Students raised on a strict diet of American Method Realism, whose basic tenet is that the actions of a character spring from his/her identity and how that identity causes them to react to the circumstances around them, find that the questions of "who", "what", "where" and "why" no longer have clear answers; the assumptions of

gender, and power dynamics are being knocked-off the patriarchal pedestal and re-examined.

The word of the age seems to be chaos. However, most people employ this word to express a feeling of apathy; a lack of structure. This is because it is human nature to seek stability, and to explain events in terms of cause and effect; what scientists would call a 'closed linear system'. A system is quite simply any environment that is isolated for examination. By isolating for examination we are consciously measuring one thing against another, often in a vain attempt to find if it fits an assumed pattern. But life doesn't always occur in recognizable patterns; some things happen that don't fit expectations, and events can impact and change the course of action without warning.

Chaos Theory is useful in that it has revolutionized the scientific community's means of dealing with 'complex dynamical systems', those experiments with conditions which do not easily fit the formulaic solutions that have historically been used. What scientists have found, in fact, is that chaos is not a lack of structure, but the result of events when elements interweave in unlikely, unpredictable ways, interacting and affecting one another in a complex pattern that is constantly creating itself as it goes. What appears chaotic on a micro-scopic level indeed has a structure when viewed in the larger, macroscale level.

"Chaos eliminates the Laplacian fantasy of deterministic predictability", James Gleick explains in his monumental text *Chaos: Making a New Science* (6). For thousands of years scientific pursuits, and I infer acting texts as well, have explained the world in terms of linear cause and effect. Take, for example, a simple pendulum, any weight tied to the end of a string; as it swings back and forth its path, or **orbit**, can be graphed as a loop, with the weight and velocity returning always to the same starting place. With such a constant motion, one can easily predict future events based upon the data of its initial state (Romankow, 8). But, a pendulum in the real world is subject to **friction**; each orbit becomes smaller as friction decreases

the energy in the system and the object eventually comes to rest. Any number of random natural forces, what Chaos theorists call **noise**, that come into contact with the object can change its motion in unpredictable ways. Gleick describes the effect, saying "Tiny differences in input could quickly become overwhelming differences in output -- a phenomenon given the name 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions'" (8).

Some systems are not chaotic in nature, but can exhibit chaotic characteristics for short periods of time; "simple systems", says Gleick, "give rise to complex behavior" (304). Similarly, I feel, an actor begins character work on the simplest of levels, with the basic questions of "who", "what", "where" and "why", but out of the interplay of this individual with his/her environment some complex patterns of behavior can emerge. Novice actors, once they have answered these questions, hold to them as their only source of impulse; they are afraid to or unsure of how to allow other events to impact upon their range of behavioral choices; they do not know how to cope with "noise".

It is the intention of any training program to prepare their students to deal with the complex pattern of moment-to-moment decisions. Unlike other disciplines or subject areas, where students memorize a series of rules or laws against which everything else is measured, the means by which an actor becomes trained is 'in-direct'; that is, the methods employed in the classroom are not always, on the surface, directly, literally translatable into the specific circumstances and performance challenges of every character he or she will encounter in the course of their study and/or career.

Chapter One will outline more clearly the reasons why I feel Chaos Theory is an effective means of describing performance and the process of learning. In Chapter Two, I intend to show how by training 'in-directly' the actor develops a flexible instrument capable of dealing with the shifts in given circumstances that are the experiences of a character or the realities of performance itself. I will round out

my discussion by examining how the 'in-direct' methods became useful in confronting numerous random problems when taking work into the realities of performance as an actor and teacher, in Chapter Three.

Chapter One : Recognizing the Chaotic Aspects of Performance

"stammering is the native eloquence
of us fog people"

- Edmund, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

"I'm mostly interested in when people
fail to say something. . . I think
character really exists in the struggle to
say something."

- Anna Deavere Smith

The job of the actor is a precarious one: the actor is put in the position of being responsible for the complexity of the whole, but is asked to create it from a place of specificity. By way of analogy, the most striking example of this concept I can offer was my observation of a painter on the Phil Donahue show. The program focused on art and artists and the controversy over how far the boundaries of the definition of art have been pushed. It ended with an artist named Danny Ditch, the so-called 'two-fisted' artist. Within a matter of two minutes at the close of the show he painted a seven-foot tall black canvas with a red and blue silhouette profile of Dr. Martin-Luther King, Jr. using his fingertips for brushes: in other words, fingerpainting.

The cameras switched between close-up and the long shot, which was the angle that could actually reveal the form; as I watched it struck me that Ditch could not step as far back as the camera, and indeed he hardly ever paused to step away from his canvas. From his extremely close vantage point, he still must have been aware of how the tiny imprints of paint off the tips of his fingers affected or altered the overall appearance of the canvas from the audience's distant point of view, similar to the microscopic dots of George Seurat's famous paintings.

Similarly, the actor, through the process of rehearsal, must associate himself with the author's overall intent and the affect that the director and design staff will

have on the look of the show, but his/her singular responsibility is making each individual moment of action live. The actor must appear to be unaware of his or her part in the creation of the whole; the performance must appear spontaneous, unrehearsed. The actor grapples with a duality of existence: he/she is both responsible for creating the illusion of character, and aware of his/her presence in the illusion, whether called upon to acknowledge that awareness to the audience or not.

Chaos Theory: a primer

Any work of art carries elements of this duality. Indeed, since art is a personal expression of things experienced, or observed, or dreamed of from nature, it can be said that actors are mimicking the very duality of natural existence. Every living thing is both random and yet seemingly a part of a larger, hidden scheme. The seasons come and go like clockwork, yet the size and shape of each individual leaf, and the time of its eventual descent, are random; ruled by the wind.

This is, perhaps, why we have artistic sensibility in the first place; Gert Eilenberger, a German physicist, explains: "Why is it that the silhouette of a storm-bent leafless tree against an evening sky in winter is perceived as beautiful, but the corresponding silhouette of any multi-purpose university building is not, in spite of all efforts of the architect? The answer seems to me, even if somewhat speculative, to follow from the new insights into dynamical systems. Our feeling for beauty is inspired by the harmonious arrangement of order and disorder as it occurs in natural objects -- in clouds, trees, mountain ranges, or snow crystals"(Gleick, 117). Nature derives beauty from the interplay of randomness and order. This interplay occurs on all levels of observation, from microscale to macroscale; a landscape is as beautiful as any single tree or flower in it because at every vantage point there are

important elements. It has no scale because at any distance an observer finds something interesting that draws his eyes.

With the advent of popular psychoanalytic theory, humankind has begun to place ourselves in the middle of the hierarchy of scale, instead of at the beginning or end; we recognize that the inter-relation of various element in the outer, natural world, such as dirt, wind, air and water, mimic the interplay of microscopic structures of our own inner, individual, natural world. Says Gleick, "With or without chaos, serious cognitive scientists can no longer model the mind as a static structure. They recognize a hierarchy of scales, from neuron upward, providing an opportunity for the interplay of microscale and macroscale so characteristic of fluid turbulence and other complex dynamical processes. Pattern born amid formlessness: that is biology's basic beauty and its basic mystery"(299).

The purpose of Chaos Theory is to add sense to this mystery. As mentioned earlier, even systems that appear totally random have periods of regularity or stability; it's just that the interplay between the opposing behaviors is unpredictable over long periods of time. In many cases, the eventual outcome of the system is known, but the series of events that lead to its inevitable conclusion are random. For example, let's return to our pendulum. The eventual outcome, or **destiny**, of a pendulum put in motion is rest; Gleick explains:"Every orbit must eventually end up at the same place, the center: position 0, velocity 0. This central fixed point 'attracts' the orbits. . .The friction dissipates the system's energy. . .to the inner regions of low energy"(134).

The **attractor** then becomes a place of stability or predictability. Romankow uses the more apt example of a marble and a bowl; spin a marble around the inside of a bowl and the "defects in the marble and bowl" will "add up exponentially and drive the marble into ever-changing, unpredictable orbits"(10). However, it will eventually settle and come to rest on the bottom - the attractor. "While at the top and bottom of the bowl", explains Romankow, "one can always predict the position

of the marble, simply because of its non-activity. Two regions of equilibria exist, yet while the marble moves between these two regions, one cannot accurately predict probable orbits. Here, chaos exists"(10-11).

The marble has two distinct states of being, activity and non-activity, or as I refer to them, experience and analysis. Similarly, if we put the actor in place of the marble inside of a bowl that we call the realm of performance, we note that there is an interplay between moments of activity and those of reflection, decision, or stasis. Dr. Eric Maisel, a psychoanalyst who focuses his private practice on people in the art communities, in his book *Staying Sane in the Arts*, describes the dual existence, saying "Artists have available to them two working states, absorption and concentration. . .when artists are absorbed they are lost in time and space. . .As the dancer Kay Mazzo described it, 'You prepare and prepare for a role, but the minute you're on stage, you are lost, lost in what you are doing'. . .Concentration, on the other hand, is much more of an effortful state. Artists force themselves to concentrate when they feel no particular inspiration and have no real desire to work but nevertheless demand of themselves that they must. . ." (39).

Rollo May calls this process **encounter**; in his book *The Courage to Create*, he says, "The first thing we notice in a creative act is that it is an *encounter*. Artists encounter the landscape they propose to paint -- they look at it, observe it from this angle and that. They are, as we say, absorbed in it" (39). He goes on to describe, "Artists, as well as you and I in moments of intensive encounter, experience quite clear neurological changes. These include quickened heartbeat; higher blood pressure; increased intensity and constriction of vision, with eyelids narrowed so that we can see more vividly the scene we are painting; we become oblivious to things around us (as well as the passage of time)"(44).

Whether you call it 'absorption' or 'encounter', a leap is being made in the creative moment; a leap away from one's normal state of existence, away from the safety and security of the known or assumed aspects of personality; in short, away

from one's attractor. During experience, the mind is engaged but in a different manner; as observer. After we have experienced, the mind can analyze, and here the body is not as engaged. This interplay can be thought of on many scales; it happens over the course of a scene, and it happens in a millisecond between each line.

In my undergraduate performance experience I remember this kind of experience; after a show, I would arrive back in the make-up room full of excitement and yet unable to fully grasp or articulate what had just happened. There were mistakes, to be sure, but there were also moments where it seemed that the audience and I were following the events of this other person's life. Such moments were scary; they had happened, afterall, without any conscious effort from me.

All creativity starts with impulse, which is a movement toward action (Harrop/Epstein, 3). Not just action, but an action that is new, perhaps frightening. May says, "A dynamic struggle goes on within a person between what he or she consciously thinks on the one hand and, on the other, some insight, some perspective that is struggling to be born. The insight is then born with anxiety, guilt, and the joy and gratification that is inseparable from the actualizing of a new idea or vision. The guilt that is present when this breakthrough occurs has its source in the fact that the insight must destroy something...the new idea will destroy what a lot of people believe is essential to the survival of their intellectual and spiritual world" (May, 62-3).

Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, in his book *The Art of Thinking*, agrees, saying, "Studies confirm that most people behave unimaginatively not because they lack imagination, but because they fear ideas that differ from the norm, ideas that might raise eyebrows. They do themselves a great disservice, because creativity depends upon imagination. 'No great discovery is ever made without a bold guess', observed Sir Issac Newton"(Ruggiero, 114). Or, to put it another way, as the late

teacher Joseph Campbell said, "You can't have creativity unless you leave behind the bounded, the fixed, all the rules"(campbell/moyers, 194).

Stanislavsky as a Paradigm

What is today the bedrock of American actor training was, some time ago, a reaction to the bounded, the fixed. A combination of cultural factors at the turn of the century caused a shift in popular attitudes about identity; Darwinism, Freud's model of the psyche, the writing of Ibsen and Chekhov, all knocked "man"kind off the pedestal of supremacy. Where before humans were privileged, superior beings, people were now beginning to see themselves as just another animal; as creatures who construct their reality from a psychological need and are capable of manipulating, and suppressing emotion and memory. Character, instead of being something pasted-on, a mask or cliché, became a complex psychological persona to be inhabited and infused with the actor's own emotional fire.

Actors, like a young Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, were awed by the intense emotional life of the performances given by the Moscow Art Theatre when they played and taught at the American Laboratory Theatre (Smith, 8-9).

Stanislavsky's system centered around focus, relaxation and emotional recall aimed at creating a "specific, genuinely felt physical and emotional reality" (Smith, 15). As passed on by Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, and absorbed by the Group Theatre in the 1930's, this ideal can still be considered our national paradigm of acting. After the Group's inevitable demise, Strasberg, Clurman, Miesner and Adler all went out into the world like apostles. To this day, the major acting studios in New York bear their names and legacies.

But a distillation process had taken place; for this reason, I opt for the term American Method Realism. What is taught in this country is a brand of Stanislavsky's technique that has been colored by the American sensibility of

"truth"; and, perhaps irreversibly, by Strasberg's dogmatic perfectionism. Despite the fact that such technique has met with scrutiny in our post-modern, multi-cultural world, every major training program across the country expects students to learn the basics of Stanislavsky before they learn anything else.

To a certain extent this makes sense; most actors enter undergrad training with a self-consciousness about their performing. Still unsure if they have chosen the right path, they are eager to 'get it right'; to prove that they can act. But the question inevitably remains in the back of their heads: am I saying these lines right? do I look right for the part? In front of others they are physically stiff; they force emotional reactions; their voices stay within a limited range. They assume the role to be a pre-conceived form that they must get right.

Method training's aim is to make all action more believable; to do this, one needs to remove focus from the act of performance and place it on the act of achieving the goals of the character. In this sense, you make his/her actions your own, and they inevitably become more believable. However, how you make the character's actions your own is a delicate thing, and it is this aspect that caused controversy between Adler and Strasberg back then and continues to be debated today.

One of the more outspoken critics of the American Method system is teacher, actor and author Richard Hornby. In his very engaging book, *The End of Acting*, Hornby sets out to show the shortcomings of "the method". "The tenets of this ideology", he explains, "can be summed up as follows: Theatre imitates life, the more closely and directly the better. The good actor therefore repeats on stage what he does in everyday life, drawing on his personal experiences, but, more important, reliving his emotional traumas"(6). This is perhaps because Stanislasky's technique, and many other teachers interpretations since then, center around establishing a "magic IF"; the actor, when confronted with a particular moment in the character's

stage life, is asked to find an analogous event in his/her own life from which arise similar emotions.

It is a valid theory perhaps, but one that is problematic in practice. On the one hand, as actors focus on themselves they do begin to relax, and their actions take on a more genuine quality. They get to know themselves, and begin to see how emotional states are not things that exist in and of themselves but rather arise out of an impulse towards something else. But, the identification of references from the text with events from one's own life can also be limiting. It can cause an actor to make a value judgement about the moment in the text so that it can be labeled; then the task of finding an analogous memory can get underway. It asks the actor to understand the text from the beginning and skip experimentation.

One of the more popular primary method-based texts, as I have mentioned already, is Uta Hagen's well-known *Respect for Acting*, with its notorious Object Exercises. "My love of acting", says Hagen, "was slowly reawakened [under Clurman] as I began to deal with a strange new technique of evolving in the character. I was not allowed to begin with, or concern myself at any time with, a pre-conceived form. I was assured that a form would result from the work we were doing" (Hagen, 8). Here Hagen acknowledges the chaotic aspect of acting; the work showed itself to have meaning as a "result".

She also touches upon the idea of "pre-conceived form". Your novice actor will begin by trying to assess the emotional content of a line, or scene (indeed, he/she usually thinks the whole scene has one emotion) and manifest that to the audience; display or show it. This, in Hagen's terms, is Representational; the actor attempts to represent the idea of the situation to spectators. Its opposite, Presentational, denotes a process of experiencing situations directly and presenting that to the spectators. Hagen assumes, "Formalized, external acting (Representational) has a strong tendency to follow fashion. Internal acting

(Presentational) rejects fashion and consequently can become as timeless as human experience itself"(13).

How is this so? A person's inner life can be just as limiting because he/she is working only out of a given set of experiences, gestures, etc. Hagen infers that representational is false, lifeless, whereas presentational is truer to life. Yet, even our everyday choices are limited by a kind of technique of popular culture. As Hornby explains, "When a Strasbergian acting teacher demands that his student play himself [sic] on stage, he implies that this 'self' is a given, but is it?"(14). What we personally have experienced in the past is not always right for the character in that specific context. In addition, even the most selfless actor guards, censors his/her actions; if the only origins are our past experiences, are we really creating?

Such methods employed in certain performers can work magic, but I remain skeptical of it in light of our cultural scientific habits; we tend to search for a quick, easy solution. Gleick explains, "Implicitly, the mission of many twentieth century scientists --biologists, neurologists, economists--has been to break their universes down into the simplest atoms that will obey scientific rules"(14). In other words, scientific process causes us to find a simple answer; the assumption that in the finite details lies the answer for the whole, also known as Newtonian determinism. In terms of acting, the Method's "magic IF" could be said to be the same.

For example, in order to gain access to an emotion, Hagen prescribes telling a friend the story of unhappy event, for instance a lover leaving, and describe all the external details you can: the weather, perfume you or he/she wore, the environment, etc.; "one of these objects will suddenly release the pain anew and you will weep again"(Hagen, 48). But she is neglecting the fact that your emotional response will be colored by the presence of your friend, and that your initial experience with the emotional moment has nothing to do with experiencing/expressing it publically; all these factors affect the state of the performer.

Yet, in the next chapter, *Sense Memory*, she links these suggestions to something specific: to cough you focus on a scratchiness in a specific part of the throat, for a headache locate it specifically inside your skull, etc.. Why is Emotional Memory not linked to something specific in the given environment/bodily state **at the moment of performance**? You cry not because of a red apron from a trauma ten years ago, but because you see the picture frame sitting on your dresser that holds the picture of the man you'll never see again.

According to Hagen, emotional memory works when the given circumstances of an immediate event in the play fail to stimulate you sufficiently (Hagen, 46). Is this acting? By substituting, aren't you asking the moment to be something specific in order for it to fit the criteria of something you FEEL is analogous?

On the nature of Creativity

As mentioned earlier, the novice actor, upon first picking up a text, will sit down with Uta Hagen's notorious list of questions and answer the "who", "what", "where" and "why", and feel that the homework is done. "Yes", he'll say to himself, "Jack is angry at that point." He will walk into rehearsal armed with his anger and at that strategic moment he will let it loose at the other character. The actor is desperate for answers; what does this moment feel like?, how will it play?, what should I do? etc.. Out of fear, he or she will answer questions quickly, often too quickly, and create a model for a character that he/ she can stick to; an attractor. This is, as quoted before, a "dependence on initial conditions"(Gleick, 8).

What is missing is other information about the character and his or her experience; information that can't be learned from the static analysis at the attractor, but must be gained by experience. William Ball, in his book *A Sense of Direction*, explains, "We learn in threes. The first step of learning is discovering; the second

step of learning is testing; and the third step of learning is pattern-setting"(Ball, 15). The novice actor, left unguided, will skip the first step, and sometimes the second, opting for the maximum comfort of the third step, and set the pattern of the performance. But what makes a moment creative, as we have said, is a leap away from the security of what we think we know. We must match/test what we know against what actually happens. Chaos scientist Norman Packard explains, "In the development of one person's mind from childhood, information is clearly not just accumulated but also generated--created from connections that were not there before"(Gleick, 261-2).

"The child finds it easy", Laurence Olivier once wrote, "but then, a child has a supple body and an open mind: fearless until taught fear; eyes wide, innocent and aware. . .The child becomes daunted by the shadows of the future; then the child becomes the adult; then the adult becomes aware of his mortality. Shakespeare knew this, and so should the actor"(Olivier, 24). In the innocence of childhood we are perpetually exploring and trying. As connections are made we begin to solidify judgements about actions and responses. Unfortunately, the judgements we make are based on our experience, which is not always the only outcome. Storing the memories of our experience in our mind, we begin to rely solely on our minds to make decisions for us based on what feels safe.

This is because we live, essentially, in a Cartesian culture; we think of our bodies as merely a corporal presence that we inhabit, and therefore all of its actions are dictated from the driver's seat - our mind. Again, the novice actor feels pressured to know from the beginning what the gestures will look like, what the words will sound like because he is working under the cultural expectation that behavior is planned; particularly in an art form, which must have a conscious design.

"Immortalized in Bartlett's for his inscrutable, Popeye-like declamation, ' I think therefore I am,'" , writes Marc Barasch in *Psychology Today*, "Descartes was

history's most persuasive partisan of the mind-body split, a bedrock notion of modern science. Mental events, the savant declared, occur in a separate domain from those of the flesh"(Barasch, 59). Barasch explains how science is beginning to change its mind, so to speak, about the nature of mind-body relations, with the advent of PNI; psychoneuroimmunology, the new branch of medicine that examines the interplay of information between mind and body. "What [Candace] Pert [former chief of the Brain Biochemistry Section of the National Institute of Mental Health, and codiscoverer of the brain's opiate receptors] proved once and for all is that brain, nervous system, and immune system, far from being incommunicado, are at this very second hunched elbow-to-elbow at the espresso bar of the Chatterbox Cafe, animatedly sharing your most intimate particulars"(Barasch, 60).

Hornby points out that Strasberg developed a model whereby the entire creative process was from the inside to outside only; but the actor is not doing two separate things, rather he is, in Hornby's words, "responding to both internal and external stimuli, he both thinks and feels"(115). In contrast, Hagen separates "emotional memory" from sense memory; to her emotional memory is the recall of psychological or emotional response, and sense memory is physiological response. They appear to be separate realms for her, although she acknowledges that one can cause the other.

Eminent voice coach, teacher and author Cicely Berry explains the problem this way, "I think we tend to use words as if they belong to either our reason or to our emotions, so that we make them either only literal and logical, or alternatively only emotional. We do not use them as our thoughts in action, which are always shifting and changing, and are the result of both thought and feeling."(10) This is very much a result of the shift in performance paradigms; acting in the time before Stanislavsky was shaped around the cultural assumption that the stage was a place for beauty; beauty of form in the body and voice.

As mentioned in my introduction, the sum and total of all this is not to discredit American Method Realism, but rather to point out that as a process it, like the scientific methodology at the time of its inception, assumes that all a character's actions come logically as a result of identity; indeed it assumes that identity is easily categorized; a given. Voice, gesture and other aspects of performance are regarded as 'external' to this central aspect of the character.

Identity as a Construction

Most actors, in their first experiences with the stage, concern themselves mostly with the act of hiding from the audience behind a character. Afraid of being exposed in front of several dozen people (often their friends and parents, which make-up the large percentage of audience in the theatrical boot-camp known as high school drama), they will put too much attention into being active, often creating 'business' that has nothing to do with the matters at hand. A character becomes a kind of shield between them and the audience. At first, the actor will wrack his brain trying to think "What am I doing here, at such and such moment in the play"?. Instead of trusting his/her instincts and allowing a process of experimentation to occur, from which would probably come an apt solution, the actor demands an answer. The actor demands cleverness. He decides that the character is caught in a moment of intense inner turmoil. He stands there, facial muscles clenched in a tense display; the director eventually takes note and asks him what he is doing, to which he inevitably responds "Can't you see I'm thinking"?

Acting at this stage of his or her career often calls for character parts; no high school has a real Willy Loman or Lady Bracknell walking its halls. A pattern of characters built on assumption, or what I call 'the Inductive Leap', begins to emerge, as the novice actors translate sparse character sketches into immediately playable "traits". Teenagers are asked to add-on a life's worth of experience with a layer of

grey hairspray and a limp; afterall, "all old people walk this way don't they"?; or play the villain by being as downright rotten as they can be; or play the ingenue by delivering every line in their best Marilyn Monroe.

If my description of this scene seems apt, it's because I have done this same thing. My high school years were filled with character parts; my dynamic (some would say excessive) energy amazed my audience of friends; I would bound unafraid onto the stage, armed with my box of tricks: the confused look, the happy look, the angry menace. There was no reason to be afraid of performing, for in performance one could lead the audience through all kinds of fun, frightening and fanciful imagined or historical events; the stage was, I remember commenting to a friend, the one aspect of my life which I could control.

Many performers start this way; theatre attracts many who, perhaps, are not fully satisfied with their own identity, which they mistake as being an easily definable, fixed entity. They are drawn to the idea of escaping themselves. Such actors will take direction very well, for they come to trust things outside themselves more than that which is internally driven; or, perhaps, an intense ability to generate their own ideas will develop to prove their cleverness and worth. I would, in retrospect, put myself in the latter category.

As the actor matures, the need to escape the self by being clever gives way to finding a comfort and trust in one's natural beingness and bringing the power of that to a character. The interaction of your own selfhood and the text naturally will create new connections that were never there before; and what is created will be apt for both you and the character in the moment of action; cleverness is no longer needed. In an ironic paradox, one becomes a part of the force the you are being subjected to it at the same time.

There is no set of standard rules that an actor can memorize and have at the ready to recall for every acting situation. What he/she can do is learn how the body works and make it as flexible and receptive to its moment-to-moment shifts.

The human psyche is a complex dynamical system, subject to influence by an unlimited number of factors in chaotic ways. While American Method Realism aims to infuse characterizations with a life that is seemingly spontaneous, through the use of focused energy, its tendency to promote head-centered choices should be monitored. An actor's homework and pre-determined vision of the character must be augmented by the randomness of experience in the moment, away from the safety of the attractor.

Chapter Two : Grounding Chaos in Action

"I enter another zone of awareness, a detachment. The feet, body, and arms move automatically to the rhythm of the drum, but my mind and heart soar above everything."

- George Horse-Capture, on the Pow-Wow

"Much that goes unspoken has its form buried somewhere in the language, pressing for utterance. Soundless, I am full of words. Once uttered, the words are full of me"

- unknown, *The Clam Lake Papers*

"The paragon of a complex dynamical system", asserts Gleick, "and to many scientists, therefore, the touchstone of any approach to complexity is the human body. No object of study available to physicists offers such a cacophony of counterrhythmic motion on scales from macroscopic to microscopic"(279). As an artist, an actor has this complex, 'counterrhythmic' thing as his/her medium; in other words, we ask that the actor be able to shape his/her behavior according to both the natural randomness of existence and the esthetic order of a work of art.

In short, we ask that the actor both create and be an observer of the creation at the same time. As Rollo May describes, "The important and profound aspect of the Dionysian principle is that of *ecstasy* ...[which] achieved a union of *form and passion with order and vitality*"(48-9). May's definition of ecstasy is "ex-stasis" or "to stand out from", "to be freed from the usual split between subject and object"(48-9). Denis Diderot, in his landmark text *The Paradox of the Actor*, stated that the actor "must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker"(Hornby, 101).

For me, the problem early on in my training was that I could never get that internal onlooker to be "disinterested"; on the contrary, I was usually so charged with nervous anticipation and the genuine thrill of performance that any efforts on the part of my acting teachers to instill vocal and physical dexterity usually went out

the window. It was an eagerness that stressed perhaps the creator part of the equation; my moment-to-moment choices were clever surprises, my acting dynamic; but my audience, and myself, were apparently aware that I was shaping it that way. Uta Hagen describes, I believe, the same feeling:

"I lost some of the love [of acting] and found my way by adopting the methods and attitudes of the 'pro'. I learned what I now call 'tricks' and was even proud of myself. I soon learned that if I made my last exit as Nina in *The Sea Gull* with full attention on the whys and wherefores of my leave-taking, with no attention to the effect on the audience, there were tears and a hush in the auditorium. If, however, I threw back my head bravely just as I got to the door, I received a round of applause. I settled for the trick which brought the applause"(Hagen, 7).

This is a result of my sensitive dependence on initial conditions; eager to understand what each moment of the performance would feel like, I did my homework like a good little actor: thoroughly. Each moment had a pre-conceived emotional context. As with most novice actors, my choices were shaped by my first contact with the play. Uta Hagen explains, "When an actor first reads the play on which he is going to work, he is an audience...his first contact with the play must soon be discarded and not confused with the real work on the play and the part"(147). In other words, the actor is sympathizing with the character's plight, in the same way that we may abstractly sympathize with the pain we witness on the nightly news.

Subjective vs. Objective

It is, in short, an objective reaction. But, this feeling should not be mistaken for a realistic understanding of what the person is encountering subjectively. "Many actors", says Hagen, "take the outer event and the outer words at face value. For example, the character says, 'I hate you' under circumstances where he is

actually crying out for attention from someone he loves. But the actor works only for the hate"(39). An apt analogy would be to witness a violent car accident; from a distance, the image of two objects careening into one another with such velocity can cause one to be physically ill; "How could anyone survive that?" we cry. Yet, speaking from my own experience in just such a collision, the body goes into shock when it encounters events that threaten its grip on reality. Sitting in the passenger seat of my friend's car, time seemed to be moving in extreme slow motion as headlights glared and glass shattered around me, my body being held tightly and safely by my seatbelt to the car as it was flung sideways up onto a guardrail. Hagen explains:

"The *first time* we are caught in a particular, brand-new crisis in our lives--such as a brush with death or the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster such as fire, flood, or hurricane, a man-made disaster such as assault or robbery, a serious illness or accident, or the first powerful attraction to another human being--our responses all have something in common. They involve a struggle *to cope with the event, to understand it, to fight for normalcy, to regain control over the seemingly illogical emotions we are having because we do not yet understand the consequence* of such events on our lives and souls. It is these responses of amazement, this fearful incongruity, and the actions of fighting for *normalcy* which we must unearth and bring to the character's life in a similar dramatic crisis--*not* the response of the onlookers who are able to evaluate the human consequences of the disaster"(92).

An emotional reaction is created in the observer/audience by virtue of their attempt to identify with the victim; it is an assumption of what it was like to be involved in what they witnessed. They then apply it to their own life.

What actually happened, from the victim/actor's point of view may be quite different. This is where so called "method" work can be problematic; by focusing on the actor's own emotional life, behavioral choices are perhaps limited to what he/she has experienced and understands. It asks that the actor assess the emotional, perhaps physical, content of an experience. His or her assessment can be easily flawed if it is based on what they assume a person would experience; they can even place themselves in danger by virtue of imagining more of a risk, emotionally or physically, than actually occurred, or than is necessary in a theatrical reconstruction.

It should be the actor's task, always, to create a subjective, theatrical reality in a manner that is safe and objective. Peter Conrad, in a New York Times interview with actress Natasha Richardson, writes "Actors are masochistic creatures, taking the agonies of others upon themselves (which is why we need them, to do our suffering for us)" (46). This makes about as much sense as the notion that people go to musical comedies, and other 'popular' entertainments, to watch actors be entertained. No; those genres are popular because the audience is entertained by the performance. Mr. Conrad is correct: we need actors. We need them not to feel things themselves, but to help us feel our own pain.

An audience gathers not to see real suffering, but to see the image of suffering, the representation of pain, happiness, humor and everything in between, which invokes in them their own memory of, or hope for, such experiences in their own lives. The magic of theatre comes not from its 'realness' but from the fact that it appears real.

The nature of Equivalence

What appears real is something that is the physical **equivalent** of the actual event. Eugenio Barba describes equivalence as the process of the artist whereby nature is codified by constructing a series of equivalent or corresponding structures that mimic nature rather than reconstructing it (95). To explain, he uses the *belle courbe*, a piece of Decroux mime which creates the illusion the the actor is pushing a heavy box across the floor. In reality, part of the actor's body weight would be supported by the box itself as he exerted force against its side. In the absence of the box, the actor must still mimic this aspect of physicality, in essence the appearance of being off balance, if we are to believe he is really pushing something. Barba explains that this position "is the result of both a technical demand made by the performer and a precise observation of the reality which he proposes to represent"(95).

Returning for a moment to my memory of the violent car accident from a couple years back, let's assume that I am given the assignment of playing it as a scene on stage. Method realism would ask me to remember my own experience, or find an equivalent: the magic "as if", as in "it's as if your body underwent a severe physical trauma". No matter what my memory was of what actually happened to my body, I would have to recreate the event without the assistance of the high velocity of the actual accident. Immediately I would have to find a way to make my body appear to be tossed about, defying gravity, while at the same time being absolutely in control of my body's weight for my own safety.

Anyone who has ever undertaken stage combat training knows that: for safety's sake, nothing about a fight should ever be real. Instead a fight is specifically choreographed to physically mimic the sequence of a events, so that, in the words of Richard Raether, Master Fight Teacher, you "tell the story". While working with Richard I learned how equivalence really works. A skilled teacher will not only teach you how to hit "out of distance", but will show how to create the illusion of force with your whole body. It was an eye-opening experience to realize that the fight is safe not just because the punch misses, but because it is not a real punch at

all. The actor is using the whole body; every aspect of balance, force and direction finds its equivalent; practice adds comfort and speed, and from the distant audience point of view the illusion is complete.

Like Danny Ditch's painting, the tiny dots are lifeless on their own, but witnessed from a distance at full speed the gaps between them disappear and we see the full canvas. As an actor in the fight scenarios we created as a class, I found a way to allow my "onlooker" to be "disinterested" in what the audience was experiencing, and to stop indulging in my own emotional experience. Instead, my body and mind were more-than occupied with the task of realizing the balance and posture of violence sans aggression. After my experience with stage combat, the question haunted me: If it is possible for an actor to construct the reality of a fight, why can't the same equivalence work for the reconstruction of any emotional moment on stage?

In my undergraduate training, one performance remains in my memory the pinnacle of my experiences on stage: *Anna Christie*. In my sophomore year, at the ripe age of nineteen, I took on Chris Christopherson, a sixty year-old Swedish seaman. What was so wonderful about the experience was that instead of playing a blanket cliché of age, I worked closely with my director to find a specific physicality, balance, voice and gestural language for Chris. My work was, as others commented who were witness to rehearsals, very "method"; but here my attachment to a magic "if" was centered around physical considerations, not emotional. My energy and enthusiasm were channeled into adopting the physical reality of the character that was, after all, radically different from myself. I found that the emotional reality came naturally from the character I had created.

But not all roles will offer the actor a physical style to focus his/her energy upon; the reality of this "business" is that most people's careers begin with roles in modern plays, or TV commercials, film cameos, where they are playing their own age, class, and time period. The trick is to apply this same approach to roles that do

not require such a rich investment in creating physicality. So, without the safety net of a stylized physicality, one must have an acting process that is focused on the equivalence of emotions. To accomplish this, it is first necessary to understand what real emotion is all about.

The nature of Emotion

It is a cold, damp Sunday night in the middle of winter, and in a darkened room in a run-down apartment complex a group of men is sitting down and talking about feelings. My friend, Drew, stands looking into my eyes and holding my hand. He asks me:

"O.K., what's the thought?"

"I am lonely. I don't want to be alone. I am sick of feeling alone."

"So, say this, in a happy voice with a big smile: 'I'm alone and I always will be, and it's wonderful!'"

Instantly I am in tears; without even vocalizing, the mere thought of uttering the phrase Drew has directed me to say has unleashed a pent-up fear from deep within me. He holds me while I cry.

The process has been happening like this for about a two years now, ever since a small group of men in the Madison-based Men Stopping Rape decided that a big part of the work of stopping violence in our culture was re-training ourselves to accept emotional vulnerability as part of masculinity. The Emotional Support Group (ESG) was formed.

The ESG began as a kind of think-tank; our first meetings were conversational, labored with theorizing, assumption and problem-solving. We found, as voice teacher Kristin Linklater explains, "The adult voice is, in most instances, conditioned to talk *about* feelings rather than to *reveal* them"(5).

As our sense of safety with each other grew, we began to challenge each other to delve deeper, and this led to engaging in physical activity. The experimentations

eventually gave way to a set of guidelines and methods known as RC, or Re-evaluation Counseling. The basic tenet of RC is that by bringing emotions to the surface we can separate out the irrational distress from the real, controllable events in our lives. The counselor asks the person being counseled questions, leading them through a verbal exploration of what they are feeling, and listens for clues. What begins as random rambling soon reveals a pattern of distress which the counselor picks up on.

If he senses anger, he can encourage the person to explore that physically, offering to resist as the person pushes against his hands. If he hears a habitual response, he can offer a contradiction, like Drew's comment to me, which points up the absurdity of the original thought. Either of these can blend into the other; laughter can bring tears which can lead to rage and back to tears again. The body can release emotions in a myriad of ways, often around the same event. When the work is done, and some strategies have been developed to deal with the distress when it arises again, the counselor and group help the person out of his emotional distress with "up and outs". This entails asking questions of the person which remove him from his distress; "What are three things you notice in the room around you?", or "What was the most beautiful thing you saw today?" are a couple of examples. In essence, the group reminds the individual that his identity is separate from the emotional experience, which exists for only as long as it needs to.

What the process reveals is the fluidity of emotion: we pass in and out of emotional states without warning, or sometimes without reason. It also shows that what we feel about an event is colored by our past experience and assumptions, and is not necessarily the "truth" of the event. By re-evaluating our actions we make future behavior choices based not on old fears and habits but upon what we truly seek to create for ourselves. Such a process can only happen in a 'safe space' where there is no shame around the display of emotion.

As a performer, the ESG provided me the opportunity to witness and experience first-hand what happens physiologically at moments of emotional release. The process of coming to grips with events provokes a chain reaction of emotions that interweave in ways that betray logic. Tears are almost always preceded by laughter or rage. The common denominator among all my experiences was an intense connection to the breath. For this reason, the heart can be easily engaged by engaging the body in activity. In the example I mentioned, my reaction was sparked by the quality of voice I was supposed to speak in, which was completely antithetical to what I was feeling; the absurdity released the pain. Other times, devising a physical task, such as exerting force against someone, banging a chair, or simply being held and cradled, can tap a well-spring of anger, anxiety and vulnerability.

Hagen explains, that "just as the emotions feed the actions, so the **emotions are furthered by the action.**" [emphasis hers]"(99). Furthermore, as Hornby states, "Emotional release by itself, no matter how real, 'honest', etc. the emotion may be, is never enough by itself to create a character"(59). He explains that Stanislavski believed that good acting was full of emotion, but the emotion was "an end point rather than a starting point, the result of carefully prepared, logical, and ultimately involved acting. Emotion is the result, not the cause, of good acting"(72-73).

So, we begin to realize that emotions themselves are a release of energy from the body that occur when the body is released enough to allow them out. It follows then that an actor's best route to realizing emotional moments on stage is to focus on relaxation in the body. The actor, once relaxed can focus on the playing of the actions of the character which will in turn produce an emotional connection in the actor, and therefore in the audience. It is the relaxed body, put into action, that will transparently reveal emotion of various kinds on various levels. It is the relaxed body that will, in effect, willingly give-in to chaos.

During my undergraduate training, I was anything but willing to give-in to chaos. This was evident to the actors that shared dressing rooms with me, who witnessed a nightly ritual of rigorous warm-ups and pain-staking attention to detail before performance; a ritual whose apparent aim was to ensure that nothing would go 'wrong'. This warm-up was more of a work-out. I would launch my body into a full calisthenic routine; sweat, fast heartbeat and deep breath were to me, at the time, signs that my physical self was ready.

In-direct method

As Hornby points out, even though the early American method actors were rebelling against classical theatre, it was a theatre they had been raised on. By the time they began rebelling, they had already acquired background technique in speech and movement training (8). As the descendents of that generation turned to teaching, a distillation process seems to have occurred; the emotional aspects of the technique were elevated and the fundamental training took a back seat labeled "external".

To classify the realm of physical and vocal training as secondary is to overlook the vital connection between mind and body. It leaves the actor stuck in the belief that he/she must be experiencing something for an audience to perceive it. I have worked with actors who actually requested that I hit them in a scene because they couldn't stand doing anything "fake"; in the absence of any physically-grounded technique, they see placing themselves in jeopardy as the only alternative. Witness the famous story of Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman on the set of the film *Marathon Man*. Hoffman, when called upon to play an interrogation/torture scene, stayed up all night and didn't eat. When he arrived on the set, ragged, unshaven and baggy-eyed, a well-slept, but confused Olivier remarked "My dear boy, why don't you simply try acting?".

It is a humorous example of a cultural phenomenon: why do Americans not have traditional methods that allow for a sense of the 'theatrical'? "Contemporary Occidental [read: western] performers do not have an organic repertory of 'advice' to provide support and orientation", explains Barba, comparing the western approach with Asian traditional forms where performers have "a base of organic and well-tested 'absolute advice', that is, rules of art which codify a closed performing style"(8).

It becomes a problem when you consider exactly how often actors are employed; even the more successful actors spend most of their time looking for work. How does one keep in practice? Musicians have their scales; athletes stretch and lift weights. What does an actor do to prepare for the moment of encounter? My graduate training afforded me a unique answer to that question: you develop a daily discipline of codified physical exercises that encourage relaxation and develop a dynamic sense of balance and energy throughout the body. In short, you take Asian Stage Discipline with Phillip Zarrilli.

Stepping into Phillip Zarrilli's Asian Stage Discipline class is like entering another world - a world where Cartesian dualism does not exist. Using a combination of yoga, Tai Chi Chu'an (Wu style) and the Indian dance/martial art form Kalaripayattu, students engage their bodies in a daily workout similar to the musician's scales practice (thus the word 'discipline'). The class followed a repetitive structure: fifteen minutes of initial stretching, Tai Chi sequence, more aerobic kicking stretches and then Kalaripayattu sequences (meipayattu).

As a novice student, I was awestruck by the sight of Kalaripayattu; at the end of the first week of class, we were given a demonstration by students who had been studying for two or more years. Combining fluidity of motion and grace punctuated with staccato jumps and kicks, the experienced students appeared unaware of their own proficiency as they moved across the floor kicking their feet up to make contact with their hands over their heads with a strong "snap". Even

the simple moves of the Tai Chi had a grace that was mesmerizing; where before I had had acting teachers lead me through relaxation exercises that I quickly lost interest in and abandoned, here was something that seemed to have an athletic value in being practiced for its own sake.

The work inevitably begins in a fashion similar to the student's previous physical fitness training; given a task, he/she processes mentally, then throws him/herself into it fully. Frustration and a sense of failure abound. Entrenched in Western standards of success, students initially assume the intent of the exercises to be like previous physical challenges: kick your foot as high as this, even if you hurt yourself to do so. Again, if my description seems apt, it is because I expected that my goal was to kick so high, and often pushed too far. The irony here is that from our Western perspective, a goal is achieved by pushing, reaching, straining that extra inch or so; of course the result is that we tighten our bodies and thus cut-off the breath. To the Asian practitioner, however, the breath is the source of strength, originating in the center of the body, thus directly connected to the sense of balance and distribution of energy. It is a release in this area that unleashes the spirit of the performer. Those students who can not relinquish control of the bodies from their minds to their breath never get beyond mechanical repetition; they also never understand what the work has to do with performance.

When the repetition has caused the conscious mind to become bored enough to disengage and the body begins to move on its own, the student is learning what it means to act spontaneously, but is doing so with the support of technique. Coordinating a deep, centered breath, specific visual focus and the extra-daily balance of the codified Asian forms, the body learns to create the aura of grace and amazement on its own; to use Zarrilli's words, the daily repetition "encodes the techniques *in the body*" [emphasis his] (131). Instead of throwing myself into exercises thinking consciously "I want my body to move like that", eventually I was

able to initiate movement with an impulse that focused on each moment as it was happening and was connected to the breath.

By labeling this training 'In-direct method' I intend to point to the central conflict that Western performers have with training in general: we expect immediate results. The Asian performer, on the other hand, is seen as being on a path, a long-term process where the training encompasses the entire life (Zarrilli, 132). Zarrilli states, "It is only when the fundamental techniques of practice which constitute the given discipline have been so well embedded into the neophyte's body that such techniques are a part of his body-consciousness, ready-at-hand to be used at any moment, that the student is ready for higher stages of development"(132). Barba asserts,

"Training does not teach how to act, how to be clever, does not prepare one for creation. Training is the process of self-definition, a process of self-discipline which manifests itself indissolubly through physical reactions"(Zarrilli, 1994, 10).

The mimicry of the initial repetition eventually gives way to "a reconstruction enlivened by proficiency"(Zarrilli, 133). It is the connection to and focus on the breath, deep and centered, that brings about this proficiency and makes the mechanical physical forms "live with presence"(Zarrilli, 142).

For me, my body had always been an enemy, not an ally, in my expression. Overweight through most of my childhood, and teased because of it, my body always was obstacle; it could not communicate the person I was on the inside to the outside world. Even as I matured, and puberty brought a welcomed change in metabolism, I seemed always a bit uncomfortable in my body. I retreated to my mind, where things were much safer. When I did communicate with the outside world, it seemed strained, stressed; I was concerned with how the message was going to come across.

Asian Stage Discipline challenged this Cartesian block, by virtue of the fact that the work is neither wholly athletic nor mental - it is action that engages the bodymind, as Zarrilli says; the whole spiritual existence of the actor. Now that I have been practicing the Asian work for three years, the affect on my body of these techniques, the strength derived from grounded breath, the connection of inner and outer focus to the specific gesture/action, is effortless within the moment of action. The body does not rule the performance, nor is it a hindrance. The trap of American realism is that the body is perceived as having to conform to the psychological path of the performer. But, in fact the mind is focused on the body, emotion fills the body with the breath, instead of staying isolated in the mind. The process of thought-action-reaction, or, to use my earlier terms, the shift between stasis and experience, happens at lightning speed. It is a feeling of true joy, for one who is so often concerned with his expression, to arrive at the place where you know the form enough to trust that it will be there and you can just leap into the moment of action with abandon.

It felt that for the first time my body was learning on its own, without having the mind translate it first. For years, acting teachers had been talking about energy; doing the Asian work I came to realize that energy was created by tension between two opposing forces (Barba, 10). Observing or practicing oriental forms one can see in them an opposition to daily forms of balance [natural balance]; Barba asserts, "This deformation of daily body technique, this extra-daily technique, is essentially based on an alteration of balance. Its purpose is to create a condition of permanently unstable balance"(Barba, 34). We see that even a slight alteration in the manner of use of one part of the body has repercussions on the balance of the whole; thus a slight alteration creates a new, visually interesting physical dynamic (Barba, 36). "The performer's dynamic balance", says Barba,"based on the body's tensions, is a balance in action: it generates the sensations of movement in the spectator even when there is only immobility"(40).

Words as Movement

This stylized opposition of physical form makes sense for the Asian-based arts which center on dance and the creation of images; Western drama belongs to the word. Many students abandon the Asian stage discipline work because they do not see how it translates into performance; however, it is the same attitude that has kept even Western methods, such as voice training, on the margin. It would seem that to some actors, anything that appears as 'technique' is empty of feeling and therefore unnatural.

The illusion is that natural is truer; the method was brought to prominence in America through the drama of Clifford Odets, noted for bringing "street language" to the stage; Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and many others were lauded for their rough-edged delivery. The message to young actors was clear: what will make you notable are those habits that are truly YOU. However, while this may be very effective in works written in the American Method Realism vein, where the hiding of emotion, the modern in-ability to connect with people, is key; what about the same actor picking up Shakespeare? Moliere? Tony Kushner?

Play texts like these require a transparency of emotion that our own habits do not allow. We have in fact been conditioned to hide; to return to my quote of Olivier earlier, "the child finds it easy". As Freud noted, in early infancy known as the Oral phase, the baby begins to understand that there are things outside of itself that bring pleasure; these things respond to its release of breath through voice (Hornby, 40). Richard Hornby adds, "Tests have shown that the infant in his earliest experimentations with speaking can make all possible phonemes (the smallest distinguishable units of sound in a given language) in all known languages"(40). Linklater agrees, pointing out that language begins as grunts, guttural, sexual

impulses(11):"The beauty of a vowel. . .lies in its intrinsic musicality, its sensuality, its expressiveness"(13).

However, Hornby notes, "Gradually, the reward/punishment system is internalized in a mechanism of repression"(41); the infant represses the sounds it used to make so easily. Hornby goes on to make a stand (as he often does) for integration:

"This is the reason that speech training for the actor, and dialect work in particular, must be intergrated with regular actor training. There are far more important objectives in teaching speech to actors than audibility or correctness. When speech is conceived of as a mere external, a means of projecting nonverbal emotional experiences that are supposed to take place inside the actor first, the results are hollow"(43-4).

The austerity of the Asian Discipline room provided an apt background for Graduate Voice Training with Karen Ryker. The work was similar in terms of its intense focus, but where the Asian involved my mind with the task of copying an outer form, the Voice work brought me inside, to try and find a "true" impulse that was not a shadow of an expected outcome.

The voice was viewed as being a product of the whole body, and therefore attention was paid to the same considerations of balance, breath and focus. Ryker's teaching borrowed from Kristin Linklater, Cicely Berry, Michael McCallion, Arthur Lessac, F.M. Alexander, her students, and her own intuitive inspiration. The main goal was the removal of the old habitual patterns of voice production, what Judith Leibowitz, renowned Alexander teacher, refers to as "inhibition"(44). This required the students to develop an extra-daily awareness of their bodies in the act of vocalizing, then create strategies to replace the habits with healthier patterns.

This models the process of F. Matthias Alexander; note that his technique was developed by himself through intense personal examination, aimed at the goal of improving a fault by addressing the body wholistically rather than simple "quick fix" of the specific area (Leibowitz, xvii). The backbone of Voice class was

Alexander's set of verbal/mental directions: "Let my neck be free", "Let my head go forward and up", "Let my torso lengthen and widen", "Let my legs release away from my torso", "and let my shoulders widen"(Leibowitz, 49). Notice the importance of "let": there is no conscious muscle engagement. Again, here, as with the Asian work, the actor seeks a state where the body responds effortlessly.

Self-analysis would reveal those places where tension in the muscles was cutting off the flow of breath and energy along the body; by receiving hands-on massage or using the Alexander directions, and dropping the breath deep into center, we would gradually release the tension, or displace it to another area of the body. Tension is not so much removed as it is managed. The intention was not to create the illusion of a 'cure' for the students, but to develop strategies for dealing with tension when it arises, in the moment.

In exercises and workshops, Ryker would encourage repetition with twists; that is, saying the same line over again but with a different impulse, or in a different pitch, or stressing the consonants or vowels, and so on. What this work reveals is that, just as one can create a visual image, or use an emotional memory to trigger a vocal impulse, that the experience of vocalizing, in turn, feeds emotional impulses back into the body.

The relaxation portion of the class would be followed by action; using random phrases, memorized or read from sheets, we would throw words out into the space, at each other, and to the world beyond the walls of the room. Over time, I came to sense the difference between an impulse that was forced and pressed from the chest/shoulders and one that was coming freely from deep down below. I also became aware as to how, like in Asian, my body was able to learn on its own. States of relaxation and release, once felt, could be recreated when needed. For example, one of Ryker's verbal directions in class had been to imagine yourself floating in a pool of water; this image was intended to provoke a free, weightlessness in the body. One afternoon, on my own, I floated vertically in my pool; the verbal/mental

instruction Ryker had given in class before connected with actual experience. As I sit here typing this, I can recall the floating ease and sensation of buoyancy.

The deeper impulse, being connected to the emotional center, is subject to the same chaotic shifts under distress; it therefore becomes important to create the equivalent effect when re-producing a character's distress. What I discovered was that, as mentioned earlier, it is the novice actor's habit to stick to the attractor, the initial impulse for a moment of the play. Vocally this means that he/she will try to lay this quality over the words; an entire line, perhaps all the lines in the play, will have the same sound because the actor feels "this is what the character sounds like". A result is that rather than, in Cicely Berry's words, using the text as the character's thoughts in action (11), the actor usually plays the end of the line. In short, the voice betrays the **destiny** of the character. Imagine an actor playing Hamlet who decides that the journey of the character is that he fails. That could be considered an accurate account of where we find him at the end of the play. But, if you are playing Hamlet, you can't play failure; you have to play someone who is trying like hell to fix what is rotten in the state of Denmark. The lines have to lift and carry from one thought to the next in order to show Hamlet's attempt to search for some thought that will make sense of what is happening around him.

Nothing bores an audience more than knowing the outcome of the character's situation; even if they know the plot, have read the play, seen it before, etc, they can remain engaged if they are engaged by the struggle. What keeps them engaged is the shift between chaos and normalcy. This connects back to Uta Hagen's comments about trauma: the audience is captivated by watching a character come to grips, attempting to understand the impact of events. This is shown in voice: it is the shifts in tone, pitch, and volume that reveal distress. It is these shift which maintain an audience's attention.

By way of example, or analogy, let me describe the opening moment to the film *Casablanca*. The movie opens, as do most movies, with the logo of its

producing company. There is usually a musical theme that goes with the logo; or some begin the movie's theme music under so that the logo is a visual symbol appearing briefly, and then we go into the story at hand. *Casablanca* is an example that falls somewhere in between; the studio logo is underscored by a triumphant version of the French national anthem. Only the first phrase is played, but interestingly as I sat there humming along with it, I missed a note; where the song would normally fall to a note of resolution at the end of a phrase (le jour victoire est arrive' . . .), this version lifted the note to a sharp, contrasted with an impending tuba baseline. This segued into the actual movie theme.

This struck me so sharply because in Voice class so much emphasis has been put on "not abandoning the last word" and "following the thought through into the next". Here, the producers had made a choice to strengthen the ending of the musical phrase, thus catching the attention of the audience by surprising them, lending the victorious song a morbid, forboding air, and allowing the phrase to carry us right into the main action, having been properly put into a state of suspense by virtue of sound.

It can be seen as an interesting tool for the performer: lifting the end of a phrase, going in fact against the grain of inflection, gives the audience an unexpected sound as a hook into the next, building moment. The actor must produce the equivalent; this can be accomplished simply by changing pitch and tone line by line or word by word. This is awkward for us; we tend to assume that transitions must be smooth. Most of our pitch explorations have been scales; smooth and gliding. But in chaos, things can shift from state to state without passing through each state in-between. Gleick borrows Benoit Mandelbrot's term, "The Noah Effect", to explain **discontinuity**: "when a quantity changes, it can change almost arbitrarily fast"(92-3) By way of example, he notes how economists traditionally projected price changes happened smoothly, passing through each

successive number on its way to a new high, but in reality "Prices can change in instantaneous jumps"(93).

This is the reality of many characters' lives. For instance, I once worked on Tom's monologue in Scene Two of *The Glass Menagerie*, a famous and overdone piece that attracts novice actors by virtue of its cathartic, raw emotional context: you get to yell at mother. In my performance, I fell into the trap of the piece and rode the angry impulse all the way. Several years later, while coaching another novice actor who had fallen into the same trap, I pointed out the possibility that in the second part Tom seems to switch to sarcasm; could it be that the situation has become so absurd that he has given up trying to convince Amanda, and he starts to toy with her? "But he's angry", the student said. "Yes", I replied, "but his anger comes from the fact that his mother is so thick she can't see how much he has given for the family. Somewhere in there is a place where he begins treating her like the child; he doesn't have to yell because he sees his mother as stupid, someone he can talk down to". What happened to the piece because of my insight, and the willingness of the student to try it, is that we found many different colors vocally and emotionally; the anger he thought about at first was still there, but it was where it was supposed to be - at the end - and sprung naturally out of the failure of all the attempts to get Amanda to understand.

Chaos creates information; each new piece of data must be dealt with since you never know where the stream will remain constant. "The more random a data stream", says Gleick, "the more information would be conveyed by each new bit"(256). Chaos is in fact, according to Gleick, the creation of information; as a system exhibits chaos, by virtue of its unpredictability, each new event, piece of data, becomes a new clue as to the nature of the thing (260). Likewise, the actor engages his/her audience by using lines to reveal information, each new phrase or line evolving from the moment before, but leading to someplace perhaps unpredictable.

These transitions can be useful for an actor's vocal health as well. Our vocal training was augmented by anatomical considerations thanks to Bruce Poburka, a speech pathologist. During one of Bruce's lecture/demonstrations I was struck by his comments about the importance of nasal breathing; air, in the nose, is warmed and moistened, thus it protects the vocal folds more as it passes them on the way to the lungs. It had been a goal of mine to retrain my breath to do that naturally because one of my problems is dry mouth (one of the worst things that can happen to an actor on stage, several feet from the nearest liquid source); it happens during periods in which I am very vocally active. What I noticed is that once my breath accelerated for a particular, high-emotional moment, it became a habit and inspiration would continue to happen through an open mouth. Actors must allow themselves to change gears emotionally and physically, moving from an intense moment of emotional height (where breathing is quick, through the mouth, exposing the vocal folds) to a state that is visibly still heightened and emotionally engaged but is physically healthier (where the breath inspires through the nose to keep it warm and moist, and the muscles relax to let the vocal folds rest and the breath flow easily in and out).

Chaos as Teacher

Judith Leibowitz asserts that there is no way to experience a new, healthy habit without first inhibiting the old, detrimental one (45). She notes that both giving and withholding consent for an impulse are active states ; that is, changing a habit can begin with a conscious choice to not let your body respond in its old way (46). Both the Asian Discipline and the Vocal Training allow for self-analysis to uncover these habits, and then replace them by installing a new focus for the body. They both also use what educational psychologist Guy Lefrancios calls the 'fatigue method', whereby a stimulus is presented again and again at such a rapid rate that

the person tires with responding in turn with the undesired response, and eventually opts to either not respond or respond in a new, different manner (26).

A teacher's central job is not to implant a technique but to rather encourage freedom which allows old, protective habits to be abandoned, which in turn will allow the new techniques to take root on their own. The teacher should remember educational psychologist Edward L Thorndike's law of effect: responses that occur just prior to a satisfying condition being reached are more likely to be stamped-in [reinforced] than those occurring before an annoyance, which are more likely to be stamped-out (Lefrancios, 27). Director William Ball instructs directors to give their actors freedom because only when they feel safe and free will you get their best work. That means accepting things that you don't agree with in some cases, and allowing the actor to explore a path instead of steering him/her from it; says Ball, "Even when the idea seems to be completely unworkable, a mature director can live with it for a few days, because a bad idea will eventually fall out of orbit by its own weight"(16).

The trick is to let the student teach him/herself. Experience will speak to the student's body directly, much louder than words. That is one reason why I have always found Cicely Berry's techniques so useful; they create a metaphorical physical experience for the words to ingrain vocal impulses and rhythms in the body; like walking between pieces of paper on the floor on each punctuation to see how emphasis and meter works; or setting up a physical struggle analogous to the mental struggle of the text (not unlike the work my friends and I undertook in the ESG).

Linklater also engages the student's body with exercises that focus on the physical experience of individual vowel and consonant sounds and eventually whole words in an attempt to find where the impulse for those sounds lie in the body. Both agree to the need for text analysis and the need for any performance to be preceded by simple vowel work and breath release; but where Linklater seeks to uncover what is already there, hidden under years of conditioning, Berry seeks to

create new experiences by finding a physical metaphor and putting the body under those conditions.

While studying in London, in the fall of 1989, I was fortunate to catch a workshop with Cicely Berry at the Almeida Theatre on the occasion of her production of *King Lear*. In this workshop, led by Berry with members of the RSC who were in her cast, I was impressed with how little talking she did; a very small lecture on her process was followed by lengthy exercises in which all were encouraged to participate; she loves to listen. At one point, she asked for a volunteer and I decided to be bold enough to raise my hand.

Giving me a copy of *Lear*, she told me to read Edgar's speech, but while I was doing so there would be four people surrounding me and trying to capture me; my job was to escape. By putting four other participants in opposition to me, chasing me all over the Almeida, I was embodying the meaning of Edgar's words ("I heard my name proclaimed and by the happy hollow of a tree, 'scaped the hunt") as I was speaking them; as I was experiencing them. Afterwards, she asked me to share what I went through, and I said that I felt my breath flowing very freely because I needed it to escape, and that because of that I felt the words were going somewhere, they were active, trying to affect the bodies around me.

An actor must look for a correlating situation and attempt to put the words into action under those conditions. By doing this he/she will implant fresh, new impulses that are by their nature connected to the life of the character. This is especially necessary when our own past is void of experiences like those of the character. But even if we have undergone something similar, though American Method Realism would tell us that remembering that image is enough, that image/memory is made richer by finding a physical corollary.

In my scenework I have aimed to fulfil this need for myself. When working the Malcolm/Macduff scene from *Macbeth* (IV, iii), my partner and I decided to spend a rehearsal immersed in darkness, the room lit by a single candle; this created

the visceral experience of being in a private, secluded chapel where these two mistrusting souls might converse about Macbeth. The atmosphere fed our creative choices; in the dark I became less aware of bodies and more aware of voices moving back and forth between them; I listened better. We used broadswords to add the element of danger; when Malcolm makes his last effort to threaten Macduff, to in effect test his loyalty, I pulled the sword on him and placed it on his throat; the blade became an extension of my body into his, so that I imagined my words were sharp, glistening, pointed.

Similarly, in the rehearsal process for *Richard III* (I, ii), rather than lingering on creating my own individual physical shape (Richard is classically played with various physical deformities), my partner and I tried to create a physical relationship between Richard and Anne. First, we used the coffin as an obstacle to circle around, as two animals or boxers in a ring would, dancing around each other before striking; then progressing so that it became the bed upon which I try to mount her. Through this experimentation we decided that instead of playing Richard as a manipulative, arrogant man who seduces Anne as a power play, the scene was richer if Richard really wanted Anne. This meant that over the course of the scene it became a case of "how far would he go?". Later, when he is really desperate, my partner and I tried having Richard grab for Lady Anne and press his face to her belly; the image of this desperate man in love juxtaposed with Anne's disdain of being touched by a murderer was chilling. The experience of touching my partner gave me a specific tactile experience as a springboard for the line "Never came poison from so sweet a place". In this sense, the scene challenged me as an actor: "how far can I go to convey this character?". It was important for me to check-in with my partner about moments that required close physical contact, so that I was sure they were moments of assault for Anne and not for the actor.

Of course, there is danger here as well; one must not let the scene become about "business"; externals are used only to motivate vocal impulses. Berry stresses

that we must not feel the need to add action at the expense of the language, but rather realize that "the words are themselves a movement" (24); each moment is something to be lived in, and you must resist the impulse to entertain or get to the end of your line, or you will miss creating "the thought in action through the words as they are spoken" (23).

Berry and Linklater are not contradicting one another; I see Berry's work as an extension of Linklater's. Actors need extensive freeing of old vocal patterns with Linklater's vowel and word explorations to prepare them, make them a clean slate as it were; and this is perhaps a good habit to repeat going into each new production; with each new character you do, in essence, have to reinvent yourself. But when the actual rehearsals begin, Berry's technique becomes most valuable for finding the metaphors of physical action in the text as a springboard to vocal expression.

Both agree that above all you must serve the words. The words are the play, it is the experience of them that you must convey to the audience; that means fully living in each one in its moment of creation - even exposition must have an immediate life - and having a voice free enough to allow the text to take you to those new places. Staging the voice, or "choreographing" the text is dangerous; so is demanding of yourself that you have every intention pre-selected. That's the thrill of acting; you must go out there on the edge where it is not all safe. As Olivier puts it, "if you're practiced, rehearsed and thoroughly versed, you have something to offer. You know what the lines are about, but you haven't waited for the final, ultimate way of saying them or handling a single moment. . . take care of the play and let genius take care of itself " (26).

The central aim of any training program should be to prepare actors for the moment to come. Students who view vocal and physical training as mere externals having nothing to do with their inner emotional realm will still be able to leap into the void, but they might find their acting stiff, tense and limited. The path to true virtuosity is a twisted, difficult, sometimes sordid one. An actor must train the

whole body; Asian Discipline in-body techniques, though seemingly un-connected to a western actor's predicament, will blend with Voice Training and in-directly assist the actor in the moment, in ways that might not be readily visible, but will reveal themselves when he/she steps back to view the whole canvas.

Chapter Three: Playing with Noise

"flowers grow out of dark moments"
- Corita

"There are some enterprises in which a
careful disorderliness is the true method"
- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

"It is the imperfections of life that
are loveable."
- Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

I can think of no better explanation of the predicament of the artist, than James Gleick's description of the predicament of the scientist:

"Theorists conduct experiments with their brains. Experimenters have to use their hands, too. Theorists are thinkers, experimenters are craftsmen. The theorist needs no accomplice. The experimenter has to muster graduate students, cajole machinists, flatter lab assistants. The theorist operates in a pristine place free of noise, of vibration, of dirt. The experimenter develops an intimacy with matter as a sculptor does with clay, battling it, shaping it, and engaging it"(125).

This is the reality of the theatre; no theory or method can exist in a vacuum. It must stand the test of the realities of production; it must fit with all the other considerations an actor must encounter: sets, lights, costumes, other actors, style of the play, production schedule, fatigue, stress of daily life; in short, it must allow that performer to deal with the random **noise** he/she encounters.

Gleick notes that scientists tend to want their models to both emulate nature and be simple. "The choice is always the same", he says, "you can make your model more complex and more faithful to reality, or you can make it simpler and easier to handle. Only the most naive scientist believes that the perfect model is the one that perfectly represents reality"(Gleick, 278). From an actor's perspective, this rings true in that the limitations of every production inevitably force you to compromise attention to one moment in favor of another. Some actions will reach a complexity

true to the nature of reality; other moments will perhaps fall short, be less focused, because of it.

No show ever has enough rehearsal time. It becomes important, therefore, to create what Hornby refers to as a "magic space" in rehearsals (78). That is, time being sparse and precious, both the director and actors must collectively create an shame-free atmosphere that is conducive to the kind of exploration I feel is necessary to move the characterization beyond habit or empty cliché. There must be what Hornby calls "artistic detachment", similar to exercises developed by Viola Spolin, whereby there is always a "'point of concentration,' 'a chosen agreed object (or event) on which to focus,' which transports the player, giving him [sic] energy, yet also provides artistic detachment"(80).

This detachment can occur in many ways; when playing Yepikhodov in a recent production of *The Cherry Orchard*, the closeness of the ensemble cast was a major factor in my ability to see the rehearsal hall as a playing space. The fact that I had a small role became an asset; it allowed me free time to play, experiment. The willingness of my cohorts, particularly the actors portraying Dunyasha and Yasha, to be flexible with the ways in which lines were interpreted allowed us to use rehearsal time to try affecting each other in different ways, instead of setting a pattern and sticking to it. This allowed all of our characterizations to move to a new level.

For instance, Yepikhodov is the bumbler, referred to by others as "twenty-two misfortunes". There have been plenty of productions where the actor has stuck to this attractor; a mopey, shy Yepikhodov results. My choice was that his "accidents" came not out of a lack of self-esteem, but rather because he had such energy for life that it distracted him at times. Another element that came out of experimentation rather than from text analysis was the relationship between Yepikhodov and Dunyasha. Since Dunyasha falls for the exotic, self-centered Yasha, it is easy to assume that she is weary of Yepikhodov's advances early in the play. In one production I saw, Yepikhodov's initial entrance, tripping and spilling flowers, was

played as an embarrassing incident that annoyed Dunyasha. But by improvising and creating our character's histories, the actor playing Dunyasha and I decided that it might be more interesting if Dunyasha and Yepikhodov actually liked each other, flirted with each other in fact. This would set in motion a relationship whereby Yasha's appearance would create more tension. We took this idea into rehearsal and put it to the test in playing the scenes. I found that it allowed me the option of playing Yepikhodov's intention to rise to the challenge and prove himself better than Yasha; again, even in knowing that ultimately he isn't, it is necessary to play as if trying like hell to be.

Yepikhodov's last line also provided a revelation. Towards the end of Act IV, when the family is packing to leave, the stage directions indicate that Yepikhodov, in response to Lopakhin, answers in a hoarse voice. Lopakhin asks him what happened to his voice, and Yepikhodov's response is "I drank some water a little while ago. I must have swallowed it wrong"(56). Again, on the surface, this is easily playable in the context of Yepikhodov as a bumbler; it is another case of 'pity me, I can't do anything right'. However, as the character grew, it seemed a shame to not allow him the full sense of humanity. When we were blocking the scene, the presence of the other characters saying goodbye to one another and the sight of the suitcases made me sad. What I came to realize was that Yepikhodov was very sad at the fact that everyone is leaving; what better way to cover-up that sadness than by trying to pass it off as another mistake. His broken voice was caused by tears, and the "glass of water" being "swallowed wrong" became a metaphorical reference in that the water had flowed out his eyes instead of into his throat. It became, in fact, a very vulnerable moment.

These moments, whether they happen in rehearsal and become tools for the rest of production, or happen in performance itself (sometimes unfortunately on closing night), are the best experience that theatre can offer. My two thesis roles, Orestes in *Iphigenia in Taurus* by Euripides and Carl in *The Baltimore Waltz* by

Paula Vogel, undertaken in the third year of MFA study, afforded many such moments.

Living in the body of Orestes

When one thinks of Greek characters, one usually conjures up images of Greek sculptures: large, muscular figures of great stature. It is quite a leap in imagination between myself and the archetypical male, mythic, tragic hero. It is not a role in which I'd be type-cast; I was privileged to have the chance, but it afforded me a unique dilemma. Was it my task to fit into shoes bigger than mine, portraying the size and athleticism of a muscle-bound male? Or, was it my task to show the reality behind the myth, portraying Orestes as a feeble, scrawny intellectual not up to the task of violence the Gods demanded?

Ultimately, the richest choice seemed to lie somewhere in the middle; I had the ability to bring a gentleness and vulnerability to the character; this role afforded me the opportunity to experience things more physically, as Orestes would have. Knowing my mind was fully capable of handling the logic, philosophic aspect of Greek culture (and indeed, Euripides was considered the most psychological playwright of the era), I immediately surmised that my greatest obstacle was my body. Orestes would require me to work with my body in a new way; to present a different kind of physical presence on stage. Orestes is a threat. Not a bully, but a potential threat. He is in training.

Having been involved in the Asian training on a regular basis, I realized that it would keep me loose, flexible graceful; as a performer I definitely need my body to be proficient in all that. But as Orestes, I needed more. Orestes need not be a He-Man, but at the age of eighteen, raised as the son of the King in a barbaric culture (one that was barbaric by necessity), his icons were men ten years older than he with backs as broad as the columns in the Parthenon. Men definitely had a specific

identity; masculinity was shaped by contest of strength; men's value was based on how hard they could work or provide or protect.

So, I committed myself to a daily double-dose: an hour and twenty minutes of the Asian discipline (stretching, Tai chi, kicking, aerobic dance) followed by a half-hour of weight-lifting. My first foray into the weight room at the SERF (the UW Gymnasium) was alienating. It is a world away from the formalized, contained, serene meditation of the Asian Discipline room. It was the analogy of Orestes' world. That first day I wrote in my journal:

I walk in and my eyes meet with a thousand anonymous points of skepticism; they are all looking at me. What am I doing here? Flabby, pear-shaped man of below-average height with a beard and glasses. They seem to say "you don't belong" silently as under the endless creaking of metal on metal as weights fly to and fro.

Placing my stuff in the corner I move about confused. Where to begin? This is so foreign; I have never worshiped the body like these men; I have never loved sweat, as they seem to; I have never flaunted my physique for the women doing free-weights ten feet away, as many of them do (one major difference - Orestes never would have had women training with him in his day and age). I always focused on the mind; I can probably quote more major authors than any of these guys, I think to myself, defensively. So what? That means nothing here. Here what counts is what you can put up-front, in the open. What will save your life if someone decides to lunge for you.

On the wall is a device that you pull handle grips on and you lift weights on a rack up against the stone. There is no way to adjust the weight on this machine, I just do my best. I find it hard and exciting. Instead of pulling the grips straight out in front of me, I find it easier for starters to push down. In my mind I create the image of Orestes pushing down on the Furies that are trying to reach him on his pedestal.

I observe another man using a device that is part of a large "machine" whereby a bar is attached by a cable to a stack of weights. Instead of just standing and pulling the bar to him, either in front for pectorals, or in back for upper shoulder blades, he kneels and then pulls the bar down to his chest. He leaves and I step up to try it, after a rather large decrease in the weight setting. I find the kneeling helps; this too is Orestes; this is Greek: under the weight of Fate, bearing the burden and not giving up the fight. Stress. Strain.

But productive stress. Strain that is a celebration of the ability of the human body to persevere. In these moments of lifting my brain becomes distracted by pain; this is un-comfortable not only because the weight is heavy, but also because I am not used to it. My mind is not

used to yielding to my body. In this distraction, my body is given true agency over itself, similarly to the way Asian has shaped my body's ability to just act, commit to movement without conscious design.

This is the life of Orestes; these are the experiences I need to put into my body [deposit in my kinesthetic memory].

My forays into the weight room brought a stress and strain that had to be overcome when it came to rehearsals; despite my physical profile of Orestes, as actor I still needed a fully relaxed, responsive vocal instrument for the muscularity of the Greek text. What I found was that Orestes' words required the equivalent of tension; we would never have believed the struggle of the character if there wasn't somehow a struggle in the attempt to vocalize it. This is due largely to the fact that the events are all in the past or off stage. At Orestes' second appearance he is bruised and bloody, having been beaten by the Taurian soldiers; immediately upon his entrance he and his friend, Pylades, are interrogated by Iphigenia, his sister; the two siblings, unknown to each other, engage in a verbal sparring match.

The circumstances of the character require portrayal of injury, but the predicament of the actor is that important information must be conveyed and energy maintained over the course of a very long scene. Using techniques acquired in Voice class, I experimented with deep, quick inhalations followed by slower, deep exhalations. Like the *belle courbe*, this mimics the physical reaction of the body under stress, in this case, specifically, having been punched and thrown. However, unlike the real circumstance, in which the quick inhalations would be part of the body's attempt to regain control of breathing, I never lost control of mine, and in fact used the inhalations as quick catch-breaths in-between phrases; during the exhalation I had plenty of breath to work with the musicality of the words.

The Greek text, like Shakespeare, challenges the actor's sense of variety; the actor must sustain energy and the audience's interest over the course of monologues that are several pages in length. Orestes has such a monologue; it was the bane of my performance. Part of this was due to the fact that I had worked it as an audition piece several months earlier, and I believe, against my own good advice,

that I developed a kind of attractor for that moment in the show; a comfort spot, if you will. Where perhaps I could have taken time to play with it more as I learned it, I had already memorized the text - and the intentions. To undo my original work, which had been constructed to fit the context of an audition, done solo, required rigorous, line-by-line analysis of the shift in thought. A saving grace was that I had a Pylades there from whose reactions I could draw impulse.

That particular moment always stuck out in my mind as a bit forced. Perhaps the reason I look back on it as such is because of a discovery made towards the end of the run. In the monologue, Orestes convinces Pylades to be saved and carry Iphigenia's letter home to Argos; in doing so, he tells Pylades how to carry on his name - by having a son with his sister and naming it after him.

The monologue ends with Orestes railing against Apollo, the God who instructed him to commit the matricide which led to his exile. The transition between the two sections was always so difficult, mainly because I saw it as a transition and not as a fluid flow from one thought to the next. Again, my training had prepared me to construct logic, and not how to deal with the illogical side of a character. One night, as I was saying goodbye to Pylades, I hugged him and, drawing him away from me, cupped my hands around his jaw and neck, instead of placing them on his shoulders, as had been my usual blocking. What happened was that some of the stage blood from one of his "injuries" streaked across my hand as I withdrew it; as I did so, I looked at it, and the image struck an impulse within me that motivated the jump to my anger towards the gods. It will always bother my on some level that I didn't think of that before; the older part of me that always relied on his cleverness says "Why didn't I think of that?"; the newer part of me will appreciate merely that when the moment occurred, my body was relaxed enough to "go with the flow". One can not always think before doing; sometimes the thinking must come from the doing.

It's the language that terrifies Me

Speech specialist Jane Martin notes that in the postmodern theatre, "speech has no function except to show its failure as a medium of communication/this fragmentation reveals an underlying feeling of helplessness and lack of contact between people" (31). It is this kind of fragmentation that confronts Anna as she tries to juggle medicalese in dealing with her brother's illness in Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*. The role of Carl offered me a unique challenge: playing a fragment of someone else's imagination. The action of the play, after all, takes place in Anna's mind; Carl is already dead; in fact, I think the action of the play takes place in the first milliseconds after Anna has heard that he is dead. It made me wonder "Who am I"; none of the traditional questions of identity would do. My attractor for Carl would have to be a kind of neutral: a balanced body and calm voice onto which I could add elements necessary for specific scenes.

Vogel's play is in that category of newer texts I mentioned earlier which create a fast-paced velocity with transitions that are almost cinematic. Anna and Carl's journey to Europe, which exists only in the mind, does not unfold in a simple linear form. Some scenes take up no more than half of a page in the text. Other scenes require Carl to either speak to the audience, or to play a neutral character to provide background, as in Scene 9 where the Third Man in the role of Public Health Official absurdly lectures the audience on precautions. In the opening sequence, Carl has a lengthy monologue which shows how he got fired from his library job at the San Francisco Public (an incident that Vogel assured me had really happened). It segues right into a three-person scene; in the transition, Anna repeats her line about being terrified about language, and Carl's next line reads as if it is from a language lesson book; it is in fact a motif that Vogel uses throughout the rest of the play to mark transitions between scenes and themes.

Immediately after this "language lesson", Carl and Anna interact with a Doctor; Carl learns that he has a terminal disease and within the blink of an eye Anna has taken on the disease herself. This required me to go from a moment of total deadpan to reacting to the news that I'm going to die to reacting that my sister is going to die. In each of these situations, the Method's "magic if" was useful to connect to the image of receiving a death sentence (something I had experienced myself and could therefore draw from directly), but the transitions between them were not smooth or realistic and therefore required a physical impulse.

My "language lesson" neutral was balance, blank faced and spoken in an over-pronounced, calm voice. While Anna delivered her next line ("But we decided to go when the doctor gave us his verdict"), I let the breath drop deep into me; when I responded to the Doctor's line "I'm sorry", I let the breath out quickly, raising my pitch to near the cracking point, which is what happens when I cry. Then I continued to take deep, heavy breaths and use my falsetto; the combination of the breath, cracked voice, and memory brought tears.

The transitions required a kind of neutral; their importance lay in not only maintaining the dream-world notion of learning foreign languages for the trip, but alluded to Anna's difficulty in dealing with medical terminology as well. They could also be used to hint to the audience some of the themes underlying what, on the surface, appeared to be simple, absurd comic bits. For instance, at the top of Scene 2, Carl says to the audience "Medical Straight Talk: Part One" (11). Knowing that the disease in the play, Acquired Toilet Disease or ATD, was a comment on the hysteria and homophobia surrounding AIDS, I decided to emphasize "Straight" just a bit, giving it a sarcastic edge.

It is a credit to Vogel that the relationship between the siblings is realistic: they fight. In scene 21, the Third Man leads the audience through a German lesson on the verb *verlassen* (to leave); the lesson provides a through-line in an ongoing fight regarding Anna's rampant promiscuity. The fight escalates rapidly over the

course of a page, and is cut-off with scene 22 in which Anna and Carl discuss their relationship with the audience. Out of this discussion the fight re-emerges and concludes. Both these scenes challenged me to arrive at emotional heights without much preparation. Initially, a strong vocal choice got me there, such as pumping up my volume, raising pitch and taking quicker catch-breaths; the inner, emotional connection followed as my body experienced the psychological changes. Once again, I could not rely on there being enough time for thought to precede action; my body had to be experiencing, thinking and reacting simultaneously.

The classroom as Laboratory

All of these examples of creative choices happened under the circumstances of production; in each case something outside myself provided the stimulus for a choice: another actor on stage, the director, the costume I wore, the mood of the lighting, the tone of incidental music; in other words, noise over which I had no control. This noise became useful because of the work habits I had acquired in that initial training ground: the classroom. It is difficult though, because most classrooms are far removed from the technical support, and lack the austerity of a darkened theatre full of audience waiting in silent anticipation. As a teacher, I asked myself "how do I provide the creativity that naturally arises in production in a classroom/workshop setting"?

Hornby prescribes, "Rather than planning out moves and speeches in a conscious, plodding fashion, the good actor lets that world work on him, searching for things that will become stimuli for interesting, apt behavior"(160). But here, Hornby falls into trap: he [actor] must not plan - but must be open to stimuli for "interesting, apt" behavior. What is apt? It implies a value judgement and therefore a censoring process. An acting teacher must realize that the students he/she teaches will inevitably be full of shame-based habits that keep their true

feelings guarded. It is the teacher's job to encourage them to open up, but he/she must be cautious of the way in which the work is critiqued, lest the analysis make the student feel that he/she needs to fulfill a specific expectation. What is apt must be what is right for the overall vision of the show; what communicates the richest meanings embedded in the text.

Lefrancios points out that "Our sensory systems are sensitive to an overwhelmingly wide range of stimulation. Clearly, however, they respond to only a fraction of all available stimulation at any given time"(58). The teacher's job is to focus the student on certain stimuli and help them find the importance in the scene. We are drawing it out of them, not prescribing it. This means it is very important for the student to always feel safe putting his/her stuff out there; negative reinforcement ("no, do it again"), though it still instigates action, will fail to create enthusiasm for the act (Lefrancios, 35). Positive reinforcement is what is needed; I don't mean that we should falsely praise students for work that falls short, but rather that we as teachers recognize that in the doing there was something to be gained: the knowledge of where the student needs to focus more.

In my class, T&D 150 The Fundamentals of Acting, I set that pattern for this kind of analysis from day one. My first class concluded with a "name-game" exercise aimed, so I told the class, at learning their names. What inevitably happens in this exercise, whereby each person adds their name to a growing chain, is that the students remember every name in the chain except the person sitting next to them. I point this out as an aspect of the body's reaction to a situation that is essentially performance (the situation after all involves performing a task in front of people): the mind freezes when it senses it is almost its 'turn'.

By bringing the discussion to whole class I avoid criticizing the individual who just made a mistake; more importantly, this concept of performance is tangible to them because it draws directly from something they have been doing. They are, in essence, teaching themselves. The teacher acts as guide, instigator, providing the

excuse to engage in action; once they go into action, the natural, chaotic interactions of their collective imaginations creates wonderful results. The process has felt, at times, very much like a puppet master who must instruct the marionette how to manipulate its own strings; or perhaps, more accurately, like a modern-day Giapetto who must explain to Pinocchio that he has no strings.

The teacher's best tool is chaos: by engaging the students in action the interaction of the students individual identities and the material will create something new. The student learns by virtue of trying, even if a performance has not been totally "successful". The important thing is that the work be critiqued as behavior/actions that the student has constructed. By focusing on behavior as a construction, the students will come to see themselves as separate from the act, distanced enough from it so that they will see it as only one option among many avenues they can pursue.

CONCLUSION: Leaving the Attractor

"after ecstasy, the laundry"
- Zen

"you know the notes, now please
forget them. . ."
- Pablo Casal

"But then comes the time for using
the rules and not being bound by
them. . .you can actually forget the
rules because they have been
assimilated."
- Joseph Campbell

Sanford Meisner said often "the foundation of acting is the reality of doing"(17). He never tried to teach his students tricks or gimmicks, but instead encouraged them to keep doing, keep trying, keep promoting action. He would explain to them "It's mechanical, it's inhuman, but it's the basis for something. It's monotonous, but it's the basis for something"(22).

Sydney Pollack, in his introduction to Meisner's book *On Acting*, exhorts his technique saying "I believe there are only a few people who can really teach the technique of acting. Most are well-read and intelligent, and confuse their ability to theorize and intellectualize about the subject with an ability to cause real growth in an actor"(xvi). Not only do I agree with this thought, it can be said to be the driving force behind this thesis.

By implementing Chaos Theory it has been my intention to promote teachers and students to do less *talking about* and more *doing*. It is to suggest that a student who feels safe from shaming judgement will be more willing to let the impulses fly, and that when this happens new possibilities are created. American Method Realism techniques are useful in building a history, a framework, for a character; but this framework will tend to close out other behavior that doesn't seem to fit its logic. Choices in the moment will tend to be repetitive. We do not need to limit

ourselves; what we should strive to do is to both create a safe space where actors are encouraged to let impulses out and promote mastery of techniques which create new impulses.

What lies in front of us is a void; an absence of events. Moment by moment we fill this void with behavior choices. We choose from among a given, learned set of actions, or by inventing new combinations among what we already know. The choices are shaped by our needs and circumstances; they lead to moments of action that pass us in succession and become history.

Author and teacher Esther Beth Sullivan wrote "theatre is often a collaborative and collectivizing endeavor which displays both a will to act and a will to transform experience for the purpose of critical analysis"(140). What I find useful in that description is "to transform experience"; we need actors to give us new options, expand our behavioral choices. Director Liz Diamond says:

"I think American actors are more adventurous than we give them credit for being. I find American actors are dying to embrace theatricality, are dying to embrace more heightened performance forms. It's true that our training for actors - and for directors by the way - doesn't really encourage us to approach these plays any differently. The tools we have are still largely Stanislavskian, methodological tools, and I have found that those are quite limited... I think that what we need are actors who see themselves as artists engaged in a dialogue with their audience. Actors who read the newspaper, go to museums, see art. People who see their craft in the larger context of the cultural debate in the country. There may be some moments in which actors find it useful to think about their own personal psychological connection to what a given figure in a play is going through. By the same token, there are times when you have to say 'subtext doesn't exist in this text. I absolutely do not know anything beyond what these words give me, and I have to trust that and I have to make the language fly'"(Pearce, 38-9).

I believe Diamond is calling for the same transformation of experience; she also notes that actors need and want transformation in their training. She recognizes a need for a wholistic approach: the actor should be well-rounded, able to deal with Method Realism where it is useful, and able to go beyond playing subtext

when not. In short, we seek to create a generation of actors who are adaptable; whose training gives them command of all the intricacies of the body. This physical discipline will give rise to emotional connection, making the inner world of the actor transparent in the moment of performance.

The western focus is on the "me". How many times have we heard actors say "I just don't feel it", or "that's not the way I see him", or read about the self-absorbing, in-depth analysis of one's past. These practices put the actor in a possessive mode; "I have to play it as I feel it", "It's my moment", "I know he wouldn't behave that way", etc. This possessiveness extends into career: actors are perceived as serving themselves, working to build-up their resume, auditioning to get the "big break", spending thousands of dollars marketing themselves as commodities.

In the acting classroom we strive to over-come these habits; to expand the range of behavior. When challenged in certain ways, our bodies respond in ways that are unpredictable but magical. We strive to expand our communicative range to be able to deal with various types of text demands. In our effort to connect to the words of the playwright it is necessary to deal with the basic questions of identity. Once such an attractor has been formulated, we must test it, challenge it, not be afraid to leave it, momentarily, knowing that it is always there to come back to.

If there is one lesson to be gleaned from this opus by both actors-to-be and humanity at large, it is this: we must have the courage to leap. Jane Martin explains that post-modern texts highlight the spaces between us, saying, "this fragmentation reveals an underlying feeling of helplessness and lack of contact between people - an indication of the state of the world which we have allowed to exist"(31). Thus, the void is not only the future, the unknown events, but the gap that exists between us; between my subjective experience of living and yours; the gap we try to bridge in theatre. In order to do so we must leap into that void together with courage, both you and your scene partner and you and your audience. While we remain isolated

and silent, accepting only input, we are susceptible to the whims of those who construct the input (commercialized images of human experience, life framed as a commodity). Often times we find ourselves on the outside of what is deemed "acceptable" or "successful" or "attractive". Only by giving voice to our thoughts, our subjective experience, and therefore making our opinions active, can we be counted, and thus bridge the gap between us.

By taking risks and stepping beyond the circumstances of our present and past experiences, our collective cultural attractors, we find the solutions already awaiting our problems; solutions that remain hidden among the endless combinations of the matter we already possess, but have left unexplored. We must abandon labels. We must provide for ourselves the challenge to meet every moment of action, every inter-action with another being or object with a fresh, unbiased and impulsive response; and we must allow each of our loved ones, friends and neighbors the unconditional support and space for them to have the same explorations, without shame.

We must seek to leap; with patience, courage, caution, whimsy, delight, and loving abandon out into the void that is the possibility of tomorrow.

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