

Portfolio

ON PRESENCE

- A I have a question.
(silence)
Can stage presence be produced?
(short silence)
I mean, is it a craft and thus something that can be learned? Or is it a quality which is given to some actors and absent in others?
Is it a matter of *having* or *not having* it? Or can you develop stage presence and actually train and produce or construct it?
- D Whom are you asking that question?
- A Everyone present.
(silence)
- S Shall I start?
- D Please do.
(laughs)
- S So, if I understand correctly, your question is not about the notion of presence in general but very particularly about the presence of the actor?
- A Yes.
- S Well, in most discourses about the presence of the actor that I encountered, I noticed there are at least two different ways to think about the notion of *presence*. In the first, presence is often associated with the French word *présence*, which is considered to be a specific and particular quality that a specific and particular person *has*. It has to do with *charisma*, with *personality*, with aura and it is acknowledged to be an innate property. You are born with it. You have been *given* it. You *have* it. Or not.
(laughs)

Consequently, this nature of presence cannot be trained. It is a passive and an arbitrary quality. As an actor, you cannot construct nor produce it.
(*short silence*)

According to the second view on the notion of presence, stage presence is considered to be the *active* ability of an actor to attract the immediate attention of the spectator. Here, stage presence is acknowledged to be a craft. You can learn how to recognize it, how to *reveal* and develop it through specific and different methodologies, principles and techniques. So yes, you can train it. Or maybe I should say that you *must* train it, it is not given to you. It requires an intense training process before you can produce or construct it.

(*short silence*)

Being an actor student, I am in the middle of this compelling and demanding process of revealing my own stage presence, so I most certainly hope that after my training I will be able to answer your question with a firm: 'Yes, stage presence can be produced.'

(*doesn't laugh*)

D I would like to tell a little story to answer your question, A. It's about Marilyn Monroe. She obviously had a mesmerizing *présence* and a lot of charisma. People say she was very *gifted*. She was, indeed.

(*laughs*)

But then again, I think that she developed and constructed that quality very *actively* during her whole life and career. When you asked your question, A, it reminded me of an anecdote from one of the many documentaries about Monroe's life. I forgot its title, I'm sorry... One day Monroe went shopping with a friend in a very busy shopping centre. Monroe wore a scarf and sunglasses in order not to be recognized. Nobody bothered them; nobody noticed that Monroe was there. At some point Monroe asked her friend: "Do you want me to be her?" Her friend, not really knowing what she meant, answered: "Well yes, why not?" Monroe did not take off her glasses or her scarf, she didn't change anything visible, but all of a sudden she was recognized by numerous passers-by. People instantly called her, exclaiming: "Oh my God, it is her! Marilyn Monroe!"

(laughs)

The friend testified that it was as if Monroe – and I remember exactly how she said it – ‘put on the light’. Something *inside* her changed so sensibly that it looked like she was *lightning* up, like she was *glowing*. She had this special kind of energy that attracted everyone around her. It seemed like she could deliberately and instantly switch on that *light button*. She actively and literally constructed and produced her presence, right there and then in the streets of Manhattan.

- A You could say that it is amazing what Monroe did there in the streets of Manhattan but isn't it also just a strategy we all know from our daily life? I mean, I think we all know how to switch *off* the *light button*, don't we?

(short silence)

No?

(short silence)

Let me speak for myself.

(laughs)

I think I can say I have a rather explicit figure. For as long as I can remember, I often notice people staring at me. In the course of the years I deliberately developed a strategy to be less visible, to be less present. I know how to be absent. I could say that I know how to switch *off* the light. I notice that when I do that, people do not look at me. So it works. I think that most of us, for very different reasons, know some strategies to be less visible, to be *absent*. We use them for very banal reasons too. If, for instance, we see someone walking in our direction but we don't feel like seeing or talking to that person at that very moment, we all know how to act to be less visible and less present. But then again, it is true that some of us are better at acting like this than others.

(laughs)

But what I am trying to say is that if you know the strategy to switch *off* the light, you probably know the strategy to put it on as well. If you know what to do to be absent, then maybe you know what to do to be present as well, don't you?

- S I doubt whether it is that simple. I recognize the kind of strategies you describe and I also use them from time to time, but I think that we use them unconsciously. I don't think that we actually *know* what we are doing or that we know *how* we are doing what we are doing. Like you said yourself, A, they are strategies that we use in daily life. In my opinion the production and construction of presence on stage is an entirely different kind of presence, which needs another kind of knowing and another level of consciousness in order to be able to produce it.
- A Yes. I agree.
(*short silence*)
- T Yes.
Maybe we should have another look at your initial question, A.
'Can stage presence be produced?'
(*short silence*)
We see the words 'stage presence' joined together, as well as the verbs 'can be produced'. Let us focus on the notion of *stage presence* and attempt to discuss *what* it is and then try to describe *how* stage presence *can be produced*. Presuming that it can be produced, of course.
(*laughs*)
During this conversation I already heard the terms *présence, charisma, personality, attention, aura, energy, glow* and *light*. If we were to make free associations on the concept of 'stage presence', I am sure we would encounter still a few other terms.
- A Maybe we should do that?
- D Yes, why not?
- T (*laughs*)
Yes, why not?
- A Appearance, power, persuasion, attraction, appeal.

1 C. Power (2008). *Presence in Play. A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*. New York: Editions Rodopi.

- D Puissance, physicality, sensuality.
- A 'It', IT-factor, X-factor.
(laughs)
- D Live-ness, life, unmediated, direct, actual.
- A Immediate.
- D Virtuoso, virtuosity, magical.
- A Aura.
- D We already said that.
- A Radiant, radiance, chemistry, magnetism, magnetic, mesmerism.
- A Spirit, spiritual.
- D Divine, divinity, supernatural.
- A Primal, animal, spontaneity.
- D Surprising, unpredictable.
- S Being present, here, now.
(silence)
- T Yes.
I have read Cormac Power's *Presence in Play*.¹ And although he mainly and extensively describes how presence in theatre has been *theorised*, he also offers a very useful and clear framework for our conversation, which focuses more on the *practical* aspect of presence in theatre. Cormac Power differentiates between three different *modes* of presence in theatre:

2 Power, 2008: 15.

1. The *fictional* mode of presence or the *making-present*.
2. The *auratic* mode of presence or the *having-presence*.
3. The *literal* mode of presence or the *being-present*.

(short silence)

During actors training, rehearsals in studios, performances as well as in moments of reflection, most of us highly appreciate and quite often focus on the *here-and-now aspect* of theatre. But which *here and now* are we in fact talking about? Is it the here and now of the *drama*, the *fictional* here and now? Or do we talk about the here and now of the *theatre*, the *literal* here and now?

A Are you pointing out the difference between the here and now of, for instance, Hamlet in Denmark in front of the castle in the middle of the night and I, as an actor playing Hamlet in a specific theatre on stage at 8 pm?

T Yes. Cormac Power uses that very same example, A. He asks:

(says it by heart)

“Are we in the imaginary presence of Hamlet at Elsinore, or in the real ‘live’ presence of actors on stage?”²

A I would say that we are present in the presence of the imaginary Hamlet and the real ‘live’ actor *simultaneously*. But Cormac Power asks his question from the perspective of the spectator. From my perspective as an actor I think that it is my job to make the audience believe that Hamlet is there in Denmark in the middle of the night and that I am there as well, with the audience, in that particular theatre on that particular time.

S I really don’t think an actor’s job is *to make* an audience *believe* that Hamlet is in Denmark during that specific night. Nobody with a little common sense will ever *believe* that Hamlet is actually there and in that place. Hamlet does not *really* exist. We all know that it is fiction.

- 3 The notion was coined in 1817 by the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He argued that a writer can write in such a distinctive way that the readers are willing to suspend their judgement whether or not the 'story' is plausible. Later on, the concept was often used to point out the specificity of theatre, in which an audience is willing to believe what happens on stage, notwithstanding the fact that they know it is not *truly* and *really* happening.

- A Exactly. I didn't say that people must literally believe it. I deliberately said that as an actor I have *to make* them believe it. Of course Hamlet is not *really* present on stage, but an actor has *to make* Hamlet present. An actor makes the fiction present.
- D Yes. For me, that is one of the most peculiar aspects of theatre. If an actor says: "Look at this castle" while pointing at nothing in the air, everyone in the audience can *see* a castle in their imagination.
- A Indeed. To accomplish this, the actor-spectator relation is crucial. An actor cannot make a fictional world present without the help of the audience. An audience must participate in the making-present. In fact, it is a tacit agreement between the audience and the actors on stage. A theatre audience is acquainted with the convention of drama, in which fictional worlds are constructed, in which fictional worlds are made present.
- D Yes. That is the whole idea of the *suspension of disbelief*,³ which is of course very common in theatre. The audience suspends their disbelief, they freeze or set aside their disbelief or their judgment about the implausibility of what is presented on stage. They are *willing* to believe it. Children are great at it, in the audience, but also while they are playing themselves. If they say or see someone saying: "I am a witch", they suspend their disbelief for as long as they are watching or playing. They know that they are not a witch or that they are not actually seeing a witch, but they deliberately believe they are for as long as the play(ing) lasts.
- A There is a long tradition of *installing* the fiction in theatre, for instance by knocking before the play begins, by dimming the lights, by opening the curtain, the distinction between the stage and the audience... All of these techniques invite the audience to enter a fictional world and to participate in the creation of the illusion.
(*says by heart*)

- 4 This fragment is from Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, Act 1, Prologue.
- 5 P. Brook (1996). *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 139.
- 6 Brook, 1996: 140.
- 7 Brook, 1996: 140.
- 8 Brook, 1996: 140.

“Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide on man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i’ the receiving earth;
For ‘tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there; jumping o’er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.”⁴
(laughs)
Henry V.

- T Peter Brook also talks about the idea that “the making present will not happen by itself ” and that “help is needed”.⁵ On the last pages of *The Empty Space* he writes that there is one French term that stands out “for those who watch, for public, for spectator”, namely: assistance. In French when you say: “I watch a play”, you can say: “J’assiste à une piece”, you assist a play. You help a play. Brook writes that “it is an assistance of eyes and focus and desires and enjoyment and concentration”.⁶ He also says that “what is present for one is present for the other”.⁷ And “the audience assists the actor, and at the same time for the audience itself assistance comes back from the stage.”⁸
(silence)

- S I understand and have already experienced the importance of the actor-spectator relationship and the fact that they mutually influence each other. But I would like to come back briefly to this idea of a *suspension of disbelief*. Isn’t that just an aspect of a very specific kind of theatre? I mean, I see for instance a lot of post-dramatic theatre without any narration at all, without narrative aspects to believe in or to make the spectator believe.

- 9 Umberto Eco writes about the specificity of a 'performative situation':
"semiotics of theatrical performance has shown (...) its own proprium, its distinguishing and peculiar features. A human body, along with its conventionally recognizable properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience. In order to do so, it has been framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has to be taken as a sign. From this moment on, the curtain is raised. From this moment on, anything can happen – Oedipus listens to Krapp's last tape, Godot meets La Cantatrice Chauve, Tartuffe dies on the grave of Juliet, el Cid Campeador throws a cream cake in the face of La Dame aux camelias." (U. Eco (1977). *Semiotics of Theatrical Performance*. *TDR* 21(1), 117).

- A I think every kind of performance constructs and *makes* things *present* on stage in one way or another. The very fact that you invite people to come and watch your performance, or that you deliberately choose where you want to show your performance, in which frame and in which context, is already a created situation. It is not a *real* and realistic situation; it is not a situation within *reality*. Theatre presents a fictional world and invites an audience to enter into that fictional world, regardless if the performance is a highly traditional text-based one or an experiential non-text-based, non-narrative, interdisciplinary project.
- T We must not understand *fictional* here as a synonym for *narration*. It is being used in a much broader sense. It differentiates the fictive world from the real world, from *reality*. Theatre is a distinct world in itself.⁹ Because it is a performance it is already fictional in itself.
(*short silence*)
I think we can agree that there is always a fictional mode of presence in theatre and the same goes for acting, doesn't it? The simple fact that someone is acting makes it fictional.
- S Yes. That's clear.
- T I suggest that we direct our attention to *the auratic mode of presence* or the having-presence mode now. We have already mentioned the notion of *aura* a few times in this conversation. What do you associate it with?
- A Although *aura* can easily be associated with colours of energy that are surrounding us (*laughs*) and chakra's and other esoteric, non-tangible aspects, for me it has a concrete experiential characteristic. For instance, I remember very well the first time I experienced aura in a conscious way, or maybe I should say that I experienced something so specific that I could not but conclude: Aha, *that* is aura.
(*laughs*)
Can I tell you about it?

- 10 Benjamin does not explain the notion of aura directly in relation to actors on stage, but he quotes and analyses what Pirandello says about film actors. By doing so he attributes the notion of 'aura' exclusively to the theatre actor. "The film actor", wrote Pirandello, 'feels as if in exile-exiled not only from the stage but also from him- self. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence... The projector will play wit his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.' This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays." (W. Benjamin (1969). *Illuminations*. New York, Schocken Books, 229).

T Of course.

A I think I was fourteen years old when I first saw an art book with some illustrations of paintings and drawings by Egon Schiele. It struck me deeply. It appealed to me in a most profound way. I thought his work had an overwhelming simplicity and yet I felt complex emotions. For me, it was an ode to ugliness and a celebration of imperfection. Only years later I had the opportunity to attend a retrospective exhibition on Egon Schiele in München. When I entered the exhibition hall I immediately *sensed* something that I cannot but describe as the *presence* of the works. I realized that before that day I had never actually seen the ‘real’ works. I was there in front of the authentic works and the authentic works were there in front of me. I was present, there and then, in the presence of those works. It felt as if I met Egon Schiele for the first time. The three-dimensionality, the materiality of the works that I could actually touch if I wanted to, *spoke* to me much more directly than when I looked at illustrations in art books at home. It felt as if I had a tacit dialogue with the works. In my perception it was as if I was not only looking at the paintings, but the paintings were also looking at me. I really felt the *aura* of the works. And I had not read Walter Benjamin’s essay on *aura* yet.¹⁰
(laughs)

D Your story is very exemplary for Benjamin’s analysis of aura indeed.

S I do not know that essay.

D The cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in 1936. It is part of the work *Illuminations*, a collection of essays and reflections of Benjamin. In this essay he argues that the nature of art has drastically changed due to the new possibilities to reproduce works of art. He claims that works of art have become subject to radical forms of technical reproduction since the emergence of film and photography. And he adds that because of this evolution, the *aura* of those works of art is getting lost. He writes:

- 11 Benjamin, 1969: 220-221.
- 12 Benjamin, 1969: 188.
- 13 Between March 14th and May 31st 2011, the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMa) organized a retrospective exhibition on the work of the performance artist Marina Abramovic. During that exhibition Abramovic also presented a new performance with the title *The Artist is Present*. For three months, during the opening hours of the museum, she sat on a chair in complete silence. Visitors could sit in front of her and look at her, in a one on one relation, in silence. The director Matthew Akers followed the whole performance and made a documentary about it with the same title: *The Artist is Present*, which was released in 2012. (Show of Force Production, 2012)

(says it by heart)

“that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” and “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity”. He describes the conditions for aura as “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.¹¹

(short silence)

A, I don't know whether your idea about the paintings looking back at you also came up before you read Benjamin (laughs) but he also describes that experience as an aspect of aura. Did you know that?

A It did and I do.

(laughs)

D Maybe I should read it.

(takes 'Illuminations', searches, stops at page 188, then reads)

“Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met (...) there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent. ‘Perceptibility,’ as Novalis puts it, ‘is a kind of attentiveness.’ The perceptibility he has in mind is none other than that of the aura. Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”¹²

S That makes me think of Marina Abramovic's¹³ project *The Artist is Present*. Abramovic sat in the MoMa in New York for ninety days, as if she were an artwork made flesh. As if she were the incorporation of a sculpture or a painting from the museum. As if a work of art had come ‘alive’ there and then in the MoMa. Abramovic literally looked back at the ones who looked at her. She installed a one on one, tacit dialogue with her onlooker. In the documentary about the project it is clear that the ‘attentiveness’ of Abramovic and the one who looked at her both

- 14 Power, 2008: 49.
- 15 Power, 2008: 49.
- 16 Power, 2008: 74.

generated *auratic* dimensions.
(*short silence*)

A So works of art can have an auratic presence. And for me your example of Abramovic shows that an artist can have a strong *auratic presence* as well. In this particular case but also in many other cases it has a lot to do with the kind of reputation you have or the reputation you have created around yourself as an artist. Fame, celebrity, authority can be very *auratic*.

S But what about actor students or less famous actors or unknown performers having auratic presence?
(*laughs*)

T In the book I mentioned before Cormac Power writes that in terms of the actor:

(*says it by heart*)

“aura (...) is much more complex and potentially dynamic than that of a painting or a statue” because “auratic presence can be constructed *in the act of performance*”.¹⁴

(*takes the book, searches, stops at page 49, then reads*)

“The actor’s (auratic) presence can be constructed through his manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which that actor confronts his audience and engages their attention.”¹⁵ So he is suggesting that auratic presence can be constructed and consequently that it can be trained. In the paragraph ‘The Presence of the Actor’¹⁶ he elaborates on the idea of actors having presence and he focuses on two notions that occur in many actor training theories and that are being used by many practitioners:

1. The notion of *pre-expressivity*.
2. The notion of *neutrality*. I suggest that we first dwell on these two notions because they are also important aspects in my work with students. We cannot exclude these concepts when we want to discuss the *production* of the presence of the actor.

(*short silence*)

- 17 Although the notion of pre-expressivity is still commonly used in actor training, I have noticed that Barba himself does not use it anymore in his latest book *On Directing and Dramaturgy*. Instead he speaks about the *actor's dramaturgy* or the organic dramaturgy as the basic level of organization in performance. To a large extent, it deals with the same concerns. The reason that Barba does not use the term pre-expressivity anymore is perhaps to be found in a discussion that arose amongst theatre scientists concern-ing the notion. In a conference at which I was a guest speaker together with Patrice Pavis, Pavis was clear in his rejection of the notion because he argued that a body is always infiltrated by culture and by language and thus is always expressive. In his opinion the distinction between expressive and pre-expressive levels is nonexistent. I continue to use the notion though, because I believe it serves as a practical device during training situations to focus on the energy-intensity of the actions of the actors first and not primarily on the meaning of the actions. (The conference I mentioned was the conference PLAY. Relational Aspects of Dramaturgy, held on March 15th and 16th 2012 at KASK/School of Arts Ghent.)
- 18 E. Barba (2006). *A Dictionary of Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 218.

What do we know about the notion of *pre-expressivity*?

- S The term was coined by Eugenio Barba.¹⁷ He writes that since he started thinking from a process-oriented instead of a result-oriented point of view, it was the biologist's way of thinking that helped him to understand his own work. Biologists do not only study the different parts of an organism, like the different organs (the liver, the heart...) and they do not only study the different systems (e.g. the respiratory and nervous system) but they also distinguish different levels of organization. They study the cellular level of organization, which is at the basis of the level of the tissues, which is at the basis of the level of the organs, which is at the basis of the level of the organ systems, which are coordinated at the level of the unity of the living organism. According to Barba a performance also is a living organism. He points out that the totality of a performance also has that layered structure which is made up by distinct levels of organization. He claims there is a basic level of organization – a cellular level we could say – and he defines this basic level as pre-expressive.

(short silence)

I'd better read what he exactly wrote on it in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*.

(takes the book, searches, stops at page 218, then reads)

“This pre-expressive substratum is included in the expression level, in the totality perceived by the spectator. However, by keeping this level separate during the working process, the performer can work on the pre-expressive level, *as if*, in this phase, the principal objective was the energy, the presence, the *bios* of his actions and not their meaning. The pre-expressive level thought of in this way is therefore an operative level: not a level that can be separated from expression, but a pragmatic category, a praxis, the aim of which, during the process, is to strengthen the performer's scenic *bios*.”¹⁸ And just before this fragment he writes that it is “the level that deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, (...) with how the actor can become a presence that immediately attracts the spectator's attention.”

- 19 C. Stanislavski (2008). *An Actor's Work*. New York: Routledge.
- 20 C. Stanislavski (2010). *An Actor's Work on a Role*. New York: Routledge.

A You could say that Stanislavski also made this distinction between the pre- expressive level and the expression level. In *An Actor's Work*¹⁹ he studies the processes that *pre-cede*, that *pre-prepare* the actor for his subsequent work, which Stanislavski describes in *An Actor's Work on a Role*.²⁰ Before an actor starts to work on a role, he works on a much more primary, basic level. And wasn't Stanislavski mostly concerned with 'the *life* of the human body and spirit of the role'? Bios means life, doesn't it?

D Yes, it is the Greek word for it.

S Indeed. But the goal of Stanislavski's study was always to play a role from a dramatic text, written by a playwright. Whereas, when we speak about a *role* now, it can refer to many different things. The actor himself can create his role through improvisations. The role can be non-spoken. It can be a purely physical manifestation. Then we call it a *score* instead of a *text* or a *role*.

In our training the work also starts on the pre-expressive level, regardless of the fact whether we work with a dramatic text or with a score. Initially, we are not concerned with the result.

We do not reason from a result-oriented point of view, but from the very process and the experience, from the sensation and the perception of the student/actor himself. As a result, we shift our attention for the meaning of an actor's actions towards the next chronological level, in favour of the quality and intensity of the student's actions and energy. Barba is very clear about the importance of the pre-expressive level. He writes:

(searches in his green notebook)

"For performers, working on the pre-expressive level means working modelling the quality of their scenic existence. If they are not effective on the pre-expressive level, they are not performers. They can be used within a particular performance but are no more than functional material in the hand of a director or choreographer. They can put on the clothing, the gestures, the words, the movements of a character, but without an accomplished scenic presence, they are only clothing, gestures, words, movements. What they are doing means only what it must mean, and

- 21 E. Barba (2002). *The Paper Canoe*. New York: Routledge, 105.
- 22 Barba, 2002: 15.
- 23 Barba, 2002: 62.
- 24 Barba, 2002: 61.

nothing else (...) The effectiveness of a performer's pre-expressive level is the measure of her/his autonomy as an individual and as an artist."²¹

T Yes. It is essential to note that Barba talks about the *scenic* existence, the *scenic* life. By differentiating the scenic life from, let's call it the *realistic* life, he suggests that we need to differentiate between what he calls the *daily* and the *extra-daily* use of the body. He claims that the way we use our body in daily life is conditioned by culture and society, and that in daily life we use our body in an unconscious way most of the time. Barba writes that "the first step in discovering what the principles governing a performer's scenic *bios*, or life, might be, lies in understanding that the body's daily techniques can be replaced by extra-daily techniques which do not respect the habitual conditionings of the use of the body."²² Just as the pre-expressive level is included in the expression level, the daily use of the body is of course also included in the extra-daily use of the body. But again it is a practical category. You can work and focus on the extra-daily use of the body *as if* it is a distinct category. I do it in my work with the students as well. By using principles from, for instance, the martial arts and yoga, both of which use physiological processes to break the automatisms of daily life, we try to develop another, non-daily quality of energy. We focus on the quality of the actor's energy, not on the *quantity*. We focus on the *intensity* of the energy. Barba talks about temperatures of energy. He says that "energy is a personal temperature-intensity which the performer can determine, awaken and model".²³

S That is a crucial aspect in our training with you T, isn't it? To awaken and to model our own temperature-intensity. For instance, we work with what Barba calls the two poles of energies, the two poles of temperatures. One is the Animus energy, which is strong and vigorous, the other is the Anima energy, which is soft and delicate.²⁴ Some students are more acquainted with the Animus temperature, and others more with the Anima temperature. We are deliberately and consciously exploring our own 'opposite' temperature. Or we are consciously accentuating our own temperature and we study what happens if we accentuate our opposite

- 25 Barba, 2002: 62.
- 26 Barba, 2002: 63.
- 27 Barba, 2006: 52-53.

temperature. We search how we can equilibrate the use of Animus and Anima.

Although the distinction between Animus and Anima has, in the way Barba describes it, in essence nothing to do with the distinction between masculine or feminine, every student also explores male and female roles. This allows us to 'awaken' and to 'model' other types of energy and temperatures through which we can discover our own temperature-intensity.

T Barba writes something about exploring female and male roles which I totally underline. It is also why I ask students to work with male as well as female roles, regardless of their own gender. Barba says that "the art body – and thus 'non-natural' body – is neither male or female *in and of itself*"²⁵ and "when the male student adapts himself from the beginning exclusively to male roles, and the female student exclusively to female roles, he or she undermines the exploration of her/his own energy on the pre-expressive level."²⁶

(short silence)

S In T's lessons I encountered another interesting notion that Barba uses: the dilated body.

(searches in his green notebook, then reads)

"The dilated body is a hot body (...) and is above all a glowing body, in the scientific sense of the term: the particles that make up daily behaviour have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion, they move further apart, attract and oppose each other with more force, in a restricted or expanded space."²⁷

T By studying and exploring opposite tensions in the body, playing with balance-imbalance, weight, gravity, equilibrium, speed, rhythm, dynamism, tempo, intensities and temperatures of energy, the actor's body becomes dilated.

The Dutch translation of 'dilated' is *verruimd*, in which we see the word *ruim*, which is derived from *ruimte* – 'space' in English. You *have* more

space. If you have dilated your body, you *have* more presence.

(silence)

I think we can move on to the next notion we wanted to discuss, namely neutrality. Does anybody want to say something on that?

(silence)

- A Years ago I attended a workshop on 'le masque neutre' of Jacques Lecoq. As we know, Lecoq developed a physical actor-training program that he taught in Paris until his death in 1999. An ex-student of his led the workshop I attended. He told us that Lecoq's idea was to develop a mask that would have no specific characteristics, no sense of the past or the future and, most importantly, no intrinsic conflict. A mask that was *neutral*. It took him more than ten years of experiments to create the neutral mask as we know it nowadays. It is a full-face leather mask, without any expression at all. I remember that the workshop confronted all the participants in a very profound way with their own habits and patterns in posture and movement; properties that no one was aware of. When someone put on the mask and just stood in front of everyone else, you could see all the specificities and the personal style of that person. The neutral mask requires a neutral way of standing, walking, sitting... When you move with the neutral mask on, your movements need to be very precise, you need to articulate your gestures far more accurately and much clearer than you normally would. Another thing I recall is that with the mask on, some people were much freer in their expression. It liberated them. I don't think this holds true only for the neutral mask, but for any kind of mask.
- D Like in carnival, yes. Being anonymous, you let go of all censorship. You dare to act like you never would in real life. It liberates you indeed.
- S You could say that the mask is unmasking the person. That the socially embedded rules and codes are being unmasked by wearing a mask. That is very intriguing indeed.

28 J. Grotowski (2001). *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, edited by Richard Schechner & Lisa Wolford. New York: Routledge, 30-31.

A I also observed that most of us tend to have more facial expressions than we are aware of. Obviously, if you wear a mask your facial expression is not of great value.

(laughs)

Working with masks teaches you how to channel your expression through your whole body, so your whole body is more involved in the movement than it usually would.

S In our training too, T often asks us to channel our facial expression through our whole body or through another part of our body. T asks for a more *blank* facial expression.

(short silence)

I associate the notion of *neutrality* with Grotowski's principle of the *via negativa*. Grotowski's *via negativa* is not about teaching the actor how to act. It is not about teaching or learning a set of skills and effects. It is not a deductive method. It is a technique of elimination, an inductive method. In terms of the exercises, the *via negativa* tries to identify and to eliminate the physical blockades which inhibit free creative action, rather than passing on a positive, systematic set of skills.

(takes his green notebook, searches, then reads)

"We do not teach the actor a predetermined set of skills or give him a 'bag of tricks'. Ours is not a deductive method of collecting skills. Here everything is concentrate on the 'ripening' of the actor which is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one's own intimacy (...) The education of an actor in our theatre is not of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to his psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction. (...) Ours then is a *via negativa* – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks. (...) The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not 'want to do that' but rather 'resigns from not doing that'."²⁸

T It is an important aspect of my research to find out, together with the student, what hinders, what blocks the 'inner impulse'. In my opinion, an

29 Grotowski, 2001: 220.

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essential state of acting is the state in which there is no time between the inner impulse and the outer reaction, in which the impulse *is* the action; the action is the impulse.

- T As actors we all know these moments: we are playing and we want to do something, but we do not do it. Something hinders us, something blocks us. We think too long about what we want to do and we cannot decide to just do it, and then the impulse is gone. The time between the impulse and the action is literally *too* long.
- S Yes, but it is interesting that Grotowski reverses it. He says that we need a state in which we do not *want to do* something, but one in which we give up *not doing* it. We do not have to *want* to do something, we just have to *accept* something *as inevitable* and *do* it. So we don't ask the question: 'Why do I not do what I wanted to do?', but: 'How can I unblock or *unhinder* myself and accept the freedom to do what I *must* do?'
- D I associate this technique of the *via negativa* with sculpting. A sculptor also mainly removes that which is hiding the form. He also uncovers something rather than building it. The *via negativa* tries to 'reveal' forms instead of generating forms that 'cover' something; it reveals instead of hiding.
- T Yes. In that respect Grotowski calls it 'revealing oneself'.
(takes 'The Grotowski Sourcebook', searches, stops at page 220, then reads)
"If one learns *how to do*, one does not reveal oneself; one only reveals the skill of doing. And if someone looks for means (...) he does it not to disarm himself, but to find asylum, a safe haven, where he could avoid the act which would be the answer (...) For years one works and wants to know more, to acquire more skills, but in the end has not to learn but to unlearn, not to know how to do, but how not to do, and always face doing."²⁹
(short silence)

I must make a side note here. Without wanting to contradict Grotowski, I claim that it is important to know *how to do* things. In my opinion, Grotowski points out the difference between, on the one hand, actors who are revealing and demonstrating their *skills* of doing, actors who are ‘only *technical*, who are ‘just’ *skilful* and, on the other hand, actors who are revealing something highly personal and much more intimate. In my training we do not learn how to play Hamlet in a virtuoso way, nor do we acquire a ‘bag of tricks’ that can be used in every rehearsing or performance situation. But we do learn, for instance, *how to develop* this state of being in which impulse becomes action, *how to un-block* or un-hinder ourselves, and *how* we can learn to know that state in which we reveal. Developing skills for the sake of demonstrating skills is something I am not looking for either. But to know *how* you do *what* you do while you are doing it is most certainly an important *skill* to develop for actors and actor students, I think.
(short silence)

- D Grotowski talks about “a complete stripping down” and “the laying bare of one’s intimacy”. This also has to do with the masking and the unmasking aspect in training, which we discussed earlier. I think Grotowski means that he does not want an actor to hide behind his skills, behind his mask of skills. When he talks about ‘disarming’, I think he wants to take the ‘arms’ or ‘tricks’ away from the actor. He wants to unmask the actor’s skills. For him, an actor must reveal. Must unmask. Peter Brook is clear on that as well. I am currently reading John Heilpern’s book on Peter Brook, in which he writes that for Brook:
(takes the book out of his briefcase, searches, stops at page 157, then reads)

“Actors must strip away their outward personalities, mannerisms, habits, vanity, neuroses, tricks, clichés and stock responses until a higher state of perception is found. To watch a piece of theatre performed truthfully is to see in a different way. Perhaps we awaken. We are shaken out of our every day condition and we see life differently. Sometimes our lives are changed. But the actor must change first. He must shed useless skins like a

- 30 J. Heilpern (1999). *Conference of the Birds. The Story of Peter Brook in Africa*. New York: Routledge, 157-158.
- 31 J. Lecoq (2000). *The Moving Body*. London: Methuen, 38.

snake. He must transform his whole being.”³⁰

(short silence)

For me, *neutrality* is a state of being in which one can let go of the personal idiosyncrasies and the habitual ways in which one likes to present oneself in daily, socially-coded, well- civilized life. In those circumstances we are often trying harder to hide ourselves than to reveal ourselves. In theatre we must get rid of those useless skins. We must *dis-arm* ourselves. And be more vulnerable.

S It is true that it is important to become aware of these specificities and peculiarities we have as social and well-civilized persons (*laughs*) but it is as important for actor students to become aware of their peculiarities while they are on the floor and while they are acting. We all have what we could call a ‘personal style’ in moving and speaking, not only in daily life, but also on the floor. Sometimes the patterns that we encounter on the floor are similar to those in daily life, but sometimes they’re rather different too. To become aware of those patterns is crucial.

A It is true that it is important that we are able to let go of that *personal style*. If you always stick to your particular, fixed way of speaking and moving, you can really get stuck in it. But if you start by exploring and identifying a more neutral state of being, you are open to other ways of moving and speaking and it liberates you. Lecoq writes in *The Moving Body*:

(says it by heart)

“The neutral mask opens up the actor to the space around him. It puts him in a state of discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive.”³¹

T I think the state Lecoq is talking about here is very similar to what Brook describes as a higher state of perception and it is also similar to the state I study and call a *state of blankness*. I associate blankness with *stillness* and *emptiness*. We explore and try to identify on the floor which body positions, which postures, which tensions in the body hinder or help us to be *still* and *empty*. It is a state in which everything is still possible, in

which everything can happen, a state of possible discovery and of openness, yes. You are open to stimuli; you are receptive to them. You can still be 'filled', you are not yet 'full' of yourself. This is also important from the point of view of the spectator. When the actor is *blank*, he creates room for the spectator. He leaves him enough room to give meaning to what he sees, he allows the spectator to fill it in for himself. This way, both the actor and the spectator are able to 'fill' themselves in. The actor has not yet sealed up the meaning.

- S At the beginning of the training I found it extremely demanding to experience and to allow that *emptiness*. One is so acquainted with always being busy and adding things to what is already present. But now I find starting from a point of stillness and emptiness highly liberating. It rids you of the idea that you need to want to do something. You just do it.

(short silence)

In Dutch we have the word *volledig*, in which we see *vol* en *ledig*, respectively 'full' and 'empty' in English. I think it is a great word, one that combines seemingly contradictory words. I would say that a *state of blankness* is not an *empty* state but a 'volledige' state. It is full and empty at the same time. It is a state that has not yet been defined or fixed. It is full of potentiality.

(short silence)

My experience of and my ideas on *presence* have profoundly changed during the lessons. Before the training, when I thought about *presence* and when I tried to find out how to be more present, the *here-and-now* aspect of acting was the hardest thing to realize. It seemed and felt difficult to merely focus on the very moment and not to be distracted by past or future thoughts and feelings. I thought I needed to shut out a lot of things to accomplish this kind of *nirvana-like* state of being. In the training I experienced that *presence* is not only focusing on what *happens*, but also on what *can* happen. It is not a static state but a highly dynamic one, with a lot of potentiality.

(silence)

- 32 Power, 2008: 87.
- 33 Cited in E. Blumenthal (1984). *Joseph Chaikin. Exploring at the Boundaries of Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 51.
- 34 E. Barba (2010). *On Directing and Dramaturgy*. New York: Routledge, 26.

T Now I would like to discuss the third mode of presence, which Cormac Power calls the literal *mode of presence* or the *being-present*. He writes that this is the mode which is “the most factual and perhaps mundane of the three modes”.³²

It is.

(short silence)

Although it may seem obvious to say that actors are literally present in the literal presence of the audience, for me the literal mode of presence of the actor is a very crucial aspect, which needs to be studied and developed further. Joseph Chaikin says that:

(says it by heart)

“The basic starting point for the actor is that his body is sensitive to the immediate landscape where he is performing. The full attention of the mind and body should be awake in that very space and in that very time (not an idea of time) and with the very people who are also in that time and space.”³³ Actors and actor students tend to (un)consciously forget or deny the fact that they are there and then, in a specific studio or theatre at a specific time, with the very people whom they are playing with or who are watching them. To be aware of and to establish this factual relation with the space, the time and the people around you is the basic starting point indeed, also for me.

S *(laughs)*

I laugh because I think of what T often says when we are working in the studio with for instance Shakespeare material. He says: “Don’t be in Shakespeare-land, be *here* in studio 1. Relate to the space and everything and everyone who is here in studio 1, right now.” He asks us to *really* look and to *really* listen, to *really* do what we are doing. Eugenio Barba says that the work of the actor is:

(says it by heart)

“to perform *real actions* in the fiction of the scenic space”.³⁴

A Are Barba and T pointing out the difference between, let’s say, *really* drinking a glass of water and *pretending* you are drinking a glass of water?

- S It certainly has to do with that, but it goes even further.
Maybe we should dwell a bit more on what is meant by *real actions* and what we think about the matter.
(*short silence*)
- T Yes. Let me tell you something about my dog Happy.
(*laughs*)
She loves playing with me and I love playing with her. Simple games, like me throwing a stick or a ball and she fetching it. I like to tease her a little from time to time. Sometimes I pretend I will throw the stick but I do not actually throw it. Sometimes she starts to run to fetch the stick and realizes only later that I didn't actually throw it. Other times, she just stays where she sits and keeps looking at me, waiting for me to actually throw the stick. So we could say that sometimes she believes my 'pretending to throw the stick' and sometimes she doesn't. I found it highly intriguing so I started to analyse the differences in what I was doing in relation to the way she reacted. If I didn't act properly, she did not respond in the way in which I wanted her to respond. I found out that if I just did the action in a *mechanical* way and merely *imitated* the throwing of the stick without actually being involved and engaging my whole body in it as much as if I would really throw the stick, she sat and waited. My intention to throw, my impulse to throw must be real, or she stays. I need to perform the movement with the same kind of energy as when I would actually throw the stick. If not, she waits. I must perform real actions, not feints. In Dutch the word for 'feints' is *schijnbewegingen*, in which we see the words *schijn* en *bewegingen*. *Bewegingen* means *movements*; *schijn* is not easily translated literally but it is the opposite of *real*. If I use *schijnbewegingen* she does not react. If I perform real actions, she does.
Interesting, isn't it?
(*doesn't laugh*)
- S Great, yes. Barba writes:
(*searches in his green notebook, then reads*)
"It is undeniable that, in the daily reality as in the extra-daily one of

35 Barba, 2010: 26.

36 Barba, 2010: 26-27.

theatre, a *real action*, even reduced to its impulse, possesses a strength of sensorial persuasion which produces an *organic effect* – that is, one of life and immediateness – on the spectator’s nervous system.”³⁵ So, when you reduce your throwing of the stick to its real impulse, you persuade your dog, it produces an organic effect in her nervous system and she starts to run.

(short silence)

You talked about the need of the ‘engagement of the whole body’ and about ‘involvement’. Barba uses more words to say the same thing. He says that a real action changes the entire tonicity of the body and consequently that of the spectator. He describes a *real action* as:

(searches in his green notebook, then reads)

“your smallest perceptible impulse and I identify it by the fact that even if you make a micro- scopic movement (...) the entire tonicity of your body changes. A real action produces a change in the tensions in your whole body, and subsequently a change in the perception of the spectator. (...) The action originates in the spinal cord. It is not the wrist which moves the hand, not the shoulder or elbow which moves the arm, but the dynamic impulse is rooted in the torso.”³⁶

Therefore we work a lot on what T calls the awakening of our spine and torso. We try to detect and experience the differences in quality and ‘perceptibility’ between movements that originate and/or reverberate in the spine, and other movements that don’t and remain stuck in the periphery.

- A This explanation of the meaning of *real actions* is indeed much broader than how I first understood it. I took it in a very *literal* way.

(laughs)

I thought Barba and T meant that every action must be *really* and *literally* performed.

- S Well, I think they argue that the actions must be *really* performed, yes, but not always *literally* per se.

37 Barba, 2010: 25.

38 Barba, 2010: 26.

- A I don't understand.
- S Actions must be *really* performed, in the way we just discussed: real actions are actions that change tensions in the whole tonicity of the body. If that is the case your actions are *real*, you *really* perform your actions. But I don't think that actions must always be *literally* done. If, for instance, you have to fight or slap someone, you can of course agree that you will *literally* fight or slap him (*laughs*) but probably it is as interesting to find and to choose the *equivalent* of that literal action. Barba also mentions that principle of equivalence:
(*searches in his green notebook, then reads*)
"Tools or interventions are considered equivalent when, although different in shape or nature, they have equal values, produce equal effects or fulfil identical functions (...) In my performances, I might let a vocal action replace by a physical one and a stare be the equivalence of a piece of dialogue (...)"³⁷
He also says that you can find the "equivalent of the energy" through the quality of tensions, the dynamic design, the effort that you use, the speed... So you can find and develop the equivalent energy of fighting without having to *literally* fight with one another. Barba writes: "The real dynamic *information* was thus retained, but appeared in a different *form*."³⁸
(*silence*)
- D I really like the story about your dog. It is a very good acting lesson. You have to be involved with your whole body and mind as much as when you perform the actions *for real*. On stage you must perform *real* actions in order to persuade the spectator, in order to attract his attention.
- T Barba offers us another interesting notion in that respect. He talks about *the decided body*. He says that various European languages use this grammatically paradoxical expression:
'to be decided' in English, 'être decide' in French, 'essere decisio' in Italian, 'beslist zijn' in Dutch... This is a good way to describe how the

39 Barba, 2002: 33.

40 D tells a story here that we can also read in Barba (2002: 35): “The great Danish physicist Niels Bohr, an avid Western film fan, wondered why, in all the final shoot-outs, the hero shoots faster even if his adversary is the first to reach for his gun. Bohr asked himself if some physical truth might not explain this convention. He came to the conclusion that such a truth did indeed exist: the first to draw is the slowest because he *decides* to shoot, and dies. The second to draw lives because he is faster, and he is faster because he doesn’t have to decide, he is *decided*. This brilliant discovery was the result of a whimsical empirical research: Bohr and his assistants went off to a toy store shop, bought water pistols, and back in their laboratory, duelled for hours and hours.”

actor's state of mind and body must be. Barba points out that we see a passive form in the expression which assumes an active meaning and
(says it by heart)

“in which an indication of energized availability for action is presented as a form of passivity. (...) this does not mean that someone else or something decides for us or that we submit to a decision. Neither does it mean that we are deciding, nor that we are carrying out the action of deciding.”³⁹

S I can see similarities to what we discussed before and to what we explore in our classes, namely to diminish the time between the inner impulse and the outer reaction. When your impulse is action, ‘you are decided’. No?

T Yes.

A It is a rather vague notion for me though.

D There is this little story I associate it with and that may illuminate it for you, A.

(laughs)

It is said that the Danish physicist Niels Bohr was a big fan of westerns. He was especially intrigued by the duel fights in them. He wondered why the hero is always the one who fires the first shot to kill his rival, even if the opponent is the first one to reach for his gun. The story goes that Bohr and his assistants played duels with water pistols for several hours to find out why *(laughs)*. He came to the conclusion that the first one to reach for his gun is the slowest because he *decides* to shoot. The second one reaches for his gun faster because he must not decide. He is *decided* and therefore continues to live.⁴⁰

(short silence)

T If we try to make a résumé of what we discussed today, what do we have? First of all, after our discussion I think we can agree that we answer the initial question – ‘Can stage presence be produced?’ – with a ‘yes’.

(short silence)

We discussed how an actor can *make* things *present* in the fictional world of the stage. We said that an actor makes things present for the simple reason that he *is* acting; that he is an actor. We talked about how actors can develop and train to have presence through specific techniques and principles. One technique is the *via negativa*, which tries to unblock and un-hinder the free creative actions of the actor.

The other is the principle of *neutrality* and *blankness*, which tries to develop a state of mind and body in which the actor is open to discovery and responsiveness; in which the actor reveals and unmasks. It is a state full of potentiality.

We talked about the notion of the *dilated body*, which is a body that fills the space and time in a way that attracts the immediate attention of the audience.

Then we pointed out the importance of the *literal mode of presence*. We said that it is an essential starting point for an actor to establish a factual relation with the very space and everything and everyone who is there and then, simultaneously with him.

We talked about *real actions*, that demand the commitment and involvement of the whole body and mind, and we touched upon the notion of a *decided body*, which is a body that acts and reacts out of necessity.

(short silence)

A I still have a question. Or maybe it is more of a remark.

We have discussed the three different modes of presence separately, but in the actual practice of playing and creating those different modes can and do often interact, don't they? In my opinion, the specific way in which they interact is what generates different styles and genres of performances and acting. When we talk about, for instance, the difference between the *reality of the theatre* and the fiction of the drama, the difference between the now of the theatre and the now of the drama, isn't that an essential dialectic of theatre in itself, a dialectic drama artists are often *playing* with? In the nineties Marianne Van Kerkhoven pointed out that theatre

- 41 In 1999 Marianne Van Kerkhoven wrote in *Etcetera* (no 68): “The primacy of ‘pretending’ has been replaced by the primacy of the ‘materiality of the moment’, of the reality of the here and now. The theatre starts to compete against the mediatization and fictionalization of reality and therefore it also demands an attitude from its audience which understands this altered way of communicating.” (Original Dutch text: “Het primaat van ‘het doen alsof’ wordt vervangen door het primaat van ‘de materialiteit van het ogenblik’, van de realiteit van het hier en nu. Het theater gaat de strijd aan met de mediatisering en fictionalisering van de werkelijkheid en vraagt van zijn publiek dus ook een houding die deze veranderde wijze van communiceren begrijpt.”)
- 42 Power, 2008: 9.

started to compete against the mediatization and fictionalization of reality, and she analysed that “the primacy of ‘pretending’ has been replaced by the primacy of the ‘materiality of the moment’, of the reality of the here and now.”⁴¹ Therefore we could say that, at that time, the literal mode of presence was given priority over the fictional mode of presence.

T Yes. That is a good remark. Cormac Power also discusses it, and he argues in a very similar way to you, A. He writes:

(searches in ‘Presence at play’, stops at page 9, then reads)

“One might say that a feature of much theatrical experience involves the *simultaneity* of imaginatively ‘seeing’ a fictional world that has been conjured up, while *seeing* the theatrical means of creating the fictional. If the stage is always concerned with ‘now’(...), this ‘nowness’ is one of considerable complexity in being both actual and factual.”⁴²

(short silence)

Because this ‘nowness’ is so complex, it opens up many different possibilities to deal with it. Drama artists are indeed *playing* with that field of tension between the actual and the fictional, as you have said, A. Cormac Power writes:

“Presence (...) is that which theatre, perhaps more than any art form, puts into play.”

(short silence)

An actor can also *play* with the complexity of this ‘nowness’ and with the complexity and interaction of the different modes of presence. For instance, he can play with the duality of *literally* being present on stage as a ‘live’ actor simultaneously with the fictional being present of, for instance, Hamlet. *How* he puts it *into play* can indeed result in different acting styles, as you have suggested earlier, A. Or maybe it is even determined by these acting styles? It would lead us too far to discuss those different acting styles/methods in great detail now, but I am sure we will encounter them in one of our next conversations. As for today I think we have gathered enough material that we can take back to our work in the studio.

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