

Bodily and Vocal Practices

On attention and liveness of the actor/performer in the performing arts - a few first stumbling steps

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by

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This is a short reflection on the seminars and workshops during the Bodily and Vocal Practices course 15hp on the subject of ‘attention and liveness of the actor/performer’.

My IDP* during my master program is, as it is framed to day, “the neurodiverse multimedia actor” trying to #deneurotypicalize acting technique and finding out what a social media actor is and does - and from this perspective I am trying to decode and formulate my questions and also maybe a critic of the acting schools and performance research of today.

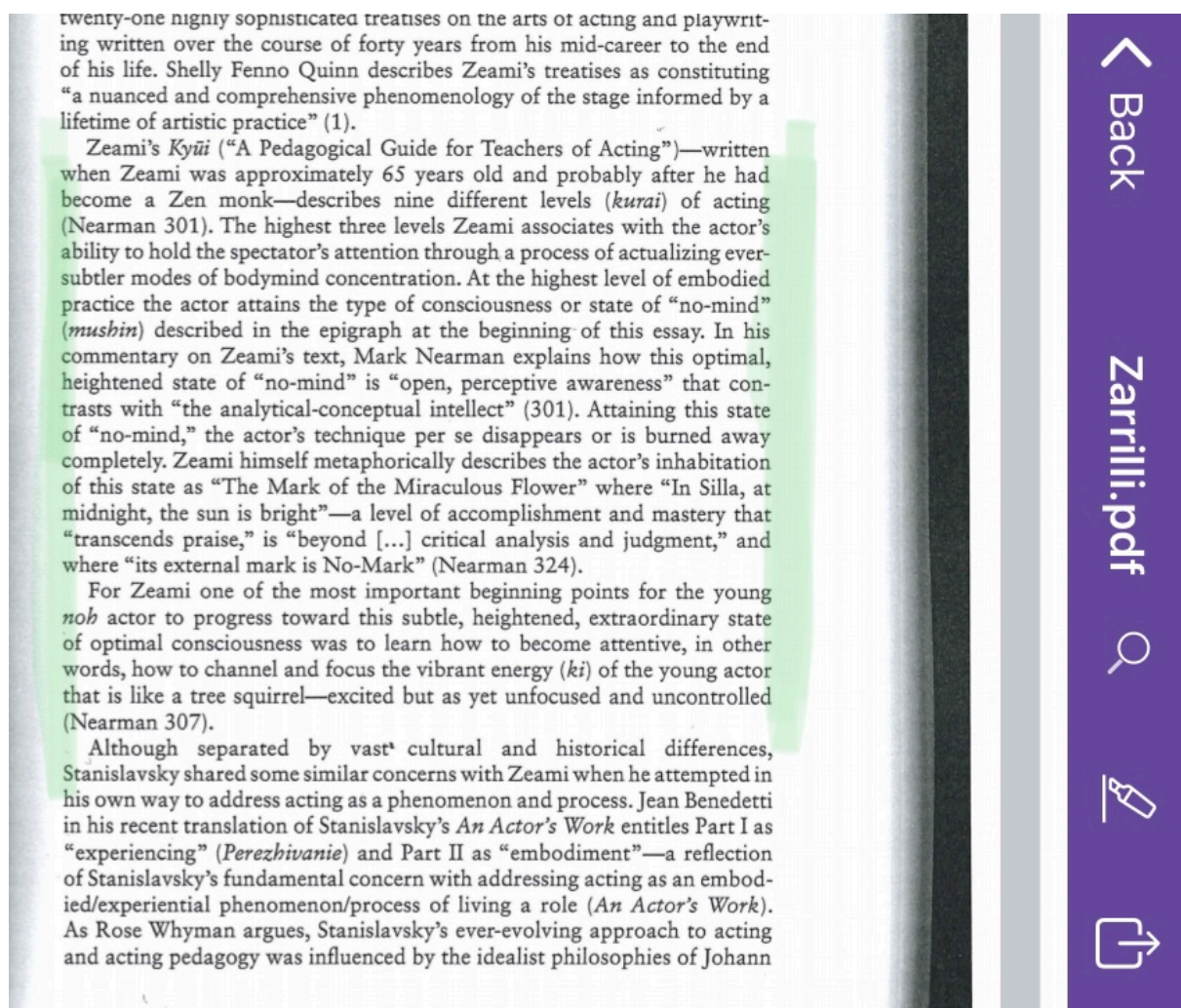
First I like the idea of attention as something more fluid as “George Home-cook” tries to explain in “Aural Acts”¹ but I think it still lacks substance, and I think as a neurodiverse person myself with ADHD I really can and can’t relate to the fluidity of attention. As I understand the neuroscience behind the DMN (default Mode Network) and the TPN (Task Positive Network) as described in research²³. I believe there is a difference in how a neurotypical actor and a neurodiverse actor behave on stage in relation to attention and how we behave in class, during rehearsals and even on stage sometimes because of it. And not knowing the difference I believe can be damaging for neurotypical students of a neurodiverse teacher but especially for neurodiverse actors acting and learning through a neurotypical acting system...

¹ George Home-cook: “Aural Acts: Theatre and the Phenomenology of Listening” in: Kendrick & Roesner (2011). Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

²<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0925231220312066>

³ <https://www.additudemag.com/default-mode-network-adhd-brain/>

Just taking the DMN/TPN in to consideration a neurotypical person going into the TPN shuts off the DMN and can pay a more undivided attention to the task at hand whilst a neurodiverse person with ADHD going into the TPN can't shut off the DMN or control the on/off switch so it is always humming in the background or taking the foreground if the task isn't enough challenging, fun, interesting, novel, dangerous to name a few dopamine inducing verbs that helps the focusing of attention. Instead the only time the DMN shuts off is during hyperfocus a very intense type of focus that is hard to break out off. And my hypotheses is that actors and acting students with ADHD needs, or at least feels like the need, to be hyperfocused to achieve the same goal as a neurotypical person going into the TPN and at some rare times goes into the "magical flow" the "No mind" the "mushin" as "Zeami Kyūi" centuries old Noh theatre scribe describes it...



in Philip Zarrilli - The actors work on Attention, Awareness and Active Imagination⁴

I believe that this flow is and is not the same as Hyperfocus⁵⁶⁷... It has the same affect but since flow is something creatively magical, illusive and circumstance... hyperfocus is something that happens a lot for the neurodiverse actor.

Let me explain why I believe this could be harmful to students:

If you believe that you must have full focus to rehearse and practice an acting task to be believable and also to project the right level of attention to the characters perceived will/action from a director/audience perspective - let say it is 'to get your partner to stay so you could be together or the relationship is lost' - then rehearsing that scene for theatre for 4 hours demands hyper focus from the ADHD student/actor but only that the TPN is activated for the Neurotypical actor. And after 4 hours of Hyperfocus, or 8... you are exhausted as an ADHD actor and there might not be any room for socialising, or any other kind of life around the theatre/school after such a rehearsal.

Hyperfocusing during a show for 30 minutes - 2,5 hours a day is much more tolerable but even here, if we take me as an example, I'm so tired after meeting the audience and performing so between 50 minute shows on a tour the best thing I can do is to sleep for 30 minutes. It's going to be very interesting to see if there is a way to break away from that hyperfocus as a ADHD actor creating a space to mentally breathe without losing the perceived awareness/attention/focus of the character from an audience perspective Or the actors real attention/awareness/focus/action on the acting task. How? Maybe it is not a technique I want during shows - but I know I need it in class and during rehearsals!

Another easy example is the difference of learning text during rehearsals on stage and trying to learn them yourself at home. "Just" learning text is usually

⁴ Phillip Zarrilli: "The Actor's Work on Attention, Awareness, and Active Imagination: Between Phenomenology, Cognitive Science and Practices of Acting", in: Blecker, Sherman et al. (2015). Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations. London: Routledge. Page 77

⁵ <https://www.additudemag.com/understanding-adhd-hyperfocus/>

⁶ <https://www.additudemag.com/hyperfocus-adhd-study-news/>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7851038/>

boring and with a, usually, dysfunctional working memory with Neurodiverseness, it can be very challenging to just learn text to be able to do the fun stuff later on the floor... It takes a lot of energy and will power just to stay with the text and can take a very long time (or it is learned the last minute when the deadline gives you enough dopamine to hyperfocus, but then you won't know the text as well as your peers by heart)... This can be perceived as laziness from the teachers and also can feel like you are being lazy if you don't know about your own challenges. I myself learned to memorise over 100 decimals of Pi an evening in upper high school because my brain hyper fixated on it and thought of it as fun, but learning 3 pages of text, for an acting assignment in drama school over night (or worst case scenario, over lunch) was like knocking my head against a wall. Now I know why... but I didn't then and I don't think students and teachers at acting schools or directors and actors take this into consideration when choosing ways to learn and rehears a text. And it can cause a lot of frustration - A director getting angry at the actors for not learning the short text during coffee break or the teacher sending of students one by one into small rooms with a monologue for 30 minutes and not getting any results what so ever or a student with a headache that goes home for the day because they just lay on the floor trying, and failing, to learn the text - instead of jumping around, trying different actions and learning the text by playing with a scene partner shouting out the words and different actions (for an example of a different fun method).

End note:

This is super interesting and I find it very fascinating that Zeami kind of mentions DMN/TPN half a millennia before neuroscience hand also kind of hyperfocus in "no mind" "the highest state of attention" as described in the earlier posted image - also that he mentions "Tree squirrel" that still today is a derogatory word for an ADHD person... Makes me wonder if he actually had ADHD...

To be continued with the #denuerotypicalizing in acting and performing arts...

Liveness

(from a hand in assignment about a missed liveness seminar).

What technics do I use to obtain a feeling of liveness in the performance?

So I have had some thoughts about this since reading the pdf⁸ and listening to Philip Auslander's 2 hour seminar on youtube⁹ - "liveness revisited".

And I believe that just thinking about the immediacy, the interconnectedness and the temporality of the feeling of liveness in a performance especially performed in front of a live physically present audience is a too blunt of a tool.

I would like to argue that the whole body's feeling of authenticity of the performance liveness should be considered and valued.

For an example "Earth hour"¹⁰ is a global audience performative event with no performance, no performers and no other interconnectedness other than the time period it self (of course with measurable global environmental effects) - but the "performance" is almost just a period of time... A liveness of just being connected in time and the realness of it is easily measured by your own clock. And it is just perceived as interconnectedness and liveness because nobody takes up the same time and space as any other... but it's a feeling of liveness and urgency and interconnectedness - it is also a phenomenological perceived connectedness because every country is in their own time zone...

This is almost just achieved with time... the temporal aspect of liveness which is far from the only thing I would argue is measurable as liveness or being "live".

I would say that each sense has its own sense of perceived authenticity of liveness and depending on the art of the performance it is more or less important to the observer to uphold a feeling of authenticity of liveness.

For some examples:

⁸ Philip Auslander "Digital Liveness – A Historico-Philosophical perspective", in: Journal of Performance and Art, Vol.34, no.3, 2012.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FddAFn4O-Ig> "Liveness Revisited" at the the NEH Institute 2018— Thursday 21 June 2018 <https://howlround.com/happenings/neh-institute-2018-digital-technologies-theatre-and-performance-studies>

¹⁰ <https://www.earthhour.org>

1. To see the movie Pina¹¹ in a theatre at the premiere, or seeing “rite of spring”¹² with an audience in a live performance in a theatre or the movie Pina Bausch in a cinema later (in 3D or 2D) holds different Liveness. One is that the premiere is a temporal fixed point and creates a strong fear of missing out for all that misses it and it can only go live once for the first time (at least perceived so).

2. Secondly dance is primarily perceived and appreciated (my own thoughts here) through having a body yourself and feeling it move with the dancer which I have been told to be a lot more affective seeing the performer dance physically in front of you in the same place through activating more mirror neurones¹³¹⁴ in the brain. And less so in 3D than physically live but more so than in 2D ((??) that’s my personal feeling anyway)). But this might not hold true: What I mean is that the liveness is different depending on what sense you focus on: Therefore an actor reacting to something on a big screen can connect with the audience in a much more authentic and direct way than in the theatre because it’s more believable because we stripped away a lot of layers of non-authenticity... And it is a form of liveness that is not temporal, which the same action and reaction on the stage would be but it’s irrelevant for the audience because the feeling the reaction creates in the audience trumps the temporal liveness here (maybe?).

So this is a very tricky question, what it is to be live or hold lividness on stage, because I am already perceived as being “live” (authentically there with them) by the audience if we are temporarily inhabiting the same time near or afar...

But to give the audience a heightened feeling of the character’s or the performance’s liveness I want to be perceived as I am fully committed to solving a task, winning an argument or get a reactive response from my audience or stage partner that is true here and now and important in time (for the character) and believable, under the set of imaginary circumstances by the audience (and the things the audience can forgive like distance, louder voice, make up, a screen, etc. if the liveness of something else is more important - like story, action, feelings, movement, danger, artfully deformed/heightened expressions of

¹¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1440266/>

¹² <https://www.pinabausch.org/en/tag/2473/common-grounds-das-frühlingsopfer>

¹³ <https://cryptopath.medium.com/mirror-neurons-and-the-role-they-play-in-dance-movement-therapy-995f4007db74>

¹⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11299-014-0160-x>

an instrument (body, voice, musical instrument, canvas and paint, and so on), balance, time, connectedness, etc.) - or my character might come across as very unlive...

But, to create the feeling of just the temporal liveness the best example I can give as an actor is through my latest jester show in Södra råda¹⁵: where the temporal liveness of the show almost always is of utter importance.

Here I used a couple of tools to create a sense of temporal connectedness:

1. the use of audience interference

Ex: a kid walks up on stage or a parent isn't evolved in the show and I point that out and make it and them a part of the show.

2. using the audiences reactions and contributions in the show to create a more immediate sense of here and now and liveness.

Ex: A mom told us she "borrowed the child she was with from another parent" so we made it a running joke in the show of her being chased and wanted by the police for kidnapping and how badly she had disguised herself (she wore a red dress with BIG white spots on it and at the end of the show she also had three 'purjolökar/leeks' in her handbag... for some reason 🙈😬)

3. The use of spontaneity and improvisation and picking up on real events in the audience/the world and performance to Elevate the real liveness of the performance during the performed liveness

Ex: It's still Corona times and the audience is a bit nervous standing together 1 m apart. And we also pick up people to do circus numbers, street magic and slapstick acts. And I had a bottle of hand disinfection with me for myself. This in a moment of spontaneity became a running gag because as soon as some did any interactivens with us in anyway it came out to disinfect hands/shoes/the whole audience and as a threat/fakir number/etc..

- Lifting the uneasiness in the audience

- Giving us free play to disinfect our and the audiences hands

- Heightening the here and now and the liveness of the event - it could not happen in the same way and not as spontaneous for us as artist and the audience feels like this could not have happened anywhere else or in any other show.

¹⁵<https://www.mariestadstidningen.se/2021/09/04/smyginvigning-i-sodra-rada-skon-kansla/>

- And creating a stronger connection with the audience and keeping them focused and with us (or against us) during the show.

End note liveness:

The thing I like most about this talk about Liveness, and in a broader sense with all senses, is that it forces the theatres to be really specific in their choice of performances - because if the feelings is felt with more liveness on a big or small screen. Then maybe choosing a story that is crucial to be felt through the actors face and voice is almost always best seen on a big screen and like music live events maybe those screens have to come up in theatres Or with microphones OR other stories and performances have to be chosen to get the theatre goes in to the theatres.

Like more choreography, audience participation (creating with their minds), poetic bodies/voices/instruments, stories and performances that crave liveness from other/more senses relatively close to you in an actual irl room.

Reading and rewriting this again also stresses the importance for me to defining liveness on screens and social media not only to give it a higher standing as a live art but also to really differentiate what strength both theatre and screens have for creating liveness and that it is really important for me if creating another theatre piece that it doesn't play at the wrong strengths forcing away the audience to other mediums that gives a larger possibility for the perceived liveness and interconnectedness.