

## Zarrilli, Phillip. “ ‘...presence...’ as a question and emergent possibility: a case study from the performer’s perspective”

119-152

Zarrilli argues that presence, “emerges in the spatio-temporal realm of experience, embodiment, and perception shared between the performer(s), the performance score and its dramaturgy, and the audience” (120). From the performers perspective it is said that ‘presence’ *should* only exist *as a question*. That is: an emergent state of possibility that is right for *this* performance score (meaning both the tactile, material layer of a performance and what is underneath).

### ‘Presence’ as a problem

“‘Presence’ is a highly contested and vexed [geëgerd, in de war, netelig] term” (121). With Power (2008: 117-148) and a quote from his own work in 1995 he emphasises that it is silly to see presence as an essence since post-structuralism. He says a more nuanced discussion has appeared with Power and Dolan who focus on the pleasures afforded from the perspective of the spectator, when one attends a performance where ‘presence’ emerges. Furthermore he mentions a couple of titles that take part in this discussion:

Power 2008 *Presence in Play*

Dolan 2005 *Utopia in Performance*

Roach 2004 “It” (theatrejournal) // 2007 *It*

Fischer Lichte 2008 *The Transformative power of performance*

Goodall 2008 *Stage Presence*

Power’s book with his three modes of presence is given the quality of demonstrating that ‘presence in theatre is not a singular, monolithic entity’ (Power:13) but a complex phenomenon.

Dolan is said to be interested to understand the ‘influence’ of presence, examining presence, talent and magnetism and how it can be used as a means to progressive rather than conservative goals in and through performance (Dolan 52 and 30-1).

Paraphrasing his own book *Psychophysical Acting* (2009: 41-60) he approaches the question of ‘presence’ phenomenologically,

“assuming an ‘enactive [opvoerende] approach’ to acting in which the actor as gestalt [geheel; meer dan de som der delen] optimally engages her bodymind fully in each moment of performance as she creates, encounters, and responds to the performance environment” (122).

As soon as an actor and a spectator meet in a space, there is a sense of literal, phenomenal presence that he calls simple, literal phenomenal presence (and needs not to be written with apostrophs like this: ‘presence’). Which means that the simple presence of spectator and performer constitute the performance event in their phenomenal co-presence (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32-3; Zarrilli 2009: 222). The simple mode of presence is compared to Lichte’s weak concept of presence in an earlier publication (Fischer Lichte 2008: 94) in which she also conceptualises a strong concept of presence (2008:96) as “the actor’s ability of commanding space and holding attention”. This strong concept of presence is what Power dedicates a chapter to which is ‘Having presence’; it is given a specific term:

auratic presence. This is said in a footnote in which an earlier discussion is mentioned about this issue, by Féral: "Performance and theatricality: the subject demystified" *Modern Drama* 25.

Zarrilli argues that the strong concept of presence (what Power calls auratic presence) is not singular but multiple: "the quality, valence, and intensity of the actor's ability to generate an inner 'energy,' to engage one's entire embodied consciousness in each performance task, to command space and hold attention is always shaped by one's training/experience, as well as the dramaturgy and aesthetic of a specific performance" (122).

Zarrilli states that he is against approaching auratic presence or the strong concept of presence in terms of mysticism: "Any language which mystifies the actor's work I find highly problematic and think has no place in the studio or rehearsal room" (in a footnote on p. 150). However, the concept of 'energy' (and particularly: its circulation) plays a key role in his approach to acting; he bases this on 'vibratory theory' by Zeami Motokiyo, a Japanese aesthetician, actor, writer in Noh theatre (Nearman 1984<sup>1</sup>, Hare 2008<sup>2</sup>). *Vibrant theory sounds interesting with the notion of 'resonance' in mind*

The territory of the strong concept of presence from the performers point of view is marked by,

"psychophysical processes of embodiment, attunement, awareness, and perception in which the actor's bodymind relationship to the enactment of a score makes available a certain degree, quality, or heightened intensity of relationship that is 'energetic' and attracts and sustains the spectator's attention" (122).

He identifies 3 problems of 'presence':

1. It can be confused with the charisma of the actor ('stage charm') (Roach 2004: 557)
2. Similarly, it can produce the cult of the individual (Goodall 2008:12)
3. It is problematically reified as mysterious, magical or secret power of the actor's art.

Zarrilli doesn't use the concept of presence in the studio for it is not up to the performer to experience presence, but rather to focus on deploying his energy and awareness to the specific work he has to do in each moment of the performance. For the performer presence should remain *unremarkable*.

"I argue that the actor should not strive to attain 'presence'; rather, *if* 'presence' is perceived by the audience, 'it' [Roach] emerges in the vortex [werveling, draaikolk, maalstroom] of the performative moment" (123)

#### Developing *Told by the wind* (2010)

Amongst many different sources (of which a lot of Asian sources), they work with the shift of first person and third person perspective, which is central to *Noh* theatre (125). Speaking also of 'quiet theatre' (Boyd 2006<sup>3</sup>) which turns its back to the, "often busy volume of theatre's multiple modes of communication, paring away and divesting performance of anything non-essential"(127). Moreover, they work with the concept of *yugen* which, "cannot be translated. It has been profitably described in various places as 'mystery and depth' and as 'what lies beneath the surface'; the subtle, as opposed

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<sup>1</sup> Nearman. 1984. "Feeling in relation to acting: an outline of zeami's views," in *Asian theatre journal*

<sup>2</sup> Hare. 2008. *Zeami: performance notes*

<sup>3</sup> *The aesthetics of quietude*

to the obvious; the hint, as opposed to the statement” (Hare 2008: 472) (Zarrilli 126). In working on *Told by the wind* each element operates at a subtle, suggestive level.

#### Told by the wind: the performance score

The performance is summarized

#### **Between production and reception:**

#### **a phenomenological account of ‘presence’ as emergent in *Told by the wind***

#### Dramaturgy, structure and ‘presence’

A certain openness to multiple, suggestive possibilities in narrative, time-space determinations (and a lack of contact, a lack of dialogue) the relation between the two figures is may be explained as a shifting set of possibilities. Another way of describing the performance score and its dramaturgy phenomenologically is that it presents itself to the audience’s experience and consciousness as something like an evolving jigsaw puzzle, leaving open the question of what the absolute image is, yet having a certain causality or inner logic in how the pieces relate (note again a subtlety in how different elements relate to each other).

#### Initial responses to *Told by the wind*

...hypnotic, compelling and mesmerizing – such words are used as responses. Zarrilli asks: why? and how? He turns to an analysis of the second dimension of the performance score, focusing on, “the dynamic quality of the actor’s embodied consciousness, awareness, and perception deployed in enacting some of the specific tasks/actions that constitute the total performance score”

#### A phenomenological account of the actor’s performance score

Zarrilli explains how in the beginning he opens up his awareness of the ‘other’ through a state of embodied questioning. For the figures in the performance the ‘other’ always remains *both a question and a possibility* that is shaped and reshaped throughout the performance.

They are also working with poetic texts for which the performer attempts to engage one’s entire embodied consciousness in hearing/sensing the ‘saidness’ of each line. At a technical level this means that the voice should resonate in the chest of it wants to hit the pitch. Also the saying of the text leaves a ‘residue’ [overblijfsel]. Also how to switch between a third person and a first person?

#### Acting as ‘question’: ‘presence’ as emergent

Both the performance score and the dramaturgy of the whole are crafted with great precision and detail.

“I would argue that only when performers have confidence in and clarity about the precise nature of their performance score can they allow themselves the freedom to be ‘surprised’ in the moment-by-moment enactment of that work in performance”(145).

Of course, the score needs to be executed in the moment of each enactment.

What is central to both the dramaturgy of the whole and the performance score is the inherent indeterminacy and lack of narrative closure.

Also indeterminacy, questioning, 'holding together contraries' and a dialectical process between presence/absence all point to,

"the optimal state actors *should* embody when performing – a state of being/doing where one's embodied consciousness is absolutely 'on the edge' of what is possible (...) in the indeterminate position of being 'on the edge' of *not knowing*. This place of 'not knowing' is a state of readiness – dispositional state of possibility to which the actor can abandon herself in the moment. To inhabit this state of now knowing what is next or what might emerge is to inhabit a place where there is the potential to be 'surprised' in the moment of abandonment. Paradoxically, the 'knowing' actor must become innocent, and each task/action must always become a 'question' in the moment of enactment" (146-7).

At the end he makes a remark about spectator experiences of presence, to which he also makes a footnote in which he says that for Fischer-Lichte embodied experience of the spectator is capable of collapsing dichotomies between actor/spectator and body/mind collapse. It results in the spectator experiencing an intense sensation of themselves being present and even to experience themselves as energized (Fischer Lichte 2008: 96). This process, according to Fischer Lichte, is potentially transformative in that there is "a constant process of becoming" what she calls "the radical concept of presence" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 99) Zarrilli 152. He ends the chapter by saying:

"When the actor opens into the unknown, this may also open an imaginative space for the audience in which they too enter a potentially compelling space of deep 'listening,' 'seeing,' or 'feeling'. It is an unusual place because it only exists on the edge of possibility" (147).