

# The Life-Death Paradox in the Presence of the Actor

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## **ABSTRACT**

The central idea of this paper comes from the premise that the life that runs through the physical actions of the actor's body will only be able to exist in his/her work from an acceptance and opening to the continuous imminence of its opposite – death – as a metaphor for emptiness, failure, not-knowing, not-controlling, abyss, error, fall. In this sense, the "allowing-oneself-to-die" favours, paradoxically, "allowing-oneself-to-live", which thus contributes to presence effects in acting. For this analysis, one of the starting points is the Oriental practice and philosophy, featuring aspects of yoga, meditation and Zen paradoxical thinking. Thus, we approach the mindfulness practice as a way of cultivating emptiness, aiming at providing the actor/performer with favourable conditions for an opening to the experience and zone of affect.

**Key words:** presence; void; actor preparation; life-death paradox; embodied mind.

Let us listen to Clarice Lispector:

Pleasure brings so much pain that one almost prefers familiar sorrow to unaccustomed pleasure. True happiness cannot be explained or understood. It is best compared to the beginnings of some irretrievable disaster. This complete fusion is unbearably consoling — as if death were our greatest and final good, only it is not death, it is immeasurable life which comes to resemble the splendour of death. One must absorb happiness little by little — for it is emergent life. And let those lacking in strength cover each nerve with a protective membrane, with the membrane of death, in order to withstand life. (1992; November 23, 1968).<sup>1</sup>

The present text is composed with restlessness. It is engendered by questions which have guided me since the beginning of my research in scenic arts: what forces permeate actors on those occasions when what we call presence can be recognised in their performance? What makes it so that at a given point in acting, there may be a flow of life through the actor's body, but not in other moments? Is it possible to train a body beyond techniques, towards an openness to affect? How shall we name these forces in order to exchange experiences regarding what is apparently unspeakable? Are there points in common in the bodies-in-art, which can be identified and mapped out, in a search to understand which paths potentiate the body as a territory of affects?

Since 2006, I have been investigating the universe of actors' preparations in an effort to find clues which may assist or call into question the paths of acting, in close dialogue with praxis. The reflections elaborated over the years derive from both an external and an internal perspective in various fields of performing arts as an observer, teacher, director or actress in workshops, rehearsals, creative processes, field research, plays and in traditional Brazilian festive manifestations. Twelve years later, I review this short albeit intense trajectory and recognise a certain unrelenting direction in its course, accompanied by changes in perspective that were essential to the following analysis.

The central idea of this text, which derives from an ongoing study, is based on the premise that life, which traverses the physical actions of an actor's body as a flux, can only exist in his work with the acceptance and opening towards the constant imminence of its opposite – death – as metaphor of emptiness, failure, not-knowing, uncontrol, abyss, fault, fall. In this sense, *allowing oneself death* fosters, paradoxically, *allowing life*, which therefore contributes to the states of presence in acting. With the study's chief focus on the life-death paradox of the body in the enacting arts, I strive to understand the convolutions of this process, both in practical and in conceptual terms, as a way to complement and broaden investigations of this field of enquiry in the theatrical area. Given the tension and friction between oriental<sup>2</sup> and occidental thought, I aim to identify the dualities that exist in the workspace of art practices in the contemporary scene – body/mind separation; internal/external; theory/practice; self/other – and to resignify, based on a paradoxical vision of being in the world and in the present moment.

Death is fundamental to constitute the notion of happening. Hence it has this paradoxical character of being simultaneously a nothing, a thing that does

not happen to us, and also the only thing that we know to happen and to make happening possible. Therefore death is a kind of condition to the possibility of happening (Viveiros de Castro, 2009).

This concern with the theme of the presence and preparation of actors emerged during my undergraduate studies in Scenic Arts in the University of Campinas, (1998-2001), while participating in a theatre collective, the "Grupo do Santo". In the collective we held continuous training sessions, directed especially at street performances, as our main play, *Retrato na Janela*, was presented in open and public spaces. For this reason, our empirical research was an unceasing oscillation of attempts, mistakes and successes, working through difficulties encountered in our rapport with spectators, with the open space, and with our own bodies: breathlessness, physical resistance, acrobatic and musical abilities, improvisation and so on. This field of study was expanded during my participation in the Master's Program in Scenic Arts, also at the University of Campinas, when I researched the states of presence, availability and gestural precision of street actors within traditions of popular culture, with a field study of the Cavalo-Marinho plays in the Zona-da-Mata region in the State of Pernambuco. Thus, I explored these traditional modes of transmission of an intuitive and practical performance knowledge for open spaces.

In the traditional performances of the Cavalo-Marinho, I noted a strong association with the notions of structure and spontaneity developed by Grotowski (1984) and later on by Thomas Richards (1995), Mario Biagini and Eugenio Barba (1994).

For the abovementioned authors, spontaneity may be enabled through a minimally explored structure that will allow the creation of an already established repertoire of bodily states and qualities of movement, action, voice and situations that may be at hand for the play. The play may be produced from macro-compositions, as in the case of improvisations within the dramaturgical structure itself; from micro-compositions; internal micro-reorganizations; new creations; or slight variations in performances with fixed formal structures. Even in these cases, the space for play is maintained. Though almost unnoticeable to the public, it is this space that holds the quality we have often named as *living* or *organic*.

In the conference given at the Congress on Western and Eastern Theatre in Rome, in 1984, Grotowski expounded on several differences and similarities between actors from these parts of the world. Owing to the fact that in most of the traditional Oriental manifestations, such as the Balinese theatre, Japanese Noh or classical Chinese theatre we find that actions and movements are as a rule minimally codified, Grotowski stated that in these cases the energy and improvisatory flow could be possible amid subtleties in a micro universe:

In the Orient, it is much more a question of improvising the applications of energy, of discovering forms as energetic functions. The elements, the forms/details, are very precise, to the point where they become movement, gesture, and vocal signs. But within this framework, the order of the details can be rearranged in a subtle manner, the rhythmic accents changed, the duration of the "stops" between the details modified, and an even greater complexity achieved. The actor is able to observe "how things are going",

"how it is done", and discover the surprises of the moment (even give himself some surprises). The forms are rediscovered as channels. Energy flows in its own way, indefinable (Grotowski, 1996, p. 237).

Some years afterwards, in his well-known text "From the Theatre Company to Art as Vehicle" (a compilation based on the transcripts of two conferences presented in 1989 and 1990), Grotowski defended the idea of *verticality*, which would be the corporal work stemming from more subtle and less crude energies, albeit brought to the density of the body, in its perceptive and physical materiality. Verticality is also connected to details, to an investment in thoroughness, in minute detail, in the logic of the tiniest actions and their intertwining, thus in the spaces *between*. This quality could only be achieved, according to Grotowski, when accompanied by an equally vertical dedication to labour, wrought 'with solid professional expertise':

One cannot work on oneself (to use the term of Stanislavski), if one is not inside something which is structured and can be repeated, which has a beginning a middle and an end, something in which every element has its logical place, technically necessary. *All this determined from the point of view of that verticality toward the subtle and of its (the subtle) descent toward the density of the body.* The structure elaborated in details—the Action —is the key; if the structure is missing, all dissolves (Grotowski, *apud* Richards, 1995, p.130; author's italics).

These two passages by Grotowski point to the existing tension between technique and spontaneity, or between structure and flow, fixed and mobile, rigid and malleable. These are examples of terms present in scenic practice, often taking the form of distress in the creative process or in training, as if it were necessary to find a method or an answer to the paradigm. In my practice as a teacher, director and researcher, sometimes I observe actors preoccupied with the technical construction of physical actions, but their energy flow is insufficient to render the sequence alive. Conversely, other actors seemingly have no effort to improvise or maintain the flow, but they need to develop further the precision and finishing of their gestures and actions. These two types of actors are also represented in the text "Art as a Vehicle," when Grotowski exemplifies two distinct approaches to work on the body: the first, to put the body into a state of obedience; the second, to challenge the body, keeping in mind that both approaches are legitimate and have their own dangers (Grotowski, *apud* Richards, 1995, p.129).

This exposes a common dilemma of the rehearsal room: a dual thought/action that only is soothed when it can perceive where it is, a thinking/doing that cannot deal with the inexplicable, the unknown and the unplaceable. Hence the complaint I have observed in workshops or creative process in my doctoral research about the division felt by actors and students of acting in their practice . This feeling in turn occupies their mind-bodies in the moment of acting and deters them from being present. The internal clash between thinking and doing hinders the possibility of inhabiting the unknown present, without a judgement that attends every performance: whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, and so on, even though this unknown, as mentioned by Grotowski, pertains to

small improvisations in the dynamics of micro-actions, almost invisible to the spectator's eye.

This clash between thinking and doing which accompanies actors, at least in the Western world, appears to stand in direct relation to a dualistic system of understanding the world and oneself. Not only does this separate mind from body, but this duality entails a relational hierarchy that implies a body being controlled by the mind, as if the mind were not body, and as if the body did not think (Richards, 1995, p. 66). This system of understanding has been questioned over the last century in the West by thinkers of several areas who propose a different perception of man and the world, in a more integrated and less polarized manner. Instead of being considered disconnected or separated, these parts relate to each other: they create, recreate, organize and disorganize themselves continually without a predefined command (Damásio, 2000; Gil, 2004; Greiner, 2005). In the East, we perceive the wide-ranging prevalence of a unified view of the body-mind, of the interconnection rather than separation of bodies with parts that compose the visible and invisible spheres of the world (Uno, 2012; Yuasa, 1987; Suzuki, 1969).

In the scenic arts, the tension between thinking and acting, between internal and external polarities: self/other, self/world, man/nature, reason/emotion, between other dualities, also observed in their relation to structure and spontaneity in my Master's research on Cavalo Marinho and street theatre, led to my PhD research, in which I explored the "work metaphors" found in particular case studies involving the creation and workshops of theatre groups selected for the project. The concept of "work metaphor" was introduced in order to designate the language of practices in rehearsal rooms, training and pedagogical processes, as a means of recognizing in the specific language of this territory a potent wisdom that may reveal issues on the actors' preparation. In case studies with the Lume Theatre (Campinas), Teatro da Vertigem (São Paulo) and Familie Flöz (Berlin), I focused my research on the provocation of the bodies present contained in the indications given by the directors or teachers in the mentioned processes.

As a result of observations in workshops by Renato Ferracini of the Lume Theatre, I designated some of the work metaphors as paradoxical indications, for they suggested to the participants a space of free corporal investigation, which would produce no guiding model, let alone imagine something intelligible by means of synthesis of consciousness. When Ferracini suggested to his students, for instance, that they: "explode lightness [while] maintaining tension" (Ana Lewinsohn, unpublished workshop notes), they had no reference as to what this provocation meant in practice. Without pre-established models, and advised constantly not to concern themselves with finding a correct way to perform the exercise, students were encouraged to experiment and ultimately, to create. It became clear that, as long as they searched for a logical understanding of this paradoxical indication, they seemed a little lost with the separation between thinking/imagining/acting. However, once they surrendered understanding and simply allowed their bodies to think for themselves, in the pressure of the instant or exhausted by preceding attempts, an actor emerged with his singular course of time/space and actions that we could dub *organic, alive or present*.

Still, what is the meaning of a body thinking for itself? Thomas Richards in his book *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions* (1995), gives us an indication, while discussing organicity, through the contrast of human and feline action:

If I observe a cat, I notice that all of its movements are in their place, its body thinks for itself. In the cat there is no discursive mind to block immediate organic reaction, to get in the way. Organicity can also be in a man, but it is almost always blocked by a mind that is not doing its job, a mind that tries to conduct the body, thinking quickly and telling the body what to do and how. Such interference often results in a staccato and broken way of moving. But if you watch a cat, you see that all its movements are fluid and connected, even the fast ones. In order for a man to arrive at such organicity, either his mind must learn the right way to be passive, or learn to occupy itself only with its own task, getting out of the way so that the body can think for itself (Richards, 1995, p.66).

Imbued by the restlessness which I signalled at the beginning of this text, I kept returning to questions such as, to what extent one can train a body beyond technique, towards openness to affects. Therefore, after my doctoral research, inspired by the power of such paradoxes, I undertook a post-doctoral project to expand the study of a thought/practice built on the hypothesis that *life* (or organicity, presence) so sought for in the work of the actor, is only achievable as a flow in his body; paradoxically in the acceptance of its opposite, death, as a metaphor for *void*, unknown, abyss, or even mistake, fall, failure. These are various terms that refer to a world seldom treated in actors' or directors' expositions; most of them prefer to focus their discourse on the achievements and efficiency of their methods, thus leaving this important aspect of creative work, as a largely unexplored territory.

The issues raised till now point to a course in the actor's preparation which, in the Western theatrical world, must incorporate the difficulty of dealing with the mind/body paradigm in practice, hence also in theories that elaborate this universe. As we have seen, the non-dualistic concept that encompasses the complexity of acting and the actor in performance has been recently studied by a few authors, some of them, cited above, such as Gil, 2004; Greiner, 2005; Uno, 2012, for example. The search to comprehend intricacies of this process, is not intended to clarify an irresolvable mystery, because there is no way of addressing the invisible forces that compose acting. For we know that these forces are in continuous motion and will be singular for each time/space and actor, hence the impossibility of elaborating a universal treatise on what forms *presence*, *life*, and *organicity* in acting. With this in mind, the course of this beginning investigation proposes to consider such difficulties in light of an Oriental thought/practice which, due to its non-dualistic conception of itself and the world, may aid in heightening the tension of these restless feelings from a different perspective.

By and large, in the East the separation of body and mind, or life and death, does not even present itself as an issue, or an anguish as we suffer in the West, because the world and man have always been apprehended as one and paradoxical. This ties in with the indivisibility, within Eastern cultures, of theory and practice,

because any theory only makes sense of existence as a reflex consolidated with the practice of life or, in our case, with artistic practice:

As the Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa explains, in Japan and China one presupposes that the mind-body relation changes through body training, as enabled through culture (shugyô) and training proper (keikô). Only after adopting this experiential starting point can one inquire the relation of body and mind. In other words, this debate should never be restricted to an exclusively theoretical speculation. It originates from a practical undergone experience (taiken), that implies a body-mind continuum within a subject and his transactions with the environment. Theory is, by necessity, a reflexion of lived experience, because it organizes itself during action (Greiner, 2005, p.22).

The relationship between Oriental practices and philosophies and acting practice is by no means a novelty. Ever since the West gained access to Oriental practices, such as various forms of meditation, yoga, martial arts and traditional dance and theatrical manifestations such as Noh or Kathakali, as well as some translated texts on Zen, Buddhism and Taoism, we find appropriations and contaminations of these universes in some modalities of training and in the conceptualization of intercultural performances. In the early twentieth century Stanislavski, drawing from his studies of Ramacharaka's book *Hatha Yoga*, employed *asanas* (postures) and *pranayamas* (breathing exercises) with his actors (Tcherkasski, 2012, p.7). Other records show yoga as part of Grotowski's training, as well as his interest in Kathakali shared by Antonin Artaud (1999), Eugenio Barba (1994) and Philip Zarrilli (2009). Also noteworthy are Peter Brook's travels to India before the staging of the *Mahabharata*, because of his own as well as his company's exposure to traditional performances and ritual arts (Zarrilli, 1986, p. 92); and Ariane Mnouchkine's work with Balinese and Noh masks, due to her trips and Erhard Stiefel (mask creator of the Théâtre du Soliel) to Bali and Japan (Picon-Vallin; Coelho, 2012, p. 159).

Such procedures have become controversial and open to challenge, especially by Indian writer, director and playwright Rustom Bharucha (1993). In his book *Theatre of the World*, Baracha presents a severe critique of the appropriation of parts of Indian culture by Grotowski, Brook and Barba, for instance, and in Schechner's performance theory. His chief argument is that intercultural theatre ought to be a two-way interchange, to the equal benefit of both cultures. However, things have run a different course, inasmuch as colonized countries such as India had no choice over contact with the first world. Hence the forcefully established relationship has never been horizontal, as the colonizing country always establishes itself as superior (also, simply due to its greater economic power, which enables colonizers to travel to distant cultures).

Moreover, Bharucha shows how the appropriation of parts of Indian culture by the cited directors was characterized as scientific and surgical; that is to say, they were set by pragmatic and immediate conditions, without deference to the historical/political/social and cultural context in which the appropriated techniques or myths arose and are still present to this day. Bharucha expresses especial

concern, not only with the aesthetic issues involved in intercultural exchanges, but with the ethical relationship to be between the social parts involved, or its failure. A few years later, Patrice Pavis, in his book *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* took up this theme in a similar tone when he states:

The motivation behind the Oriental vision of such artists (from Brecht or Artaud to Mnouchkine or Brook) certainly is due more to the crisis in Western theatre and the desire of its revival, than by any ethnological concern to comprehend the other (Pavis, 2008, p. 6).

The problems addressed by Bharucha are useful to ponder not only on the philosophy/practices of the East related to the actor's work. They may also apply to conditions within a country. This is the case of Brazil, with its vast territory, colonial history and variegated immigration, which resulted in an immense cultural diversity. One needs constant awareness of the obligatory ethical stance in the face of otherness and especially when cultural segments are appropriated and disseminated in creations or methods. Thus, the process of appropriation and re-creation of facets of cultural traditions must be conducted with delicacy, perceptiveness and due respect for their sources.

Various degrees of contagion-contact-contamination with different cultures can be created. This will depend on the internal availability with which bodies get in contact and also, of course, of the time allotted to experiences and exchanges; following that, on time dedicated to work based on this experience. Here, work is understood in the broader sense: continued reading, thought, corporal practice, disciplined usage of techniques and even leisure. The separation of art from life, artistic work and life, also influences ways of addressing the "material-immaterial" divide when encountered. This could be because in Eastern traditions this demarcation is not so sharp; it is rather more diluted and blurred, due to the fact that performances like Cavalo Marinho, Topeng, Noh or Kathakali are a perennial part of the life of the entire community (Schechner, 1985:25). In other terms, a deepened contact with this existential reality is quite likely to transform not only the way of training, creating, and being-on-scene, but daily life itself.

Meditation developed over several millennia in India, Tibet and Japan, but because its practice is invisible to most beholders (movement and action are interior) it is less appealing to actors and directors than the above-mentioned "exotic" traditions. In fact, meditation is not a practice to be observed from the outside, such as other Eastern festive or ritualistic traditions; it has to be lived, experienced, a *care of oneself* (Foucault, 2004). Nevertheless, there are some artists whose meditation practice exerts a noticeable influence on their work or on their creation methods. David Lynch, the film-maker, in his book *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (2006), emphasizes the immense creative benefits derived from the practice of meditation and describes in detail some of his attendant procedures as an artist.

Cassiano Quilici, scenic arts researcher in the University of Campinas, has been conducting a longstanding investigation rooted in his practical experience within a meditation centre which he co-founded, on the relationship of Buddhism with some creative artists which include John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, Meredith Monk,

Bill Viola, Marina Abramovic, Yoshi Oida and Lee Worley. It is worth noting that the conceptions which Quilici expresses in his writings and talks are based not only on his exterior observation of these artists and their works, combined with the study of classical Buddhist texts cross-referenced with theoretical essays on performance, theatre and philosophy. They are inescapably based on his practical experience of meditation within his own body-mind. Thus, his assertions and queries stem from the field of experienced relationships, confronted with what he observed in/from others, be they theorists, artists, or theoretician-artists.

The chief question with regard to meditation practice and its relationship with creative artists is the emergence of the *void*. We return again to the death-life paradox and the need of the actor/performer to open him or herself to the experience and its enveloping affective zone, required in order to be permeated by invisible forces that fill in time-space in the act of training, rehearsing and performance. This brings one back to the frightening abyss: the blankness, death, failure, fall, darkness, uncontrol. There is no question that meditation promotes this body-mind state from the start. In the contemporary world, the need to pursue the *void* both for artistic creation and for ordinary life (without precise limits between these two spheres) seems to be even more pressing in times of frenzy, fragmentation and stress, aggravated by the Capital-driven impulse to do, to do, to do; to produce, produce, produce. In our case, to create, create, create. Inevitably, this way of living-working affects the form of theatrical scene and the bodies of the performing actors.

We perceive a clear primacy of activity, of presenting oneself, showing oneself, demonstrating technical and expressive skills, delivering texts in haste. There is a lack of breathing, being absent, receiving, opening oneself up. These are all required in order to play unassumingly with the invisible, running the risk of failure at any point, confronting death and not evading moments of emptiness. When filling in all spaces with the unceasing intake of excessive information and technique: when is there opportunity to establish a real relationship? These symptoms of postmodern humans pervade the forms of living, creating, acting, teaching, learning, of being alone or with others.

Some Western thinkers, especially post-structuralists of the philosophy of difference (Machado, 2009), demonstrate in their writings an attentive eye to inter-relational spaces: the *pre-individual* (Simondon, 2003); creation of an *open body* (Gil, 2004); a *body without organs* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1995); the *care of the self* (Foucault, 2004). They bring out the *stupid life* ("vida besta", Pelbart, 2007) or *bare life* (Agamben, 2002) that we live. These texts challenge life put into compartments, individualizing, divided, polarized, whose end-product are *surviving* beings (Pelbart, 2007) within a world of excesses in which one seeks unendingly for more, without having to deal or live with any *void* – which is inherent to all humans, be it as internal, subjective void, or by the objective void, death, which is everyone's destination. This process, impelled by biopolitics which nowadays even affects spheres of subjectivity, fabricates persons easier to manipulate, *docile bodies* (Foucault, 1987), whereas the inward regard and acceptance of the void could potentiate life and generate empowering or micro-revolutions.

This brings up another paradox: the famished man, apparently *replete with everything* (information, money, technology, friends, sex, work, food, matter) has to

face an immense *inner void* (of sense, relevance, values). Contrarily, the bold act of facing and embracing the void can produce a blended state of plenitude, of being in the *present of the present* (Fabião, 2010). This seems to be one of the major and most meaningful challenges and difficulties of today: living with the void, which itself may engender a dissolution of the subject (of the urges to do, to do, to do), to be rebuilt – in practice, not only in theory – as a relational being, with oneself, with the other and with nature. The conjecture is that a non-dualist vision and experience, not split into body/mind, self/other, theory/practice, inner/outer, life/death has necessarily to include the confrontation, intimacy and learning of the state of void. Since we have for a considerable time been living with a tyranny of excess, it may be that only by steering towards the other extreme one may practise the search for paradoxical experience, world and man unified, in process, as he is. The first obvious requirement for the entire process is *deceleration*, or slowing down.

Even those who practice meditation as a form of deceleration and approaching the void, may be hindered by limitations and the habit of always *striving to achieve*, focusing on the end goal, on the result to be achieved. It is necessary to let go of everything, even of our will and goals, one has to practise being present and observing the process without attempting to stop it, control or guide it. Possibly, in such a way, one may get closer to gaps, *small voids*, moments of great potential, but even these should foster no attachment. Every moment will be unique and impossible to regain in the same mode and by the same course, because the active forces will be different each time. Cassiano Quilici discusses our need of safety, permanence or achievement, when he states that:

Emancipation "means that in birth you are emancipated from birth, in death you are emancipated from death. There is detachment from birth-and-death, and penetration of death-and-birth. This is the practice of the Way" (Dogen, 2005, p. 98). Dissolution of any kind of resentment with regard to impermanence is possible when there is no denial of what is to come, nor identification with it, when there is detachment not only from "objects" but from the very longing to exist or "to not exist". (...)

To the extent that subjectivity is still involved and enmeshed in the quest for some mode of assurance, by way of affirming its will and expanding its domain, it would be incapable of opening itself to the experience of its "empty" foundation. In this flight movement emptiness, when experienced, will promptly give way to a new manifestation, instead of the serene comfort in the silence of the void. Emptiness is viewed only as a necessary condition to pass from one form to another, and to intensify the becoming. The unceasing passage from one form to other is a way of always jumping out of the "void", instead of experiencing it in contemplation and its entire depth (Quilici, 2014, p. 97).

Likewise, in theatrical practice, one should delve into uncharted territory, away from safe paths, give up the excessive will to be, to make, to accomplish, create, compose, erect. The various possible ways for training, all the techniques, procedures, methods and non-methods to prepare actors, share – or so they should – the need to create *favourable conditions* to the flux of life in the bodies that are

present. These conditions pertain to the capacity of the actor (performer or dancer) as well as the director, lecturer or performing partner who provokes these experiences, to be available in the present time to all imminent risks – of serendipity, failure, noncontrol, unsureness or, ultimately, emptiness. In this sense, the death-life paradox of the actor, when experienced in its fullness – precisely in the space *between* life and death, ascent and fall, success and failure – may favour organicity, organic actions, organic relations, being and existing in the *present of the present*.

Carlos Simioni, actor and researcher of the Lume Theatre in Campinas, presents a technical demonstration which is visceral, virtuous and motivating, entitled "Prison to Freedom". Here he returns to the initial corporal explorations as an actor, retrieving small segments with humour and irony, to indicate that, after years of assimilating and creating technique, he now desires to "liberate himself from technique". Subsequently, he bravely bares his current state of research, still precarious though potent, of presence and rapport with the public. Ultimately, this begs the question: to what extent are all those years of profound investment in technique actually required to "achieve" a state of presence? This is an issue which remains unsettled.

As I described above, I am interested in relating principles, thoughts and practices from the East with questions regarding the actor's preparation that motivate my current research. I am wary, nonetheless, of treating faraway cultures superficially or generically, given the issues and controversies that may arise from such interchanges. As a result I have been gradually incorporating Zen literature and Zazen meditation, together with readings on yoga and the practice of ashtanga yoga. This approach has brought insights into the body-mind relationship in the preparation of Western actors from the creative practices in which I have taken part in the last few years.

In my artistic and academic trajectory, I perceive that in the field of actor training much attention is given to physical aspects of corporal preparation, such as precision of movement, opposition, focus, construction of a physical repertoire, sequence of physical actions, dexterity, agility, tonus, different qualities of movement, weight, direction, pause, gaze, vocal resonators etc. However, when it comes to improvisation or, especially at the time of rehearsal, in the repetition of a created scene or its performance, we often notice difficulties which denote the actors' division of body and mind and their self-judgement of actions in performance.

The actor or student seems to find himself either in the past, evaluating something that he has just accomplished, or in the future, concerned with his next action or line; or still, which is more usual, anxious about his assessment by the audience, teacher, director or colleagues. He therefore surrenders the present, instead of plunging into the abyss and embracing error; a way of opening his mind/body to forces, affections, improvisations and plays that happen during acting. In moments when this actually takes place, we are presented with life in its rare beauty, which could even seem grotesque, as according to Kayser (1986), this would be the fusion of opposites rather than a definition of meanings; that is, life when bound to its opposite – death – as a real possibility, in its intrinsic precariousness and vulnerability, paradoxically finds its full strength.

Eastern practices such as yoga and Zazen meditation endeavour to quieten the mind, based on a unified conception of body-mind which stems from millenary wisdom and has empirical support (in the sense that it was widely experimented with proven results). I see these as a substantive contribution to the constitution of self and world, which in the West are divided and fraught with anguish that reflects upon the practices of actor preparation. In the unending quest for clues on how to train the body towards openness to affects and present forces, instead of only assimilating and reproducing techniques, I came across an article from 1976 by David Feldshuh, professor at Cornell University in New York, entitled "Zen and the Actor", in which the *void* of the Zen mind is viewed as a quality of freedom and of unconstrained possibilities, of readiness and connection to the unconscious, from which creativity would arise.

According to Feldshuh, in the process of meditation we reduce the separation of mind from action, called *suki* in Zen, which means the "space between two objects". As stated by the author, all separations between thinking and acting are forms of *suki* and produce a standstill that breaks the creative flow and the ability to respond. Performing artists should thus surpass technique, forget their study and themselves in order to attain acting without feeling divorced from experience, not oscillating between carrying out an action and judging it. Shunryu Suzuki, in his widely known book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, raises an important point for reflection on this action, a principle which he entitles the "correct effort":

The most important point in our practice is to have right or perfect effort. Right effort directed in the right direction is necessary. If your effort is headed in the wrong direction, especially if you are not aware of this, it is deluded effort. Our effort in our practice should be directed from achievement to non-achievement.

Usually when you do something, you want to achieve something, you attach to some result. From achievement to non-achievement means to be rid of the unnecessary and bad results of effort. If you do something in the spirit of non-achievement, there is a good quality in it. (Suzuki, 1970, p. 59)

One alternative to overcome technique is to train the mind, and not only the body, as is the most customary way to prepare actors. What Feldshuh calls the "Zen mind" is, in his view, also the mind of the actor. A mind trained to forget the training, which would be the final step in any acting process: to allow the present to operate on the actor in the most expressive way possible, to be here-now for that which is about to take place. We could, accordingly, consider training the mind an important key to inhabiting the present. According to Feldshuh, that would be the internal condition necessary to integrate the techniques acquired with the creative work:

The actor must be trained in many techniques, but without Actor's Mind these techniques cannot be fully actualized. Actor's Mind is the inner condition necessary to integrate any technique into the creative act, an act that goes beyond the boundaries of conscious control or analytic intelligence requiring the capacity to surrender to the moment and live fully in it. This quality of consciousness resembles an animal state in its reliance on the

wisdom of the total organism. In this state thinking becomes an instantaneous, non-deliberative reaction. The mind is not confined, the attention is not limited to any single aspect. Self-consciousness disappears because there is no split in awareness. There is no turning back or wobbling because the mind is fluid. Even though the actor has rehearsed a movement or line again and again, each creation is new, coming alive and dying at every moment in front of the audience (Feldshuh, 1976, p. 86).

Daniel Reis Plá, in his doctoral thesis, discusses exhaustively the relationship between Buddhist meditation and actor training. In a chapter entitled "Everything is a question of technique", he debates alternative connections of technical aspects of the artist's work, contrasting the utilitarian vision directed towards a pre-established result, as critiqued by Suzuki, with the constant self-remaking that corresponds to a more integral and holistic vision, in which art is not separated from life:

Thus, to have knowledge of a technique is inseparable from the knower. Individual behaviour, the kind of exercises and procedures that are employed, and the person's system of belief are viewed as tools that allow access to the desired results. Action, agent and environment cannot be separated in this context. Technique is not quite something I acquire or a means towards an end; rather, it is a way of constructing myself. Thus, by searching for a definition of technique detached from a utilitarian perspective, I can state that, instead of a way of doing, technique is a way of becoming. This is not to deny the aspect of know-how, but learning how to do becomes a way towards individual transformation (Plá, 2012, p. 46).

In this regard, in my recent pedagogical practice in the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, where I have been lecturing on acting since 2016, I have been experimenting with modes and procedures that articulate moments of emptiness, contemplative techniques of yoga and meditation, in combination with rehearsals, improvisation, creating scenes and training. I also coordinate an outreach project titled "Afternoons of Emptiness" together with dance lecturer Karenine Porpino, in which we propose the experience and discussion of meditative practices in their relation with artistic production and academic research on art and education. Though these are incipient experiments, they offer glimpses of subtle yet broad changes of participants' behaviour and attitude with respect to the group, to themselves and to artistic creation. These initiatives are to be expanded and should be gradually incorporated into regular disciplines. Hopefully, they should soon promote a deeper discussion of the intersections and possibilities of generating other visions of technique and creation in the theatrical field, induced by verticalized experiences of contemplative practices.

To conclude this discussion composed of restlessness and searches, albeit far from a conclusion, I would like to return briefly to points underscored in this text: the relation of a structure, or a technique, with creative freedom and improvisation, whether these are easily noticed or micro-perceptive; the paradoxical thought/practice as an alternative way of escaping the dualistic standards of the Western world, which pushes bodies towards an unknown territory of thought about the body; a cautious contact with parts of Eastern philosophy and culture, as a

means of expanding possibilities of preparation of actors; the acceptance of the imminence of death in the scene, as metaphor for a void or unknown which allows, paradoxically, the flow of life and organicity in performance; lastly, the training of the mind by way of meditative practices that may in turn contribute to the process of being present and open to the interplay of affections and forces which permeate theatrical happening. To reiterate, to a large extent this is only a way of pondering these issues, derived from my progression as a researcher and impelled by anxieties in the work room, which are always restless and yearning for other suggestions and clues.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original: "O prazer nascendo dói tanto no peito que se prefere sentir a habituada dor ao insólito prazer. A alegria verdadeira não tem explicação possível, não tem a possibilidade de ser compreendida – e se parece com o início de uma perdição irrecuperável. Esse fundir-se total é insuportavelmente bom – como se a morte fosse o nosso bem maior e final, só que não é a morte, é a vida incomensurável que chega a se parecer com a grandeza da morte. Deve-se deixar inundar pela alegria aos poucos – pois é a vida nascendo. E quem não tiver força, que antes cubra cada nervo com uma película protetora, com uma película de morte para poder tolerar a vida" (Lispector, 1984, p.155).

<sup>2</sup> Despite considering the East in its innumerable and distinct cultures, and keeping in mind their distinctness and variety, I employ the designation of Orient in specific reference to the integrated view of body-mind, a vision that seems to pervade many practices and philosophies, some of which stem from millenary traditions.