

# ACTING AND ESSENCE

*Experiencing Essence, Presence and Archetype  
in the Acting Traditions of Stanislavski and Copeau*

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## STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

MAT—Moscow Art Theatre

VCA—Victorian College of the Arts

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents a practical hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry into experiences of presence and essence in actor training and performance, within the Stanislavski tradition and in the neutral mask, associated with the Copeau tradition. Drawing upon on published writings on and by Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, Lev Dodin, Lecoq and others, the author argues that essential experiences and events are central to the work of many of the most significant figures in modern acting and that their approaches are best understood within a spiritual framework. Using the framework of transpersonal theory and the writings and practices of A.H. Almaas, and drawing on his own acting experiences and those of his co-researchers, the author explores various qualities of presence, or aspects of essence, that arose in the studio investigations and performances conducted during the research. These aspects include Love, Identity, and Personal-ness. The author demonstrates how these aspects illuminate the work of the above practitioners and open possibilities for the actor within their traditions. He demonstrates how, in the light of Almaas's phenomenology and psychology of essence, these aspects can be incorporated into a working process through an expanded understanding of the actor's "dual consciousness." He concludes by situating the insights he describes within the necessity for maintaining an attitude of endless exploration and inquiry, and a commitment to presence over and above any known perspective, in order to avoid the fossilization of the insights or the perils of "spiritual materialism."

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

I have chosen to use feminine pronouns for generic nouns throughout my text, both to balance the still-prevalent assumption that ‘the actor’ is male and to honour the fact that the majority of my co-researchers in this project were women.

*Stanislavski* is also frequently rendered into English as *Stanislavsky*. I use the former spelling. When other writers use the latter, I have not drawn attention to it (for example, using *sic*) because my references to Stanislavski are so numerous that to do so would have unnecessarily encumbered the text. For all other Russian names I have used their most widely known transliterations.

I have included within the text many accounts of my own acting, teaching and personal experiences, as well as accounts by my co-researchers. These passages are indented, italicized and where necessary preceded by their year and a short description of context. For example:

*1997. I am in a workshop with a teacher in the Lecoq tradition. We are playing a game, improvising, and suddenly I find myself playing the father at a country wedding, looking at my daughter....*

I have also included a number of exercises, which are in most cases variations on those known within the traditions I deal with, or my own inventions. These are indented and the title of the exercise underlined. For example:

Exercise: Stop

Standing in neutral, find the horizon. Then find, on the inside first, the gesture ‘Go Away!’ (the hands come up to the sides of the chest and push forward vigorously straight ahead)....

Information and quotations that are drawn from personal communications, including interviews with co-researchers and others, are indicated by context or in the flow of the text and are not formally cited as references.

At times I refer to those teachers with whom I worked personally by their first name. This practice is intended to distinguish these artists from those with whom I have not had personal contact. The nature and significance of personal contact in actor training is a central concern of my thesis, and it seemed appropriate to foreground such contact in this way. When I cite the public writings or performances of my teachers, I employ the usual scholarly style.

Finally, this thesis is interdisciplinary, spanning transpersonal studies, acting and theatre, and is intended to be read by specialists in each of these fields. Writing to a diverse audience requires that I present more background and explanation than would be the case writing only for one group. I beg the reader’s indulgence in this matter.

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION: PRESENCE IN AND BEYOND THE THEATRE

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND

When I was seventeen, I went to The Hole in the Wall Theatre in my home town of Perth, Western Australia to see a production of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* directed by Raymond Omodei. The play is a tempestuous encounter between two lovers in a motel room on the edge of the desert in North America. They can neither leave each other nor remain together. At first we in the audience have no idea why, but the play gradually reveals that they share a secret, a transgression of a taboo. Like Shepard's other plays, *Fool for Love* plays with the mythic dimension of ordinary American lives, marrying realism and theatricality.

Watching this performance, I found myself swimming in presence, enraptured by a mysterious yet palpable atmosphere that held me transfixed. I was riveted to my seat in silence, in such absorption that I feared to move. The entire audience seemed to share this absorption; any small movement reverberated through the space. I seemed to sense the feelings of those around me—surely the actors too could feel each movement the audience made, each wave of emotion.

*May and Eddie kiss, deeply, passionately. She pulls back from him and looks into his eyes with such love, such longing, and lifts her knee into his groin.*

Each new action, rhythm, or revelation in the story unfolded in a concentrated and intensely shared sea of awareness; it seemed an unfolding of that awareness, of a physically-felt communal presence.

*Eddie collapses on the floor in agony. The lights change, instantly. Within a looming darkness, his foetal form lies in a lonely pool of light.*

This image seemed to usher the audience into a deeper, more forbidding grotto of our collective soul. For ninety minutes the actors played “relentlessly without a break” (Shepard 1984, p. 19), transporting us to some other realm, to a dimension of experience beyond the everyday.

Those ninety minutes had for me opened a window to *something else*, something greater than me, greater than Sam Shepard's play, greater than the actors' skill. Had the others in the audience felt what I felt? I do not really know, but my experience seemed communal, reaching beyond the boundaries of my body to encompass everyone there. I thought: *Is this theatre?* It was theatre that had brought me this singular experience and, from that point on, I knew what I wanted to do. Having tasted the radiance, beauty, truthfulness and *there-ness* of that event, knowing that it was possible for the theatre to be *that*, I felt that to do anything other than acting would be a lie and a retreat.

At that time, I was rehearsing two roles for a play at school. Searching for some guidance on acting in our school library, a second event occurred that was to shape my artistic life and this thesis. I found Stanislavski's *Building a Character* (1988), one of three books that present his acting system in the form of a fictional journal by an acting student, Kostya. If Kostya is the young Stanislavski, then his teacher, Tortsov, represents the great actor-teacher in the years of his mastery. As I read, a revelation slowly unfolded: acting was far more than a matter of talent, luck and determination; there was a *body of knowledge* concerning it, a training process that challenged the body, heart and mind. Tortsov and his students were immersed in mysteries. Daily he led them, step-by-step, deeper into the magic of the theatre, the world and themselves. Stanislavski's searching nature and his idealism appealed to something very deep in me. He felt like a kindred spirit.

At that time, I thought of myself as a physically and emotionally truncated person. I knew that if I entered a profession that exploited primarily my intellect, I would develop only that aspect of myself and I would end up leading half a life at most. I imagined in Stanislavski's work the possibility of becoming a more substantial human being. If acting was what it appeared to be in *Building a Character*, then it was worth a struggle. Standing in my mind alongside the experience of *Fool for Love*, Stanislavski became one face of my ideal and an enduring reference point, inspiration and challenge.

As I began to pour my heart into acting and to practice some of Stanislavski's suggestions, echoes of *Fool for Love* occasionally sounded in my theatrical experiences. In the final performance of the play that had me searching the acting section of the library, I felt a greater power and flow take over. As if completely free, I felt myself improvising within the detailed form we had been given, not knowing what I would do next. I felt carried by a wave of life, power and intuition that renewed so completely my experience of both the play and myself that I hardly recognized either. Afterwards, I felt for the first time that state of grace and well-being that follows a good performance. I remained awake for hours, floating on these feelings. Many actors report similar experiences, and theatre lore and literature abounds with such stories. One of the most famous tells of Eleonora Duse's first taste of her talent, as a fourteen year old, playing Juliet in her family's troupe. So deeply did the experience affect her that after the

performance, she walked silently for hours through the streets, as her father followed respectfully behind (Le Gallienne 1973).

A few years later, I attended an ‘agent’s day’ presentation of the graduating actors of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts—a collection of short scenes and monologues designed to show off the actors’ marketable qualities. It is not an event at which anyone expects to see great art, and most of the performances on this day made little impact on me. But suddenly, in the middle of a scene about a marriage break-down in which the wife was suffering terribly, something incredible happened. Without any noticeable effort, the actress in the scene suddenly brought through a wave of feeling so intense that it stunned and enlivened me. A palpable, electric presence washed through the room and imposed itself upon the audience like an uninvited guest. I felt like I was staring at the face of her inner anguish in the air before me. As powerful as this experience was, I was surprised afterwards when the friend I was with, a hard-bitten sceptic, said “What the hell *happened* in that scene? That was just amazing.” It had not been merely a subjective experience, but an event.

By the time I was accepted into the acting course at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in Melbourne in 1991, I had a broader experience of theatre. The Perth International Arts Festival had brought many excellent companies and performances to the city—Brook’s *Mahabharata*, Cheek by Jowl, and the stunning Georgian Film Actors’ Studio Theatre, among others. And although I appreciated many different elements of these productions, it was the quality of living presence, of invisible impact, that I looked for. I thought that this dimension of experience was what theatre was about and thought also, naively, that everybody else would agree with me. I had no vocabulary for these events at the time, but in my first year of training, I was compelled to think more deeply about them. In classes with David Latham, experiences of this kind began to happen nearly every day.

In 1991, the VCA School of Drama was housed in a converted warehouse between a shoe factory and the Melbourne mounted police stables, a stone’s throw from the city’s Arts Centre and Botanical Gardens. Its studios were basic but atmospheric; wooden floor boards and natural light offset the strange pale blue of the painted brick walls. Unlike the other two leading drama schools in Australia, the VCA had not yet adopted a policy of accepting actors with regard to their ‘industry marketability’, and we first years were a fairly motley crew of eccentrics from diverse backgrounds.

For the first eight weeks, our classes focused on awakening and integrating our bodies, breath and imaginations, and incorporated Feldenkrais exercises, Alexander Technique, and ideokinesis. Following this preparation, we began work with David Latham, the Dean and Head of Acting. David had come to Australia from Lancashire via Canada, and spoke with a unique hybrid accent. He seemed to have theatre in his bones, to know about it in such a way that his

knowledge was inseparable from his person. Whatever he said, it always seemed like the tip of an iceberg.

After some weeks of improvisation, and imaginative and physical work, David asked us to wear all black to the next class, because he was going to introduce us to “The Mask.” The sight of all the first years arriving one morning all in black signalled that we were beginning work with the neutral mask, and the combination of sincere good wishes and knowing mockery from the older students added to the sense that we were about to endure a rite of passage. After a physical warm-up, David stood in front of the class, held up a single mask and told us, in a way that made the capital letters audible: “This is the Neutral Mask. It is Man or Woman Before Time. It Has No Past. It has no psychology. The Mask *is what it sees*. It does not do one thing on the outside and another on the inside. It is Pure *Action*.”

The neutral mask is a training tool for actors, not a performance mask. It has a neutral expression, with no particular character or attitude. It was invented, or discovered, by Jacques Copeau, who sought to revitalize the theatre of his day by stripping away all excess in order to reveal the essential, and this is what the mask does: it reveals. Because the mask has no past, it does everything *for the first time*. It has no preconceived ideas, and neither must the actor wearing it. It unmask the actor, and it essentializes her, meaning that it evokes actions that are simple, pared back, resonant and complete. It provides an excellent foundation for acting, a “reference point” for all subsequent work (Lecoq 2000), and is now widely used in actor training in the West.

Our first task was simply to wear the mask in front of the group. The second was to wake up, see a bird and watch it fly away. Students have many different experiences in these first exercises, from a sense of beautiful honesty, expansion, release, calm or timelessness, to claustrophobia and terror. In the first weeks of this work, I experienced mostly confusion or non-comprehension. Then in one exercise something clicked. We had to prepare an unbroken sequence of three athletic actions and perform it in the mask. I used actions I knew well, and which were associated with certain people in my past. These associations remained with me as I worked and I enjoyed crafting a sequence in communion with them. They seemed to be alive in some secret zone within me, and I seemed to draw a kind of power from them. I felt that I would enjoy bringing my sequence to an audience, and I would enjoy *keeping my secret from them* as I performed.

I did not have these thoughts at the time, and I would not even have recognized this inner process if it was not for David’s comments when I finished the exercise.

“What did you feel?” he said.

“Not much.”

“You must have felt the power of that.” When David said this, I realized that he had perceived in me something to do with my secret associations and the sense of power they gave me, something that I thought of as ‘background’, as totally inner and invisible. The fact that he saw it made it possible for me to recognize it too, and my recognition of this background presence became my entry to the neutral state and a doorway to deeper and thrilling experiences of the world of the mask.

Traditionally the mask work proceeds from simple, universal human actions, such as saying goodbye, waking up, and meeting another, to journeys and *identifications*, in which the actor becomes the elements (Earth, Water, Air and Fire), materials (such as plastic, aluminium foil, rubber, cooking oil) and even colours and music. The identifications are always oriented not toward mirroring the external form but toward touching and inhabiting essences. David also worked with archetypes such as the Warrior, the Orphan, the Innocent or one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

David referred to the essences with which we identified as *images*, by which he meant not a mental picture but the entire imaginative gestalt, including all inner sensations, emotions, impulses, visual imagery and kinaesthetic experiences. To prepare for the identifications, he would guide us to connect with an image on a personal level and then to move through the personal connection to the essence. The work was not about miming in any traditional sense; it was not about making a picture with the body of Fire or Water, or Lust, but connecting very deeply with the essence or central quality, and allowing the form to emerge from that deep connection.

David also worked with journeys. Journey structures are common in the mask work, the most famous being Lecoq’s:

At daybreak you emerge from the sea; in the distance you can see a forest and you set out towards it. You cross a sandy beach and then you enter the forest. You move through trees and vegetation which grow ever more densely as you search for a way out. Suddenly, without warning, you come out of the forest and find yourself facing a mountain. You 'absorb' the image of this mountain, then you begin to climb, from the first gentle slopes to the rocks and the vertical cliff face which tests your climbing skills. Once you reach the summit, a vast panorama opens up: a river runs through a valley and then there is a plain and finally in the distance, a desert. You come down the mountain, cross the stream, walk through the plain, then into the desert, and finally the sun sets (Lecoq 2000, p. 41).

Lecoq encourages his students to be aware of the “symbolic overtones” of the natural environments they move through—crossing the river can be a metaphor for adolescence, for example. In David Latham’s work metaphor is central. His journey structures draw on Joseph Campbell’s (1993) monomyth, and so are based not on the natural world but upon the archetypal patterns Campbell discerned in myth, dream and ritual:



*You wake up. You receive the call to set out on a journey, and you answer the call. You cross a threshold and enter a new world. You travel along a road of trials where you meet forces that help you and forces that hinder you. At the end of the road of trials you face a great test. When you pass this test you are given a gift, you return with this gift to the world you came from. You share the gift and you sleep.*

The purpose and substance of this work is always action. It is about what the actor does and what she is seen to do. It is about becoming the image, so that there is no division between inner experience and action: *the mask is what it sees, the mask is action.*

As more of us ‘found the mask’, the work became an intense and demanding shared adventure of discovery, a revelation of a new world of experience, much as they were for Copeau’s and his students, as Jean Daste’s account indicates:

The first dramatic exercises I did with the mask were, for me, the discovery of a mysterious world. ... [T]he mask allows us to see a world which could give an actor a whole new life. We left behind us altogether the naturalistic way of acting, and yet the characters possessed a greater reality and a greater vitality. We would make up very simple exercises with various themes: waiting, discovery, fear, anguish. Thanks to the mask we were penetrating deeper and deeper into a mysterious world. One group made up the families of sailors, watching from the shore for the arrival of a boat. It has been shipwrecked; we wait; we realize the sailors will not return. We are all carried away by a great emotion. It is the chorus. The force of this masked group astonished Copeau as well as all those who attended this exercise (quoted in Copeau et al. 1990, pp.237-238).

John Bolton, a highly-regarded teacher whom I observed in this research, expressed the same sentiment. Looking back on his neutral mask work with Lecoq, twenty years before, he told me he remembered “a sense of setting sail on some huge sea, some great imaginative adventure. My main memory is of this great voyage, and also the freedom that it gave.”

To me, David’s classes were a revelation. They were full of experiences of presence, profundity, resonance and power, for both actors and audience. The mask could stop everyone in their tracks, holding the room entranced in communion with something previously personal and invisible, evoking many wondrously beautiful, crystalline forms and rhythms. These forms seemed somehow familiar, as if they resonated with memories (perhaps too deep for the mind to hold) that lived in the cells, or the bones. In my journeys, there were experiences of death and rebirth, and I spontaneously enacted myths which I was unaware of at that time.

The room was often pervaded by the atmosphere of the *archaic*, as if we were touching some place far behind us in time or below us in space. Was this place from our personal past, our cultural past, or both? Was time an appropriate category at all? Where did these forms come from and why did they seem so familiar? *Archaic* comes from the Greek *archai* (plural of *arche*) which are “the basic elements out of which experience is made” (Hillman 1989, p. 15). In retrospect this archaic atmosphere marked my discovery of the archetypal dimension of

experience. We can say then, using Hillman's broad definition, that the identifications in the mask focus on different kinds of *archai*—the four elements, the colours of the spectrum, archetypal figures like the Trickster, archetypal ideas like the Deadly Sins, and even, in the materials identifications, something like the Platonic Forms of ordinary objects.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use *archetypal* or *essential* to denote all of these different kinds of archetypal experiences. I also use *archetype* to denote the Jungian archetypes as distinct from the elements, colours or aspects of essence. The context should make clear in which sense I am using the word.

The use of these *archai* in neutral mask cannot be traced to a particular tradition, like Jungian psychology, although the general orientation is clearly Western. The element identifications may have originated with Lecoq, as I have found no record of them in the work of Copeau or Saint-Denis. David Latham credits his teacher, Powys Thomas, with introducing identifications with Jungian archetypes to the neutral mask. The journey work with Campbell's monomyth is David's invention. Although the various contributors to the practice of the neutral mask may have drawn upon a number of traditions to develop these identifications, there are no references to such sources in the published writings on it.

Although each of the different kinds of archetypes with which we identified in the mask has different cultural and intellectual associations, in the mask it was clear that they were all of the same order. Each was a form beyond the personal and the particular, underlying 'normal' experience, primal, ordering and imbued with a timeless, sacred numinosity.<sup>2</sup> They also seemed objective, in the sense that my own preferences and expectations felt as irrelevant to the forms as they emerged as they would be to the movement of the planets. When I could enter the mask with an open, empty mind, free of forethought, the forms emerged out of a living stillness. The image took form in and as my body, seemingly of its own accord, as certain and objective as the sun or a triangle. Sometimes, watching my peers, the form seemed to *be* the mask. An actor in the mask identifying with Wrath, for example, became like a malleable transparent fluid revealing Wrath. Watching, I felt that I was seeing Wrath itself, staring through transparent water into the depths, and seeing the distilled living rhythm and shape of Hatred—or, similarly, Fire, Earth, the Warrior, the Star, the Lover. The "great voyage" of the mask work seemed to open, within our own bodies, one window after another on the invisible order of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Practitioners often capitalize the names of the archetypes or essences worked with to distinguish them from particular instances (Latham 1992, Eldredge 1996, Lecoq 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The term *numinosity* comes from Rudolf Otto and suggests sacredness, power, depth and luminosity. Hunt tells us that "The core of the numinous for Otto and James is an immediate response—with acceptance and surrender—to that which is utterly beyond our control—creation, life and death" (Hunt 2003, p. 36). It is the shining forth and experiencing of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of existence.

This process was, for some of us at least, profoundly transforming. Deeper forces began to flow in me, as if the lid had been lifted on a Pandora's Box. An archetype or element I had worked with would sometimes continue to flow strongly in my body long after class had finished. At other times I would feel an unexpected upsurge of emotion, or powerful dreams that—frighteningly—continued in my room for a time after I woke up. My sense of myself and my understanding of the nature of being a person were changed by my encounter with the mask. Who would have guessed that such things were in me, in us? Who would have thought that a person could burn like an inferno? The idea of a person as a *tabula rasa* was, in this context, absurd. The mask empties the mind and frees the body, so that it becomes “like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed” (Lecoq 2000, p. 36) but the dramatic forms that emerge on that blank slate are not imposed from without, but “inscribed” from within. The *tabula rasa* was simply a transition to a deeper level of form, a doorway to greater riches.

By the time I left VCA the effect of the mask work had been not only to expand my sense of theatre's potential but also to clarify and develop my ideal. The neutral mask was more than an echo of *Fool for Love*. It was as if the potent atmosphere of that performance had been transported to the studio, and was now continually changing shape, colour, texture, and rhythm, revealing more and more of its possible qualities and forms. After our neutral mask training, theatre would be forever associated, in my mind, with the numinous, the depths of the psyche and the spiritual dimension. It was this, I discovered, that I valued in the theatre. The events that made theatre meaningful for me all shared *that mysterious thing*, in which there was presence, depth, sacredness, meaning, power, universality and clarity of form. It is as if those events touched upon the meaningful essence of reality. Theatre that did not touch these depths was now much less interesting to me. A deeper value had been experienced and seemed to demand priority.

I felt a strong urge to understand and integrate the experience of mask. I wanted to learn how to harness that quality, to live in harmony with it, to understand it and integrate it into my life and my theatrical work. I think also that I wanted some defence against the power of these energies and I had an unconscious belief—so typical of the rational Western mind—that if I could name this other, I could control it. David offered me the opportunity of working with him after graduating from the school. I became an apprentice teacher, watching him teach the mask and working individually with him. Alongside these formal sessions were many conversations, usually over dinner, ranging over many hours and a vast range of topics connected with theatre. It was like Louis Malle's film *My Dinner with Andre*, only longer and funnier. David became a mentor and close friend. He also recommended Jungian writers, Joseph Campbell and Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1989), telling me “This has more to say about acting than any book I have read.”

My reading, mostly of spiritual teachings, mythology and psychology, eventually led me to Stanislav Grof and transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology focuses on extraordinary human experience and the relationship between spirituality and psychology (Davis 2003). It was first established as a discipline by a group of psychiatrists and psychologists gathered around Maslow in the late 1960s. This group, which included Viktor Frankl, Stanislav Grof, James Fadiman, Anthony Sutich and others (Hastings 1999), saw the need for a ‘fourth force’ in psychology, after behaviourism, psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology, and founded *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1969. The specific focus of this new psychology would be “empirical, scientific study” of those “ultimate human capacities and potentialities that have no systematic place” in the three other approaches, including

unitive consciousness, peak experiences...mystical experiences, awe, being, self-actualization, essence...ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit...sacralization of everyday life...cosmic self-humour and playfulness, and related concepts, experiences and activities (Sutich 1969, quoted in Valle 1989).

The insights and assumptions of transpersonal psychology expanded into other fields, so that it is now possible to speak of “a multi-disciplinary transpersonal orientation that encompasses social work, ecology, art, literature, acting,<sup>3</sup> law, and business and entrepreneurship” as well as anthropology and sociology (Ferrer 2001, p. xix). Ferrer (2001) contends that these different disciplines are united by a shared vision based on a “conviction that a comprehensive understanding of human beings and the cosmos requires the inclusion of spiritual phenomena” and by a “commitment to the epistemic import of spirituality” (p. 8).

*Transpersonal* is therefore a synonym for *spiritual*. *Transpersonal* means “beyond or through the personal” and an experience or event is transpersonal if it includes but transcends “the sphere of the individual personality, self or ego” (Ferrer 2001, p. 5). Like *spiritual*, *transpersonal* derives its meaning partly from its polarity with ‘ordinary’ and ‘limited’ experience or understanding. Implicit within the term, therefore, is the idea of expansion, in experience and understanding.

Grof’s own work focuses on the healing and heuristic potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. He is considered a leading authority on this topic and is respected by many as not only one of the most important figures in transpersonal psychology but in depth psychology generally (Campbell 1972, Capra 1983, 1988, Tarnas 1993, Scotton et al. 1996, Wilber 1998a). Initially his work involved psychiatric research with psychedelic substances at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague and later, while Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Institute in the United States. When this research became impossible due to new legislation in the early 1970s, Grof began to explore

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<sup>3</sup> Ferrer may here be referring to Manderino’s *The Transpersonal Actor* (2001), which suggests ways of working with the aura, introjection, and vivid internal imagery in conjunction with exercises from Method, the American interpretation and development of the Stanislavski system of acting. Manderino does not address presence, essence or archetype and I did not find his work significantly relevant to my research question.

drug-free approaches that could build upon the discoveries of his earlier research. The approach he developed employed faster, deeper breathing, evocative music and bodywork in a setting oriented toward fully supporting the participant's spontaneously emerging process. I recognized in Grof's (1985, 1987) descriptions of his approach a deep affinity with the neutral mask work. Not only did it involve the use of trance and an orientation towards allowing the body and psyche to bring forth its own intelligent forms, but participants in his "breathwork" spontaneously experienced many of the phenomena explored in the mask, such as identification with elements, archetypes, and the natural world.

I began to train with Grof and to participate in his process at the same time that I began to work professionally as an actor. The breathwork sessions evoked states and experiences similar to those I had accessed in the neutral mask. Clearly the theatrical dimension so crucial to the mask work was absent but I discovered, when I began to act again, that the process of opening and transformation I experienced in the mask seemed to have been deepened and extended by the breathwork: greater flow, embodiment and intuition imbued my performances. And, like the mask classes and the theatre that I loved, breathwork evoked that feeling of palpable atmosphere, of "swimming in presence." At the end of a session, which lasted three hours or more, up to forty people would lie in the room in semi-darkness, gradually coming back to everyday consciousness. Having traversed a vast range and depth of experience, some people would be talking quietly to one another with unforced openness and vulnerability; others would be sitting or lying quietly. I would sit in this sacred atmosphere as I had in my school theatre, stilled by the atmosphere of living presence, feeling at home.

The first fully professional role I played was, as it happened, in a *Hole in the Wall* Theatre production directed by Raymond Omodei, alongside one of the actors I had seen in *Fool for Love*. Over the next seven years, Ray offered me a series of good roles, and supported my relentless questioning and experimentation. During my time at VCA, I had maintained my engagement with Stanislavski's writings and practice and discovered Michael Chekhov (1985, 1991), Vakhtangov (Gorchakov c.1950), Uta Hagen (Hagen & Frankel 1973), and Sonia Moore (1984, 1991). I had also worked briefly with a Russian émigré director, Leonid Verzub, who I will introduce fully later. In my work with Ray, I was able to play with what I had learned from these artists and to discover what worked for me, with varying degrees of success. My exploration of transpersonal psychology and spiritual practices wove through this work, suggesting particular experiments as well as inspiring me at a subconscious level.

In 1998, after a few years of working like this, I attended a talk by Jean Berwick on the Diamond Approach, a spiritual path formulated by A. H. Almaas. The Diamond Approach integrates contemporary psychological knowledge—especially object relations theory—with more traditional spiritual understandings and methods (Almaas 1988, 1992, 1996, 1998a, 2001, 2002, 2004). Far from being a superficial or theoretical conceptual synthesis, Almaas's work integrates

psychology and spirituality seamlessly in practice, in ways that have significant implications for psychology and our contemporary understanding of spiritual traditions. It has become widely respected not only in the field of transpersonal psychology (Scotton et al. 1996, Davis 2003) but also by practitioners of traditional spiritual paths (Kornfield 1994).<sup>4</sup>

Before attending Jean's talk I had read a favourable assessment of Almaas's work (Wilber 1998a) but knew very little about it. At that time, one of great turmoil in my personal life, I was not interested in reading anyone's ideas. If something had validity it would have to reveal this directly, in my experience. In this slightly defiant and emotionally wrought frame of mind, I sat listening to Jean. She seemed very ordinary, small and conventionally dressed. She kept checking the time and looking at her notes, something Stan Grof never did, though he would often speak continually for three hours or more. At times she even seemed shy. She said nothing out of the ordinary. At the end of the talk I was hanging around, still undecided about whether to attend the retreat Jean would lead the next weekend. After talking to a few other people, Jean came and sat down next to me. As she did I felt, very clearly, as a physical sensation, a wave of kindness encompass me. It was as if someone had approached me with a lamp: I felt the light and warmth of compassion touch first my edges and then radiate through my body until it encompassed me. It was as palpable as a breeze.

I attended the retreat, which involved meditation and *Inquiry*,<sup>5</sup> Almaas's main practice, which is to openly explore whatever arises in one's awareness. During one inquiry, I had a strange but distinct experience. I tasted something in my mouth but I couldn't say what it was. "Tell me what it's like," said Jean. There was a clear, definite sensation, a heightened physical perception in that area. It was as if I was concentrated in my mouth and on my tongue. There was a taste like clear water, which was more immediate than the sensations of my body. Jean said: "The taste of Presence."

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<sup>4</sup> Almaas does not consider his work to be transpersonal psychology. He is explicit and unequivocal that the Diamond Approach is a spiritual practice that incorporates psychological knowledge only in so far as it supports the unfoldment of the student's soul and their spiritual realization, and that he considers therapeutic benefits a side-effect of this larger process of development. Yet, that the Diamond Approach has significant implications for transpersonal psychology is widely acknowledged (Scotton et al. 1996), and it is increasingly recognized within the transpersonal field that transpersonal psychology is inseparably intertwined with the notions of spiritual development and liberation (Ferrer 2001). Also, when Almaas does situate his work within contemporary discourse, he does so in dialogue with the visions of transpersonal theorists like Wilber, Washburn and Grof (Almaas 2004). Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, and for economy of expression, I refer to Almaas's work and the Diamond Approach as a significant contribution to transpersonal psychology. Socially, historically and philosophically considered, I can think of other field in which it can be more logically placed.

<sup>5</sup> Almaas does not capitalize 'inquiry'; it is always clear from his context when he is referring to his particular central practice and when he is using the term more broadly. I do capitalize the term throughout this thesis to avoid confusion.

## PRESENCE AND ESSENCE

Following this retreat, I became Jean's student<sup>6</sup> and began reading Almaas's books describing the path and understanding of the Diamond Approach. Like many other approaches to spiritual realization, the Diamond Approach is a path to the discovery of the most fundamental nature of reality and the human being, which Almaas (2004) calls essence, presence or Being, depending on the particular perspective and context. He uses essence to refer to the ground or fundamental nature of the individual, which "is experienced phenomenologically as presence" (p. 38); Being denotes the true nature of universal reality, and can also be experienced as presence. Almaas also recognizes that deeper than presence, ontologically and in terms of the path of realization, is a dimension of Being that is actually experienced more as absence, as a profound unknowable depth. Nevertheless, presence is a crucial concept and his work can be seen as, in part, a hermeneutic-phenomenology of presence.

Almaas ontology is not unique; it has much in common with other transpersonal thinkers (Wilber 1980, Grof 1998, Hanna 2000) and spiritual traditions (see, for example, Chittick 1998, Inayat Khan 1999). However the Diamond Approach is distinguished by two crucial insights. The first is that *presence, essence and Being arise in differentiated qualities, as facets of presence, aspects of essence, and Platonic Forms of Being*. These include compassion, love, will, peace and many others, each of which is associated with particular phenomenological gestalts. The second is that *each aspect of essence is connected with particular psychological issues*, and the knowledge of depth psychology about these issues can be employed as skilful means to help a person experience the aspects and integrate them into their character and life. Effectively, psychological work and spiritual work become a single process; psychological insight opens into spiritual realization, which is the realization of presence.

My encounter with this teaching marked a turning point in my theatrical explorations and catalysed a period of rapid development in my acting. This development was acknowledged by both my peers and press reviews, although the inner workings of the shift were kept to myself. Up until my encounter with the Diamond Approach, I had not been able to articulate what had happened in the mask classes, or in experiences like *Fool for Love*, in a way that had any significant positive effect upon the practical work. I thought that to attempt to articulate the ineffable would destroy it. Yet, in Almaas's writings, I found a clear articulation of many spiritual states, and a clear exposition of the psychological issues associated with them. Almaas's writings seemed not only to name many subtle experiences I had had, but this naming enabled him to differentiate very finely between various states. This very fine differentiation and clear

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<sup>6</sup> *Student* is the term given to the practitioner of the Diamond Approach, which is the method of the Ridhwan School. In this text, in those instances when the context does not make my meaning clear, I use *student* to denote to a Diamond Approach practitioner, and *actor* or *student actor* to denote an acting student.

conceptualization in turn made it possible to work with these states (and the obstacles to them) with clarity and specificity. Certain of his concepts (and his particular way of using concepts) began to support and evolve my theatrical understanding and practice. In terms of its influence on my development as an actor, my early work with the Diamond Approach stood alongside my work with Grof and certain significant experiences at VCA, including the neutral mask work. It seemed to open pathways for development and understanding. This thesis is the result of my explorations down a few of those paths.

The most important of these concepts is *presence*. I am aware that presence is not only “the most persistent consideration in any discussion of performance” (States 2003, p. 115) but also, due the influence of Derrida’s deconstruction and other post-structuralist theorists, one of the most critiqued and contested terms in the contemporary academy (see for example Fuchs 2003). I will address post-structuralist concerns in the fourth chapter. At this stage I will simply try to make it as clear as possible how, following Almaas, I use the term. The following presentation draws heavily on Almaas’s presentation in *Essence* (1998a, pp. 2-82).

Almaas emphasizes presence because it is more common and accessible than the direct experience of essence. By presence he means mean a felt experience. Presence is not a thought, a vision, an emotion, memory or energy. It is not an impulse. Its existence cannot be argued for logically, or proven, but it can be pointed out. Almaas points to the phenomenon of presence in everyday language and common situations: what do we mean when we say we are present, or that a person has presence, or that there is a presence in a room? There is something occurring in these situations, an important qualitative difference is denoted by our usage of the word *presence*.

Almaas contends that there are situations in which presence can be felt more intensely: at times of great danger, in powerful aesthetic experiences, during childbirth, in periods of overwhelming emotion. At these times, we feel that “there is more of me here” (1998, p. 2). There is not only increased awareness, but the sense that there is more of something *in* my seeing, sensing, smelling, in my arms and legs. At such times, we experience “intense contact with the body, along with an astonishing capacity to use and direct it. It is as if at that moment the individual actually exists in her arms, for instance, and can use them with an unusual amount of control, efficiency and immediacy” (p. 3).

Presence is most easily approached and recognized through its differentiated qualities. To use one of Almaas’s examples: a woman giving birth, if she is able to maintain clear consciousness through the process, needs to become very present to meet the task. Those around her can sense her presence. The dramatic intensity of the situation, and the impossibility of escaping it, can lead everyone around her to become more present. Then, when the baby is born, what is it that enters apart from a body? What fills the room that would not fill the room if, say, everyone



was standing around as a machine produced a new and wondrous gadget? Another quality of presence has entered, which will be different from the quality of the mother: usually deeper, more delicate, soft and permeable. We can discern different qualities between babies too: some have a bright and vibrant vitality about them, and others perhaps a more tender quality (Almaas 1998a, pp. 4-5). I remember meeting a friend's baby for the first time, entering the room where he was sleeping. The room was filled with a peace so deep it was as if we had been transported to some immense underground cave; the inner city sounds receded far into the background. I am not talking about mood, or anything that could be connected to the décor of the room, but about an immediate felt quality.

We can also consider presence from the opposite pole of life. If you have ever been present when someone died, consider: what is it that the living person had that a dead body doesn't have? The dead body is present, in a way, but there is no *presence* in it. We are not *met* by something non-material that *exists*. When my grandmother died a transition was clear to all of us there. For a while after she died something remained with her body which had been with her when she was alive and then, suddenly, it was gone. We could no longer sense my grandmother's presence.

The most fundamental quality of presence is existence or Being: "I am present" is the conscious experience of "I exist." The feeling is: "What is real in me is here" (Almaas 1998a, p. 10). This "real" which can be known only by presence, as presence, is essence. Presence is called essence when I recognize it as my being, my existence and my nature. When I see that I am seeing, and sense that I am sensing, in this seeing and sensing of the fact that I am present, my presence is what is real, because it is what is actually here now, rather than something based on the past, like a memory. This experience of certain knowing cannot be approached through the *cogito*, "I think therefore I am"; in this case, "because there is inference, there is no total certainty" (p. 11). Essence is known directly: in the experience of 'I am', the I that thinks, the I that exists, the 'am' are all the same. There is no duality.

Essence, felt as presence, is therefore the ontological ground of personal consciousness. It is also the ground of all manifestation, and is therefore what is referred to in other traditions as spirit. Spiritual development is therefore the recognition, and integration into one's identity, life and actions, of essence in all its aspects. And because essence is the ground of everything, Almaas defines spiritual development as "moving towards wholeness" (Almaas 1996, p. 498).

Essence is not based in the past; it is a living immediacy that can become so palpable that it feels substantial, and in fact it is substantial. Almaas distinguishes essence from other transpersonal events and experiences such as powerful emotions, energy, ecstatic visions. Although the ecstatic visions and emotions of spiritual experience, such as the opening of the heart, can be amazing and profound, they are not necessarily touching upon essence either, because they are

passing events that include a transitory emotional discharge. The opening of the heart, Almaas writes, can be a doorway to a more subtle and direct experience, of the being-ness of essence. This being-ness becomes most obvious when essence is felt as a substance, when it is a completely palpable continuity of presence (Almaas 1998a, pp. 15-82).

Almaas (1998, 2001) also distinguishes essence from the Jungian archetypes. He sees Jung as concerned primarily with symbols and images, not with presence, and believes that for this reason Jung misses the ontological reality and substantiality of essence. He believes that Jung's archetypes reflect essential aspects, but some are symbols, on the level of the mind, and others are actual Forms of presence. For example, the Wise Old Man seems to correspond in significant ways to the essential aspect Almaas calls the Diamond Guidance, but would be considered a symbol by Almaas; it is not marked by the directness of knowing that characterizes Almaas's experience of essence. *Mercurius*, on the other hand, which Jung takes from Alchemy, Almaas would consider an essential aspect because it can be experienced substantially as a differentiated quality of one's own essence.

The exact relationship between essential aspects and Jungian archetypes is a problematic question, one which I leave problematic. Both however fit the broad definition and description of archetypes I gave earlier, as the basic elements out of which experience or manifestation is made, and as forms that are unaffected by personal preference. (I discuss the nature of essential aspects and archetypes more fully in Chapter Four.) In this thesis, when I refer to essential experiences and events, and archetypal experiences or events, I mean a particular kind or transpersonal event, which is specifically patterned, to some recognizable degree, and imbued with presence, and which is distinct from the habitual or ordinary preferences of the individual or individuals involved.

## **THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Through Almaas's elucidation of presence and essence and their different qualities, it became possible for me to think about the experience of the neutral mask and my theatrical ideal more clearly, to name the phenomena, and interpret them in ways that positively affected my practical work. I began to think that what the mask shared with my most valued theatre experiences was presence and that each revealed essence; that the presence I had tasted on the retreat with Jean was in the mask lived and enacted (to some degree) in action and in space, and that arresting forms emerged in the mask because my body was receptive to essence and so able to be structured by it. Almaas's concepts seemed clear, close to my experience and practically effective. I felt strongly that within his vision lay the possibility of more precise and fruitful theatrical processes integrating the spiritual with the theatrical, and this feeling seemed to be pushing me to bring it to some kind of fruition.

Peter Brook (1987, p. 3) refers to this kind of impulse as the “formless hunch”—that which demands from within the artist to be brought into form. Within my formless hunch, I could discern some questions. First among these was: *how can I more effectively create performances or theatrical events that were more like neutral mask and Fool for Love, theatrical events of harmony, beauty, depth, numinosity, presence, vital power, resonance, and grace?* Using the terms and context established above, my question can be reformulated as: *what can I discover, as an actor, about creating essential theatrical events (theatrical events infused with and informed by presence) through engaging transpersonal studies and the spiritual practice of the Diamond Approach?* There were other, related questions: *Is it possible to share with others those discoveries I had made in my acting through inner work? If so, how could this be done ethically and responsibly? What is the relationship between the actor’s art and spiritual work? Is acting a kind of spiritual work and if so how? Was the craft that I had truly a craft that could cultivate the kind of performances I really valued?* In order to investigate these questions, I needed to explore more systematically and in a sense to *retrain* with this integration in the forefront of my mind.

I was somewhat tentative about engaging in this kind of inquiry through postgraduate academic research. Having experienced the sometimes uncomfortable relationship between the academic and practical orientations toward the theatre, I was aware of how easy it is to generate knowledge that is on one level intellectually satisfying but at the same time artistically indigestible, or even disabling. I decided in this research to attempt to adopt and articulate an approach that, while systemic, rigorous and academically sound, would mirror as closely as possible the process of development that was already occurring in my work. To best do this I decided that, rather than attempting to address the full range of questions I describe above, I would take as my touchstone of validity the “formless hunch” that gave the impetus to the inquiry in the first place. Working in the studio, rehearsal room and on stage with other actors, I would observe how this hunch was able to come into form in our own bodies and performances, and allow new knowledge to emerge from that process. From the perspective of the hunch, the specific question—how to create theatrical performances infused with presence—was held lightly within a more encompassing question: *what is the integration or unfolding that is trying to happen and what understandings emerge from that unfolding?*<sup>7</sup> The success of the research and the validity of the knowledge it has generated rests on whether that knowledge can facilitate a greater capacity in myself and others to realize to some degree, in actual creative work, the artistic ideals that called forth the inquiry in the first place.

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<sup>7</sup> This approach is akin to and was somewhat influenced by the “Hawkesbury Model” of action research, which facilitates unexpected “emergent knowledge” rather than predictable outcomes (Hill et al. 2001). This approach is associated with the School of Social Ecology (now subsumed into School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Penrith), in which I conducted much of this research. In the third chapter, I describe my method in greater detail, situating it in relation to hermeneutic phenomenology and transpersonal theory rather than action research or the Hawkesbury model. This reflects the greater influence on me of the former methods, and my greater familiarity with them.

## OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

Fortunately I am not alone in this kind of exploration. Just as I draw upon the spiritual practices and perspectives of the Diamond Approach, many of the major figures of twentieth century acting technique in the West—Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, Copeau and Peter Brook, among others—have drawn upon spiritual practices in the development of their work and aimed to realize a spiritual ideal through the art of the actor. Stanislavski drew heavily upon the writings of Yogi Ramacharaka, Chekhov upon Rudolf Steiner, Brook on Gurdjieff, and Grotowski upon an extraordinary range of influences, from the Hindu yogi Sri Ramana Maharishi to Hasidic Judaism to Voodoo ritual. The first chapter traces the influence of spiritual practice, thought and experience on Stanislavski’s system. It explores how profound this influence is and clarifies the particular sources he drew upon. The second chapter explores the Stanislavski tradition after his death, as well as the more overtly theatrical approaches associated with the Copeau tradition, showing how each of the artists above embodied within their art their own concern with essence. It also considers the relationship between spirituality and theatricality, and the different ways these practitioners enacted this relationship.

Despite the fact that there are many illustrious precedents for an inquiry into essence and acting, none of the above artists worked in an academic context.<sup>8</sup> Conducting such an inquiry in an academic setting makes particular demands. There is a need for transparency in terms of method, and for grounding terms like presence and essence in a coherent epistemology. In the fourth chapter I outline my epistemic assumptions. Drawing on transpersonal theory I argue that acting is in itself a coherent way of knowing and that the neutral mask can serve as the basis for a particular paradigm of inquiry. The practice and experience of the neutral mask shares many characteristics with Almaas’s approach to spiritual understanding and the transpersonal orientation. This congruence makes it possible to articulate my perspective as an example of a transpersonal participatory epistemology, to position it in relation to modern and postmodern thought, and to address concerns that my inquiry might be grounded in naive essentialist or humanist assumptions.

In the fifth chapter I describe my method, again using the neutral mask as a fundamental reference point, but in this case relating it to hermeneutic-phenomenological research methods adopted by and adapted for transpersonal research (Valle & Halling 1989, Anderson 1998, Anderson & Braud 1998, Valle 1998, Valle & Mohs 1998, Von Eckartsberg 1998b, Anderson 2000), which I adapt for the specific purpose of researching transpersonal events in acting. I draw particularly on Anderson (1998), who incorporates elements of hermeneutic and heuristic research into an approach she calls “Intuitive Inquiry.” This method involves refining one’s

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<sup>8</sup> Grotowski did work in a university, while employed by the University of California at Irvine from 1983-1992, but his work and writings remained markedly those of an artist-researcher, not an academic.

interpretation of a certain 'lifeworld text' or phenomena by stepping into the 'hermeneutic circle', and repeatedly confronting one's developing interpretation with other interpretations and texts. This process passes through stages of heuristic research described by Moustakas (1990): *immersion, incubation, illumination, explication* and *creative synthesis*, resulting in a text that is not only theoretical but resonant, poetic and grounded in personal experience, and which incorporates autobiography, experiential anecdotes, poetry and critical reflection (cf. Van Manen 1997).

My particular research strategy involved immersion in the (written and 'lifeworld') 'texts' of theatrical and spiritual work via:

- studio investigations with trained actors
- observation of exemplary representatives of the Stanislavski tradition and the neutral mask
- critical reflection on the writings and lore of these traditions
- interviews with actors and teachers working within them
- the creation of two performances: *Palaces in Ruin*, which I devised, directed and performed in with three other actors, and *Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters: a fantasia on Chekhov*, directed by Leonid Verzub, in which I performed
- ongoing systematic spiritual work, including regular retreats, daily meditations and monthly Inquiry sessions with my teacher.

I kept detailed written records of my experiences, and sometimes video records, which served as the basis for later reflection and analysis. On many occasions I recorded interviews and discussions with my co-researchers, who also shared their journals and written reflections with me. These augmented my less formal dialogues with others about the research investigations. These materials served as the basis for critical reflection and analysis leading up to the writing process. From October 2002 until December 2004, I cycled between active immersion in studio work, and reflection on relevant texts and my research materials. Thus a 'hermeneutic circle' was established, in which I gradually developed my interpretation by repeatedly confronting it with experience and texts of my source traditions. This approach also ensured that my investigations stayed anchored in the theatrical world, on the one hand, and in a systematic and guided spiritual practice, on the other. This method proved able to facilitate clarity and integration in my unfolding understanding without interfering unnecessarily in the creative work.

The understanding that emerged from engaging the hermeneutic circle in this way is presented in Chapters Six to Nine, the first three of which centre around particular archetypes or essential aspects and their relationship to elements of the acting techniques of Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov and others. I consider these archetypes not as resources for the creation of particular characters, but in terms of how they relate to acting of presence, power and resonance (although, in practice, these two dimensions cannot be completely separated). Chapter Six examines the nature, and the potential for the actor, of essential love and the related archetype

of the Fool. Chapter Seven focuses on identity, Michael Chekhov's Centre, narcissism, how Active Analysis (one variation of Stanislavski's system) enacts a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the self and the importance of this understanding for evoking immediacy, presence and spontaneity in acting. Chapter Eight explores the state of 'I Am', a state which is central to Stanislavski's system, and which I argue corresponds phenomenologically to Almaas's (1988, 2002) accounts of the "Personal Essence." Chapter Nine builds upon the connections made in the preceding chapters to present a novel perspective on dual consciousness and essential experience in acting, and offers possibilities for further exploration. The conclusion relates the preceding explorations to a wider context, makes some broader conclusions about acting, essence and spirituality, and warns against the dangers of systematization and 'spiritual materialism', arguing that a theatre of essential experience necessarily requires a radical openness to the unknown and the possible, rather than an adherence to particular principles or perspectives.

## **THE NATURE AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS THESIS**

The insights that have arisen in this research have been tested in an ongoing process of practical work and interpreted in the light of this unfolding process. This approach has led to a gradually deepening understanding of the relationship between theatre and essential experience, and of the benefits and dangers of bringing a transpersonal perspective to theatrical art. It has led to an increased capacity on my part, as an actor and teacher, and to a richer, more substantial vision. The knowledge that has resulted is therefore, grounded in the bodies and practice of each of us who participated in the research. The exercises presented in each chapter are one of the main expressions of the emergent knowledge. I do not attempt to present a system for creating essential theatrical events, but offer my own inquiry as one resource for other theatre-makers and researchers with an interest in the spiritual potential of performance. This research project should be seen as one systematic and reflexive phase in an ongoing artistic inquiry.

The 'findings' I present here are intended to be read as one approach to this issue out of many possible approaches. I do not claim universal relevance for my understanding. It is limited by my distinctly Western mindset, my gender, the relative artistic isolation of living in Australia (in terms of the traditions in which I work), the particular ways that the traditions with which I am familiar have been taught to me, my own personal blind spots and so on. While many of these are addressed in the text that follows, they are by no means transcended. In the spirit of hermeneutic phenomenology, my intention is rather to turn my own situated-ness to the advantage of the inquiry. I have chosen to write personally, and to situate the intellectual insights and explorations openly within my personal experience. This seems to me to be both more honest and more direct. Also, as I will argue later, the importance of the personal dimension is central to my argument. I expect that the knowledge expressed here will be of

critical interest only for those who share similar values and orientation, and are especially familiar with my theatrical influences.

In Joseph Campbell's *Creative Mythology* (1991a), an inquiry through myth and archetype into the relationship between the creative act and the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of existence, he writes:

Creative mythology springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thought, and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value. Thus it corrects the binding authority holding to the shells of forms produced and left behind by lives once lived. Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all, but life, not as it will be or as it should be, as it was or as it never will be, but as it is, in depth, in process, here and now, inside and out (pp. 7-8).

The dynamic relationship which Campbell describes, between creative art and the greater reality beyond, beneath or behind the one visible to all, has been the field and the process in which I have worked, learned and unfolded as a human being. This thesis does not aim to be an authoritative overview, but is intended as a creative act of renewal and integration, loyal to my own experience of value. It does not claim validity or applicability beyond the creative arts and, perhaps, to a limited degree, individual spiritual inquiry. I do however hope that this thesis' original contribution is, for some, a renewal of aspects of the traditions of Stanislavski and Copeau, the first of which I approach in the next chapter.

# PART 1 ~ BACKGROUND

*The Spiritual and Essential Dimensions of Acting  
in the Stanislavski and Copeau Traditions*



## *Chapter 2*

### **PRESENCE, ESSENCE AND TRANSMISSION IN STANISLAVSKI'S SYSTEM**

While the interests I express in the introduction may seem esoteric, in the context of modern Western acting, they are not unusual. An interest in essential, numinous and archetypal experience is not only a strong thread in modern Western actor training and performance from Stanislavski onwards, but actually the central concern of some of the most significant and influential practitioners in modern theatre. In the tradition of Western theatre that deals in depth with the art of actor, there is a tendency to see theatrical work in a spiritual vein, and to create theatre in the service of a spiritual ideal. Spiritual practices and philosophies have influenced modern acting far more than is usually admitted. Acting schools use many exercises drawn from the spiritual traditions, humanistic psychology and the human potential movement. Since Stanislavski's pioneering work, theatre in the West has recognized that the cultivation and development of the actor's capacities involves 'work on oneself' in a way that implies much more than the acquisition of skills. The movement toward incorporating into the art of acting the deeper implications of 'work on oneself' has been, with the related theme of theatre serving a higher or essential purpose, a defining characteristic of the 'art theatres' that have followed in the footsteps of Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). In fact, so prevalent, powerful and persistent is this movement that it might be more appropriate to speak of a stream than a thread.

The next two chapters will consider this element of the work of some of the major acting pedagogues, theorists and practitioners of the last hundred years for whom essential or archetypal experiences are fundamental—Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, Brook, Copeau, Lecoq and Lev Dodin. The spiritual sources and preoccupations of some of these figures have gained more recognition in recent literature (for example, Schechner 2001a, Chamberlain 2004, Leabhart 2004), but just how central and important essential experience is to modern acting as a whole has not yet been acknowledged or demonstrated. I do not think that the work of these central figures can be adequately understood without acknowledging this dimension.

This chapter explores essence and presence in Stanislavski's work and relates it to key elements of his system: the creative mood, experiencing, infection and superconscious feeling. It also considers the spiritual influences upon Stanislavski, specifically the books of Yogi Ramacharaka and his friendship with the Tolstoyan Leopold Sulerzhitsky. The next chapter will consider how the themes established in Stanislavski's work reverberate through twentieth century approaches to acting, constellating themselves uniquely in the visions of each of the above practitioners and in the practice of my own teacher, David Latham.

## **STANISLAVSKI AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS SYSTEM**

Modern acting began with Stanislavski and nobody has had a greater influence upon it than him. His pioneering investigations into the art of the actor—in his own performances, in studio collaborations, in a working theatre and its dramatic schools—are remarkable for their depth, breadth, coherence and influence. It is doubtful that any other art-form has been shaped by a single individual to the same degree that acting was formulated as an art-form by Stanislavski. As is well known, he founded the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in partnership with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, in 1898. The MAT made famous the plays of Anton Chekhov and Gorki, and established the acting ensemble as a new ideal in the theatre.

Stanislavski was already considered one of the best actors in Russia prior to the creation of the MAT, and company's tour to Europe in 1905 established his international reputation as an actor and director of genius. Yet following this tour, he became increasingly dissatisfied with his own performances, feeling that the life and truth had gone out of them, leaving only an empty shell. In 1906 he began a systematic exploration of his art to discover the means by which inspiration and the ability to act with "life and truth" could be consciously and deliberately attained (Stanislavski 1956, p. 459). He maintained this exploration, continually developing his ideas and practices, until his death in 1938. His explorations were carried out primarily in a series of studios attached to the MAT which Stanislavski founded to teach and develop his system. The artists nurtured by these studios shaped modern acting in Russia and the United States (Edwards 1966, Benedetti 1999).

From the outset, Stanislavski saw his life in the theatre as a spiritual mission. In an April 1889 letter to his future wife he wrote that "the artist is a prophet who appears on earth to bear witness to purity and truth. ... He must be an ideal man" (Benedetti 1999, p. 37). His perspective was influenced by Belinski, who presented "a vision of the artist as a missionary whose task was to declare the poetic nature of the world itself" (p. 35). Belinski thought that the arts should illuminate the general in the particular; the artist should lead an ethical life, penetrating through his works to the heart of things for the good of society as a whole. For this she should rely on instinct and image, not reason and concepts. There was nothing unusual in the nineteenth

century about an artist seeing their work in spiritual terms—in secular modernism, art filled the shoes of religion—but Stanislavski’s spiritual ideal became, for him, a living experience, which served as the foundation of his system.

Numerous accounts have been offered of the system’s development, with most authors drawing heavily on Stanislavski’s own account in *My Life in Art* (for example, Edwards 1966), and some, including Carnicke (1998) and Benedetti (1999), on his notebooks. My account will inevitably survey old ground, but through a different lens, one that seeks to discern and trace the role of presence and essential experience in Stanislavski’s work. I would like, in some sections following, to offer a different kind of reading, one that stands alongside Stanislavski in the course of his relentless search and empathically traces and participates in his lived journey of inquiry. Imagining myself in his shoes (while acknowledging how very far I stand from him in talent and achievements) and drawing on analogous experiences in my life, I will read him as an actor who shares his preoccupation with the spiritual potential of the theatre. Of course, this re-vised Stanislavski will be my creation, part real and part imagined. As Declan Donnellan (2002) might phrase it, he may not be true but he might be useful, as a reference point for my own inquiry.

For those who know this story well, I would like to highlight two statements by Stanislavski which I find fascinating and which inspired me to examine his work with renewed curiosity. The first appears in *My Life in Art*, which he wrote in 1924, after repeated triumphs in Europe and America, and after famous successes in Russia such as the First Studio’s *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Michael Chekhov’s brilliant Khlestakov in *The Inspector General* and Vaktangov’s *Turandot*. At this time, at the very height of his fame, he wrote that the system “has not yet shown any of its real results” (Stanislavski 1956, p. 527). The second statement he made in 1931, toward the end of his life, when he told a young singer that only the inspirational Sulerzhitsky had really understood him, and Vakhtangov had half-understood him (Benedetti 1999, p. 341). Is it not possible in the light of these statements that Stanislavski’s system is, even yet, *more than we think it is?*

Stanislavski’s system was founded upon inquiry into his own experiences as an actor, his observations of other actors of genius and his collaborators in the studio and rehearsal room (Edwards 1966, Benedetti 1999). For much of his career he was “for the public the supreme actor of his time” (Benedetti 1999, p. 219). On tour in Germany in 1906, one critic wrote: “His Satin was unforgettable. ... In any case, this man is a genius. The rest are capable, indeed very capable artists, surrounding a genius” (Benedetti 1999, p. 164). Toporkov (1998, p. 35) describes seeing the MAT *Cherry Orchard* for the first time:

...gradually my attention came to rest on a tall man in an overcoat. I recognized him, it was Gaev.

The tall man, as he entered, seemed to bring with him life itself. What I saw seemed a miracle. How could a person, on stage in front of a thousand people, be so completely occupied with his own cares? It did not occur to me immediately that this was Stanislavski himself.... [He]didn't "astonish" me in any way; he didn't use the 'big guns' in the actor's arsenal. I couldn't determine if, from an actor's point of view, that was good, but I couldn't take my eyes off him; it was as if he had bewitched me.

It is important to recognize that he was an actor of great subtlety and impact because, although he drew on theoretical writings in psychology, yoga and acting, his system was founded in his observation of his intimate experience and began with a personal acting problem.

By 1904, tired of naturalism, Stanislavski had already begun restlessly seeking 'the new art of the actor'. He had established an experimental studio in 1905, the 'Studio on Povorskaya', with Meyerhold leading it, but it had been a failure. In 1906, Stanislavski was at the height of his fame so far, yet he was miserable and artistically unsatisfied. He retreated to Finland and, at 43, spent a famous summer on the cliffs, making a comprehensive review of his artistic life, a review which heralded the beginnings of the system (Stanislavski 1956, Benedetti 1999).

Consider this actor, already famous, suddenly discovering that his work no longer nourishes him. He buries himself in a room and spends the days pouring over notebooks, chain smoking, wrestling with his acting. To draw on the system, we might ask "what if—here, today, now—I was in his shoes, his circumstances?"

*2004. Inquiry, reading Stanislavski. Reading now again my tattered old copy of My Life in Art, a 1956 edition I am very fond of, despite Benedetti's dismissal of the translation (1999, p. 295). After wading through secondary sources for days, I breathe a sigh of relief and recognition: here again is Stanislavski, my contemporary. Once again I feel the influx of his innocence, his passion, his clean thinking and, as counterpoint, a quality of underground restlessness, of relentless struggle, a wrestling, searching soul, fuelled and tormented by a daimon of great and unwavering force.<sup>1</sup>*

The problem is urgent, heartfelt; he has devoted his life to something that now seems empty: "Formerly all issued from a beautiful, exciting, inner truth. Now all that was left of this truth was its windswept shell, ashes and dust..." How to prevent this "fossilization," associated with habits, "tricks," and "a desire to please the public"? He feels the need for a way to prepare his spirit for the performance: "...it was necessary to know how to enter the temple of that spiritual atmosphere in which alone it is possible to create" (Stanislavski 1956, pp. 459-461). From the very beginning, his search is for "life" and for a "beautiful and exciting inner truth," which emerges only in a "spiritual atmosphere."

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated in 'A Note on the Text', sections that are indented and italicized describe personal experiences, usually experiences of acting, but also Inquiries. "Inquiry" here refers to the process of exploring my immediate experience on whatever dimensions present themselves to awareness, with openness and curiosity. This process is explained in more detail in the chapter on method. This passage foregrounds the experience of reading Stanislavski 'as an actor'.

It is easy to dismiss such language as romantic idealism. Certainly Stanislavski was an idealist, but clearly he was also a realist. He created theatre his whole adult life—and was relentlessly successful. What if we consider that, at times, in his experience, the real and the ideal intersected?

*2004. Inquiry, reading Stanislavski. Reading about his early search I wonder: What is this inner truth? What is the experience of “life” as opposed to the “shell”? I have felt the “shell” many times in rehearsal and performance: it is a painful inner impoverishment, which brings with it a storm of self-loathing, criticism, despair. I remember too moments of truthfulness, moments of being truly there. As I become curious, something in me opens: a feeling, but steadier than most feelings, a questioning, as if a flame has been lit in me. I begin to feel like I want to know more, to move into the unknown, to search and discover. Feeling this flame inside me now, I begin to feel more present, more alive, alert and impassioned.*

Stanislavski carried some burning questions from Finland back into his work and life at the theatre—*Life and truth in performance: what is it? How does it happen?*—and this burning question infuses his work, drawing forth more insights and experiences:

During one performance in which I was repeating a role I had played many times, suddenly, without any apparent cause, I perceived the inner meaning of the truth long known to me that creativeness on the stage demands first of all a special condition, which, for want of a better term, I will call the creative mood. Of course I knew this before, but only intellectually. From that evening on this simple truth entered into all my being, and I grew to perceive it not only with my soul, but with my body also (Stanislavski 1956, p. 461).

What is the *inner meaning* of the creative mood? What is it to perceive with the soul and body something one has only known intellectually? What is it for a truth to enter into all one’s being?

Stanislavski began to explore the creative mood when it appeared in his own experience, and to discern its elements and qualities. Studying “the great actors,” he

*“felt the presence of something that was common to them all, something by which they reminded me of each other. What was this quality, common to all great talents? It was easiest of all for me to notice this likeness in their physical freedom, in the lack of all strain. Their bodies were at the call and beck of the inner demands of their wills” (1956, p. 463, my italics).*

I would like to highlight here that Stanislavski first *felt a presence*, directly and immediately, and that this presence was what defined for him a great actor—it was “common to them all.” The easiest way he could find to perceive and approach this presence was through the physical; it seemed connected to an ease and freedom of movement. This became the first component of the creative mood and of the system, *relaxation*, but it is clear in Stanislavski’s thinking above that this relaxation is one manifestation of the deeper presence, which he felt directly.

2004. *Inquiry, reading Stanislavski. In my body now, I remember situations in which I have felt this ease. The feeling arises again. It is more than a mere lack of strain, although that is one way of identifying it. There is a presence of ease; it feels at first cool, spacious. Inside me I see and I feel currents of spaciousness running just beneath my skin, but as I relax a little more, a warmth begins to move deeper inside me, in my belly, in my muscles. I am curious about this warmth, and it seems to respond to this curiosity by filling out in my belly, a kind of melting, flowing satisfaction, bringing with it a sense of being very embodied and human, solid and fluid at the same time. Although subtle, it is, as Stanislavski says, "exceptionally pleasant" (1956, p. 463)—not just nice: exceptionally pleasant. "Creative repose" he would later say, is "the most important of all the principles of good acting" (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 188).*

Relaxation is one manifestation of a specific presence, the creative mood, and one of the easiest ways to notice this presence, but it is integrally related to other facets of this mood, as we will see.

Stanislavski's next discovery crystallized while he was watching a foreign star in whom he felt the presence of the creative mood. He realized that the *concentration* of the actor's attention on the stage, and not in the auditorium, forced the audience to be interested in him, and that trying to amuse the audience repelled their attention and broke the creative mood. He discovered the importance of *autonomy* from the audience, and that "creativity is first of all the complete concentration of the entire nature of the actor" (Stanislavski 1956, p. 465). Here concentration is not, then, just the capacity to hold an unwavering attention; it is a condensation, an intensification, within a zone of the actor's choosing, of her "entire nature." What is this entire nature? In the introduction we saw that Almaas described the experience of presence as feeling like 'there is more of me here', which is to say that it is a concentration of my presence. Perhaps an actor's "entire nature" is then her presence. Concentration would then be to intentionally and successfully define the zone in which our presence is concentrated.

Stanislavski writes how he then noticed how another famous actor searched, at first without success, for a "true note," something he could believe in. This precipitated his discovery of *the feeling of truth*. Stanislavski reasoned that you can only believe in the truth but, he asks, what kind of truth is possible when all is fake in the theatre? It is the truth that exists in the light of the 'magic, creative if': *if all these imagined circumstances were real, what actions would be true?* Theatrical truth is truth in the context of this *if*.

I speak of the truth of the emotions, of the truth of the inner creative urges which strain forward to find expression, of the truth of the memories of bodily and physical perceptions. I am not interested in a truth that is without myself; I am interested in the truth that is within myself, the truth of my relation to this or that event on the stage (Stanislavski 1956, p. 466).

The feeling of truth is inseparable from many other important capacities:

...the play of imagination and the creation of creative faith...the barrier against scenic lies...the feeling of true measure...the tree of childlike naïveté and the sincerity of artistic emotion. The feeling of truth, as one of the important elements of the creative mood, can be developed and practised” (p. 467).

Truth here is not then representational, not about an accurate depiction, but a felt quality. These four elements together are the system in embryo: the creative mood, the presence of something that gives rise to physical ease, attention focused in the world of the play and the feeling of truth inseparable from the *magic if*. These elements are all interrelated: the feeling of truth brings relaxation; concentration is impossible without belief and inseparable from the creative mood.

I trace the birth of the system in this way to draw attention to two things, the importance of which will become more evident in later chapters. Firstly, Stanislavski’s research is grounded in his immediate, intimate experience. Secondly, it is focused on a direct experience of presence and proceeds by discriminating different qualities and manifestations of that presence. The elements of the creative mood which become, in part, the elements of his system, are not ideas but *felt qualities* which open, as he inquires, into other, related felt qualities. The system is not primarily a network of ideas (although it can be expressed as such) or a process (although different processes are also an important element) but a conscious, discriminating understanding of the palpable phenomena that make up acting of spiritual and aesthetic *quality*. For Stanislavski, such quality is most strongly associated with life and truth; these are the central phenomena of his inquiry, the touchstone of his artistic journey. There are clearly connections with Inquiry here, and many questions about how these characteristics of Stanislavski’s system relate to my research. (I will flesh these out in later chapters; here I am only establishing the background to my investigations.)

Over time Stanislavski came to articulate his ideal using the notion of *experiencing* (*переживание*). Carnicke’s *Stanislavski in Focus* (1998) was responsible for the restoration of this concept to our understanding of Stanislavski’s system in the English-speaking world. In that book, Professor Carnicke demonstrates that *experiencing* is the concept that Stanislavski uses to distinguish his theatre from all others. It is at once the most important and the most elusive concept in the system. It expresses “the composite whole” of his performance ideal. It is related to the creative mood, inspiration, the activation of the unconscious, concentration and absorption. *Experiencing* distinguishes the Stanislavskian actor from the mechanical hack who communicates through clichéd signs, and from the “representational actor” who touches upon living experience in rehearsal and then, in performance, skilfully presents the outward form of that experience, perhaps bringing it to life in only a few moments. The theatre of *experiencing*, by contrast aims at the “embodiment of the life of the human spirit”; it defines when acting is an art, and when it is not. It is “the *sine qua non* of the system” (Carnicke 1998, pp. 107-116).

Stanislavski takes the term from Tolstoy's *What is Art?* (1897) in which the novelist argues that "art communicates experiencing, rather than knowledge" (quoted in Carnicke 1998, p. 110); its role is to *transmit* the artist's *lived feelings* to other people. The term Tolstoy uses for this transmission is actually "to infect." Stanislavski also adopted this term and it became an integral component of his ideal: "In real art," he writes, "influence proceeds of itself. It is based on the infectiousness of genuine feelings and experiences" (quoted in Carnicke 1998, p. 111). The actor must experience her role, because this experience is the very essence of art. And because the actor's immediate, genuine feelings and sensations are naturally 'infectious', the audience is drawn into, receives and shares the experience. In art, therefore, infection is inseparable from experiencing.

## THE INSPIRATION OF SULER

Stanislavski initially expressed his spiritual ideal in the language of Belinsky. With the early development of the system he began to clarify and concretize this ideal, discerning its palpable, describable elements, eventually articulating it in terms formulated by Tolstoy. This evolution was no doubt influenced by Leopold Sulerzhitsky, or Suler, an enigmatic Tolstoyan and pacifist, who befriended the actor just before the birth of the system. Suler was the only close friend of Stanislavski's adult life (Benedetti 1999). He had lived a varied and adventurous life before turning up at the MAT. Trained as a painter, he worked for many years as a sailor, travelling widely, and spent years in exile in Central Asia for revolutionary activities (Stanislavski 1956). The portrait of him in Stanislavski's *My Life in Art* (1956) overflows with love, admiration and gratitude. He describes a man of abundant vitality, generosity and optimism.

Suler was destined, largely through the radiance of his personality, to influence Stanislavski's artistic and personal ideals (if it is even possible to separate them), and to help him develop and realize them. Together, they "dreamed of creating a spiritual order of actors [whose] members were to be men and women...who knew the soul of man and aimed at noble artistic ideals, who could worship in the theatre as in a temple" (Stanislavski 1956, p. 537). The theatre would be part of a permanent rural community of actors. Audience members would travel and stay overnight to "prepare their souls" for the performance. No money would be charged; the theatre would live on the farming and "household economy" of the Studio's actors. This dream remained unrealized, but Stanislavski did buy the First Studio some land on the shore of the Black Sea, where each summer they would "live the life of primeval men," spending their days in manual labour, cultivating a true spirit of ensemble (Stanislavski 1956, pp. 538-539).

At Suler's funeral in 1916, Stanislavski "wept like a child" (Benedetti 1999, p. 239), and decided that his purpose henceforth would be "to offer service to love and to nature, to the beautiful and divine" (Polyakova 1982, p. 240). Whether this decision was to honour his friend's spirit or



because he felt that no personal future rewards could ever match the friendship he had lost, it is impossible to tell. In the 1930s, he told Sulerzhitsky's widow, "Not one day goes by when I do not think of Suler, believe me" (p. 240). The system was thus born in the midst of personal dissatisfaction and despair but also within the atmosphere of the profound mutual love and understanding of this friendship.

*2004. Inquiry, reading Stanislavski on Suler. I remember my own youthful optimism, and I remember Glenn Hitchcock, my first theatre mentor and teacher—his radiance and irrepressible energy, his broad smile, generosity, humour and love. I remember my first directing experience, working on Moliere's Love is the Best Remedy in a youth theatre in Perth, unconcerned about success, joking with the cast, fervently wishing that they would feel joy and love in their playing, and that they would benefit as people from the experience. When I read about Suler and remember Glenn, the main impression is of light, faith and optimism as a palpable force. I notice that this impression has a living quality in me. It's not just a memory, but a part of me. I wonder if Glenn, because he expressed it so radiantly, awoke this quality in me, and helped me to see it in myself?*

Suler was Stanislavski's collaborator, assistant and inspiration for the first decade of the development of the system, up until his death. He became the director of the First Studio, formed in 1912, in which the system was explored and refined (Benedetti 1999, p. 210). Within it Suler nurtured those talents who would play the most important role in the spread of Stanislavski's methods, both in Russia and the United States—Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov, Richard Boleslavsky, Maria Ouspenskaya, Vera Soloviova and others. As one Stanislavski scholar puts it "modern acting can trace its very roots to the men and women Stanislavsky gathered together in this tiny Studio [sic] to prove through work the value of his System [sic]" (Stanman 2005).

It is commonly thought that Suler introduced hatha yoga to the First Studio's training as well as "Eastern meditational practices" he had apparently learned on his travels (Merlin 2003, p. 21). But what were Suler's "Eastern meditational practices" and where did he get an interest in hatha yoga? The longest period Suler spent in "the East" was in the Central Asian fortress of Kushka, now in Afghanistan, after which he travelled on horseback and on foot over the steppes of "Turkestan"—now Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, in which a vibrant and unusually open form of Sufism is the dominant religion (Tyson 1997, *Turkmenistan* 2005). It is unlikely that he learned hatha yoga in Central Asia. He may have encountered Hindu practices during his life as a sailor in which he made "several journeys around the world" (Stanislavski 1956, p. 469). Whatever teaching he encountered in addition to Tolstoy's influence, Suler developed an open, universal attitude to religion that made a clear distinction between form and content; he was interested in the "essence" rather than the externals (Sulerzhitsky 1982, p. 59). His "every sentence and remark had the heart as its motive"; he emphasized sensitivity and compassion and believed that

“the purpose of art is make people be attentive to each other, to soften their hearts and give them nobler dispositions” (Vakhtangov 1982, p. 41).

## **“YOGI RAMACHARAKA”**

It is unclear exactly what connection Sulerzhitsky had with Hindu yoga or Eastern meditation practices. That Hindu yoga was in some way an influence on the system could have been discerned by a careful reader of *An Actor Prepares*, published in 1936. Forty years later, Wegner (1976) drew the attention of English-speaking scholars to its importance, and to early writings on Stanislavski’s practice that are explicit about its influence. Carnicke (1998) has exposed how this influence was obscured by both Soviet and western interpretations of his work. Despite these efforts, I would also argue that our understanding of the influence of yoga upon the system, and of the system itself, has been limited by the lack of a detailed examination of just what yoga Stanislavski studied; to say that he was influenced by “Eastern meditational practices” or “Hindu yoga” is akin to saying that he was influenced by “western philosophy” or “music,” so vast is the range of perspectives and practices that can come under those headings if we liberate them from an homogenizing Orientalism. An examination of the specific influences on Stanislavski, and a consideration of their social and historical contexts, can reveal much about the system and breathe fresh life into it.

The first important point to consider is that the Russian Silver Age (1890-1914), which was Stanislavski’s intellectual cradle and the cultural matrix in which the system emerged, was deeply influenced by Western occult movements. Carlson (1993) writes that, as for western Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century “Occultism, in a bewildering variety of forms, became the intellectual craze of the time”:

The various forms of occultism were sensationalized in the penny press, dissected in serious journals, debated at public and private lectures, and demonstrated on the stage and at open séances. ... ‘In the journals and newspapers, everywhere, there are publications about books on hypnotism and similar mystical questions,’ wrote an overwhelmed Russian contemporary. ‘In the bookstore display windows, at the train stations, all these books about spiritualism, chiromancy, occultism, and mysticism in general leap out at you’ (p. 4).

Particularly influential were Spiritualism and Blavatsky’s Theosophy, which was “the most important occult trend...in terms of cultural and philosophical content” and which touched many significant artists and thinkers of the time (p. 28). It also touched Stanislavski, indirectly, but not as indirectly as might be assumed from current publications.

Theosophy was not only an important player in the creation of Western Orientalist discourse which viewed “the East” as a resource with which to nourish the spiritually impoverished modern secular West, it was also highly influential in the spread of the notion of the world’s

religions having a universal essence. It expounded the notion of a “Universal Brotherhood of Humanity” based upon the idea of a single, universal, esoteric religion that unites all the known religions (p. 29), and which could be expressed most perfectly in terms of Hindu Vedanta. This is Madame Blavatsky’s famous ‘secret doctrine’. King (1999) demonstrates how, Vedanta’s reception in the West has been consistently linked with a perennialist agenda, with commentators from the European Orientalists of the late eighteenth century to the Theosophists presenting Vedanta as not only the ‘true’ Hindu religion but also very close to the ‘true religion’ of all humanity. Perennialism, King (1999) argues, is often driven by colonial aspirations, and has often involved the distortions of the religions it subsumes. The colonial exchange is complex and not one-sided, however. For instance, even Ghandi “only discover[ed] the fruits of India’s religious traditions through the romanticist works of the Theosophical Society” (King 1999, p. 231n), and the originally western notion of Vedanta’s universality was taken up and popularized by Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, in the service of Indian nationalism.

Of the major works on yoga and Eastern religions available in Russia prior to the revolution most (for example, Asvaghosha’s *The Life of the Buddha* and the most popular edition of the *Bhagavad Gita*) were translated by Theosophists or, in the case of Ramakrishna’s *Gospel* and Vivekananda’s works, expressed a universalist or perennialist perspective (Carlson 1993, p. 152). In considering Stanislavski’s and the First Studio’s adoption of yoga, therefore, it is important to remember that their interest was part of wider movement in Western and Russian culture at the time, which looked to ‘the East’ and to secret streams beneath the surface of its own culture for spiritual inspiration, and which intertwined both of these influences in a universalist view of religion.

According to the available resources in English, the only works on yoga that we can be certain Stanislavski actually read are by Yogi Ramacharaka, although there were certainly others. Carnicke (1998, p. 141) points out that he quotes from *Raja Yoga* (Ramacharaka 1934), which was published in Russian in St Petersburg in 1909. Polyakova (1982, p. 213) tells us that *Hatha Yoga* (c.1904) by the same author was the source of many exercises at the First Studio. Stanislavski also owned a number of his other books, although it is difficult to say which. Judging by the Russian titles and references in his own writings, it is likely that he owned those published in English as *Gnani Yoga* and *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup>

When I discovered the reference to *Raja Yoga* in Carnicke’s book, I decided to try to trace Ramacharaka’s lineage, hoping to uncover just what form of yoga had influenced the Russian

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Professor Carnicke for the Russian titles of the books on yoga in Stanislavski’s library of which she was aware. My efforts to discover more about these and other possible titles from Russian sources has as yet been unsuccessful.

theatre master with a Tolstoyan soul-mate. I discovered that not only was the book originally published in English, but that it was still in print, along with all of Ramacharaka's other books. Reading *Raja Yoga*, two things were immediately clear to me. The first was that this book was clearly a very significant influence on Stanislavski. Many phrases and concepts that seem naïve or a little thin in his writings when read through the lens of Freud or even of Hindu Vedanta, become more robust and compelling when reconnected to their roots in Ramacharaka.<sup>3</sup>

The second thing that was very clear to me as I read the book was that it was written by a Westerner, not a Hindu Yogi: its language and references placed the author closer to Dale Carnegie and Theosophy than to Patanjali or even the perennialist Vivekananda, and indeed this turned out to be the case. "Yogi Ramacharaka" was the pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson, an American who was influential in the New Thought movement in the early part of this century (*William Walker Atkinson Homepage* 2005). New Thought is a philosophical-religious movement "emphasizing the attainment of health, wealth, and happiness through the control of one's conscious and non-conscious beliefs, attitudes, and expectations by means of deliberately practicing the presence of a wholly benevolent deity" (Anderson 1993). It combines Christianity, Emerson's transcendentalism, Hindu Vedanta (drawing on Vivekananda and others who attended the Parliament of World Religions in 1893), spiritism and the esoteric psychology of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866), who also influenced Christian Science.

According to his publisher, Atkinson learned yoga directly from "Baba Barata," a Hindu Brahmin who travelled to Chicago in 1893 and remained in the U.S. to lecture on "the Philosophy of the East." Needing help with his writing, he became friends with Atkinson, and together they penned the books, attributing them to Yogi Ramacharaka, which was apparently the name of Barata's guru (Ramacharaka n.d.:back cover). This story is called into question by other factors: firstly, when questioned by a persistent investigator, the publisher admitted that the above account is based on hearsay (Ananda 1990). Secondly, Atkinson himself was possibly also a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in Chicago, and is cited by some sources as one of the "Three Initiates" who anonymously penned *The Kybalion*, an alchemical text still well-regarded in some esoteric circles (*Alchemy Texts Archives* 2005). In secret brotherhoods of Western esotericism, like the Golden Dawn, it is common practice for initiates to remain anonymous and to 'cover their tracks' with invented stories and subterfuge. Thirdly, such secret brotherhoods are mentioned in Ramacharaka's books, along with other elements suggesting spiritism and theosophy, such as channelling and astral travel—elements which Stanislavski evidently did not find useful. Ramacharaka also makes frequent reverential references to the channelled, or 'revealed', works of theosophist Mabel Collins. Large sections

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<sup>3</sup> Carnicke (1998) makes an identical point with regard to yoga. My point here is that reading Stanislavski through the lens of Ramacharaka adds additional clarity, which one would not get from reading, for example, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, because Ramacharaka's perspective is anything but canonical.

of these “Yoga” books are devoted, very incongruously, to her *Light on the Path* (see, for example Ramacharaka 1934, pp. 218-219). If a Hindu yogi was the co-author, he was either happy for Atkinson to include a great many unattributed ideas from New Thought and Theosophy, was influenced by Theosophy himself or didn’t know Atkinson was giving the material his own gloss.

For my purposes it is not important to determine the actual authorship, only to recognize that although the books contain information and exercises drawn from Hinduism, which could have come from other publications, they are not very reliable accounts of Hindu yoga, and contain much material that clearly derives from western sources or, in the very least, that has been filtered (perhaps channelled) through a western mind. This is not to say that they are not useful—as they clearly were for Stanislavski and the First Studio—or that they are not the product of an insightful mind. The books do bear some resemblance to yoga teachings, in their division into *gnani (jnana)*, *bhatka*, *karma* and *raja* yogas, in the breathing exercises contained in *Hatha Yoga*, in the descriptions of the true ‘I’, and other respects. They very likely draw on Vivekananda (1893-1902), who had made such an impression in Chicago in 1893.

Whatever their pedigree, Yogi Ramacharaka’s books were a profound influence on the system. The Stanislavski scholar Burnet Hobgood considered that although Stanislavski was influenced by Eastern mysticism he “refashioned these ideas so sharply that one must regard them as his own” (quoted in Wegner 1976, p. 89). In his opinion, the Hindu ideas of prana and the circle are stronger in Michael Chekhov’s work. But in fact, the flow of Ramacharaka’s ideas into Stanislavski’s thinking and practice is so extensive, and their transmutations so various and so subtle, that it would take a full-length thesis to analyse this area fully. Wegner (1976) recognized that Stanislavski’s *circle of public solitude* and *radiation* come from yoga. His conclusion that Stanislavski’s emphasis on right breathing, body position, concentration and watchful discrimination corresponds to yoga’s *pranayama*, *asana*,<sup>4</sup> and *dharana*, also seems to me to be correct. And Carnicke (1998), who has contributed more to this topic than any other author,

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<sup>4</sup> For the student of the Stanislavski system who is told that “hatha yoga was studied at the First Studio,” it might be important to recognize that this “hatha yoga” is vastly different to practices the term denotes today. In the contemporary West, and increasingly in India, hatha yoga is associated with *asanas* (postures) of Iyengar or Astanga yoga (Iyengar 1979, Swenson 1999). Few recognize, partly because the Indian yogis who formulated these systems for contemporary consumption choose to present them as ancient practices, that the most well known yoga forms in the West are modern reconstructions by students of Krishnamacharya, namely B.K.S. Iyengar and Sri Pattabhi Jois. Yoga in India prior to the emergence of these *asana*-focused forms hardly emphasized *asanas* at all, and in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* they are hardly mentioned. (I am grateful to Dr. Brenda Dobia for offering me this broader context of understanding regarding Hindu yoga.) The physical exercises in Ramacharaka’s *Hatha Yoga*, which was written prior to the influence of Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, do not resemble any *asanas* one would expect to encounter in contemporary yoga classes; they are simple, unchallenging and have a distinctly Western tenor. As Ramacharaka/Atkinson explains it, the exercises “are taken in part from some of the Oriental movements, adapted for Western use, combined with a number of motions which have found favour with the physical trainers of the armies of Europe and America,” who “have studied the Oriental movements, and have adopted such of them as suited their purpose...” (c.1904, p. 201).

recognizes not only that Stanislavski drew from Ramacharaka exercises in relaxation, observation, communication, concentration and radiation of *prana*, as well as a number of parables, but also that yoga profoundly influenced his conception of the unconscious, the superconscious and the unity of psychology and physiology.

But the influence runs even deeper. Stanislavski teaches his students the process of “subconsciousing” which involves sending thoughts on a problem into the unconscious and waiting for it to reply (compare Ramacharaka 1934, pp. 223-248, Stanislavski 1961, pp. 82-83 & Stanislavsky 1988, pp. 207-208). Like Ramacharaka, he recommended that they avoid indulging the instincts, and distinguished clearly between the instincts, which can be “purified by thought...[and] ennobled by alert attention” and inspiration (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 101). Some exercises for developing attention and the five senses given to the Opera-Dramatic Studio in the mid-1930s (Benedetti 1998, pp. 33-40), and to the students in *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski 1980, pp. 79-81), are drawn directly from *Raja Yoga* (1934, pp. 114-115) and others are complex variations and expansions of them.

Other Ramacharaka ideas permeate the system as a whole. These include his ideas on rhythm, nature and the will. Stanislavski tells his students that they must realize that “the whole universe exists in accordance with a definite rhythm and...you, as a fraction of it, are also subject to the laws of rhythm” (1988, p. 144). Ramacharaka writes that “All is in vibration.... In all vibration is to be found a certain rhythm. Rhythm pervades the universe.... All motion is a manifestation of the law of rhythm” (c.1904, pp. 166-167). However, the depth and detail of Stanislavski’s active explorations of rhythm and the radiation of prana actually far surpassed anything Ramacharaka describes (giving credence to Hobgood’s assertion that he made the ideas his own), as indicated in a striking passage in *My Life in Art*, where he talks of exercises for

the development of the feeling of rhythm not only in movement but in the inner sensations and in sight, and so on. The process of sight is the raying out of spiritual juices that come from us and enter into us. These rayings out have movement and once there is movement, there is also its tempo and its rhythm. The same thing is true of the sense of touch. In order to differentiate silk and velvet one needs another tempo and rhythm than in differentiating the brushes of a clothes brush. To smell ammonia one needs another tempo and rhythm than in smelling the lilies of the valley (1956, p. 562).

He tried to develop in his students “the inner rhythm of that unseen energy which calls out movement and action” in order to make of their thoughts a “fiery ball” that goes straight into the heart of the spectators (p. 562).

The other interesting and useful area of Ramacharaka’s influence to consider is the connection he makes between the unconscious, nature and the creative will. Stanislavski tells his actors that their method is based on the will (Toporkov 1998). It is one of the faculties, along with the mind and the feelings, that must be developed in the actor. But he also writes about the creative will, which he associates with Nature. Similarly, Ramacharaka uses this phrase to refer to the

universal force behind all things that is synonymous with the creative intelligence of Nature. The chapter in *Gnani Yoga* he devotes to this topic (c.1907, pp. 55-77) is a hymn to the power of Nature, reminiscent of Stanislavski's own (1988, pp. 295-300). "If you will but keep the word and idea 'NATURE' before you," Ramacharaka writes "you will be able to more clearly form the concept of the Creative Will.... All phenomena of the so-called unconscious belong to it" (c.1907, pp. 60-61). Benedetti tells us that "The basis of [the] whole 'system'...was the conviction that in acting as in everything else nature, not the rational intellect, creates" (1999, p. 169). Which is to say that nature, like the unconscious, is not subject to the will, but has a creative will of its own.

## **'I AM', EXPERIENCING AND SUPERCONSCIOUS FEELING**

The most important of Ramacharaka's concepts adopted by Stanislavski are the 'I' and the 'I am.' For Stanislavski, 'I am' is synonymous with the inner creative state (1961, p. 34) and with *experiencing* which, as we have seen, is the *sine qua non* of the system. Carnicke asserts the state of 'I am' is synonymous with experiencing, with the qualification that 'I am' emphasizes being 'in the moment' on stage and a static state, while experiencing suggests flow (1998, p. 202 n.5). Benedetti translates "I am" (*ja esm*) as "I Am Being," and describes it as the goal of the first stage of rehearsal, when "the borderline between me and the character is blurred. ... At that point a kind of creative spontaneity occurs. The subconscious takes over. I behave with the same immediacy as I do in life but with the difference that my behaviour is selective, shaped, aesthetic and transparent" (1998, p. 9). With 'I am', the actor arrives at "organic nature" (Stanislavski 1961, p. 254), which for Stanislavski is the source of the highest form of creativeness (1988, p. 299). The actor attains "organicity," a term Grotowski (1997) often used and which he attributes to Stanislavski.

The Russian phrase for 'I am', *ja esm*, is actually from Old Church Slavonic and has "religious overtones" (Carnicke 1998, pp. 174-175). When he reaches 'I am' himself, Stanislavski's experience is that "the world of things has, as it were, come to life. The walls, the air, things are bathed in a living light.... At the same time I am aware of a kind of creative joy" (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 26-27). An actor in this state is able to "breathe a living spirit into his part" (p. 34). The profound spiritual nature of 'I am' is made fully explicit in Ramacharaka, for whom it represented the *second* level of self-realization, after the attainment of the 'I'.<sup>5</sup> The 'I am' is "the consciousness of one's identity with the Universal Life, and [one's] relationship to, and 'in-touchness' with all life, expressed and unexpressed" (Ramacharaka 1934, p. vi). It is therefore a

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<sup>5</sup> Stanislavski also writes of the 'I', which is "the essence of our art and the main source of creativeness are hidden deep in man's soul; there, in the center of our spiritual being, in the realm of our inaccessible superconsciousness, our mysterious 'I' has its being, and inspiration itself" (1961, p. 81). He also writes that everything an actor learns "is only an approach to a more flexible liberation of his creative 'I' from the clutches of his egoic 'I'" (1988, p. 110).

profound spiritual development. If it is an in-touchness with universal life and consciousness of one's *identity* with that life, then 'I am' is perhaps not used simply to emphasize being in-the-moment—a quality carried much more comfortably by Stanislavski's demand for everything to be as if "*here, today, this very minute*" (1961, p. 254)—but carries the very deepest resonances of *experiencing*.

In this state, not only is the dualism of mind and body overcome, as Carnicke (1998) recognizes, but the dualism of mind and environment. Furthermore, if Stanislavski's use of 'I am' carries Ramacharaka's meaning, and if this state is synonymous with experiencing, then the experience with which Stanislavski intended the audience would be "infected" was necessarily spiritual experience—the actor who is experiencing his role is in touch with its life and the life around him ways that surpass everyday experience. The actor must enter the realm of the superconscious. In fact, the most unequivocal and impassioned statement Stanislavski ever made of his ideal says exactly that:

THE SUPERCONSCIOUS THROUGH THE CONSCIOUS! That is the meaning of the thing to which I have devoted my life since the year 1906, to which I devote my life at present, and to which I will devote my life while there is life in me (1956, p. 483).

If we accept both this statement, and Carnicke's assertion that experiencing is the *sine qua non* of the system, then we must recognize that *experiencing* is intimately interwoven with superconscious feeling. The resonances of both these central ideas are carried by 'I am'.

Stanislavski's superconscious is not at all abstract, but a specific and clearly-felt quality of feeling. For Ramacharaka the superconscious is not only the source of artistic inspiration, but also of higher feelings, such as "Compassion, Human Brotherhood and Love. ... Intellect is cold—Spiritual Consciousness [the superconscious] is warm *and alive with high feeling*," (pp. 41-42, my italics). In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski's description of the development of the system and his early struggle to transmit it culminates in his description of the First Studio's *The Cricket on the Hearth*: "It was in this production, perhaps, that there sounded for the first time those deep and heartfelt notes of superconscious feeling in the depth and measure and form in which I dreamt of them at that time" (1956, pp. 539-540). The theatre of experiencing is primarily a theatre of superconscious feeling. Superconscious feeling is the spine of the system and Stanislavski's life, the supertask and the through-line of his work. It is these spiritual treasures, these superconscious feelings which speak directly to the heart of the audience, that inspire my inquiry and are its primary subject.

But what are these superconscious feelings? Stanislavski's writings on this question are elusive and complex. He stresses that the actor must express her living experience, and that these experiences are personal, even if they exist in the person only as "seeds" (Stanislavski 1980, p. 178), yet he also writes that a good actor "takes as his starting point the universal passions that



lie behind his own heart” (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 187) and that stage feelings are not raw emotions felt for the first time, but based in emotional memories that have been purified by time, and turned into poetry (Stanislavski 1980, p. 173). The kind of feelings which the actor experiences and transmits to the audience are therefore personal, poetic and universal.

I believe the difficulty of pinning down the nature of superconscious feeling reflects not only the subtlety and elusiveness of the feelings themselves but the vast range of feelings that can come under the umbrella of the word *spiritual*. This is where Almaas’s (1998a, pp. 37-42) perspective can be useful, because he makes very specific differentiations between different spiritual experiences. He distinguishes essence from the various spiritual energies that are frequently met by spiritual practitioners such as *prana* and *kundalini*. *Kundalini*, according to Almaas, is the energy of essence and the “raw material for our emotional states” (1998a, p. 39). Its emergence is usually associated with dramatic experiences including the opening of the seven *chakras* (energy centres along the spine that coincide with major nerve plexi in the body). *Prana* is more subtle than *kundalini* and is associated with the breath and vitality. Almaas sees *chi* (or *qi*), connected with the body’s energy meridians and central to Chinese medicine, as somewhat deeper and denser than *prana* and *kundalini*. An even deeper, and less well-known dimension of experience is the *lataif* level. *Latifa* (plural *lataif*) is an Arabic word meaning “subtle, soft, light, delicate, gentle, refined, pure” (Almaas 2002, 253). The energy centres of the *lataif* are different to the chakras, and the experience of their opening is different. At the *lataif* level one experiences a very subtle energy with some essential presence in it; the experience is both more subtle, steadier and more solid than the experience of *kundalini* energy; there is a sense of Being and subtle substance in it, which distinguishes it from the other forms of energy mentioned. The essential aspects manifest on the *lataif* level—one feels a subtle compassion, strength or joy, for example, waking up in the body, usually in a particular energy centre, such as the solar-plexus or the centre of the chest. Going deeper still, one can experience this presence as completely substantial, at once more subtle and more solid, and this Almaas calls the essential dimension. At this level, Being manifests in particular substantial, living forms of presence, such as nectars, diamonds, pearls, and so on, all of which have a particular meaning.

Stanislavski definitely worked with *prana*, which is related by Ramacharaka and others to the breath and which is cultivated by breathing exercises (*pranayama*). In a diagram printed in the Russian edition of *An Actor’s Work on Himself* and reprinted in Carnicke (1998, p. 99), he uses the lungs as the structuring image in his pictorial representation of the system. In the chapter on “Communion” in *An Actor Prepares*, which includes his teaching on “irradiation,” he describes how the *prana* exercises he has adapted from Ramacharaka are used to transmit experience. When the actor is “irradiating” she feels a “current” issuing from her, “a definite physical

sensation” (1980, p. 215).<sup>6</sup> This basically matches descriptions of *pranic* energy in spiritual literature, which is often described as like an electric current (Bair 1998, p. 178).

However, when Stanislavski/Tortsov attempts to describe the sensation of irradiating he also says: “One of my students likened it to the fragrance of a flower. Another suggested the fire in a diamond. I have felt it when standing at the crater of a volcano. I felt the hot air from the tremendous internal fires of the earth” (1980, p. 216). This suggests more than the experience of prana. So too does his assertion that “The more subtle the feeling, the closer it comes to the superconscious” (1961, p. 82). These descriptions suggest something akin to the *lataif* level, and when he moves to the depth of ‘I am’ his descriptions definitely suggest experiences of Being or essence. The feeling of essence comes through strongly in the following passage, for example:

The conscious levels of a play or part are like the levels and strata of the earth, sand, clay, rocks, and so forth, which go to form the earth’s crust. As the levels go deeper down into one’s soul they become increasingly unconscious, and down in the very depths, in the core of the earth where you find molten lava and fire, invisible human instincts and passions are raging. That is the realm of the superconscious, that is the life-giving center [sic], that is the sacrosanct ‘I’ of the actor...the secret source of inspiration. You are not conscious of these things but *you feel them with your whole being* (Stanislavski 1961, p. 12, my italics).<sup>7</sup>

I believe that the complexity of Stanislavski’s accounts of superconscious feeling, and the particular qualities of these accounts, indicate that, as he sought a theatre of superconscious feeling that would ‘infect’ the audience with the *experiencing* of the actors, Stanislavski found himself working with various levels of the experience that might be considered spiritual, including the prana level, the *lataif* and the essential dimension itself. And I believe that it is valid to say that, through the art of the actor, Stanislavski aimed at the transmission of essential experience.

## **MEDITATION AND HEART-TO-HEART TRANSMISSION IN THE SYSTEM**

Experiencing and infection do not just pertain to performance but also to the teaching of the system. Regarding the production of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Stanislavski writes that Suler “put all his heart into this work. He spent many high feelings, spiritual strength, warm beliefs and

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<sup>6</sup> How is this current different from the experience or feeling that is being transmitted? As far as it is possible to tell from Stanislavski’s presentation the current always carries the quality of the experience and is inseparable from it. Carnicke clearly demonstrates that experiencing, at least in practice, draws no hard boundary between the ‘character’s experience’ and the actor’s experience of the performance situation, but encompasses play, double consciousness and communion with the audience (1998, p. 108). I think the same reach and ambiguity applies to superconscious feeling.

<sup>7</sup> Note here the odd way that Stanislavski uses the word “unconscious.” Clearly if “these things” are felt “with your whole being” then they are not actually unconscious; we cannot feel something with our whole being unless we are very conscious of it. By “unconscious” he seems to mean “deeper than the ego” or “deeper than ordinary experience.”

beautiful dreams on the actors of the studio, until they were literally infected with his ardor, which made the production unusually spiritual and touching” (1956, p. 539). “Infection” in this context certainly becomes something akin to transmission, which in many spiritual traditions denotes the awakening of the student’s spiritual potential through contact with a teacher who embodies that potential. Stanislavski was unequivocal about the importance of this dimension of the system:

...nothing can fix and pass on to our descendants those inner paths of feeling, that conscious road to the gates of the unconscious, which and which alone are the true foundation of the art of the theatre. This is the sphere of living tradition. This is a torch which can only be passed from hand to hand, and not from the stage, but only through personal teaching... (1956, p. 571).

This is not merely romantic rhetoric; the process of transmission is conscious and crafted for Stanislavski. He explicitly describes how a teacher can bring an upset student into harmony by deliberately remaining unaffected by the rhythm of the student’s own atmosphere while consciously radiating a more harmonious quality herself. He also writes that while each student “must find his own rhythm of creative work,” the teacher “must include the rhythms of all his pupils in his own creative circle” (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 94). This technique is not in any of Ramacharaka’s books, but is evident in other texts and practices concerning the relationship between guru and student (see, for example, Inayat Khan 1999). The importance of transmission was also recognized by Oliver Saylor at a performance of *Three Sisters* in New York in 1922. Although in the first act he hadn’t particularly noticed Stanislavski, he

suddenly awoke to the presence of towering genius in the great unobtrusive scene in the second act. The third and fourth followed with the proud anguish of that farewell, and I understood the secret of the Moscow Art Theatre (Edwards 1966, p. 222).

For Saylor, this “secret” was that Stanislavski could transmit to others his own experience as a great actor.

The basis of both infection and irradiation is a particular exercise drawn from Ramacharaka: rhythmic breathing. This meditation involves breathing fully in rhythm with the heart beat. It is the primary exercise for the development of prana and vitality, and foundation of all the breathing practices he presents (Ramacharaka c.1904, pp. 166-175). Stanislavski placed enormous importance on this exercise. In his lectures of 1918-1922, he tells his students that respiration and rhythm are the foundation of life and “the foundation of the whole of our art” (1988, p. 93). He encourages them to connect the rhythm of their hearts with that of their breathing (p. 142) and tells them that unless they do this rhythmic breathing they “will never become good actors” (p. 168). Why did Stanislavski place such importance on this exercise? Perhaps he was thinking of Ramacharaka’s assertion that “the effect on the body of rhythmic breathing” is that “the whole system catches the vibration and becomes in harmony with the

will...and while in such harmony will respond readily to the orders from the will” (1960, pp. 52-53). Had he discovered here in this exercise a conscious approach to that quality he had observed in the great actors at the beginning of his search, that “Their bodies were at the call and beck of the inner demands of their wills” (1956, p. 463)? Perhaps he hoped that through rhythmic breathing his own students’ bodies could become similarly transparent.

My understanding of Stanislavski and of what he meant by superconscious feeling underwent an important shift as a result of a chance discovery. Researching the role of the four elements in spiritual practices, I came across a text by a contemporary Sufi teacher, Puran Bair, that offers many detailed meditations on the elements (Bair 2001). Bair’s practice, “Heart Rhythm Meditation,” is essentially identical to Ramacharaka’s rhythmic breathing. Even Bair’s variations on the basic form have exact correspondences in Ramacharaka (compare, for example, Ramacharaka 1960, pp. 57-67, & Bair 2001, pp. 175-186). I began to practice this meditation and as I have continued to work with it, it has become an extraordinary reference point for interpreting Stanislavski. This is primarily because, having practiced a number of meditations over the last fifteen years, it is clear to me that breathing in rhythm with the heart is an extraordinarily powerful way to contact ‘the universal passions that lie behind my heart’. Attending to the actual rhythm of the heart makes clear how much our mind interferes in our inner perceptions: the mind keeps trying to impose its own rhythm. It seems to think that the heart cannot beat unless it beats too. But distinguishing between thought and heartbeat allows the mind to be silent and brings an extraordinary sense of the *reality* of the heart. Solid feelings of essential presence emerge in the heart, and there is a sense of touching the real. The effect is something like, having been thinking of a lover for weeks, actually kissing her lips. The meditator has been thinking about reality and looking at it, and suddenly there it is in her heart, so close she is touching its insides. Feelings and sensations deeper, more subtle and substantial than the everyday arise quickly through this meditation. In the light of these experiences, Stanislavski became for me a much more interesting individual. It becomes possible to take him literally, to understand that in his work a seeming romanticism and a seeming realism are actually expressions of genuinely experiential familiarity with essential presence, whether or not he had the vocabulary or conceptual frameworks to articulate these experiences consistently.

Another aspect of rhythmic breathing meditation is that when it is performed in groups, its effect is much stronger. A number of my friends and I have practiced it together over a period of some months and its capacity to facilitate openness, trust, love and affection in relationships has been obvious to all of us. The quality of a subtle and substantial love is indeed a palpable result. If the members of the First Studio were doing this meditation together, then no wonder it was a place of extraordinary creativity and influence! No wonder Stanislavski places such emphasis on infection, rhythmic breathing and irradiation! No wonder he tells actors that their creative ability depends upon the work of their hearts! For perhaps rhythmic breathing is not

only a way to work upon the heart but can also, in certain conditions, ignite and carry the “living torch” of the system; it is a method of transmission and a container for that transmission.

## CONCLUSION

I wrote at length about Sulerzhitsky and his impact on Stanislavski and the First Studio actors not because I wish to indulge in an emotional rhapsody, but because my discernment of the quality of his presence and the other elements I have discussed above, make up an entire hermeneutic gestalt in which the spiritual dimensions of the system are newly illuminated. Consider these elements: the quality of Suler’s presence and his undoubted effect on Stanislavski; Suler’s commitment to essence over form; his likely contact with Sufi rather than Hindu meditation; his introduction (via Ramacharaka’s *Hatha Yoga*) of a meditation practice that is in many respects identical with a contemporary Sufi practice, and my experience of the effect of this practice. Consider also: the importance Stanislavski places on heart-to-heart transmission, radiation, rhythmic breathing, love and truth; the system’s defining concept, *experiencing*, is synonymous with the state of ‘I am’ and superconscious feeling and; Stanislavski’s evocative descriptions of this dimension of feeling. Together, these facts cast a new light on the system, reinforcing that it is a practical approach to a living spirituality, and that palpable spiritual experience is *inseparable from its practicality*. Suler’s influence on Stanislavski is, I think, best seen as a matter of transmission, in the spiritual sense—a bringing-into-consciousness, a making-palpable, of particular living potentials in Stanislavski’s soul which, having been touched and perceived, had then to be enacted, articulated, mastered and passed on.

Stanislavski suggested as much about the system, which must be learned “by way of the discovery of mysteries on one side, and exercises, obstinate and inspired labour for *the acceptance of these mysteries* on the other side” (1956, p. 571, my italics). The first element—the discovery of mysteries—is the most important. There must first be certain “inner perceptions,” such as that *something* Stanislavski felt as a presence in all the great actors, the vibrant, radiant, loving presence of Suler, the fire in the diamond or the fragrance of the flower within. Then these experiences must be “accepted” or digested via exercises and practice in performance, fuelled by the actor’s love of these dimensions, which make up the essence of her art. As Lev Dodin says, “Stanislavski made an enormous discovery, which is that the theatre is not a place where you demonstrate your skills but a spiritual substance” (Ostrovsky 1999). Without this dimension of experience infusing and guiding the work, the exercises become merely systemic, and the essential purpose of the system is lost.

The discovery and acceptance of these “mysteries” comprises the “The Actor’s Work on Himself”—the Russian title of Stanislavski’s two volumes describing the training of actors in his system—and this “work on oneself” extends beyond the studio. Stanislavski told his students

after the 1917 revolution, in a statement reminiscent of Gurdjieff (1975), that in daily life they must do all thoroughly and with the utmost attention (1988, p. 213) and that their life in art must be a continual development (pp. 229-230). “All your life,” he tells them, “will be true life only when your creative ‘I’ has merged with it” (p. 213). He is not talking only of life on the stage here; he is clearly stating that an actor’s work on himself is spiritual work that encompasses a broader transformation:

Why, in short, is it so difficult to give [the audience] true art? Because art [on] the stage is the synthesis of all the achievements that man has gathered together in his spiritual ‘I’, that is to say, in the work of his heart (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 224).<sup>8</sup>

Although Stanislavski later tempered these statements, possibly as he began to understand Soviet materialist doctrine and the consequences of diverging from it, when Leonidov, an actor who worked with Stanislavski for over thirty years, read the manuscript of *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part 1* in 1930, he recognized the depth of the “work”: “This is not a ‘system,’” he wrote “it is a complete culture” (Benedetti 1999, p. 332).

It is here, in Stanislavski’s assertion of the inseparability of spiritual realization from artistic capacity, that he invokes a theme that emerges powerfully in the lives and work of many that came after him, particularly Copeau, Grotowski and Brook: work on oneself as an actor is work on oneself as a person, and it is spiritual work. This inspires many questions: how exactly are spiritual work and acting are related? What distinctions can or should be made between them? What *kind* of spiritual realization or development is appropriate or possible for the actor? Is it possible for theatrical and spiritual work to be truly inseparable, or complementary? Or must they at some point conflict? Different responses to these questions are rendered in the lives and work of the practitioners I discuss in the next chapter.

Here, I have offered a particular reading of Stanislavski’s system which emphasizes its spiritual aspirations. I have pointed out that Stanislavski’s statements regarding these aspirations are unequivocal and his use of spiritual sources and practices to attain it are more central to the system and more pervasive than is usually recognized. The development of the system can be seen as hingeing upon Stanislavski’s discernment of presence, particularly the presence of the creative mood and the differentiation of various qualities that comprised that mood. I have presented the related notion of *experiencing* in spiritual terms and shown that is a profoundly spiritual concept, being synonymous with the state of ‘I am’ and with “infection” by superconscious feeling, which I argue is equivalent to the transmission of essential experience. I have further argued that the system can, to a significant degree, be understood as a practical

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<sup>8</sup> Lev Dodin uses similar terminology: he sees exercises as “a training of the heart and nervous system” (Shevtsova 2004).

approach to transmission through acting. To put it another way, the system aims to make the theatre a vessel for the shared experience of humanity's highest and deepest potentials. It exists so that theatre can be, as Stanislavski put it, "uplifted to the level of a temple, because both religion and art purify the soul of man" (quoted in Ostrovsky 1999). An appreciation of the importance of the living experience of superconscious feeling to the system makes it seem less systemic and more human, and foregrounds the importance of its personal, heart-to-heart dimension. How the themes addressed above—experiencing, infection, superconscious feeling, work on oneself—are echoed in the work of others will be discussed in the next chapter.

## *Chapter 3*

### **ACTING AND ESSENCE AFTER STANISLAVSKI**

Stanislavski's dream of a spiritual art of acting was shared by many who came after him. Both within the living tradition he created and beyond it, his influence was unavoidable. The themes that emerged in his work reappear and reconstellate themselves in many ways in the history of modern acting, often emerging in concert with one other theme. This is the seeming tension between theatricality and realism; those who came after Stanislavski often positioned themselves with regard to him by taking the side of theatricality over realism. In this chapter I will review how these themes were developed, transformed and re-interpreted in the Stanislavski tradition (Michael Chekhov, Maria Knebel, Lev Dodin, Grotowski), the Copeau tradition, which developed the neutral mask (I will review Copeau himself, Lecoq and David Latham), and in Peter Brook's work. I do not seek here to argue a particular point of view, or even to compare and contrast these approaches, except where to do so will illuminate my investigation into the creation of theatrical events of essence and presence. Instead, this exploration will establish a foundation for my own inquiry by introducing those perspectives and practices that I have drawn upon, often in intuitive, eclectic and paradoxical ways. Each of the above figures has influenced my work and my understanding of theatre, and provided useful concepts and exercises. I do not consider it valuable to attempt a synthesis of techniques, and have not attempted to do so, although points of integration and synthesis have certainly been discovered and created in the course of this project. I seek rather, because this is an interdisciplinary investigation, to add to the background provided in the last chapter for the benefit of non-theatre readers, just as the next chapter will provide a background in transpersonal theory for readers not familiar with that body of work. I hope that, by providing a survey of these highly influential figures and foregrounding the essential dimensions of their work, I can illuminate many interesting questions I have not addressed and establish a workable framework for those I have. I will address the Stanislavski tradition first, then Brook, Copeau, Lecoq and Latham.



## THE STANISLAVSKI TRADITION

Stanislavski's system has given rise to many re-interpretations, both practical and theoretical. As his students came to artistic maturity, developed their own theatres or emigrated, they passed on the system at various stages of its evolution or, building on the foundation of their work with him, developed their own distinctive approaches. Those who overtly developed their own techniques (for example, Meyerhold and Michael Chekhov) were typically viewed as having undergone a radical break with Stanislavski. Those who did not (for example, Sonia Moore and Stella Adler) often became embroiled in arguments over the master's true legacy. Confusion and disagreement resulted, founded on the "rather naïve notion that the system was a collection of determined, fixed exercises and principles" (Lev Dodin, quoted in Shevtsova 2004, p. 37), rather than a continually-evolving, communal practice. Scholars also contributed erroneous evaluations of the system, generally associating it with 'kitchen-sink realism', assuming a Freudian theoretical basis (Case 1988) and presenting it as the patriarchal, naturalistic pole at the opposite end of the spectrum to apparently more ideologically acceptable practitioners like Brecht or Meyerhold (Aston 1999). Recent scholarly works detailing these viewpoints have argued that they are based on a lack of information and understanding about the system or the biographies of the artists involved (Krause 1995, Blair 2002, Gainor 2002, Leach 2003). Stanislavski's system and the cross-currents of influence between him and his collaborators are simply too fluid, complex and multivalent for such simplistic standpoints to have any wide-ranging validity.

Some of the latter articles draw on Carnicke's (1998) influential book, which not only makes clear that the complexity and ambiguity of Stanislavski's thinking would not be out of place in postmodernism but also demonstrates how fluidly the system adapted and transformed as it took root in the Soviet Union and the United States. In the Soviet Union, the spiritual dimensions of the system were effaced or glossed over to suit materialistic biases, and in the United States the same dimensions were glossed over to suit a more therapeutically-oriented culture. The Soviet bias led to an emphasis on physical actions, which were elevated to such great importance in the work of some of Stanislavski's descendents that a device he used in his later years, the "method of physical actions," was held to be the final version of the system. In the United States, the teaching of First Studio members Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya became, via Lee Strasberg and the Group Theatre, the Method, which reinterpreted the system in more psychoanalytic terms, emphasizing personal emotional memories. I will focus, however, on those branches of the Stanislavski tradition in which the spirituality of the system is central, rather than those that attempt to minimize this dimension.

## ***Michael Chekhov***

Michael Chekhov entered the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911, was a member of the First Studio under Sulerzhitsky and later its director. According to Leonid Verzub, Stanislavski declared Chekhov a genius following his audition to enter the MAT. He later described him as his “most brilliant student” (Chekhov 1991, p. x). Chekhov has also been described as “Stanislavski’s ideal made flesh” (Polyakova 1982, p. 263). As an actor, Chekhov had a talent for radical transformation and for the grotesque; his “over-heated imagination,” as Stanislavski called it, was at home with the fantastic and otherworldly (Chekhov 1991, p. xiii). The sharply-drawn, expressionistic characters he created, and his ability to combine an exaggerated theatricality with psychological depth, truthfulness and improvisational brilliance made him the most popular of the MAT’s actors.

Never a mere acolyte, Chekhov developed his own approach drawing on Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy, which helped him to emerge from a profound psychospiritual crisis in his life. Steiner was originally a Theosophist, and headed the Theosophical Society in Germany. In 1913 he broke away from the organisation to form the Anthroposophical Society because Annie Besant, then the Theosophical Society President, had appointed the young Krishnamurti as the new “World Teacher” (Carlson 1993, p. 97). Steiner was a more sophisticated thinker than most Theosophists, and his break with them also expressed his desire to ground his spiritual search more in German idealism, Western scientific method and Christianity, and to eschew what he saw as Blavatsky’s and Besant’s romantic over-reliance on Eastern thought. Anthroposophy was thus moving in the same general current of thought as Atkinson/Ramacharaka, but was happy to yoke its spirituality a Western rather than a perennialist mindset.

Chekhov, as a member of the First Studio, would have been steeped in Ramacharaka’s writings and practices. How much these had contributed to the crisis he experienced, it is impossible to know, but his discovery of Anthroposophy was the crucial turning point back to health. From 1918-22, Chekhov ran his own studio, where he trained students and experimented with techniques that combined Steiner’s work with Stanislavski’s. He continued these experiments as director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, which at one point became the headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society (Carlson 1993). His overt use of occult techniques, such as telepathy and “making contact” with the characters, as well as the symbolism and expressionism of his productions caused difficulties both with the actors and the increasingly repressive Soviet government and he was forced to emigrate (Chekhov 1991, p. xxi). He continued to develop his work in various studios and theatres in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, where he died in 1955. By the time he published his technique, Anthroposophy had become mostly implicit within it, with very few explicit references to Steiner in his writings (Chamberlain 2004). His published writings make some references to Steiner’s ‘eurythmy’ and ‘speech

formation', but incorporate other notions like the higher self, archetypes and the four elements in a way that leaves Steiner in the background.

Chekhov's purpose, like Stanislavski's, was to give the actor a practical method for the mastery of the intangible powers that are crucial to art and "basic to the creative spirit" (Chekhov 2002, p. 159). (This is a different way of expressing Stanislavski's basic principle of "a conscious approach to the superconscious.") His technique uses imagination in many ways to develop the actor's expressive capacities. It leads the actor to develop certain qualities by moving or acting while imagining these qualities. In training the actor will develop the quality of ease by moving or acting 'with the feeling of ease', for example. Chekhov believed that awakening in the actor a number of intangible powers—such as the centre, atmosphere, and the feelings of ease, form, beauty, or truth—leads to "inspired acting," which implicitly contains all the elements of Chekhov's technique in much the same way that Stanislavski's inner creative state contained the elements of the system (Chekhov 1991, p. xxxvii).

Yet, Chekhov's approach differs significantly. The most crucial distinction seems to be that his technique *uses imagination to work upon the actor-as-performer rather than the actor-as-character*. It also encourages the actor to use the will and imagination to affect their feelings directly. Whereas Stanislavski always argued that the unconscious, including superconscious feeling, could only be approached through an indirect route, Chekhov was seemingly able to work directly on his own feelings, and developed many devices which attempted to help his students to do the same. Where Stanislavski used drills to test and develop concentration (or 'inner grasp'), Chekhov encouraged his students to imagine little hands in their psyche reaching out to grasp the inner object. At the time of their last conversation in 1928, the two men also disagreed on two significant points: 'affective memory' and the actor's relation to the character. Stanislavski thought that personal memories should be the entry point for real feelings on the stage, and that the character could only be built out of the actor's own soul and experience, whereas Chekhov preferred to imagine a character and to see and empathize with 'the character's feelings'.

Much has been made of these differences, with some suggesting Chekhov's system represents a radical break with Stanislavski on account of them (see, for example, Mel Gordon's introduction to Chekhov 1985). This "narrative of rupture and difference" (Allain 2005) is no doubt over-emphasized. In his late work, as was the case with Meyerhold, Stanislavski moved closer to agreement with Chekhov. In fact, there is more overlap in their work than is generally recognized, and many of their differences are in nuance rather than absolute. Chekhov emphasized the radiating and receiving of purified aesthetic feelings, which are experienced on the level of psychophysical sensation, and associated with a Higher 'I' (Chekhov 2002, pp. 87-89), all of which is also true of Stanislavski's superconscious feelings. Central elements of the system—action, super-objective, the three centres and their corresponding inner motive forces—are preserved by Chekhov, along with less well-known aspects like the notion of a

higher 'T', and despite Steiner's undoubted influence, many overtly spiritual elements of Chekhov's system seem to be derived from Stanislavski and Ramacharaka.

Nevertheless, his work has a distinctly different flavour. Working with Chekhov's techniques I have discovered that results can come quickly, in terms of palpable artistic feelings and aesthetic qualities pervading the work. Yet specific qualities appeared through Stanislavski's processes, as I experienced them with Leonid Verzub and in my own work, which only emerged in the Chekhov work in fleeting instances: a solid truthfulness, a surrendered purity and freedom, a freedom from self-manipulation, a sense of harmony in the overall structure of the work, a profound logic and organicity in the performance as a whole. These qualities might become more accessible with greater mastery of Chekhov's approach. Perhaps Chekhov's capacity to execute his own devices to the level of quality of truth and life demanded by Stanislavski may have been due to his own individual talent and development. Or perhaps, despite his brilliance, Chekhov was not actually Stanislavski's ideal made flesh. Following Chekhov's famous *Hamlet* in 1924, the older man left the theatre without a word, saying later only that their paths had diverged (Polyakova 1982). I discuss the correspondences and differences between Stanislavski and Chekhov, and how these might relate to their own spiritual experiences and perspectives, in later chapters.

Certain elements of Chekhov's technique proved crucial to my research. One of these was the extraordinarily effective *atmosphere* device. Atmosphere is the quality of presence in a space. Just as a person has presence to a greater or lesser degree, and of different qualities, so too do environments. For example, we might sense an atmosphere of horror surrounding a car crash, of grandeur in a rugged mountain range, or of hot, grating aggression as we enter a room where two people have been arguing. The atmosphere inspires the actor, creates a bond with the audience and the other performers, stirs personal feelings, and liberates the actor from self-consciousness, often evoking free and expressive action (Chekhov 1991, pp. 26-36). The presence that I felt in the performance of *Fool for Love* could also be called its atmosphere, as could presence of the mask, the difference being that in mask there is no boundary between the actor and the space (as David Latham said, "the mask does not do one thing on the inside and another on the outside"), whereas when there is character, as in *Fool for Love*, there is a relationship with the atmosphere. In that performance, the protagonists battled against the atmosphere that engulfed them; in the neutral mask *the actor's presence is the atmosphere*.

Chekhov's understanding of atmosphere is detailed and nuanced, but the exercise for developing an appreciation and mastery of it is very simple. According to his own summary:

1. Imagine the air around you filled with a certain Atmosphere.
2. Become aware of the reaction within you.
3. Move and speak in harmony with the Atmosphere.
4. Radiate it back into the space around you. (Chekhov 1991, p.34)

For Chekhov, the atmosphere is the soul of the performance. It exists in the realm of feeling, but rather than being purely subjective and individual it is “objective” and shared: the atmosphere of love, for instance, is “love itself” filling the space, and affecting all within it, whether they fight it or accept it (Chekhov 2002, p. 53). Its importance for my project is the connection between atmosphere, presence and “objective” feelings. The possibility of “love itself,” or some other differentiated form of presence, becoming the source and the substance of a performance was one we explored extensively in the development and rehearsal of *Palaces in Ruin*. Atmosphere is a device directly related to transmission (“infection”), and it seemed to me that it offered the possibility of grounding performance in essential experience for the actors and the audience together. Two other elements of Chekhov’s technique that also proved particularly useful were the Imaginary Centre, and the Creative Individuality, which I discuss at length in my final chapters.

Although Chekhov left the Soviet Union in 1928 and he was considered a non-person for many years, unable to be mentioned, he did exert an underground influence on the development of Stanislavski’s system. For although, as we have seen, Soviet ideology brought about the official ascendancy of the method of physical actions and played down the spiritual dimensions of the system, these dimensions were preserved, along with Chekhov’s legacy, by Maria Knebel. Knebel taught her interpretation of the system under the banner of “Active Analysis.”

### ***Maria Knebel, Lev Dodin and Active Analysis***

Disagreements over Stanislavski’s ‘true’ and ‘final’ legacy were sharp and heated in Russia as they were in the English speaking world. Russian actors who worked with Stanislavski late in his life (in different arenas) also claimed their own interpretations of the system as his true legacy. Kedrov and Toporkov, who rehearsed Moliere’s *Tartuffe* with Stanislavski, fixated upon the method of physical actions, which was politically expedient given its amenability to materialistic interpretation, while Knebel, who was the master’s assistant at his Opera Dramatic Studio, focused on Active Analysis, another of his later devices.<sup>1</sup> Kedrov later became director of the MAT and as a result, according to Leonid Verzub, Knebel was forced to leave and teach elsewhere. In the West, where perceptions of Stanislavski were filtered through the Method, little was known of either approach. The method of physical action became more widely known through the publications of Toporkov (1998), Moore (1984, 1991) and Richards (1995), but information on Active Analysis has only recently become available (Levin & Levin 1992, Carnicke 1998, Merlin 2001, 2003). In the Soviet Union the method of physical action held sway at least until the post-Stalinist thaw, when representatives of Active Analysis began to challenge

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<sup>1</sup> Leonid Verzub told me that Vasily Toporkov, who was in Stanislavski’s final production of *Tartuffe*, and who has given us the most complete account of the method of physical action in rehearsal (Toporkov 1998) “never did this work” and did not understand Active Analysis.

it openly. After Kedrov and Toporkov died, Knebel underwent a kind of rehabilitation with the MAT (Verzub, personal communication) and her influence grew (Merlin 2001, Levin & Levin n.d.).

Attempts to lay claim to a single true interpretation of the system are clearly not in the spirit of Stanislavski's work and, strictly speaking, the method of physical actions and Active Analysis are "devices" (*priemi*) in an ever-evolving expression and enactment of the system. That is, they were processes, tools, or techniques. Carnicke makes this very clear (1998, p. 154, 172).<sup>2</sup> They can be used to help the actor in her art, but they are not the 'system' itself. The system is a "torch" which lives inside certain people and is passed on as a living tradition. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that any interpretation that neglects the system's spiritual objectives is neglecting its original purpose and most significant potential. And Knebel's approach certainly encompasses these objectives more openly and comprehensively than the method of physical action, the latter having been in part a concession to the atheism and materialism of the Soviet state.

As part of this research, I studied Active Analysis in a year-long course taught by Leonid Verzub, a long-time student of Knebel, former Artistic Director of the Kazan Theatre for Young Audiences and now a Melbourne resident. Working with him, it became clear that the term Active Analysis is used in two different ways: to refer to a specific rehearsal technique and, more generally, to refer to Knebel's own interpretation of the system. As a rehearsal process, put very simply, it is this:

1. The actors and director read the play, dividing it into episodes and determining the main events and actions in each.
2. The actors play an episode, freely, in their own person, and in their own words. This is an *etude*, the first sketch of the performance.
3. The company returns to the text and asks what is missing from the sketch: what else is in the text?
4. They play the scene freely again, creating a second, more accurate sketch.
5. This process continues until the main events and actions are experienced by the actors, then they learn the text (from classes with Leonid Verzub, see also Carnicke 2000, Merlin 2003).

As a general approach Active Analysis includes many associated exercises that have evolved around this rehearsal device (Merlin 2003, pp. 143-154). It was this approach that Leonid

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars still refer to the method of physical action as if it is an alternative to the system rather than one of its devices (See for example, Murray 2003, p. 68).

Verzub was passing on to us in his course. According to Leonid<sup>3</sup>, Knebel “completed Stanislavski’s final research” and Active Analysis is the result. In Leonid’s classes, however, it was obvious that Knebel’s approach was her creative synthesis of the Stanislavski system with the work of Nemirovich-Danchenko and Michael Chekhov, particularly the latter.

The presence of Chekhov’s practices in Active Analysis reflects Knebel’s close personal and artistic relationship with him. It was Chekhov, Leonid told me, who brought Knebel to the Moscow Art Theatre from his own studio. He was her first teacher and “best friend.” In the Soviet Union, it was through Knebel that Chekhov’s writings were published and his techniques passed on, and through her that the spiritual life of the system was preserved in the Soviet Union. For many years she directed a highly influential ongoing workshop for Artistic Directors of Russian theatre companies, in which Leonid Verzub participated for fourteen years. Russian theatre scholar Yelena Polyakova told a visiting American acting teacher that

those who actually understood the living roots of the System saw the legacy of the System as a tree with many dead branches and but a few living ‘green’ ones. Sulerzhitsky had been a green branch as had Vakhtangov. Until relatively recently...Maria Knebel and her pupils the visionary directors Anatoly Efros and Anatoly Vasiliev had comprised about the only current “green” branch in the Russian tradition of the System.... (Stanman 2005)

Polyakova attributed Knebel’s ability to maintain the living dimension of the system to the fact that her understanding of it was based on her early training with the actors of the First Studio, especially her studies with Chekhov.

Certainly one green branch of the system today is Lev Dodin’s Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg. Lev Dodin worked with Boris Zon (who learned Active Analysis from Stanislavski in his last years) at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Theatre Arts, and also with Maria Knebel, attending the same workshop as Leonid, Efros and Vasiliev. According to Lev Dodin, the Maly company creates theatre in the service of “something higher”; he believes “that, in principle, theatre lives only according to this ‘higher’ right” (quoted in Shevtsova 2004, p. 37), and he distinguishes between theatre as a “production line” and theatre that “put[s] an emphasis on the spiritual unity of the ensemble.” The latter “creates works through one whole spirit. [The production line theatre] is just a place where people work, and the other is the place where people search for spiritual values and where a theatre production is a sort of by-product, but spiritual life, spiritual exploration and spiritual research are the main things” (quoted in Delgado & Heritage 1996, p. 71).

Like Chekhov, Lev Dodin is at home in a traditional model of theatre that includes the creation of text- and character-based performances for paying audiences. Like Chekhov, his work is

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<sup>3</sup> As I mentioned in “A Note on the Text” (p. vii, above), I frequently refer to those practitioners with whom I have worked personally by their first names, for reasons already outlined there.

imminently theatrical. Shevtsova writes that Lev Dodin aims for his actors to play in a way that combines aliveness with “heightened outward manifestations” (Shevtsova 2004, p. 39). And like Chekhov his spiritual orientation (an interest in something higher, theatre as work on oneself, the transmission of spiritual experience) converges seamlessly with his theatrical practice. Such a convergence is rare, however; polarities like theatre and spirit, acting and being, performance and truth, playing and doing have been enacted in various ways by many practitioners, and some have found their spiritual and theatrical journeys becoming distinct and irreconcilable. Nowhere is this drama more evocatively played out than in the life of Jerzy Grotowski.

### ***Grotowski’s Journey from Theatre to Art as vehicle<sup>4</sup>***

Grotowski’s life and work is an important branch of the Stanislavski tradition. He saw himself as following very much in the Russian master’s footsteps. The method of physical action served as the primary basis of his direction and pedagogy (Richards 1995), and although this method is the most materialistically-oriented interpretation of the system, using it Grotowski sustained a remarkably intense inquiry into the essential possibilities of the actor’s art. This inquiry passed through five distinct phases (Schechner & Wolford 2001). Beginning in a tiny theatre in Opole, Poland, in the 1950s, Grotowski and a small group of actors created the Polish Laboratory Theatre. This company maintained an extraordinary monastic discipline in training and was famous for its ‘poor theatre’, which sought to strip away all that was extraneous to the theatrical encounter: props, set, division between actor and audience, and so on. The possibly unequalled technical mastery of his actors was based not only on rigorous work with the method of physical action but also on intense engagement with yoga asanas, chanting and vocal work derived from Eastern acting and singing techniques. In Grotowski’s theatre, as for Stanislavski, the centre was “the personal and scenic technique of the actor” (Grotowski 2001c, p. 28) but the goal for Grotowski was

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—all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment. The actor makes a total gift of himself (Grotowski 2001c, p. 29).

In the early years of his work, Grotowski connected this process with the actor’s capacity to contact an archetype. His primary collaborator in this phase was Ryszard Cieslak, whose performances in *The Constant Prince* and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* have attained mythic proportions for actors around the world. As one writer put it: “Anyone wanting to explain precisely what Cieslak was would have to be able to extend the meaning of the word ‘miracle’ and say it without fear of exaggeration” (Taviani 2001, p. 189). Spectators actually saw light pouring out of him as he performed.

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<sup>4</sup> Grotowski is very particular in his language and even capitalization: “Art as vehicle” is how he presents the term.



Via the performances of his company and the publication of his *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) Grotowski became the most powerful influence on acting in avant-garde theatre in the last half of the twentieth century. But in 1969, just as the fame of the company reached its height, following a series of performances and workshops in New York, Grotowski abandoned the creation of public performances, ended his *Theatre of Productions* phase, and began to explore *Paratheatre*—group interactions led mostly by his actors and apparently influenced by the encounter groups of the 1960s (Schechner 2001a). These paratheatrical events sought, through a variety of quasi-ritual forms, a more authentic “meeting” than Grotowski felt was possible in the theatre (p. 210). In this work, there was no audience *per se*. Instead the theatre would prepare participatory events for groups numbering from a few to hundreds.

Many people had significant, even life-changing experiences through paratheatre (Croyden 1993, Merlin 2001), but Grotowski soon abandoned it to return to collaboration with skilled performers. In this phase, the *Theatre of Sources*, he worked not only with actors but with representatives of various traditions—Sufism, Haitian Voodoo, Hindu yoga and others—seeking “performative elements” that would have an objective effect on anyone who performed them, irrespective of cultural background. He sought in this “the sources of the techniques of sources...something simple...given to the human being” (Grotowski 2001b, p. 261). More concretely, he wrote that the participants were

Simply going back to the state of the child... I have in the background of my mind some indefinable memory: plunging into the world full of colors [sic], sounds, the dazzling world, unknown, amazing, the world in which we are carried by curiosity, by enchantment, experience of the mysterious, of the secret. We are drifting then in the stream of reality, but our movement, even if full of energy, is in point of fact a repose. ... [I]t is something tangible, organic, primal (Grotowski 2001b, p. 260).

This project was cut short by the imposition of martial law in Poland but its discoveries fed into Grotowski’s next phase of work, *Objective Drama*, in which he began to once more work with performative structures, although not public performances. Objective Drama was in many ways a transition between Theatre of Sources and the final phase of Grotowski’s work, *Art as vehicle*, which was conducted in Vialle, Italy, from 1986 until his death in 1999, and continues today under the guidance of his principal collaborator and appointed heir, Thomas Richards.

In *Art as vehicle*, Grotowski abandoned the need for a meeting with the audience altogether, in favour of the actors creating performative structures solely for the purpose of ‘work on oneself’ in a spiritual sense. At the centre in Vialle small groups of ‘doers’ (they are not called actors) work six days a week, eight to ten hours a day or more, on precise performative structures (called ‘Actions’, not performances) which incorporate ritual songs and physical actions. At the time of Grotowski’s death, the Workcentre had created two Actions, called simply *Downstairs*

*Action* and *Action*, which were each the subject of many years of daily work. The purpose of the Actions is “to work *on the body, the heart and the head of the doers*” (Grotowski 1995, p. 122).

Two performative states serve as landmarks in this process. This first Grotowski calls *body-and-essence*, which he associates with “organicity in full” and which he illustrates with a photograph of a young tribal warrior of Sudan (Grotowski 2001a, p. 377). From *body-and-essence* the performer can move, via the long process, to the *body of essence*, which he illustrates with a photograph of Gurdjieff late in life, on a park bench in Paris. Grotowski defines “essence” similarly to Gurdjieff and Almaas: essence is what is real in a person, in contrast to “personality” which is the conditioned, mechanical self. As he explains it:

Essence: etymologically it is a question of being, of *be-ing*. Essence interests me because nothing in it is sociological. It is what you did not receive from others, what did not come from the outside, what is not learned (Grotowski 2001a, p. 377).

In practice the movement toward *body of essence* involves what Grotowski calls “an itinerary in verticality” (Wolford 2001, p. 409). The actions and, particularly, the Afro-Caribbean ritual songs that make up the performative structure are thought of as a kind of “Jacob’s Ladder” through which the doers experience, in a specific sequence, the awakening of energy centres in the body (Grotowski 1995, p. 125). As each new centre is awakened the doers ascend in their consciousness to “something higher” (Richards 2001). They move from experiencing a coarse energy to experiencing one that is more subtle. This subtler energy is associated with centres higher in the body and possibly above the head. They then descend with this more subtle energy back to the level of the body and physical action, infusing both with the new quality of energy. The basis of the work is “the craft of the actor” (Richards 2001).

By all published accounts the Actions are unique and extraordinary events, both in terms of the virtuosity displayed and the performers ability “to embody and communicate to each other and to the witnesses a spiritual actuality...” (Schechner 2001b, p. 491). One director visiting with his students from Fordham University reported:

What ‘Action’ does is make palpable the pure performance energy of those who are enacting it—the doers. The effect on those watching is direct and unambiguous: the observers become witnesses to the energy, which allows them to reach a more explicit, even vibratory, level of physical self-awareness themselves. ... My Fordham students take days to process the emotional impact of seeing ‘Action’, saying they could still feel the sound vibrating in their bodies (Sacharow 2000a).

This is clearly ‘infection’ in Stanislavski’s sense, and in fact Sacharow commented that he “began to think of it as an example of the sacred art of spiritual transmission” (2000a). Grotowski called this transmission “induction.” He likens the process to placing a wire with a current running through it next to one with no current: a weaker current begins in the second wire. Yet this “induction” is not the intent of the work. Richards believes that to make it the intent of the

work would weaken the doers connection to the “something higher” towards which the work is now oriented (Wolford 1996, pp. 150-152).

Art as vehicle reflects Stanislavski’s ideal in many ways. We see again the themes of work on oneself, infection/induction, a striving for essential experience, a conscious performative means to the superconscious, and even the method of physical actions. It seems almost as if Richards and his troupe have realized Stanislavski’s and Suler’s dream of “a spiritual order of actors.” They use a remote rural location and even invite some spectators stay at the venue prior to the performance, although it is not clear whether this is to give them time to “prepare their souls” or for some other reason. Grotowski’s use of Stanislavski’s system for spiritual ends is perhaps why some people have identified him with Stanislavski and why Grotowski saw himself as continuing the Russian’s research (Richards 1995, p. 105). But there is one crucial respect in which Art as vehicle differs from Stanislavski’s ideal: it is not theatre, and it does not aspire to become theatre. Grotowski did not make any theatre after 1968, and even those theatrical performances he created prior to that date were such a radical revisioning of theatre that one can question whether they were theatre at all. Brook does exactly that:

...at the end, there is no more theatre, no more actor, no more audience—only a solitary man playing out his ultimate drama alone. For me, the way of the theatre goes the opposite way, leading out of loneliness to a perception that is heightened because it is shared. A strong presence of actors and a strong presence of spectators can produce a circle of unique intensity in which barriers can be broken and the invisible become real. Then public truth and private truth become inseparable parts of the same essential experience (1987, p. 41).

I would like to stay with this theme, because the difficulty of identifying what Grotowski did as theatre symbolizes the problems inherent in uniting spiritual work and acting, and points to how his life and work embodied a profound tension between the two. Eugenio Barba, one of Grotowski’s most loyal supporters, who brought the Laboratory Theatre’s work to the attention of the west in 1963, experienced this tension acutely in 1990:

I have been told that this is not a performance yet I see ‘people who are acting.’ If what is happening here is only for them, then why am I here? Why was I invited and why did I come? ... I don’t know why but something tightens inside me. Then I am ashamed, I become angry. ... Everything I have done has been a search for freedom in the theatre. Now I am witnessing freedom from the theatre. I am struck by the quality of the work. But I remain outside it, as if a sheet of glass is preventing me from sensing the energy of the bodies in front of me. ... I drown in the mystery, in the non-sense, in my inability to orient myself, to recognize, to connect (Barba 1995, pp. 99-100).

What is at the root of Barba’s sense of alienation? And how is it that Brook can say that theatre is the opposite of what Grotowski was doing, even when Grotowski was ‘doing theatre’?

I believe that Grotowski, in stripping away everything that he thought inessential to theatre, actually stripped away a few things that are essential to theatre. This is my own conception, but it is in harmony with the perspectives of the other artists I explore in this chapter. Each of them defines the theatre according to some element that Grotowski actually removes from his work or seeks to remove. For Brook theatre requires the breaking down of barriers; it must be a shared experience. For Stanislavski, the theatre is “a sea of human forces,” a “union in beauty of the living forces on both sides of footlights” (1988, p. 163). Lecoq (2000) says that he looks for an actor who can play, that is, one who includes the audience in his circle of awareness. In each case, the communal, shared experience is central if not defining. I will not say that all these artists share the same vision because clearly they do not, but I contend that it is possible to draw upon certain central elements they specify to articulate a vision of theatre that is at odds with Grotowski’s practice. In this vision, which expresses my own understanding of theatricality, theatre is characterised by the notion of play, which incorporates a subjunctive mood and an imagined reality. It involves contact with that imagined reality for both the audience and the actor (*experiencing* and *infection*), and contact between audience and actor. Finally, the *mask* is its defining metaphor. This conception of theatre can illuminate Grotowski’s work in interesting ways, throwing light on its peculiar tensions, and its singular and paradoxical influence.

If the theatre is characterized by shared experience, contact, play, an imagined reality and mask, then Grotowski’s work engages each of these elements idiosyncratically and problematically: he is either frustrated in his pursuit of them or makes an active effort to avoid them. In the first place, he pursues contact, but barriers remain between audience and actors. This is not only a characteristic of Art as vehicle but also of Grotowski’s theatrical productions. Certainly the accounts of the season in New York attest to an absence of a sense of contact and participation: Schechner wrote of an “impenetrable membrane separating the performers and between the troupe as a whole and the audience” and of “facial and particularly eye expressions that suggest an inward look, not a communication with others” (Schechner 2001d, p. 158). Another critic remarked that “It invites us to sacrifice but not to partake” (Ludlum 2001, p. 142); and another that the “cruelty and suffering within the action does not agitate anyone looking on.... The actor's function has been entirely altered. He has ceased being an instrument and has become an object. ... [T]he experience is a closed one” (Kerr 2001, p. 153). In this regard, Grotowski’s image of the two wires is potent, as if a spectator might not be aware of the shared field between herself and the actors, but only the change in herself as induction occurs. The actor remains another wire across a chasm of space. Here we have not “a sea of human forces” but adjacent lakes.

This reflects how Grotowski views performance and how he views spiritual work: the actor and audience member are on their individual spiritual journeys, but the actor has always gone (or is going) further. “For Grotowski, the actor is a martyr with whom the spectator cannot presume

to identify; he can only witness in awe a hero's courage and the sacrifice that is offered him as a gift" (Brook 1998, p. 196). The actor's function then, is almost didactic. He "sacrifices himself" by engaging in "the total act", an absolute disarmament by means of which the actor reveals...and sacrifices the innermost part of himself...that which is not intended for the eyes of the world" and this "sets a challenge for the audience" (Grotowski, quoted in Wolford 1996, pp. 120-121). This idea persists, although more gently, in Richard's understanding of Art as vehicle.<sup>5</sup>

Play is also absent in Grotowski's work: there is no "as if" in Grotowski, none of the subjunctive mood that Huizinga considered the essential hallmark of ritual (Campbell 1991a, p. 23). Grotowski's performances had the seriousness of high ritual but not the playfulness. "Why the absence of humour? Why can no one relax?" Eric Bentley asked after the New York season (2001, p. 166). In the Stanislavski system, the subjunctive mood is invoked by the 'magic if' and results in the 'Third Being', in which the role and actor are merged. The absence of the 'magic if' in Grotowski's work is indicated by his approach to personal memories, which differs greatly from that of Stanislavski. Rather than using a memory analogously, as an aid to discovering believable actions in the imaginary circumstances, Grotowski's actors recalled the precise physical actions (or the precise impulses to action) that they actually enacted in a particular remembered experience. In performance they retained their private and literal associations. The social, psychological and physical resistances to these actions might be overcome almost completely, resulting in actions that are more rapturously cathartic than naturalistic, but the basis of the work is nevertheless not *what would happen if I was in this situation?*, as in Stanislavski's system, but *what did happen when you were in that situation?* (see Richards 1995, p. 13). The actor, in her inner experience, sees her own memories and images; there is no shared imaginary world even between the actors, let alone between actors and audience. In Grotowski's words, "the seat of the montage" of the spectators is intentionally different to that of the actors (Grotowski 1995, p. 122). This may be the case in Stanislavski's system also (you cannot know exactly what is going on inside another person) but in that approach attention is given to creating and revealing a *shared* imaginary inner world, and to acting *as if* this world were real here and now. In Grotowski's work, where can the actor and the audience meet? The world of the play Grotowski's performance is a world where actors attain amazing states of performance and consciousness in communion with memory and impulse; it is a remembered and a presented world, but not an *imagined* one.

Whitmore writes that "Grotowski's acting theory has always stressed the need to objectify the inner impulse through the body, that is, to construct the mask out of the inner experience of the actor" (1990, p. 153). But if the actor remains with his own personal memories and actions, how

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<sup>5</sup> "In such a moment [when confronted with someone in an essential state], faced with something unrecognized in one's own inner life, questions can arise. For example, is something missing in me?" (Richards, quoted in Sacharow 2000b).

is there a mask, or a role, at all? Everything has been an “unmasking,” a removal of blocks in order to reveal the innermost secrets of the actor’s being. This points to the third anti-theatrical element of his work: Grotowski has always “sought ways to avoid the defining power of the mask” (Whitmore 1990, p. 153); he has worked for “the extermination of the ‘mask of representation’” (Birringer, quoted in Wolford 1996, p. 125). Seeking this “extermination,” he abandoned productions to pursue, in Paratheatre, a meeting between people which he felt the theatre could not provide. Having dissolved the masks of the actors and found that the contact he sought still eluded him, perhaps he thought that the path to a true meeting required that he “dissolve the mask of imposture” (Schechner 2001c, p. 211) not only of his actors but also his audience.

Mask is traditionally the theatre’s essential symbol and metaphor. David Latham used to tell us “The mask *is theatre*.” Perhaps there is a connection between Grotowski’s hostility towards masks and his inability to find in theatre a true meeting. Because the experience of a living mask, from the audience, is markedly one of *being contacted*, of *being met*, by a living presence. This is a characteristic of encountering, as an audience member, a mask: *I feel as if there is something or someone there and I am met by it, contacted*. Cole (1975), comparing the actor to the shaman, calls this moment “rounding.” This is the juncture at which the actor or shaman’s journey to a specific spiritual reality has succeeded and the invisible presence she has encountered now takes hold of her and ‘rounds’ to face the audience. Cole argues that this moment is the defining characteristic of theatre: did Grotowski, by sacrificing the mask, sacrifice the possibility of a spiritual theatre?

That Grotowski would create a theatre that was in many ways anti-theatrical (from my perspective) is understandable, because his interest in theatre was strategic and expedient in the first place. He began the Laboratory Theatre as “an ashram” (Wolford 1996). Schechner tells us that he

was never ‘in theatre’...theatre was his path, not his destination. Ready to enter university, Grotowski had three possibilities: theatre training, Indian-Hindu studies, medical school [psychiatry].... He chose theatre because he would encounter the least censorship and mind-control. ... Grotowski...used theatre to pursue spiritual, mystic and yogic interests (2001b, p. 464).

Brook writes that Grotowski’s search was “surreptitiously mystical at the core” (1998, p. 135). If Stanislavski sought *a spiritual theatre*, and the embodiment of the life of the human spirit *in the role*, then Grotowski sought *spiritual experience through theatre*, he was interested in the embodiment of the life of the human spirit, of superconscious feeling, *in the actor*. Stanislavski worked with a feeling of truth inseparable from the *magic if*, Grotowski sought always a truth with no *if*, only an *is* or a *was*, and a truth ideally free of any veils at all.

Although Art as vehicle is not theatre—“in principle, the spectator doesn’t exist” (Grotowski 1997, p. 89)—Grotowski and Richards do intend for their work to have an effect on theatre.

While Grotowski was alive, the Workcentre occasionally invited witnesses to attend, and also arranged ‘work exchanges’ with theatre groups who are invited to the centre. Many theatre groups participated in these work-exchanges. Since Grotowski’s death in 1999, the Workcentre has added theatrical explorations to its work on Art as vehicle and for the period of 2004-2006 is carrying out a very extensive program throughout Europe involving presentations of Art as vehicle, seminars, work exchanges and even public theatrical performances (Allain 2005).<sup>6</sup> Through these events Grotowski, via Richards, continues to exert a significant influence, but one that is not without its difficulties. If we fail to distinguish what Grotowski was doing from what Stanislavski, Brook and Lecoq were doing, we might confuse his technique and philosophy for one that will help us to make theatre as they conceived it, whereas it is more likely to lead us away from play, contact, and shared experience. The very elements that many others regard as crucial to the theatrical event are precisely those that Grotowski avoids: the magic if, the mask/role, and the liberating ambiguity of play, of *let’s pretend*.

## **PETER BROOK AND THE SEARCH FOR QUALITY**

Peter Brook’s story represents a different expression of the tensions that exist in Grotowski. While Brook is known mostly as a theatre director, his work in the last thirty-five years has focused on the art of the actor. His actors have “increasingly absorbed an internalized manner of working (or being) that is mystical in nature” (Dasgupta 1996, p. 83) and his explorations have influenced the profession through the publication of his very influential books (Brook 1972, 1987, 1993, 1998).

Brook was already a successful theatre director when, in the 1950s, he became interested in the “objectivity of quality”—why, for example, a precise distance and no other between actors on a stage is exactly ‘right’. At this time, he serendipitously discovered Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* (1949), which addressed this topic in ways that were new to him (Brook 1998) and which led him to become a student of Jane Heap, who taught the Gurdjieff Work in London. In this time since, he has become one of the inner circle of Gurdjieffians in Paris (Wolford 1996). ‘Quality’ has remained a key concept for him, through which he draws a connection between events denoted by common uses of the term (e.g. ‘theatre of high quality’) and experiences of presence and essence.

Brook initially tried to keep his spiritual and theatrical endeavours separate. “Early on as I began to study with Jane,” he writes, “I made a promise to myself to keep my deepest aspirations and the inner work to which I was completely committed separate from my theatre activities so as to

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<sup>6</sup> These performances include *One Breath Left*, a collaboration with Singaporean theatre company, and *Deis Irae*, a performance devised at the Workcentre. Yet it is made clear that while this production is related to ‘Art as vehicle’ in ways that are still being negotiated, it is a development from the last phase of Grotowski’s work, not to be identified with it. See [www.tracingroadsacross.net](http://www.tracingroadsacross.net).

not cheapen and exploit what I was still so far from understanding in myself” (1998, p. 85). As he grew in understanding and developed as a result of the work, he discovered that theatre and inner work “can’t stay for long in watertight compartments...[and that] the theatre was becoming a practical field in which the possibility existed of observing laws and structures parallel to those found in the traditional teachings” (Brook 1998, p. 133). His need to explore this possibility led, in 1965, to his Theatre of Cruelty research with Charles Marowitz, then to his intercultural research at Barrault’s *Theatre des Nations* festival and, in 1970, to the formation of his International Centre of Theatre Research (CIRT) in Paris. Here Brook gathered together actors from an array of cultural and racial backgrounds. He began his work with this group with a commitment to openness and a “resolute refusal to make a long-term plan” (Brook 1998, p. 166). He sought something indefinable, by working “backwards,” by listening “through the body to codes and impulses that are hidden all the time at the root of cultural forms” (p. 167). He and the actors “performed many experiments to discover more exactly the nature of the process that is normally glossed over with a vague word such as *presence*” (p. 172).

The group carried their research to various places and cultures, including Iran, immigrant Mexican communities in the United States, and remote villages in Africa, where they would arrive in a village, tell the chief that they were “trying to see if communication is possible between people from many different parts of the world” (Brook 1998, p. 180) and, if welcomed, roll out their carpet and perform. By trial, error, reflection, accident and inspiration they discovered if communication was possible, what ‘worked’ and what did not. What Brook discovered is that what communicates across cultures is not form, but quality:

Muslims put the hand on the heart, Hindus bring the two palms together, we shake hands, others bow or touch the ground—any one of these gestures can express the same meaning provided that the actor is capable of expressing the necessary quality within his movement. If that quality is not there, every gesture is hollow and carries no meaning (1998, p. 183).

The union of outer form with inner quality is the perennial problem, for the actor of course; it is the same problem Stanislavski faced in 1906, and for which the system is his solution. Michael Chekhov addresses this problem very specifically. In one exercise he directs the actor to move with the desired quality until the feeling is aroused within. By moving with the quality, *as if* it is there, the feeling emerges. Feeling and quality go together (Chekhov 1991, pp. 36-42). Unlike Chekhov, Brook does not offer a ‘how’; he does not answer by way of technique. Brook was untrained; he was neither an actor nor a teacher of acting. His group learned via the open field of inquiry he established, the questions he posed and the living exchange of their collaboration. He does not, at least in his published writings, offer devices. For Brook, “there are no secrets” (1993)—he begins with a “deep formless hunch which is like a smell, a colour, a shadow” and the work proceeds through difficult trial and error according to this hunch (Brook 1987, p. 3). The actors’ and director’s profound engagement with a question in a text gives rise to a need to



share this engagement with an audience. With this “comes an equally strong need for absolute clarity. This is the need that eventually brings forth the means” (p. 127).

From this it may sound as if in each case Brook’s means are different, that his work is largely unsystematic. In comparison to the clearly organized training and rehearsal processes of Stanislavski and Chekhov, this is true. But his work is systematic on another level, in a way that derives from the Gurdjieff Work. This is perhaps a problematic assertion, as Brook has at times denied using Gurdjieff’s teaching in his art, as in the following interview with Margaret Croyden.

*How does your affiliation with the Gurdjieff teaching influence your art?*

I rigorously, 100 percent, avoid ever using anything of the Work [Gurdjieff teaching]. ... I would never ever use a method, a principle, an idea from the Work as a structure or a formula for the theatre. ... I don’t sit down and do a rehearsal thinking Gurdjieff theory. Nothing would be more horrendous than calling the actors together and telling them that we are now going to have a religious experience—we are going to take this play and look for its spirituality. Can you imagine anything more terrible?

*But the Gurdjieff Work is in you. Doesn’t something have to come through?*

What comes through comes through. There is nothing deliberately conscious that I do to make it so (Croyden 2001, p. 18).

A very great deal evidently comes through. Brook’s constant personal practice and the ensuing transformation of his character, worldview and presence undoubtedly influenced his productions and his whole way of working.

Recognizing this is important to understanding Brook. Even the concepts of the empty space and openness—so central to Brook’s philosophy and now so much a part of theatre lore—attain their full resonance only in relation to Gurdjieff’s cosmology:

I don’t think of space in a geographical or physical sense. For me the concept of space is much deeper in its significance. Space is everything that does not yet have form. ...[T]he empty space means the virtual, yet-to-be-born reality that exists before the big bang, that contains all its meanings and is as yet undefined (quoted in Sucher 1995).

If openness and the emptiness are of fundamental importance—the context in which the formless hunch is worked out through trial and error—the process of trial and error is also underpinned by Gurdjieff’s ideas. Brook makes this clear in “The Secret Dimension” (1997), an article that appears in a volume on Gurdjieff. This article distils Brook’s understanding of the common ground of his spiritual path and theatrical practice. It is the kind of article that is almost impossible to summarize or rephrase so succinct, dense, and vibrant is its form, so I am forced to quote it at length in the following summary.

In Gurdjieff’s vision, matter, energy and consciousness are one unified field. Brook calls the dimension of this field that incorporates human experience *quality*:

It has become fashionable to mistrust ‘value judgements’, yet we appreciate people, we respond to their presence, we sense their feelings, we admire their skills, we condemn

their actions, whether in cooking, politics, art, or love, in terms of unwritten hierarchies of quality (Brook 1997, p. 31).

That there is a hierarchy is clearly visible in art. Some art is subjective and some objective, which means it is universal, “speaking to all mankind from a level beyond personal experience.” Furthermore, “True quality has objective reality”: it is real in a way that our personality—made up of our beliefs, preferences, attitudes, and so on—is not. Improvements in quality are related to a chain of energy, like a musical scale, which (like the energy of Grotowski’s doers) becomes finer and more subtle as it “rises” (p. 31).

Gurdjieff does not speak only of energies capable of rising to new levels of intensity; he also affirms the reality of an absolute level of pure quality. From this source, energies descend to meet and interact with the energies we know. When this intermingling of the pure with the gross takes place, it can change the meaning of our actions and the influence they bear on the world (p. 32).

In the journey up the scale, there are places where the energy can stall, and a “shock” or new influx of energy is needed to continue the transformation. If this happens, “the energies that are in action can make contact with energies of a different order, [then] a change in quality takes place. This can lead to intense artistic experiences and to social transformations.”<sup>7</sup> If a person is engaged in this process, then at some point his three centres (the belly, the heart and the mind) will begin to work in harmony, and then “a new quality appears, which Gurdjieff calls ‘presence’.” For teachers who have this quality to a significant degree, their literal presence is enough “to raise the pupils to a new inner state” (pp. 33-34). Gurdjieff’s three centres correspond to Stanislavski’s three “inner motive forces,” the will, the feelings and thought, which should all work in concert in the actor (Stanislavski 1980, p. 251). Stanislavski also spoke of a fourth centre, a purely spiritual centre, which could wake up in an actor (Manderino 2001). Almaas’s conception of presence is also strongly influenced by Gurdjieff and the notion of the four centres and transmission by presence is also central to the Diamond Approach. All of which indicates that Brook’s presence, Almaas’s presence and Stanislavski’s *experiencing* are highly congruent notions, although Stanislavski’s is more complex.

For Brook, the theatre “shows the movements of life in an especially concentrated form, it is an ideal laboratory in which ideas become human and can be instantly verified” and “in every school of theatre, whatever the style, the daily work is simply a pursuit of quality” even though it may be articulated in simple ways (“good,’ ‘not so good”): “the actor intuitively stretches upward until a greater sensibility informs his organism” (1997, p. 34).

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<sup>7</sup> Brook is drawing here upon Gurdjieff’s use of the enneagram, not as a personality typology, which is its most well-known application in the English-speaking world at present, but as a symbol of process (See Ouspensky 1949, p. 285-298 Blake 1996).

Here again in Brook, in a different form, is a conception of theatre that places a fundamental importance on feeling of a higher, more subtle quality as the very basis of art, and also the idea of infection/transmission/induction, this time by “presence.” And once again, this transmission is the point of theatre: “Very simply, the theatre must awaken something that is asleep.” However, unlike Grotowski who is interested in essence as such, for Brook theatre’s mission is to “make the audience...confront not only the contradictions of life but also the continuum of horrors” as well as to show “as a reality all the other infinite possibilities and all the dangers of life...[and to] transmit these experiences...” (quoted in Sucher 1995).

Brook, like Grotowski, differs from Stanislavski in the presentation of character and role, and this may also reflect the influence of Gurdjieff, for whom the personality was the mechanical part of man, in contrast to essence, which was truly alive. Brook “loathe[s] masks in the theatre” (1987, p. 223) and while he is speaking literally rather than metaphorically, there is a tendency in Brook’s work for the actors to “execute their tasks without getting into what we normally think of as characterization. ... It appears as if they are, in some sense, devoid of any personality whatsoever.” Their “modus operandi” is “not representation, but presence” (Dasgupta 1996, p. 85). Even in Brook’s *Mahabharata*, critics perceived a Brechtian effect operating, and the actor’s were explicitly instructed not to “fully inhabit an imaginary character” as they might in a “Stanislavskian approach” (Harding 2001). Thus Brook, like Grotowski, has some discomfort with the mask, as metaphor and in fact: the mask is considered to be in some way a block to experiencing the essential.<sup>8</sup>

## **COPEAU, LECOQ, LATHAM AND THE NEUTRAL MASK**

An entirely opposite viewpoint is played out in the Copeau tradition. Copeau is the most influential figure in twentieth century French theatre.<sup>9</sup> He founded the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier in 1913 to combat what he saw as the decadence of the French theatre at that time (Kurtz 1999). He wanted to pare everything back so that the essence of the theatre and the text could be revealed. Just as Brook’s company worked with only a carpet (and often without script, props or plan) and Grotowski famously created a poor theatre, Copeau stripped back the Vieux Colombier Theatre to a bare stage, doing away with decoration and seeking a mode of staging that was classical and minimalist. Copeau wanted to create “the still ground against which a movement or form could be seen.” He referred to this still ground as a “neutral atmosphere” (Eldredge & Huston 1995, p. 121).

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<sup>8</sup> Stanislavski did advise actors to “cut ninety percent” (1980, p. 162) and to strip away their personal characteristics as a way to reveal the “immutable spiritual core” (1988, p. 134). But it cannot be said that the process of paring away to almost nothing is a defining characteristic of his system, which always embraced character.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Camus: “In the History of French theater, there are two periods: before Copeau and after Copeau” (Kurtz 1999).

At the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier, Copeau employed the notion of *neutrality* in the training of actors. Neutrality for the actor was “The state of repose, of calm, of relaxation or decontraction, of silence or simplicity.... [This] state of neutrality should not be construed as being negative, it has nothing to do with being neutered. It simply means ‘Putting oneself in a state of readiness’” (Rudlin 2000, p. 71). Students were asked to begin from a state of neutrality, to connect with the impulse to action prior to its expression, fully embody the impulse and then return to the state of neutrality. “All impulses were to arise from that state and return to it” (Eldredge & Huston 1995, p. 121). Discovering this state involves a process of stripping back. Through this process, the actor discovers (or develops) neutrality, or the neutral body, which is that mode of action and experience not structured by one’s conditioning, but in which one is open and responsive to both the inner and outer worlds.

Copeau’s notion of neutrality is in fact one of the most pervasive and influential notions in twentieth century theatre, and its resonances reach deeply into the work of Grotowski and Brook (Whitmore 1990, Krause 1995). We can see here the familiar impulse to move toward something ‘prior’, something before character, and before acting. But in the work of the latter artists, the actor’s personality, their social mask, is stripped away not only as a training process but as a performance process. Grotowski’s actors are laid bare as a gift; Brook’s seem to have no personality. The actor un.masks herself and remains unmasked. In Copeau’s tradition, however, neutrality is only a beginning; it is not a holy goal or a theatrical ideal but “*the point of departure of an expression*” which, when consciously attended to, makes possible a greater clarity of form. It is the optimal condition in which to *enter a mask*, which remains the theatre’s defining symbol. Even more significantly, the process of uncovering what is essential *and* what is essentially theatrical is approached through mask, specifically the neutral mask.

Copeau’s work with neutrality took on entirely new dimensions with his serendipitous discovery of this mask. According to Saint-Denis, it was born of a practical problem: “a young actress held up a rehearsal because she could not overcome her self-consciousness and express her character’s feelings through the appropriate physical actions. Tired of having to wait for her to relax, [Copeau] threw a handkerchief over her face and made her repeat the scene. She at once relaxed and her body was able to express what she had been asked to do” (1982, p. 170). After this event, Copeau wanting to “loosen up” his students in the same way, asked them to make their own masks in such a way that their features would be “regularized” (Rudlin 2000, p. 72).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Initially, these masks were most commonly referred to as the “noble masks.” But even at the beginning with Copeau, according to Daste, they were also known as “neutral”: “we would make masks with plain human traits we called neutral masks: two long openings for the eyes, allowing the spark of a true gaze to pierce through” (quoted in Copeau et al. 1990, p. 238). Lecoq and his students sometimes appear to claim the neutral mask as his invention (Houben 1997, Lecoq 2000). The particular mask he created with Amleto Sartori was certainly a significant creative development, and Lecoq’s approach articulates a rich vision of neutrality. But as the noble masks were also called “neutral” in the work with Copeau, and Copeau had a highly developed notion of neutrality, the identification of neutral mask work with Lecoq is not quite accurate.

The mask did loosen the students up but, as we saw in the introduction, it also opened up a whole new world of exploration, and it has since become, via Copeau's nephew, Michel Saint-Denis, his son-in-law, Jean Daste and their students, including the late Jacques Lecoq, an increasingly influential approach to training.<sup>11</sup> Of these practitioners, Lecoq is now the most well-known. His influence has been immense and seems to be growing. Ten years ago, Eldredge and Huston (1995) saw his work as one of the two main streams of mask training in Western theatre—the other being that of Saint-Denis. There can be no doubt now that Lecoq's work is more widely known and discussed, at least in Australia and the United Kingdom.

The search for neutrality implies a process of transformation that is not only artistic but personal. For Copeau and many of his followers, the spiritual dimensions of this transformative process inspired, as with Grotowski, an interest in the spiritual possibilities of actor training, regardless of any theatrical outcome (Krause 1995, p. 73). Copeau himself underwent a "religious crisis and conversion" after which he dissolved his company, gave up creating public performances (temporarily) and retired to a Burgundy village with a small group of students in order to focus on their spiritual-artistic quest (Stanton & Banham 1996, p. 78). Etienne Decroux also followed a similar trajectory (Krause 1995, pp. 73-74). And even if Lecoq was not comfortable with any mention of the spiritual in relation to the neutral mask—he specifically denied that it has a "mystic or philosophical dimension" (2000, p. 40)—he also saw actor training as a journey "down into the depths...into contact with the *essence* of life, which [he calls] the *universal poetic sense*" (p. 46). Once again, the concern is with refined, essential, universal, poetic levels of experience or feeling. Once again these levels are approached through letting go the everyday identity, through a kind of unmasking. In Copeau tradition, however, the essential is sought *through a mask*, a mask that *unmasks* the actor.

In the neutral mask, the process of unmasking attains a concreteness and specificity, and remains grounded at once in the physical and in the theatrical (because "the mask *is theatre*"). In the first place, the neutral mask covers the actor's face, her daily mask (her *persona*, and the Jungian resonance is entirely apt) and requires her to express herself only through the body, silently. Secondly the actor's physical expression must be harmonious with the mask. As the design of the mask is based on the skeleton, she must be free of any muscular tension causing

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<sup>11</sup> Daste and Saint-Denis both were members of Les Copiaux, a troupe who worked with Copeau in Burgundy. Saint-Denis went on to direct the Compagnie des Quinze, which emerged out of this group, and to establish influential training programs in the United Kingdom (Old Vic Theatre School), Canada (The National Theatre School), Europe (The Drama School in Strasbourg) and the U.S. (Juilliard School of Drama). Saint-Denis' training program included work with character masks, animals and a group of four masks (based on Copeau's noble/neutral masks) known as "tragic masks" or "the four ages of man" (Saint-Denis & Saint-Denis 1982). The work with the tragic masks was oriented towards the performance of classical theatre texts (Latham 2001). After the Second World War, Daste went on to found the Comédiens de Grenoble and later the Comédie de Saint-Etienne, where he acted, taught and directed for thirty years. Among Daste's actors at Grenoble was Lecoq. Lecoq "discovered the spirit of Les Copiaux" and the mask work with Daste (Lecoq 2000, p. 5). He later went on to collaborate with Amleto Sartori to develop a new version of the neutral mask, which was based on a study of the human skeleton in an attempt to reflect a universal human form (Houben 1997).

postural misalignment. In this sense neutrality has a certain objectivity; the skeleton's alignment is a matter of physics rather than personal choice.<sup>12</sup> The skeleton is pulled out of alignment by habitual muscular contractions, which speak of past experience, and so neutrality requires that the actor release what Wilhelm Reich (1983) called the character armour. To be completely free of character armour is to be free of the influence of past conditioning—the body is able to respond to the present more openly and fluidly. At this juncture, given the tenet of psychophysical unity, physical neutrality opens into personal transformation.

In the Lecoq stream, the process remains focused on physical observation and proceeds according to the *via negativa* (Eldredge & Huston 1995, p. 124)—“you discover the ‘yes’ by a series of ‘noes’” (Eldredge 1996, p. 50). Lecoq would set a task and tell those who attempted it “Non, c’est ne pas vrais” until someone succeeded. My training in the mask with David Latham was markedly different to this. Although influenced by Lecoq’s work, David’s work is primarily an expression of the Saint-Denis stream and of David’s own creative journey. He studied the mask with Powys Thomas, who studied with Saint-Denis at the Old Vic Theatre School in London. As a teacher at the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre School, according to David Latham, Thomas worked with the tragic masks and developed exercises of his own, and also visited Lecoq. While Thomas thought he and Lecoq “were on different tracks,” his work does reveal Lecoq’s influence, specifically the use of identifications with elements, which are not present in the published accounts of Saint-Denis’ or Copeau’s approach. After meeting Sartori, Thomas also began to use his version of the mask.

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<sup>12</sup> I do not know if Sartori, when he made the mask, used primarily the male skeleton or attempted a more universal outline. Some neutral masks come in pairs, which emphasize the difference between male and female skeletons. The Sartori mask can seem masculine or feminine, but it is generally more harmonious with the male form. Nevertheless, whether it works depends less on whether it is a woman or man wearing the mask than on whether the actor is able to shed their habitual contractions and act *as if for the first time*.

David also studied the work of Rudolf Laban,<sup>13</sup> movement with Litz Pisk and one of her students, and mask with Jane Gibson (a teacher from the Lecoq tradition), Bari Rolfe and Trish Arnold, but he counts Thomas as the primary influence on his work. David's work was also strongly influenced by Joseph Campbell's writings on myth, art and religion (for example, Campbell 1974, 1993). Drawing upon these influences, David developed an approach that proceeds not by a series of *noes*, but by a constant, affirming *yea*, and which adds to physical observation a sensitivity to the psychological, archetypal and mythic dimensions of working with neutrality. Campbell's influence on this approach was profound.

By the time I worked with David the philosophical basis of his work had become "the triangle of myth, art and psychology." He was interested in "training an actor in such a way that the actor's work exists in the duality of that which is psychological and that which is universal" (Latham 1992, p. 2). Part of this is unmasking, and through this unmasking the actor "uncovers the roots." David writes that his work

is not about invention; it is not about methods; it is about revealing; revealing at a deeper and deeper level, making connections that have psychological connotations and universal connotations, and not only bringing those to the work, but allowing them to be the driving force of the work in its content and its form. The foundation of the craft thus reaches into the deepest source of our being, the essence of our humanness, individually, communally and culturally (Latham 1992, p. 4).

Of course, Lecoq's work is also about revealing, about unmasking. But while in Lecoq's work the emphasis is on revealing the idiosyncrasies that obscure clear communication, in David's work there is also a greater emphasis on the natural and unique dynamism of each student. David affirms wherever his students go in their imagination and their improvisation. To use Campbell's (1991c) phrase, he "says 'yea' to it all." Although it seems simple, such an attitude

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<sup>13</sup> David's approach also drew on the movement psychology of Yat Malmgren, which derives from Laban. The spiritual dimensions of the work of both these figures is also rich and fascinating. Although more commonly associated with dance, Laban has been a significant influence on actor training in the last half of this century, via contact with Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop, where his apprentice Jean Newlove was the movement trainer, and in particular via the work of Malmgren, who carried Laban's work on Movement Psychology into actor training. Malmgren taught at the Drama Centre in London for three decades. What is known of Laban's past is, in a similar way to Gurdjieff's, a mixture of fact and fictions of his own making (Foster 1977, p. 12-13). Some facts are fairly certain: he was inspired to study movement by his youthful encounters with Sufi dancing and with an "Imam" who (because he taught Laban much about dervish "dancing") we must assume was a Sufi. Laban wrote: "My talks with this man belong to the unforgettable treasures of my mind" (quoted in Foster 1977, p. 11). He writes of "travels in the Near-East" around 1926 which brought "unforgettable movement impressions" on which he does not elaborate (p. 25). Dance for Laban was a way of combating the "dark monster of civilization" and "drudging mechanicality" (Preston-Dunlop 1998, p. 4). He was also a Rosicrucian, and "Rosicrucian philosophies of harmony and structure underpin much of Laban's later choreographies and movement theories" (Hayes 2004). Some commentators believe him to be in "the same school of thought" as Steiner, i.e. "the stream of cosmic beliefs that flow directly from ancient doctrines of harmony and flux" (Curl, quoted in Foster 1977, p. 25). When Malmgren first read *Movement Psychology*, the unpublished manuscript bequeathed to him by Laban, such was the impact of the revelation he experienced that he literally shook (Hayes 2004, p. 136). He thought he had discovered the secrets of the universe. Laban seemed to have discovered objective laws that linked human experience to number, geometry and the movement of the body, something perhaps not too dissimilar to that for which Brook was searching. In any case, there is a common garden of influences—Sufism, Western esoteric traditions, Dalcroze's eurythmy—which intertwine and converge at many points, so perhaps it is no surprise that, as Janice Hayes, a former student at the Drama Centre told me, Malmgren was a Gurdjieffian and that "the drama centre was full of Gurdjieffians."

has depth and richness. To maintain it honestly requires great personal trust, heart and openness, and its effect on the working atmosphere in the studio is profound and significant.

I remember David's appreciation of all the imaginative places we went in our work with him—not just his *allowing* but his *appreciation* of the powerful, perverse, sexual, violent, and emotional territories we found ourselves in. He was interested in all of our dimensions and qualities. Whatever we wanted to bring out, he affirmed it. I once asked him what he began with when he started teaching. He told me that he just knew that he wanted people “to bring out what was in them”. Something deep within responds to this attitude. Underlying it is an understanding that the depths of the individual are universal, that these depths will eventually emerge, and that they will be safe to experience. In this way, we can approach the universal not by negating the personal, but by moving *through* it. We can experience how, beneath our surface characteristics, the most profoundly personal places within us are universal.

David also brought to the work a profound and intensely lived understanding of metaphor and its relation to play in the theatre. For David, the mask is a metaphor, myth is a metaphor and theatre is a metaphor (Latham 1992, p. 3). Even the preparatory physical exercises serve as metaphors, for acting and for inner states. The work thus occurs within a subjunctive mood, an atmosphere of playfulness that is also serious and holy. This playful orientation, which Huizinga famously ascribed to primitive ritual, Campbell (1991b) extended to the study of myth and religion as a whole, including the world's major religions. Furthermore he extended it to existence as a whole, invoking both the Hindu notion of *lila* and Kant's assertion that the proper approach to the world is to treat it “*as if* its being and character are derived from a supreme mind” (quoted in Campbell 1991b, p. 28). Thus he fashions a cosmology that is fundamentally playful, in which play is noble and any “seizure” by final belief “must represent a fall or drop of spiritual *niveau*, a vulgarization of the play” (p. 27). By virtue of this *as if* “a principle of release operates...[through which] the impact of all so-called ‘reality’ upon the psyche is transubstantiated.” Play, and performance represent, in this case, “a step *toward* rather than away from the ineluctable truth” (p. 28).

In the studio, this approach translates to an appreciation of the theatrical and performative nature of all phenomena. The actor can allow herself to be played as she plays. The power of each archetype is deeply respected, but even the most powerful archetypal identification is regarded as having no final reality; it may live in and through the body of the actor in terrifyingly powerful ways, but it nevertheless remains theatre. In the end, the actor takes off the mask. Thus, through Campbell, David Latham expands Stanislavski's *magic if* beyond dramatic action to ‘real life’; if the actor, in the mask, feels that she is really burning up, but even this is treated as play. In this context, in stark and fascinating contrast to the perspective of Brook and Grotowski, play and the *magic if* do not obscure reality or essence, but reveal it. The actor begins with that which cannot be shown or known and, pretending that it can be expressed, reveals



something about it. Through neutrality, the body becomes receptive, and the actor becomes a metaphor, a sign that refers not to any positively existing signified, but which is metaphorical of a certain facet of a mystery that can never be expressed in totality.

Campbell (1991c, 1993) extends his playful cosmology into an aesthetic theory. He points out that in the Hindu notion of *Maya-lila*, *Maya* has not only a concealing power but a revealing power, and that it is a shift in perspective that determines whether the phenomena of the world conceal or reveal their deeper nature. To articulate this shift, he invokes the aesthetic theory Joyce develops in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* in which he formulates three different categories of art: didactic, pornographic and true art. Didactic art is concerned with teaching or propagating a certain point of view; pornographic art presents something that appeals to our fear or desire, to our need for emotional excitement of all kinds; true art involves “aesthetic arrest” which stills the movement of fear and desire and opens the perception to the timeless and spaceless. As Joyce puts it “any object, intensely regarded, can be a gateway to the incorruptible aeon of the gods” (quoted in Campbell 1974, p. 305). Aesthetic arrest is “the luminous stasis of aesthetic pleasure” (Campbell 1991a, p. 67) whereas “improper art is kinetic....[and] moves you either with desire to possess the object or with loathing and fear to resist and avoid it” (Campbell 1997, p. 153). For David Latham, theatre is about aesthetic arrest and, through aesthetic arrest, the revealing power of illusion.

As I have worked more with the neutral mask, I have found it to be a particularly apt symbol and enactment of this vision. The essence of the neutral mask is silence and stillness, it is outside time, it does not feel fear or desire, because everything is *for the first time*. In it, the actor transforms into the elemental forms of reality and lives through the movements of the world, and yet the mask remains the same. It doesn't move; it is made of *papier mache*. It is the still point and the silence that makes movement and speech possible. In Campbell's terms, it is the World Axis, the centre of “the turning wheel of terror-joy.” Campbell writes that “Myth is the revelation of a plenum of silence within and around every atom of existence” and “Myth is a directing of the mind and heart, by means of profound informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existence” (1993, p. 267). The forms that arise in the mask are nothing if not “profound informed configurations.” Through the stillness of neutrality, the actor is able to access those dynamic forms that appear to reveal that which is unchanging, forever still. This is the domain of the archetypes, the “masks of god,” the costumes of that transcendent Source from which “words turn back” (Campbell 1991a).

When the actor is able to find neutral movement, her action contains within it a stillness.<sup>14</sup> This stillness is a bridge to the source of the forms her body takes. The performer and the audience meet at that compelling still-point, which is also experienced as silence and emptiness. As one actor simply put it, still-points “give the audience time to think into that space with you.” Repeatedly in this research, actors discovered in the mask that the shared experience with the audience requires clear still points and that in order for the connection with the audience to be maintained, the still-point, the inner calm, the silence, must be maintained *within* her physical movement. Brook discovered this when his research group performed for children. Only Yoshi Oida could hold their attention. When they asked him how he did it, he told them that he made an emptiness inside (Brook 1998, p. 172). Another neutral mask student expressed it thus: “The work has an impact when it leaves a vacuum for the audience to decide.” When the actor can do this, the stillness she feels within can express itself *as* her movement. She becomes a metaphor for that source, a *bridge* that carries over<sup>15</sup> the life from that source for the audience. As Grotowski puts it (writing about Art as vehicle) “*Performer...is a bridge between the witness and this something [presence]. In this sense Performer is pontifex, maker of bridges*” (Grotowski 2001a, p. 377). In David’s work the actor is also the communicating metaphor but, in contrast to Grotowski and Brook, the mask is itself is also a bridge, a means of revelation, which opens a pathway not only to art but to deeper levels of experience and reality.

Yet, it must be said, that all the above pertains primarily to the neutral mask, which is a very particular kind of mask. It is not a character, and not intended for performance. However riveting the theatre of mask class is as a participatory event, in which each student is both undergoing an intense process of transformation and bearing witness to this process in their peers, the neutral mask does not work as theatre outside this context. Although the neutral mask is “the mask of masks” (Lecoq) and it “is theatre” (Latham), its theatrical relevance is primarily as a reference point; it lies beneath every other mask (Lecoq 2000). Its function then is to allow each mask to exist “in the duality of that which is psychological and that which is universal.” The neutral mask has no psychology, no inner or outer conflict, and it hides nothing. Character masks, a variety of which are studied in the Copeau tradition and which represent the theatrical dimension proper, have psychology, conflicts and secrets. In this respect, the approach of the Copeau’s descendants is similar to that of the Russian descendants of Stanislavski whose work has remained focused upon the theatrical, character, a shared imaginary world and the *magic if*. This was also my own interest—theatre not as a didactic lesson in essence, or a pornography of

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<sup>14</sup> There is a paradox within the experience of aesthetic arrest: a profound encounter occurs at a still point that exists within, gives rise to and is revealed by dynamic forms. Equivalent co-existent ‘opposites’ exist in transpersonal theory (in which essence is stillness and the soul is flow – see Chapter 5) and Stanislavski’s system (in which that ‘I am’ denotes a state of Being and ‘experiencing’ is intrinsically dynamic – see Chapter 8). We also see hints of this paradox in Stanislavski’s notion of ‘the transient now’.

<sup>15</sup> Etymologically metaphor means “to carry over.”

essence (in Joyce's terms, if such a thing is possible), or a means to some spiritual end for the performers, but theatre involving imaginary worlds and characters, as a shared event infused with essential presence and its inseparable qualities of depth, resonance and mystery.

## CONCLUSION

This survey of the literature and practices of a number of the most influential figures in twentieth century acting demonstrates that in their work there is a belief that the value of a performance is primarily determined by the presence of feelings, qualities, or energies which are higher, more authentic, more essential, more subtle, and/or more real than those with which we are familiar in ordinary experience. For Michael Chekhov these are the aesthetically refined personal feelings and the objective feelings of the atmosphere; the early Grotowski was interested in archetypes and the later Grotowski made the encounter with subtle energies or essence central; Brook claims that all theatre is a search for quality, which he explicitly relates to subtle energies and to presence; Lecoq tried to imbue his students with the capacity to touch the essence of life and the universal poetic sense, and David Latham values the presence of the universal, mythic dimension. In each case, these superconscious feelings affect the audience, via infection, transmission or induction, and are central to the performance.

I am not trying to say that each of these concepts is identical, nor am I trying to wrench them from their contexts and create a grand synthesis, or conflation. I am not suggesting that these artists are all saying 'the same thing'—clearly there are differences in their understanding of what these experiences are, what role they play in their performances and how they approach them. To summarize each briefly:

- Chekhov draws on Steiner. In his system, the higher ego bestows the capacity for refined, aesthetic feelings connected with a completely realized character in a thoroughly imaginary universe that has its own "objective" reality. The atmosphere is the realm of "objective" feelings, and creates the bond between actors and audience that gives the performance its soul. As in Stanislavski's system, the actor learns to transmit her feelings through radiation.
- Grotowski was influenced by a wide range of spiritual traditions. He moved from seeking an unmasking and contact in the theatre, to a true meeting in paratheatre, to the essential development of the participants with no necessity for an audience at all. In Art as vehicle, the doers use ritual songs and physical actions to experience higher, subtle energies and descend with these energies into action and the body. In this work, there is

no character, no imagined circumstances, no play and no shared imaginary worlds, only literally remembered and re-enacted ones.

- In Brook's work, there is a shared imaginary or invisible world, and usually a narrative and character, but his actors take a more distanced approach to character than Chekhov or Stanislavski would take. He does not emphasize systemic craft or process but uses a very open process of trial and error experimentation guided by a sensitivity to *quality*. Gurdjieff provides him with a kind of meta-framework for this process, an understanding of how phenomena attain or lose quality and how presence emerges. For Brook, the purpose of theatre is to wake up something that is asleep in the audience and to open them to expanded possibilities. These possibilities are related to quality and presence.
- In the Copeau tradition, play and the mask (as literal object and metaphor) are central. The mask is used as a way to essence, and transmission is inseparable from play. The actor learns to include the audience in the space around him, to unite the inside and outside. David Latham brings into this tradition Campbell's understanding of play as a kind of cosmology: all is a metaphor, even the essential forms and feelings that arise in the mask, because they ultimately point back to the silence from which they arise.

This survey and discussion lays the ground for the inquiry that follows, and helps to flesh out the context, assumptions and discourses within which my explorations occurred. In the language of hermeneutic phenomenology, the recurring themes I have outlined, the language and practices of these practitioners, and their artistic journeys, are part of the 'text' that challenges my unfolding interpretation. The themes explored here have played through me and my co-researchers in the course of this project as I have pursued a parallel inquiry. At various points the horizons of one or more of these traditions have fused with my own practice, illuminating both my practice and the traditions and inspiring new insights. The significant novel element I bring to this engagement is transpersonal theory which, along with the epistemic basis of my research process, I discuss in the next chapter.

# PART 2 ~ RESEARCHING ACTING AND ESSENCE

*Transpersonal Participatory Epistemology,  
Hermeneutic-Phenomenology,  
Inquiry and the Neutral Mask*

## Chapter 4

### **TRANSPERSONAL PARTICIPATORY EPISTEMOLOGY, ARCHETYPES AND ACTING AS A WAY OF KNOWING**

Crotty (1998) points to the need, in academic research, for a strong and logical relationship between the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and specific methods adopted. The researcher must address a number of fundamental questions: What kind of knowledge is sought? What are the epistemological assumptions underlying this search? How is this knowledge to be sought? What theoretical perspective guides the process of inquiry? And what particular methods or techniques are appropriate to the particular project? This chapter and the next will address these questions, articulating my fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions and the research method that arises from them. The task of grounding an inquiry that is creatively oriented and focused on presence, essence, archetype and Being in terms acceptable to the contemporary academy is not an easy one. This is particularly true given that I am not attempting to deconstruct or critique presence, essence, archetype and Being as *concepts*, but taking the *phenomena* as the central values of my work. I also want to make extensive use of a contemporary spiritual teaching. In this chapter I argue that such a project is both artistically and intellectually tenable. Many of my assumptions are not mainstream, but neither are they freely chosen or given *a priori*; they have emerged from the dynamic exchange between my personal life and the traditions in which I have been immersed. I will attempt to make their experiential and historical foundations as explicit as possible. I will show how my ontological and epistemological orientation has arisen out of my engagement with the neutral mask, performance and transpersonal psychology, and how this orientation is in part constituted by an ongoing hermeneutic dialogue between these influences and the lived experience of my artistic and spiritual life.

I will first address the question of the kind of knowledge that I have sought in this research and, broadly speaking, how I have sought it. Drawing upon the epistemic perspectives and research processes of Stanislavski, Grotowski and Lecoq, as exemplars of research into acting and essential experience, I argue that acting is a particular way of knowing. Using the neutral mask as a fundamental reference point for this way of knowing, I then show how it is highly congruent

with a transpersonal participatory epistemology (Tarnas 1993, Ferrer 2001), and can be supported by the theoretical perspectives of transpersonal psychology (Wilber 1995, Grof 2000) and the Diamond Approach (Usatynksi 2001, Almaas 2004). Within my presentation of this participatory epistemology, I am addressing possible post-structuralist and anti-essentialist criticisms, arguing that within a transpersonal participatory paradigm, it is possible to speak of essence without falling into the political and metaphysical pitfalls of essentialism.

## KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH IN ACTING

*1991. VCA. Before training as an actor, I studied philosophy and politics. Although a successful student, the skills, talents and strategies which had served me so well in an academic environment seemed to be a hindrance at VCA. Acting know-how was obscured by 'thinking'; sequential rational thought, critical analysis, the ability to express a coherent view on something with logic and clarity—none of these helped the quality of my work. In fact the more I clung to them, the more confused I became and the less able to function effectively as a performer.*

*This was made particularly clear in mask class, in which my mental activity, my head-chatter, became extremely powerful and insistent. Perhaps this was in reaction to the stillness, openness, presence and vulnerability that were so much a part of the work. Perhaps it was a defence against the energies that were surfacing through the freshly tilled soil of my body and psyche.*

*In my life prior to my actor training, the basis for my conscious actions had been, I assumed, rational decisions: I reasoned through a situation and based my actions on forethought and logic. In mask class, such mentally-founded actions looked like fabrications, and the mask died on my face. I was trying to rely on my known resources, and these resources turn out to be thin, flimsy, ridden with control and devoid of meaning. Where was the basis for meaningful action when all I had was thoughts competing with thoughts and referring back to thoughts? As long as I remained in this mode of being, there was nothing I could do to make the mask live, but I did not know where else to turn.*

*I sought help, not knowing quite what my problem was. A teacher listened carefully as I tried to explain. I think he could see that there was no way out for me through ideas, and he directed me back to my experience. I started to cry, with helplessness, longing and relief, but also with shame. He said "Let yourself have this experience," and he suggested that I just stay with my feelings: "Just keep asking yourself 'What am I feeling now?'" I did this for days and, unable to hold onto anything else, I did it the next time I worked in the mask. Through allowing myself to be present to what was going on in me beneath the thoughts, without knowing what it was or what would happen, a shift began. Soon after this I had the experience that opened it all up.*

As I considered the question of how to research essence and acting, two things became apparent to me. Firstly, in my explorations in the rehearsal room and training studio, I was already developing my understanding in a way that served my artistic capacities; I was effectively

doing a form of research. I decided that this project should not discard this process, but bring clarity and rigor to it. Secondly, in formulating my method of inquiry it made sense to draw upon those practitioners who had engaged successfully in research into acting and essence before me—Stanislavski, Chekhov, Lecoq and Grotowski. If their research was effective, which it clearly was, it makes sense to ask how they did it.

In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski describes his method:

I watched myself closely, I looked into my soul...on stage and off. I watched other men and actors, when I rehearsed my new parts and their new parts with them. I also watched them from the auditorium. I performed all sorts of experiments with them and myself. I tortured them.... But the chief object of my researches remained the great actors.... (1956, pp. 462-463).

In other words, as Benedetti puts it, the system's development "depended upon Stanislavski's capacity to analyse his own practice" (1999, p. 212). It depended also, as I pointed out in the first chapter, on his capacity to *feel and discriminate* the presence of particular qualities (the creative mood, relaxation, the feeling of truth, life, concentration and so on) in performances, both his own and others'. He then explored, through exercises and performance experiments, the conditions that blocked or liberated these qualities. For the actor, he tells us, "*to know* is synonymous with *to feel*" (Stanislavski 1961, p. 5).<sup>1</sup>

Theatre practitioners tend to be suspicious and disdainful of theory—a common attitude could be expressed as 'what works, works and everyone can see if it works or not; theory gets in the way'. Carnicke (1998) recognizes that Stanislavski's practice was a form of inquiry and that his "enduring importance to the theatrical world...rests upon a rare project: to exploit practice in order to generate theory" (pp. 66-67). This was a project shared by Chekhov (1991), who wrote: "poor indeed is the influx of wisdom to...an artist, when one hears him say 'I have built my art upon my convictions.' Would it not be better for the artist to say that he has built his convictions upon his art?" (p. 6).

Yet was it "theory" that Stanislavski generated, or was it another kind of knowledge? Carnicke also recognizes that the system operated more through "cumulative practice" than "selective theory" and, drawing on North (1987), contends that *lore* is perhaps a better word for the form of knowledge associated with the system. Lore is how theatre knowledge is usually passed on, in practice. Lore "can contain mutually contradictory ideas as theory cannot; it can evolve and shift dynamically from day to day as need demands..." (Carnicke 1998, p. 67). Stanislavski believed that master practitioners should write "to try to systematize their art" (Carnicke 1998, p. 67) but,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislavski's (1961) description of preparing a role from *Woe from Wit* is a wonderful example of his method. It shows that the state of "I Am" and the feeling of truth are a constant touchstone. His understanding gradually moves forward through open curiosity, trial and error, aesthetic sensitivity, Socratic self-questioning, intuition and inspiration.



I do not think that this systematization can be equated with “theory”; *lore* is indeed a better word. “The system lives in me, but it has no shape or form,” Stanislavski said. “It is created in the very act of writing it down. That is why I have to keep changing what I have written” (Benedetti 1998, p. xxii).

Stanislavski makes a second specific statement about knowledge: “In art ‘to know’ means to be able to do” (1988, p. 121). This is also Grotowski’s view:

In Hindu tradition they speak of *vratias* (the rebel hordes). *Vratia* is someone on the way to conquer knowledge. A man of knowledge has at his disposal *the doing* and not ideas or theories. The true teacher—what does he do for the apprentice? He says: *do it*. The apprentice fights to understand, to reduce the unknown to the known, to avoid doing. By the very fact that he wants to understand, he resists. He can understand only after he *does it*. He *does it* or not. Knowledge is a matter of doing (Grotowski 2001a, p. 376).

Knowing through doing is also emphasized in some Sufi orders:

You can discover God[’s qualities] by creating him/her as your being, by actuating him/her as your being. It is a knowledge that is acquired by doing. ... It is only as it comes through that the divine nature can become known to you. There is no use saying *I need to know what my divine inheritance is before I can actuate it*. It is the other way around: you need to actuate it in order to discover it (Inayat Khan 1994, pp. 40-41).

The neutral mask is also a way of knowing by doing. More specifically it is knowing by *identification* and by what Lecoq calls “mime,” which he describes as “pre-eminently a research art” (Wylie 1994, p. 75).<sup>2</sup> By mime, he does not mean the performance form associated with Marcel Marceau, which Lecoq calls *mime de forme*, and which represents the appearance of things. Lecoq’s mime is *mime de fond*. This is the process enacted in neutral mask. It “involves an identification with things in order to make them live. ... [M]ime is a way of rediscovering a thing with freshness.... The action of miming becomes a form of knowledge” (Lecoq 2000, p. 22). *Mime de fond* enables us to experience the inner life of thing by entering its form:

Man understands that which moves by his ability to ‘mimic’ it; that is, to identify himself with the world by re-enacting it with his entire being. ... Take for example, the observation of a tree: in going beyond the ideas which surround it, and the personal feelings it arouses, one encounters a physical sensation which reveals the dynamism of the life of this tree.... It is as if the body had a skin for touching the space within and another for touching the space without (Wylie 1994, p. 80).

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<sup>2</sup> Lev Dodin also speaks of theatre as a way to knowledge: “Theatre interests me, not as a place where I have realized my wealth but as a place where I have discovered something: discovered something in myself, discovered something in my acting and discovered something for myself. For me a theatre is more interesting as a place where I can live, where I can communicate, and that’s why in time a theatre production becomes really of secondary importance, a side-product, quite subsidiary. For me the process of knowledge, the process of learning, is more interesting than the final results of the production of a play” (quoted in Delgado & Heritage 1996, p. 74).

For Lecoq, mime is the basis of all art: “all forms of art originate in its silent depths, for everything moves, stirs, shifts, evolves, is transformed” (quoted in Wylie 1994, p. 75). Research by mime is research through acting. It is knowing by identity, by being, or by playing at being.

The neutral mask identifications, which are the primary examples of *mime de fond*, are usually accompanied by intuitive insights and visions in both the performer and observer. The actor can understand a great deal about Fire, for example, by becoming it. She might learn that Fire consumes, and that it is related to inspiration. Its extraordinary leaps and lunges, and the resulting bruises, might reveal how it relates to courage. An actor identifying with toothpaste can reveal its banality. Becoming Earth can reveal the beautiful unity of suffering, compassion and wisdom. It can bring the actor a movingly intimate understanding of ashes to ashes, of the poignant and even beautiful humanness of the death and decay of our bodies. These insights accumulate and integrate over time so that the actor gradually builds a body of knowledge about acting and about the world in its inner, aesthetic, metaphorical dimension. She discovers *knowledge by identity*. She accumulates understanding via a journey of transformation.<sup>3</sup>

A journey of discovery by identity is also a characteristic of transpersonal studies. Transpersonal theory arises from the systematic exploration of the depth of the individual psyche; there are specific practices or *injunctions* that disclose the data.<sup>4</sup> Various differences in perspective in transpersonal studies arise from the different injunctions, purposes and background of the various researchers. In Grof’s case, his basic practice is the use of various catalysts for profound non-ordinary states of consciousness in a supportive, non-directive context that expresses a belief in the power of the psyche to heal itself and move toward wholeness. Almas uses Inquiry, which is an open-ended exploration of one’s own immediate experience fuelled by a love for truth, in which the soul’s own guidance is invoked by a very particular and detailed orientation or set of attitudes. In the theatrical arena there are also specific and detailed principles underlying mime or acting as research. These principles are most clear in the neutral mask, in the various elements of the state of neutrality.

Neutrality orients the actor toward the paring away (or *bracketing* in phenomenological terms) of those idiosyncratic impulses, habits and attitudes that arise from the actor’s own personality. The actor in the neutral mask faces the audience alone, without character, text, scenery, costume or the possibility of facial expression. She has a task: to become a particular image, or enact a simple action. Her actions must be in harmony with the mask. If they are not, the audience can

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<sup>3</sup> The knowledge research by mime generates reaches beyond the theatre. One department of Lecoq’s school in Paris is the “Laboratory for the Exploration of Movement,” where not only theatre practitioners but also architects and visual artists research the relationship between body and space (Murray 2003, p. 87-89).

<sup>4</sup> In terms of Kuhnian philosophy of science (Kuhn 1970): acting is an injunction (a body of practices) that gives rise to data (experiences) and a paradigm of inquiry and interpretation. Wilber, in a critique of the loose application of the word paradigm, points out that for Kuhn a paradigm was a particular body of knowledge accompanied by an *injunction*—a particular *practice* that reveals the data that gives rise to the paradigm (1998b, p. 26-40).

see it immediately. Any personal idiosyncrasies are starkly illuminated. Her actions must also live and be aesthetically satisfying. Anything not in harmony with the mask creates a sense of dissonance. This includes discursive, rational thinking: when the actor's impulses are sourced in thought, or filtered through thinking, the mask looks stupid. It loses presence and the actor's body loses its aliveness, integrity and grace. The audience, ideally, must recognize what the actor has become. The mask work is not about interpretation; an identification must foreground those qualities of the image that can be discerned by any observer: fire is hot and flows upward, air fills the container it is in, water flows downward. The mask also removes the possibility of using facial expressions or voice and, because the body is the only means of communication and expression it awakens a sense of the body's possibilities. This combination of elements leads the performer to shed her idiosyncrasies, give up the security of everyday thoughts and attitudes, and connect her body's impulses to the image. Thus the mask invokes a state of consciousness, a certain orientation of body, mind and being that enables the actor to enter the life of things in their inner quality, in their essence.

I will refer to this orientation as *neutrality* or *neutral action*. Analysing published writings on the mask (Rolfe 1977, Latham 1992, Eldredge & Huston 1995, Eldredge 1996, Lecoq 2000), my own experience and co-researcher accounts, it is possible to discern the following characteristics of neutrality:

- It does not exclude the personal, but is at once a physical and an inner experience, experienced through body, imagination and inner perception. To enact an image requires the actor to make a personal connection with it, to find it 'within', and at the same to go deeper than prior personal knowledge. Any knowledge acquired is therefore grounded in experience, intimately interwoven with insight and capacity to do and to feel.
- Neutrality involves *openness*, and 'a willingness to receive', to not impose or pre-plan an outcome. This openness is also a transparency: "The neutral mask, in the end, unmask!" (Lecoq 2000, p. 38).
- It is *timeless*. Everything happens with the "freshness of beginnings" (Lecoq 2000, p. 38). The mask has no past, and the actor must not envisage any future outcome.
- It requires the actor to shed her preconceived ideas, attitudes and physical habits, and discriminate, in movement and imagination, personal or cultural idiosyncrasies from that which is alive in the present and new. It requires her to be aware if she is taking a particular position, holding back or separating herself from the world around her ("the mask is what it sees").

- The neutral mask is action. The actor experiences, communicates and learns through *doing*.
- Neutral action is dynamic, alive and intelligent.
- Neutral action is aesthetic. It must be beautiful.

If any of these elements are missing—if the body is closed or held, expresses an attitude to what it sees, is abstract and impersonal, inactive, dead, or ugly—then the actor has not ‘found the mask’. All of these elements are interrelated and their presence is the basis for any ‘validity’ the research has.

To ground the epistemic orientation and practice of neutrality theoretically, I will argue that neutrality corresponds in significant ways to elements of transpersonal theory, in terms of both epistemology and method. It has particular congruence with the archetypal participatory epistemology articulated by Tarnas (1993) and Ferrer (2001), and with hermeneutic phenomenological research methods (Van Manen 1997, Valle 1998), particularly those adapted to the study of transpersonal phenomena (Anderson 1998, Valle & Mohs 1998, Anderson 2000). Neutrality also has much in common with the orientation of Inquiry, the main spiritual and heuristic practice of the Diamond Approach (Almaas 2002). In what follows I will articulate the common elements of these different perspectives, focusing initially on epistemology and then, in the next chapter, on method. I will ground neutrality theoretically while using the neutral mask as an illuminating reference point for transpersonal theory and hermeneutics. First, however, I need to introduce transpersonal theory more fully.

## **TRANSPERSONAL THEORY**

The field of transpersonal studies, arising from transpersonal psychology, positions itself in relationship to the historical arc of Western discourse, including its contemporary postmodern permutations, in terms which *distinguish it from* and *connect it to* that discourse. It *distinguishes* itself from the dominant materialistic paradigm through a comprehensive critique that demonstrates the implausibility—scientifically, philosophically and ecologically—of that paradigm’s dismissal of the spiritual dimension. It *connects* itself by using language that allows the possibility of ongoing communication with more familiar modes of discourse. That is, the transpersonal field is constantly attempting to build bridges between mainstream Western thought and spiritual wisdom, and to foreground the spiritual dimensions that exist within the mainstream.

Hastings (1999) points out that ideas and orientations within transpersonal psychology can be traced to humanistic psychology, William James, and the American transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Like humanistic psychology it is “a psychology with a vector” (Hastings 1999, p. 197): transpersonal psychology asserts the intrinsic value of transpersonal

experience and its importance for psychological health, just as humanistic psychology stressed the importance of fulfilling the human potential. William James is an important predecessor because of his emphasis on experiential evidence, his conception of everyday consciousness as a “limited part of a wider consciousness,” his related interest in altered states, his willingness to challenge scientific orthodoxy on the basis of evidence, and his study of religion from a psychological perspective (Hastings 1999, p. 196). The ideals of transcendentalism—its celebration of the body, nature and a simple lifestyle, its rejection of civil authority, its emphasis on intuition, mystical experience and transcendent forms like Love and Goodness—were ‘in the air’ in the counter-culture of the late sixties, and also perhaps an “unconscious influence,” on the early transpersonalists (pp. 195-196). Psychoanalysis was also an important contributor through the work of Grof (1976, 1985), who began as a convinced Freudian but whose work with powerful psychoactive substances led him to radically expand Freud’s conception of the unconscious while retaining many of his basic psychodynamic concepts.

Ferrer (2001) also emphasizes the influence of Eastern contemplative traditions, via the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, and the work of Haridas Chaudhuri, who introduced the teaching of Sri Aurobindo to the United States and established the California Institute of Asian Studies (later the California Institute of Integral Studies, and one of the most significant centres of transpersonal studies). Also important was the teaching in the United States of Tibetan lamas such as Tarthang Tulku and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and Hindu gurus such as Swami Muktananda. The *vipassana* tradition of Theravada Buddhism was a significant influence in later years, via the teachings of serious Western disciples of this tradition such as Jack Kornfield.

Some might see an example of Western colonialism in the transpersonal approach to Eastern religions, perhaps justifiably at times—Valle (1989), for example, writes that it is one of transpersonal psychology’s major tasks “to bring [spiritual] ideas from many different cultures, times and traditions into our own psychological language and scientific framework” (p. 261). However, transpersonal studies exchange with Asian teachers was not as one-sided and subject to Orientalist tendencies as the early theosophical movement, for example. From the outset, transpersonal researchers engaged in dialogue, mutual exchange and, in the case of many important figures in the movement, submission to the rigors of serious practice and study under the guidance of Asian teachers.

Transpersonal psychology also embraced, as had theosophy, the concept of a perennial philosophy, a “philosophical current...that has endured through the centuries, and that is able to integrate harmoniously all traditions in terms of single Truth which underlies the apparent plurality of world views” (Ferrer 2001, p. 73). Valle (1989), as one example among many, suggests a marked perennialist agenda for transpersonal studies when he identifies five premises of the perennial philosophy and then claims that these premises comprise “an essence that characterizes any particular psychology or philosophy as transpersonal” (p. 261). Some of the

most influential writings in the transpersonal field present themselves as contemporary psychological reformulations of the perennial philosophy (Wilber 1995, Grof 1998), and for many years there have been discussions about the relative merits of these various models (for example, Rothberg & Kelly 1998). By engaging the Diamond Approach and transpersonal studies as a resource for exploring the spiritual potential of acting, I am mirroring Stanislavski's use of Atkinson's perennialist 'yoga', Chekhov's use of Steiner's 'spiritual science', and Grotowski's use of a wide variety of traditions, including Gurdjieff's: Each of these practitioners' source traditions was also a modern invention and a perennialist synthesis.

This is not to say that I accept these traditions and their perennialist leanings uncritically. Recently, Ferrer (2001) has challenged the perennialist assumptions prevalent in the transpersonal field, along with its commitment to experientialism and empiricism. He has also argued that these elements of transpersonal theory were important in the early stages of its development because, in the social and academic climate in which it originated, which was dominated by the assumptions of Western materialistic science, transpersonal psychology was extremely vulnerable to attack. It had to shore up its scientific credentials by appealing to an empiricism of individual experience, and to shore up its philosophical credentials by appealing to an allegedly ancient and universal worldview.

Many difficulties arise, Ferrer argues, from invoking these tenets. Individual experientialism and inner empiricism devalue the intersubjective and collective dimension of spiritual events. He points out that the experiential vision of religion was developed in the late nineteenth century to defend the credentials of certain schools of Hinduism and Buddhism against the threat of Western science. The notion of spiritual inquiry as a kind of inner empiricism, found (for example) in the writings of D.T. Suzuki on Zen Buddhism and Radhakrishnan on Hindu philosophy, served similar objectives. But in many ways this notion distorts the nature of spiritual practices within these respective paths which each also emphasize "communal life, strong ethical commitments, relationships with teachers and the study of sacred scriptures" (Ferrer 2001, p. 24).

Ferrer also argues that perennialism—in its commitment to a single underlying Reality, a core religious Truth which is both transcendent and immanent and which is ultimately identical with the individual soul—seems to privilege a non-dual, monistic metaphysic reminiscent of Advaita Vedanta, and thereby to enact a dogmatism and intolerance towards spiritual worldviews that do not fit this metaphysic. Ferrer argues that within transpersonal theory perennialism has led to the simplistic ranking of spiritual perspectives: those that do not sit easily within a neo-Vedantin perennialist metaphysic are presented as either less evolved (Wilber 1995) or as merely "exoteric" and thus not as valid as the "esoteric" (experiential) knowledge of the mystical

branches of a particular school (which Ferrer believes is Grof's position).<sup>5</sup> For Ferrer, these difficulties point to subtle remnants of Cartesianism and the representational paradigm within transpersonal theory, and he proposes instead a participatory epistemology that is enactive (c.f. Varela et al. 1991), presential and transformative. Ferrer's proposal is not unique but draws on Tarnas (1993), who had already proposed such a participatory epistemology and pointed to its earlier expression in Goethe and Steiner, and Wilber (1995) who has attempted to incorporate elements of Maturana and Varela's enactive paradigm into his integral model.

### ***Transpersonal Psychology and the Epistemic Dilemmas of Modernity and Postmodernity***

I would like now to present my own account (drawing on Ferrer, Almaas, Wilber, Tarnas and Grof) of a transpersonal participatory epistemology, relate this perspective to the neutral mask practice, and demonstrate how this perspective avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and perennialism. Transpersonal theory can be seen as a particular response to the Cartesian-Kantian worldview. In epistemic terms, Descartes formulated the duality of mind and world, and ushered in modernity. The central image of this worldview, which indicates its basic structure, is the independent human subject standing facing the horizon of the world. This image captures not only the epistemic assumptions of modernity—the transcendent eye that can survey an objectively knowable reality—but also the affective tenor of modern man<sup>6</sup>: the rational ego who faces the world as a field for conquest, as a terrain to be mapped (through science as much as geographical exploration) and a resource to be plundered. The rational structure is associated with the birth of perspective, of the *horizon* which at once defines the secure limit of the known world, the beginning of adventure, and the direction of progress. The radical separation of mind and world so clearly articulated by Descartes, coupled with the myth of the possibility of directly knowing an objective stable external reality, made possible the scientific method. It enabled modern man to establish a rationally founded autonomy from the church and a technologically founded autonomy from the natural world. Yet by enshrining an unbridgeable schism between mind and nature, the 'human' and the 'real', it also laid the foundations for the alienation characteristic of modernity: the hero facing the horizon becomes

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<sup>5</sup> There is something useful in at least the latter perspective. Spiritual knowing based on an engagement with experience, moral precepts *and* sacred texts is bound to be more complete than one based on adherence to precepts alone. Ferrer is right to point out that an emphasis on experience to the exclusion of scriptural, dialogical and communal dimensions of spiritual knowing is misguided, but Grof does in fact recognize the communal elements of the path. The basis of his dismissal of organised religion (exoteric) in favour of spirituality (esoteric) is the imposition by "religion" of mediating authorities and dogmas, and its devaluing of direct experience. He clearly states that community is important: "Instead of officiating priests, they [mystics] need a supportive group of fellow seekers or the guidance of a teacher who is more advanced on the inner journey..." (Grof 1998, p. 248).

<sup>6</sup> I use "man" deliberately in this section, to emphasize the masculinist bias of the modern epistemic orientation.

“a personal subject confronting an unconscious, purposeless, and impersonal universe” (Tarnas 1993, p. 420). Critiques of the modern mind confront the nature of this personal subject.

Modernity is the representational paradigm, the paradigm of “mapmaking” (Wilber 1996, p. 59). The rational ego stands outside the world and maps what he perceives; knowledge is accurately representing the world as it is. The crucial insight that marks the transition to the postmodern worldview is that it (the map, or reality) depends on your point of view. That is to say, if modernity is the paradigm of mapmaking then postmodernity includes the awareness of the mapmaker. It emphasizes two facts glossed over by the modern worldview: the subject always stands within the territory he is trying to map, and he is not a simple, objective, transcendent observer but a conditioned, encultured, selectively perceptive individual with a specific purpose for being in the landscape in the first place. “One cannot regard reality as a removed spectator against a fixed object; rather, one is always and necessarily engaged in reality, thereby at once transforming it and being transformed oneself” (Tarnas 1993, p. 396). And if the modern subject has no interior, then the interior of the postmodern subject is crowded with structure, conditioned and constructed in bewildering complex ways. Every perspective is therefore an interpretation by the mind of the observer, which itself is a construction, an amalgam involving many mediating structures.

Kant formulated the dilemma inherent in this situation most influentially. As Tarnas puts it he “drew out the epistemological consequences of the Cartesian *cogito*, [recognizing] the human mind’s subjective ordering of reality, and thus, finally, the relative and unrooted nature of human knowledge...” This crucial insight “has been extended and deepened by a host of subsequent developments, from anthropology, linguistics, sociology of knowledge, and quantum physics to cognitive psychology, neurophysiology, semiotics, and philosophy of science...” (Tarnas 1993, p. 418). Speaking broadly, Kant’s solution—to discern the *apriori* structures through which the human mind orders its experience—has been reformulated in many ways, involving many different kinds of *apriori* ordering forms (structuralism generally) and also rejected in favour of demonstrating that the structures are not *apriori* at all but are themselves conditional and contingent (post-structuralism).<sup>7</sup> All these approaches demonstrate the myriad ways in which the world is a construct, seemingly entrenching the split between mind and reality ever more deeply, and bringing ever greater complexity to the aperspectival space of the postmodern mind.

With this line of inquiry the certainty of modernity collapses. The confidence of the modern mind was based on the transcendence of the observing subject and its ability to see clearly a pregiven world. But with the postmodern turn, the Euclidian objectivity of horizon and centre

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<sup>7</sup> Tarnas view of modern thought as primarily a search for a solution to the Kantian dilemma is not unique. Jones (1975, p. 1-14), for example, presents the history of twentieth century philosophy in similar terms.



collapses and with it, seemingly, depth: with no horizon or fixed centre or ground, no point can be deeper than any other. In postmodernity, the world becomes a play of surfaces, signifiers drifting meaninglessly in endlessly sliding contexts, nothing but networks of interpretations giving rise to interpretations, perspectives within perspectives—perspectives that cannot find their feet in an objective reality (Wilber 1998b). In this way, postmodernity can collapse into a debilitating relativism (this has perhaps been its dominant strain); no interpretation of reality is better than any other, none has greater value or more truth than any other. Reality itself becomes a deconstructed concept, placed in quotation marks, so too does the self, the subject.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, postmodernism recognizes subjectivity as the crux of the problem of knowledge, but it explores it in such a way that it reduces all the constituent components of the subject to surfaces, objects, concepts and contexts. If the difficulty for modern man is the loss of the interior, a similar problem happens in postmodernity: by focusing on the complexity of *selves* that comprise our subjectivity, we lose altogether the *sense* of being a self. If ‘the self’ is always a construct, then who am I, as an ‘I’? If there is no centre and no horizon is there a subject at all?

The feature that distinguishes the transpersonal orientation from many other postmodern responses to the Kantian dilemma, is attention to the soul in its *depth* and *inner-ness*. Building on the tradition of depth psychology begun by Freud, it explores the dimensions of the subject that are meaningful to the subject herself. Freud, like Kant, “brought the fundamental recognition that the apparent reality of the objective world was being unconsciously determined by the condition of the subject” (Tarnas 1993, p. 422) but, unlike those before him, Freud sought to discover “the root principles of mental organization” through “the systematic exploration of the seat of all human experience and cognition, the human psyche” (p. 423). Transpersonal psychology carries this exploration, via methods not available to Freud, to depths that he did not conceive. The discoveries made in the *depth* dimension of human subjectivity offer a solution, according to transpersonal theory, not only to the epistemic crisis associated with the separation of mind and world, but also to the crisis of meaning.

Cumulatively, this exploration points to consciousness as ontologically fundamental, a kind of unavoidable first principle, not just a chance epiphenomenon of matter, and not ultimately separate from reality. The subject, in a radically expanded conception, is reinstated; her depth is appreciated. That the subject arises within a particular context, and that her experiences are conditioned by particular structures, does not mean that there is no subject at all, and no hierarchies—*aesthetical* or *ontological*—in her experience. She can discover, in the depth of the psyche, meaningful forms that inhere in both psyche and world, and offer a resolution to both

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<sup>8</sup> This perspective, as Wilber (following Habermas and others) points out, involves a “performative contradiction”: to state that no perspective is better than any other is to perform an act (presenting a particular perspective) which is rendered meaningless by that act, i.e. stating that any other perspective, including, therefore, the opposite of your own, is just as good as the one you are presenting (Wilber 1998b, p. 35).

the crisis of separation from the world, and the crisis of relativism, but without negating the differentiations made by modernity and postmodernity. The self or subject is discovered to be a soul.

### ***Self as Soul***

*Psyche* means *soul*, but *psyche* is often used in contemporary psychology to denote the content of experience, and usually a very limited range of content which often excludes the deepest and most meaningful dimensions of human experience. Almaas (2004) points out that Socrates and other classical Greek thinkers used *psyche* to denote the totality of the person, including the spiritual dimension, but excluding the body: the person, the self, is a soul. This is also the sense in which Almaas uses *soul*, but he also considers the body as one of its dimensions. More significantly, he expands the notion of soul through an exploration of its phenomenology. He contends that the soul, through a rigorous ongoing process of inquiry, can be known directly, not only in terms of its content, but as an ontological fact and phenomenological experience. The soul is a fluid, self-aware medium of consciousness, through which and in which all experience occurs. It can be perceived as an alive, flowing substance of consciousness. This substance is not separate from the forms that arise within it; it is like a changeling that is constantly shifting its substance into new forms. It can take the shape of the body, feelings, concepts, images, sensations, archetypes, and so on (Almaas 2004).

In the language of postmodernism, the soul the locus of all sliding contexts, the field of awareness that contains them all. Not only is the seat of all perspectives the human soul, but the seat of *your perspective* and *all your possible knowledge* is *your own individual human soul*. The dimension of immediately felt value and experience is therefore not only the crucial fulcrum of the problem of felt meaning, but also of the epistemic problem. Contexts do not actually slide infinitely; the condition of the individual soul defines the limits of what that soul can know and usefully say, and its felt experience of value is the linchpin of ‘validity’ for any vision it expresses.

The soul and experience are actually non-dual. In the normal way of seeing things we assume that there is an observer and an observed. We even do this with our inner experience, taking the subject to be (usually) somewhere in the head, and the observed phenomenon in the body. Direct inquiry into experience reveals this not to be the case.<sup>9</sup> Nicolescu, (1997) in an article on

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<sup>9</sup> Deeply ingrained scientific ideas *about* the process of perception can block our recognition of what is occurring in our direct experience. Western science, in its attempt to reduce everything to physical reality and efface the interior dimension, sometimes expresses the view that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter. Transpersonal theory critiques this view and avoids the theoretical convolutions that attempt to support it by offering a much simpler hypothesis: consciousness is primary, and matter is one of the many forms available to it. If we call this consciousness, both as fact (awareness itself precedes all knowledge) and as phenomena (the medium of consciousness can be perceived), the *soul*, then any epistemology must hinge on the question of the nature of the soul and its relationship to reality. The only thing we can study directly is our own experience, the soul. Science sometimes claims to study the world directly via “sense data” and its interpretation, but this is a myth: nobody studies anything directly, only their experience of that thing. If we look at and touch a rock, we think we see the rock that is there, but

Peter Brook, writes about three ways of knowing associated with three periods of human thought: pre-scientific, semi-scientific and scientific. In the first “the observer is everything.” In the second, which still dominates, the object of observation is the focus, and in the third, which is just emerging, “knowledge results from a unity between the observer and what is observed” (Nicolescu 1997, p. 23).<sup>10</sup> Or, as Almaas puts it: “The perceiver and the perceived actually exist together as the experience” (2002, p. 79). Wilber (1996, pp. 232-233) points out that Bertrand Russell was convinced of the truth of this by William James and writes extensively on how this non-dual vision is articulated and practiced in Advaita Vedanta, Vajrayana Buddhism and Neoplatonism (Wilber 1995).

Crucially, the soul also has the capacity to remember, to preserve the impressions it receives from the world and to carry these impressions forward in time, and to cycle them in recurring patterns. It can take itself to be one of these patterns (or a combination of them) either consciously or unconsciously. These impressions or patterns are then the structures that determine the soul’s experience of herself and the world (Almaas 2004, pp. 96-105). They include childhood experiences, cultural conditioning, ideas absorbed from formal learning situations, and others—every experience creates an impression on the soul which can become a conditioning pattern, part of the soul’s self-image and world-image. Almaas names the knowledge that is constituted by these impressions of direct experience “ordinary knowledge” or “representational knowledge”; the knowledge that is comprised of direct experience itself in the moment of its experience is “basic knowledge” (Almaas 2004, p. 57). I will discuss this at length below.

Transpersonal psychology demonstrates that these impressions and structures conditioning our experience are much deeper than conventional psychology or mainstream post-structuralism recognizes, extending into birth experiences, embryogenesis, and patterns from the collective unconscious, such as racial, ancestral and phylogenetic experiences (Grof 1976, Scotton et al. 1996, Almaas 2004). It also offers methods which allow subjects to experience these structures directly, by identity, rather than to know them through interpretation or intuition. In structured self-inquiry or non-ordinary states of consciousness, participants can experience these

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if we take the materialist perspective on its own terms, for us to experience the rock, the light-waves generated by its atoms must make their way through our retina and optical nerves to the brain, where they fire synapses and eventually cause the brain to create an image. A similar process happens in order for us to feel the rock. To think that, after this incredibly complex process, we are directly studying a rock is absurd: we study our own experience of the world. (This example and argument was given by Stanislav Grof in a public talk. I think it originates with Fritjof Capra.)

<sup>10</sup> The portrayal of the journey of western thought as the drama of the western mind attempting to return to the ground of being is most beautifully and completely expressed, I think, by Tarnas (1993), who sees the reunification with the world happening through the exploration of the individual psyche, which in its depths is inseparable from Being itself. He speaks of this as the rediscovery of the Feminine, and employs Grof’s psychology to express and substantiate his vision. A similar view is also part of the perspective of Almaas (2004), who writes from the perspective of the soul as the integrating matrix of Self, God and World, and of Wilber (1995), who writes of the reintegration of the realms of I, We and It. These three writers, and many others, recognize in the shift from modernity to postmodernity a profound shift in human consciousness and culture.

impressions not only in their effects but in their fullness; people actually relive birth in intimate biological detail, and have similar rich and specific experiences of themselves as embryos, animals, or even groups of people. These experiences can involve transformations in body-image, sensation, affect, imagery and cognition (Grof 1985). The structures that reveal themselves gradually deepen and expand, in the sense that they might relate initially to biographical experiences, self-image, self-esteem and so on, then to birth experiences and fundamental life-patterns, then to phylogenetic and evolutionary experiences and questions of the nature of reality and its creative processes, the purpose of existence and so on. (This is a general outline; these levels overlap in many ways.) As the subjects undergo these experiences they often report that the effect of the impressions on their perception of the world lessens and the world is transformed, appearing with greater clarity, richness, beauty and transparency.

While this journey, in the context of transpersonal psychology, begins for many people as therapy, it often opens into a rewarding and fascinating adventure of discovery, yielding knowledge about reality that coheres with that available through more commonly accepted processes, such as scientific investigation. And transpersonal methods like those of Grof and Almas tend not to lead the subject towards a particular outcome, and employ methods that allow the soul to reveal whatever she wants to reveal at any moment, the journey itself has a coherent pattern. Transpersonal research reveals the person not to be a collection of random constructs ultimately estranged from reality, but a multidimensional consciousness that is inseparable from reality as a whole. And, as with the mask, the knowledge yielded is intimate, visceral, and existential. It is also knowledge by identity; here also an understanding of the soul and reality unfolds via a personal journey of transformation.

In Grof's research with powerful non-ordinary states of consciousness, his subjects experienced themselves as specific natural phenomena (animals, plants, inanimate matter or the four elements), as archetypes of many different kinds (whether Jungian or personified deities from a whole range of traditions) and even as the Source of all creation, and much else besides (Grof 1987). This cartography of inner experience may sound esoteric or unlikely but similar journeys and the idea of the human being as a microcosm of creation are found in many spiritual traditions (Chittick 1998, Grof 1998). In the Diamond Approach, the aspects of essence can arise on different dimensions and take on corresponding particular substantial forms: the student can experience (or experience themselves *as*) pearls, nectars, diamonds, lotus flowers, stars, suns, the earth and so on. In the logos of the Diamond Approach, each has a specific meaning. Similar experiences exist in other traditions—the lotus as an archetypal symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism is one example, the Blue Pearl in Siddha Yoga another—and even in these traditions, these are not merely symbols but substantial inner experiences. And neutral mask training also involves identification with many elements of Grof's cartography: the actor becomes the elements, materials of all kinds, “the Tree,” colour and even, in David Latham's

work, the Jungian archetypes. Crucially, in the course of encountering these natural forms within themselves, participants in Grof's processes often recognize their meaningful place in the human being and the cosmos. Such experiences awaken in many people "a sense that nature itself, including the human body [is] the repository and vessel of the archetypal, that nature's processes [are] archetypal processes" (Tarnas 1993, pp. 429-430).

### ***Neutrality and Vision-Logic***<sup>11</sup>

This way of knowing clearly moves beyond rational-discursive conceptualization, and can be illuminated, as can its connections with neutrality, by relating it to *vision-logic*, a *structure of consciousness* discussed by Ken Wilber which he considers a developmental advance on the rationalism of Descartes. This structure is also referred to as "integral-aperspectival awareness," "aperspectivity," or "the integral structure" (Wilber 1980, 1995, 1996). The concept has its origins in the work of Jean Gebser, whose *The Ever-Present Origin* (1985) traced the evolution of culture in terms of structures of consciousness. Culturally, the integral structure follows the "rational" or "perspectival" structure; it transcends and includes it. Wilber (1983, 1995, 2000), took up Gebser's idea and correlated his stages of cultural development with stages of individual psychological development delineated by Piaget and others (for example, Beck & Cowan 1996). Wilber points out that the existence of a "trans-rational" stage is widely acknowledged in contemporary psychological theory and vision-logic is his distillation of the variety of ways this stage is conceptualised in psychology.<sup>12</sup>

Vision-logic has the following characteristics:

- It is *aperspectival*, integrating many perspectives while privileging none. Aperspectival seeing becomes possible with the insight that experience of reality depends upon one's point of view, and that each point of view is a complex construction. It is characterized by a transcendence of perspective, or the simultaneous apprehension of multiple perspectives. This structure of consciousness "can freely express itself in single ideas, but its most characteristic movement is mass ideation, a system or totality truth-seeing at a single view; the relations of idea with idea, of truth with truth, self-seen in the integral whole" (Aurobindo, quoted in Wilber 1995, p. 185). Wilber's presentation of vision-logic is, broadly speaking, an account of the psychological intricacies of hermeneutics, if hermeneutics is taken to be "the

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<sup>11</sup> This section develops ideas I first presented in my Honours thesis (Wain 2001).

<sup>12</sup> "Numerous psychologists (Bruner, Flavell, Arieti, Cowan, Arlin, etc.) have pointed out there is much evidence for a stage beyond Piaget's formal operational. It has been called 'dialectical', 'integrative', 'creative synthetic', 'integral-aperspectival', and so forth" (Wilber 1995).

study of interpretation based on grasping the entire network of meaning” (Wilber 1998b, p. 148).

- It is *atemporal*. It is grounded in the present. Atemporality is freedom from time and within time. “For perspective-thinking man, time lacked all quality....” writes Gebser, “He employed time only in a materialized and quantitative sense” (1985, p. 284). The quantification of time is in fact a spatialization of it. It becomes “nothing but a system of measurements or relationships between two moments” (p. 285). In the integral structure, however, time is experienced as “intensity” or “presence.” In a sense the integral structure is free of time because it transcends it and yet includes it, just as it is free of the three-dimensional space of the mental structure. “[T]he integral consciousness is a concretization of time in the sense that space is dynamized” (Kramer 1992, p. xxvi). The individual operating within this structure, has a “spontaneous will,” and is “grounded in the present moment, aware of linear time as exfoliating from the present” (Wilber 1980, p. 61).
- It is characterized by *transparency* (Kramer 1992, p. xxiv-xxix). This quality is related to its atemporality and aperspectivity. The integral structure draws upon awareness of the “ever-present origin,” the originary awareness, the background of wakeful presence that exists in the prior structures of consciousness and against which they reveal themselves.<sup>13</sup> The integral structure allows us to become aware of the structuralization of consciousness for the first time and makes it possible to “render transparent our own origin, our entire human past” (Gebser 1985, p. 7), to “assimilate the entirety of our human existence into our awareness. This means that all of our structures of awareness that form and support our present consciousness structure will have to be integrated into a new and more intensive form.” This in turn will allow an “ordering [of] our relationships to ourselves, to our ‘I’ or ‘ego’ just as the rational structure allowed us to order our relationship to the group” (Gebser 1985, p. 4). Gebser writes in terms of cultural evolution, but Wilber demonstrates that the integral structure renders the individual’s psychological past (the conditioning structures that arise from them) similarly transparent.

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<sup>13</sup> Transparency is the rendering visible, through the awareness of different forms of consciousness, what has been implicit in all the other forms. Kramer and Mickunas (1992) point out that the common background is revealed through difference. They use the analogy of a cube, whose cubeness depends upon the interrelationship of the planes, whose nature depends in turn upon the sides which define it. “We can appreciate our magic awareness,” they write, “only because we also experience mythic and rational modes of being, and vice versa” (Kramer 1992, p. xxv).

- It is a *whole-body* event. The experience of this consciousness structure, following the differentiation of body and mind made through the development of the rational self, is a profound integration of body and mind: “It is a whole-bodily event...feeling through the lived body. It does not take flight from bodily existence in any form. Rather it is grounded in one’s unmitigated acceptance of, or primal trust in, corporeality. It is the transcendent body-mind” (Feuerstein quoted in Wilber 1995, p. 189). Descartes not only formulated a mind-world duality but also a mind-body duality; the rational ego involves not only separation from reality also, usually, a dissociation from the deeper, more intimate dimensions of the self. In vision-logic the locus of knowledge is the present-centred, holistic experience of the individual. This involves, on the individual level (it is also possible to discern a parallel process occurring on a cultural level) a de-repression of the dimensions of experience that have been dissociated in the development of the rational ego. Feeling, impulse and sensation must be reintegrated into the self-sense. In fact, the Cartesian duality of body and mind is undone in the integral complexity of this stage of consciousness: there is no body and mind but interdependent dimensions of existence and experience: matter, impulse, sensation, perception, image, concept, affect, and others, all of which confound the Cartesian categories.<sup>14</sup> This transition is a personal transformation and can be difficult, as my account at the beginning of this chapter indicates. In a certain sense it is a death of one way of knowing and being.
- As a form of cognition it proceeds by vision-image, rather than abstract concept (Wilber 1980, pp. 53-55).
- This stage is “at once the culmination of the personal and the threshold to the transpersonal” (Kelly 1998, p. 126). The inner and outer world appear vivid because the senses here are heightened and open to “an influx of higher subtle and even transpersonal energies” (Wilber 1980, p. 60).

Neutrality corresponds to this structure in great detail:

- It facilitates the integration of mind and body. “The mask is what it sees,” meaning the actor must become, bodily, what she imagines.

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<sup>14</sup> As we saw in Chapter Three, Stanislavski, like Gurdjieff, wrote of four centres the actor must wake up and integrate: the will, the feelings, thinking and spirit (Manderino 2001). The integration is not a simple mind-body re-integration. The very idea of a mind-body duality derives from the Cartesian paradigm and so we cannot expect the resolution of the problem to be in terms of that paradigm.

- It is atemporal. It is “Man or Woman outside Time.” It has no past or future. The “presence” of the mask corresponds to what Gebser describes as a felt-sense of time (time which is not fragmented and spatialized, but integrated as “intensity”).
- The neutral mask makes the actor transparent, in the sense that it unmasks her. It first reveals her idiosyncrasies and then, beneath them, that which she shares with everyone—the universal dimensions of her nature. Also related to transparency, neutrality is the background which allows us to enter other modes or structures of awareness consciously, to understand and integrate their nature. For Lecoq, the neutral mask is the “mask of masks”; it is “a reference point, a basic mask, a fulcrum mask for all the other masks. Beneath every mask, expressive masks, or commedia dell’arte masks, there is a neutral mask supporting all the others” (Lecoq 2000, p. 36). The neutral background transcends and includes the many forms and structures which the actor enters in the neutral mask. It is the still point that makes the movement visible.
- The ‘thought’ of the neutral mask is rich, symbolic imagery that is lived through the body as it is ‘thought’; it is not the conceptual abstraction or discursive thought of rationality. The ‘thought’ is a single integrative image, apprehended by the actor “at a single view.”
- The neutral mask has no particular attitude, no fixed position, and so is aperspectival. A character always has an attitude, expressed through a particular physical fixation, but in the neutral state the body is utterly open to the image, and the actor becomes what she sees. As Lecoq puts it, “when I walk through the forest, I am the forest. At the summit of the mountain I feel as though my feet are in the valley and I myself am the mountain” (Lecoq 2000, p. 41).

Wilber relates vision-logic and aperspectivism explicitly to postmodernity. For him, the postmodern consciousness expresses itself in pathological and healthy ways. Its pathological expression is “vulgar relativism” while its healthy expression is integral-aperspectival consciousness that can appreciate many perspectives, evaluate them and combine them into a great whole (Wilber 1998b). He sees vision-logic as a way of knowing that integrates different theoretical perspectives into a single vision, and cites his work as one example. This facet of Wilber’s work has drawn much criticism in the transpersonal field (Rothberg & Kelly 1998, Ferrer 2001).

In the mask, integral knowing is inseparable from the experience of archetypes and essences, as it is in Tarnas and Almaas (as we will see below). This is not the case for Wilber. I believe that Wilber is prevented from seeing the importance of the archetypes for integral knowing for two



reasons. Firstly he is committed to his developmental model, which places archetypal experience two developmental stages above the integral, at the “subtle” level (Wilber 2000, p. 197). Second, Wilber’s view does not incorporate a clear distinction between ordinary knowledge and basic knowledge, and thus he tries to integrate theoretical perspectives (ordinary knowledge) rather than allowing an integral perspective to emerge from immersion in the many forms of basic knowledge available to the soul. I will return to this point after a deeper consideration of basic versus ordinary knowledge and the archetypal dimension.

### ***Differentiating Basic and Ordinary Knowledge***

We have seen that Almas distinguishes between ordinary knowledge, which is based on past impressions on the soul, and basic knowledge, which is the experience arising in the moment. Ordinary knowledge he defines as “the totality of your accumulated information” and “identification with images, structures, points of view, positions, concepts, beliefs, preferences, prejudices and so on...anything we can put into a conceptual framework...whatever we know and take to be the truth” (Almas 2002, p. 69). Basic knowledge, on the other hand, is our immediate experience. It is the immediacy of phenomena in the present moment. Ordinary knowledge is therefore a particular kind of basic knowledge: it is the past arising in the present, as an abstraction, a representation. This ordinary knowledge forms the basis of what most psychologies take to be the self, which is the self-image or self-concept, as well as the constructed subject of postmodern thought.

Ordinary knowledge develops by the soul abstracting out the outlines of concepts from basic knowledge, and holding their reifications in the mind.... The soul then identifies with the reified concepts of her own experience of herself, which become her self-representations; thus by defining herself through representational knowledge she loses contact with her essential ground which cannot be captured in representational concepts (Almas 2004, p. 469).

There is something akin to the phenomenological *epoche* or bracketing in the recognition of basic knowledge, but it is not an ‘escape’ from ordinary knowledge or our historicity. One does not *draw a boundary* or attempt to bracket one’s prejudices, but *discriminates* ordinary knowledge from basic knowledge as they each arise in experience (the first action is contingent upon spatially defined concepts, the second is a qualitative epistemic distinction).

The notion of basic knowledge clearly goes against Derrida’s famous claim that there is nothing outside the text, especially when the notion of text is expanded to include society and lived experience (Usatynksi 2001). Derrida’s perspective, insofar as it maintains that there is no such thing as pure presence and that there are only representations, is true on the level of the self-image and true on the level of representational knowledge. From such a perspective one might argue that no knowledge is unmediated, and that the notion of basic knowledge implies an untenable metaphysics of presence. I am not articulating, however, articulating a metaphysical

position but a distinction which enables an emancipatory, heuristic process. The concept of immediate experience is employed to *discriminate a qualitative difference in our experience*, which provokes a process of revealing the mediation (ordinary knowledge) and *clarifying the medium* (the soul). Within this process we might say both that ordinary knowledge is unmediated, and basic knowledge arises always in a context (the soul). But this does not mean that the concepts are invalid, or that ever deeper understandings and experiences are not unfolded by the process of applying them. Only when there are remnants of the representational paradigm and Cartesian dualism in our thinking, as I would contend is the case with many poststructuralists and deconstructionists, do epistemic dilemmas about reality and mediation arise (Ferrer 2001)<sup>15</sup>.

Derrida's own approach to emancipation (from the totalizing, exclusionary discourses arising from the Western metaphysics of presence) is to try and create non-binary concepts or "marks" (*Deconstruction* 2005). From my perspective this is to remain in the realm of ordinary knowledge, tinkering with concepts. As Usatynski (2001) points out, Derrida's work can certainly be useful to reveal the ways representations and binary concepts (forms of ordinary knowledge) constitute and so confine the subject, but there are other approaches (in spiritual traditions such as Middle Way Buddhism) that deconstruct not only the relation between signifier and signified, but also the notion of an interpreting subject. From the perspective of spiritual practitioners who investigate the ways that a cognitive privileging of presence can be embodied, and who explore the profound psychological and physical barriers to releasing this mode of cognition, Derrida remains "confined to the contexts and discourses of the rational *épistème*" (Usatynski 2001, p. 144).

Furthermore, "there is nothing outside the text," when applied indiscriminately to all contexts, becomes in itself a totalizing discourse. In the terms I am using here, it is a form of ordinary knowledge that restrains the living experience of the soul. It limits, or perhaps even precludes, the possibility of liberation from ordinary knowledge, the possibility of undertaking a path to depth, the discovery of the experience of essence, the validation of this experience in communal discourse and the integration of essential qualities like compassion, love, peace and autonomy into one's character, life and actions. In short, it de-validates the spiritual journey—by many accounts one of the most remarkable, wondrous and satisfying adventures it is possible for a human being to have. To impose the distinctions and purely theoretical values of deconstruction in this context would therefore be to extend them beyond the context in which they have significant meaning. Terms like *essence* and *basic knowledge* are meaningful in this context because they are tied to specific injunctions and deeply valued experiences.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of mediation, the representational paradigm and spiritual knowing see Ferrer (2001, pp. 171-174). The concern with mediation in the representational paradigm seems an exact parallel to Grotowski's and Brook distaste for masks, that is, it depends upon dualism of the formless and forms, with a privileging of the former as more real, or to put it in Campbell's terms, an overemphasis on the concealing power of *Maya*, and a lack of appreciation for her revealing power (see Chapter Three).

The distinction between ordinary knowledge and basic knowledge has a clear parallel in the neutral mask. To come into harmony with the mask, the actor's body must release its idiosyncrasies and habitual responses. The mask sees the world and acts *as if for the first time*, as if without a past. The actor must therefore release, as much as is possible, the past impressions carried in the body. Transpersonal psychology confirms in detail Reich's (1983) thesis that our (unresolved) past experiences are carried in the body as patterns of tensions (Grof 1987). This idea is in harmony with Stanislavski's notion of the unity of psychology and physicality and its validity is so taken for granted by most actors that it seems superfluous to mention it. The neutral mask does however make this psychophysical unity very clear: in neutrality *for the first time* and *free from unnecessary tension and idiosyncrasies* are inseparable qualities.

In the various simple actions that begin the mask work—waking up, throwing a stone into the sea, waving goodbye, a meeting between a man and a woman—it is very clear when an actor has an idea *about* stones or the sea, or is overlaying the action with their own preconceptions about the action based in their own past (say, a history of difficult goodbyes) or a cultural attitude (men should defer to women, or vice versa). At these times, the body usually falls out of harmony with the mask, the actions no longer seem as alive or imbued with presence, the form is not as clean and clear, and the actor or the audience will often say that they *dropped out of the moment*. Many actors reported to me that their breakthrough in finding the mask happened when they were able to really let go of their “preconceived ideas.” This was, in fact, the single most frequently mentioned characteristic of the neutral state. This leads me to make an important connection: *the neutral mask allows the actor to differentiate basic knowledge from ordinary knowledge*, and helps her to make a transition to a lived, enacted experience of basic knowledge. I can also now flesh out what Stanislavski means by *experiencing*. Experiencing, remember, distinguished for Stanislavski the representational actor from the true artist. The representational actor depicted an image, the true artist embodied the human spirit. I would contend then that the representational actor is grounded in ordinary knowledge, and experiencing means experiencing the role in the moment, as basic knowledge, with the fullness of its impact on the body and emotions, rather than as abstracted concept.

The transition from ordinary to basic knowledge is not an insignificant event. The difficult relationship between representational, fixed conceptual knowledge and the profound immediacy, depth, presence and flowing yet ordered forms available to the soul in basic knowledge is one of the fundamental dramas of the Western mind. This drama was magnificently portrayed, at its birth in Classical Greek culture, by Euripides in *The Bacchae*, as the battle between Pentheus and Dionysus (who is, of course, the god of theatre). Dionysus (on the side of ritual, wine, women, rapture, and worship) leads Pentheus (on the side of reason and morality—the certainty of what is already known) into the ceremonies of the women (the realm of soul), where he is brutally destroyed by his own mother, his feminine source, the matrix of

his own conception and birth (Euripides 1998). I sometimes think of Dionysus's ruthless destruction of Pentheus when I see an actor in the neutral mask being swept through the space by the force of the Fire or Water within them, all their ideas about the element shattered by the relentless flow of magnificent forms now surging out of them. The distinction between abstract, representational concept and living form (between idea and Idea) could not be made more convincingly.

## THE ARCHETYPAL JOURNEY

This brings us to the question of the nature of basic knowledge and of a particular kind of basic knowledge, the archetypal dimension. For if the neutral mask strips away all actions or forms based on the past, what forms are available to it? When the actor 'brackets' the past and their personal conditioning, what kinds of actions arise in the present, as living forms? The battle between Dionysus and Pentheus is not just a battle between the fluid aliveness of the soul and order, it is a battle between two different kinds of order and two different kinds of knowledge, for basic knowledge is not chaotic and random, but depends upon and is in fact *constituted by* fundamental principles of discrimination that are not culturally conditioned. It is the archetypes that comprise the second crucial element of the non-reductionistic and non-relativistic conception of knowledge and reality that I am trying to convey, and the second contribution of depth psychology to the Western mind's epistemic dilemma. By discriminating ordinary knowledge from basic knowledge, the mask offers an entry point to archetypal worlds. It can then be used, in conjunction with specific preparatory exercises, as a means of embodied research into these worlds. It is this capacity that gives the neutral mask its sense of necessity and objectivity. It is this that gives the mask credibility as the foundation of an approach to research.

The soul is inherently ambiguous and is difficult to study directly. It is holographic—each part contains the whole. Strictly speaking it has no parts, being one continuous medium that is continually transforming, continually revealing its nature. It is difficult to make clear and definite distinctions regarding it. But the archetypes are themselves the ground of the soul, the basic building blocks of its experience and of the world itself, the fundamental discriminatory principles, and so can bring clarity and coherence to the study of inner experience (Almaas 2004, p. 19). And if, as many mystical traditions and transpersonal researchers attest, the soul is ultimately commensurate with the whole of reality, the archetypes are also the ground of discernable patterns in the 'outer world'. In fact, from this perspective, inner and outer, subject and object become radically deconstructed concepts. The archetype is never really an object of knowledge, but simultaneously the means by which the subject sees and what she sees: "The evidence we gather in support of a hypothesis and the rhetoric we use to argue it are already part

of the archetypal constellation we are in. ... The ‘objective’ idea we find in the pattern of data is also the ‘subjective’ idea by which we see the data” (Hillman, quoted in Tarnas 1993, p. 431).

Currently, the term archetype is mostly commonly associated with Jung. The idea of primal ordering forms does not, of course, begin with him; it has been a perennial participant in the drama of the Western mind, appearing frequently when there is an investigation of the nature of the soul. This reflects in part the pervasive influence of the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, but archetypes are also central to Islam and Sufism (Corbin 1969, Chittick 1998) and important in Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism (Wilber 1996, p. 217). Nevertheless, in the unfolding narrative of the modern and postmodern Western epistemologies, Jung is the crucial figure, at least according to Tarnas (1993). He writes that it was Freud’s pioneering work that opened the way to the exploration of the unconscious but it was Jung who made the crucial epistemic breakthrough: the discovery of the archetypes as “the fundamental determining structures of human experience” (p. 424), the counterpart to Kant’s mental categories, but now on the level of soul and meaning rather than mere mental abstraction. Toward the end of his life, Jung began to understand the archetypes as “autonomous patterns of meaning that appear to structure and inhere in both psyche and matter, thereby dissolving the modern subject-object dichotomy” (p. 425). The notion of archetypes was rendered in postmodern terms by James Hillman who shunned “metaphysical or theological statements in favour of a full embrace of psyche in all its endless and rich ambiguity” (Tarnas 1993, p. 425).

### ***Jungian Archetypes***

Jung described many of the archetypes in terms of anthropomorphic images (for example, the Trickster, the Child).<sup>16</sup> Less well known are Jung’s non-anthropomorphic archetypes (for example, Rebirth) or the fact that he distinguished very clearly between the archetype and its manifested imagery:

Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content. ... It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has

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<sup>16</sup> What I am calling “Jungian archetypes” obviously predate Jung, but are those he or his followers have explored in detail. Wilber has criticized the Jungian perspective, suggesting that Jung’s archetypes are mostly collective images and so not “true archetypes,” which are the transcendent forms which are the first level of differentiation out of Emptiness. Despite Jung’s unequivocal clarifications, Wilber still claims that the Jungian archetypes are mostly *collective images* (composites of prior human experiences gathered in the collective unconscious): “...the Jungian archetypes are not the transcendental archetypes or Forms found in Plato, or Hegel, or Shankara, or Asanga and Vasubandhu. These latter Forms—the true archetypes, the ideal Forms—are the creative patterns said to underlie all manifestation and give pattern to chaos and form to Kosmos” (Wilber, 1995). Yet this definition fits very cleanly with Jung’s explanation above. A limited experience of the archetypes could lead many to think that Jung’s archetypes are “collective images” but we might then ask, as we do in the mask: what is the principle around which the images collect? As my description of the experience in mask makes clear, the archetype is more principle or pattern than image. Images can obscure the connection with the archetype, as well as point to it.

become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience (Jung 1968, p. 79).

The form of an archetype is like “the axial system of a crystal”: it is

in itself empty and purely formal, nothing but a *facultas praeformandi*, a possibility of representation which is given *a priori*.... It can be named and has an invariable nucleus of meaning—but always only in principle, never as regards its concrete manifestation (p. 80).

Identification with Jungian archetypes is not a process mentioned in the published material on the neutral mask. It is an important part of David Latham’s work, an innovation which he attributes to his teacher Powys Thomas. When I trained with him, David began the archetypal identifications with the Warrior, the Orphan and the Innocent. As with all his work, David approached the universal through the personal, inviting the actors to remember events from their own lives that might be seen as instances of the archetype. The following is my reconstruction of his exercise:

Exercise: Archetypal Identification (The Warrior)

Lying on the floor, remember a time in your life when you had to achieve a task that you thought was beyond you, a task that took all your strength, but you went ahead and did it. You completed it. You may have more than one memory, just allow that. Feel the quality at the centre of the memory. What’s its essence? What’s the gesture? Other images may come up, from this culture or others. Let them come and keep feeling for the quality at the centre of the image. What’s its rhythm? Let it affect your breath. Let it play through your fingers and toes—explore it like that. What is it in the breath, the spine? When you have connected with it, stand with it in you. Then let it go.

When you enter the mask, you turn around and you are the Warrior.

The same process can be applied to any archetype: the actor moves through the personal memory to its central quality, which is then explored through her body, breath and action. In my work with him, David would lead this exercise for each of the three archetypes before naming them, and then say “Choose the Innocent, the Orphan, or the Warrior.” Then after working with a few fundamental triads of archetypes (for example, Creator, Nurturer, Destroyer) he invited the students to choose their own archetype and do their own preparation. In later classes, he would use the images of the Marseilles Tarot and identifications with the Seven Deadly Sins, which are both amazingly powerful resources.

This work usually followed the identifications with the elements, and offered a different quality of archetypal experience. The Jungian archetypes are at once more abstract and more human. The Creator, for example, can be experienced not only as a being but as a principle. The

archetype as principle can feel like a seed inside, usually in the chest or spine, or even behind the body. It feels like a crystalline potential for form, which is why I like Jung's definition: it describes my experience in mask very precisely. The archetype is a determining latent structure, felt as a presence within. If the actor can remain neutral, this presence can give rise to very clear impulses that bring the body into a very precise form. It is not a matter of having an image, and shaping the body to fit, but of allowing one's self to be sculpted and moved from within at every moment.

In my experience, I become aware of something that has crystallized within me. There is a connection without images, and this connection is maintained through the active openness of the neutral state. As I hold this openness, the seed unfolds into impulse, into movements of energy within and beyond the body. I find myself moving, usually before I feel 'ready', before I know what will happen. The specific form and action arise without any choices being made. There is a definite knowing about what the form must be: the arm must ascend to a particular point, for example, at a particular angle, in a particular rhythm, or the sense of connection is lost. The forms that arise in this work have a classical quality to them, as if composed according to complex mathematical principles, but they are nevertheless living forms.

The archetypes bring into sharp focus a quality of living objectivity in the neutral mask, a quality that is part of the neutral mask all the time, but which for some reason seems very clear in these exercises. There is a sense of necessity, of not being able to do anything except what must be done. The actor feels taken over by a force greater than herself, but a force that has a very specific form, that forces her actions to be clear, strong, certain and complete. Identifying with an archetype usually involves a sense of direct knowing at a deep level. Personal preferences cannot enter, and the work attains a wonderful nobility. There is a sense of existence, Being, infusing Form, inseparable from the Form. There is a sense of being in touch with the origin of forms. Sometimes the forms will feel ancient, and the archaic atmosphere I described in the introduction is particularly strong in this work.

I am describing here very powerful experiences of the archetypes. It is possible for an archetype to impact upon the personality, or to filter through to consciousness without apprehending it in its crystalline immediacy. This is common. We are impacted by the element, we feel *like* the element, touched by it. But there is another level, far more radical, which is when our everyday identity seems completely left behind and we recognize the archetype in our very centre, with a clarity and an immediacy unknown in ordinary experience. The freshness is pleasurable, the contrast with the personality stark and sometimes frightening. No lurking commentary, analysis or self-judgement can cast a shadow on this experience. Such opaque and obscure inner content is seemingly wiped from our inner stage, and the sense of *recognition*, of ourselves and of the quality we have become, is cellular, undeniable, personal, on the Being level. I have found that it is far easier to contact this singular dimension of experience in the mask than in meditation. In

meditation the impulses to move are disengaged, and there is an audience of one. All kinds of self-deceptions and distortions are possible in this situation. By comparison, the theatre of mask class offers, as a context for exploration, the far more stark and concrete medium of the human body under the collective gaze of one's peers.

### ***Essential Aspects***

Almaas writes that the essential aspects are a special category of Platonic Ideas. The Platonic Ideas are “the noetic prototypes of all manifest forms. The essential aspects are the noetic prototypes or archetypes of essential or spiritual qualities”; they are our “pure spiritual qualities” manifest as forms of presence (Almaas 2004, p. 135). (Jung’s archetypes cannot be said to be “pure spiritual qualities” but they are *apriori* ordering principles and so may be said to represent another category of Platonic Forms.<sup>17</sup>) Almaas’s presentation of the nature of the aspects is multi-layered, with many degrees of subtlety, and I need to simplify here without regard to the fine distinctions and layered complexity of his presentation, by highlighting those variations most in accord with the actual experience of archetypal identification in the neutral mask.

Almaas (2004, p. 134) writes that when the non-differentiated ground of the soul, which is presence, differentiates into a particular quality or aspect, “it will have recognizable characteristics in all dimensions...of the Soul.” That is, it will be “presence characterized not only by the three spatial dimensions, but also by colour, texture, taste, smell, sound, viscosity, luminosity, density, and affect”; the quality “appears in all the dimensions of the soul’s manifold”. For example, essential joy appears yellow to the inner sight. It tastes extremely sweet, is very bright and light, so light it is barely there. It feels bubbly like champagne. Essential compassion is green and feels like loving kindness, it tastes like mint, has the texture of a delicate flower petal, and can be both warm and cool at the same time. Thus “the differentiation [of the essential quality] emerges spontaneously synthesized into a coherent gestalt” (Almaas 2004, p. 310), as a form of basic knowledge. The gestalt has a unifying affect or quality.

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<sup>17</sup> Jung’s archetypes are possibly more complex. Almaas’s aspects of essence have a degree of complexity (in themselves, I am not talking about the psychological issues that can arise from the separation from them) equivalent to the kind of discrimination we need to discern differences in physical perception (to tell one colour from another for example) whereas Jung’s archetypes relate to cultural level of complexity—processes, relationships, an entity’s active role in the wider scheme. In experience, the Trickster feels as objective and immutable as, say, essential strength, but the Trickster is *dynamic*. Strength gives the soul a vitality, but the Trickster is unknowable except as a *dynamic* form; strength can be known as colour, substance, and quality. Almaas conceives of his aspects as unchanging, still, and then speaks of how they effect the soul, which is the dynamic element of his ontology. Jung’s archetypes are not conceptualized in terms of a ground that is separate from the dynamism of the soul, but are inherently dynamic: the Trickster is already playing tricks, the Mother is creating, nurturing and so on. Perhaps this reflects Jung’s greater comfort with the dynamism of the soul, with the Feminine. The search for immutable, eternal forms not touched by the vicissitudes of the forever transforming Feminine, the ambiguous and unpredictable soul, is the hallmark of the masculine Western mind. Almaas, although his understanding of the soul is profound and a remarkable contribution, is clearly more at home writing about the unchanging aspects of essence than the ambiguous soul, which he freely admits is better expressed in music, poetry and so on than in his own language of precisely discriminated concepts.



This affect implies a recognition, a direct apprehension of a particular meaning. ... We know love [for example] by being love. Our soul knows it directly because it is a quality of her basic consciousness, not a thought in the mind. There is no dichotomy of subject and object here. I am not a self who is experiencing love. In the full experience of love I am love. The knower is the known, the presence of love (Almaas 2004, p. 137).

Almaas contends that we are able to know these experiences of basic knowledge because reality has its own fundamental principles of differentiation. These principles are the aspects of essence, which make up the fabric of the soul. These principles or archetypes can be experienced as a quality of presence. Each quality can be experienced through all of the different dimensions of the soul, which are all the dimensions of experience. The same principle of differentiation can impact upon the soul as taste, texture, colour, sound, movement, image and so on. It is also possible for the soul to experience the quality in all these dimensions simultaneously, and this is the manifest archetypal form, the unified gestalt or universal concept.

Yet this gestalt can be seen, at a deep level of awareness, to be nothing but a “basic concept clothing presence”: the aspects themselves are only *discriminated differentiations* and “because they are differentiations they do not exist independently” and each aspect is “inherently completely nothing” (Almaas 2004, pp. 310-313). Here Almaas comes close to both the Jungian and the traditional Sufi view of archetypes (or Divine Names) in which, as Ibn al-Arabi said, “You only know the archetype through the exemplar” (quoted in Inayat Khan 1994, p. 43).

The Names...have existed from all eternity [in God]. We know them only by our knowledge of ourselves (that is the basic maxim). God describes Himself to us through ourselves. Which means that the divine Names are essentially relative to the beings who name them, since these being discover and experience them in their own mode of being. Accordingly, these Names are also designated as Presences...that is, as the states in which the Godhead reveals Himself to his faithful. ... Thus the divine Names have meaning and full reality only *through* and *for* beings who are their epiphanic forms.... (Corbin 1969, pp. 114-115).

In the archetypal identification exercise I have described above, the archetype is approached through a memory of its emergence in the individual’s life, then differentiated from all that is ‘not it’ and then explored through certain dimensions of the soul—kinaesthetic sense, gesture, rhythm and so on. In the full exploration in the mask, the archetype is revealed through action, gesture, posture, image and atmosphere as a unified gestalt. Furthermore, in what one student called the “active openness” of the neutral state, a specific *discrimination* is continually occurring: all that is not the archetype is pared away from consciousness, so that only the archetype emerges into form. The archetype that is being enacted, if the actor has connected with it and it has begun to work on her, provides the capacity to differentiate that which ‘is it’ from that

which is ‘not it.’ The central element of the gestalt is always the *quality or affect experienced directly in the soul as presence*.

In the Diamond Approach, the dimension that serves as a discriminating reference point for the archetype as a whole, is colour. In practice, the aspects of essence are referred to as “the red,” “the black,” “the apricot essence” so on, with each colour standing for the archetype as a whole and for the entire gestalt of its manifestations through the different dimensions of the soul. Identification with colour is an important part of the neutral mask work, and the parallel between the colours as they appear in the neutral mask and Almaas’s understanding of the colours as essential aspects is very exact. That is to say, the manifestations of colour on the different dimensions of the soul—the gestalt of connected qualities—are almost the same in the mask as they are in Almaas’s phenomenology of the aspects (although the mask makes very explicit the movement and physical action of the colour, dimensions which are not given much attention by Almaas). Red is robust and full, vital, strong, radiantly beautiful, hot, expansive, an adventure; yellow is light, bubbly, joyous, delightful, too spontaneous for the mind to keep up; green brings a sense of tenderness, delicacy and freshness; blue is expansive, unbounded, subtle and light.

### ***Archetypes and Antiessentialism***

In the contemporary academic climate, archetypal thinking is likely to draw claims of essentialism, and therefore to be regarded as ideologically dubious. Spinoza and Dreyfus (2000, p. 735) write: “The term essentialism is used today against any thinker’s work whenever the thinker takes his or her categories to be more stable than the imposition of temporary political tactics.” Essentialism is “speaking of types as if they have a ‘nature’ that is intrinsic, defining, causative, and unchanging (Cohn 2004). Cohn (2004) notes that all essentialist discourses are held to be invalidated by: their *reductivism*, which imposes unity and effaces difference; their *objectivism*, which ignores how linguistic acts create the categories that determine our reality; their *universalism*, which ignores the contextual influences on these acts and therefore on our categories; their *teleology* which “obscures the real possibilities we have for *agency* and self-transformation” and their *metaphysics*, which by claiming a greater reality for a timeless, unchanging dimension of existence does violence to the flux of the lived, temporal dimension of Being.

The archetypal perspective I am presenting cannot be characterized in this way. To answer briefly each of the problems Cohn distinguishes:

- *Metaphysics*. My perspective recognizes that all archetypal forms can only be known through their effect on the soul, the nature of which is constant change, multidimensionality and complexity. The essential aspects do not imply a

metaphysics of presence; they are disclosed by a phenomenological inquiry into the interplay of presence and absence. From the perspective of the Diamond Approach, absence, indeterminacy and the unknowable constitute deeper dimensions of experience than presence, form and Being, but even such polarities as these are eventually discovered not to pertain to the deepest experiences of reality.

- *Teleology*. Rather than defining a particular goal for transformation or limiting agency, writings on archetypal and essential experience open new possibilities of agency and transformation and immediate knowledge of the archetypes actually requires and provokes transformation.
- *Reductivism/unity over diversity*. As Ferrer points out, quoting Habermas, this is one of the epistemic dilemmas contingent upon a subtle Cartesianism: “the metaphysical priority of unity above plurality and the contextualist priority of plurality above unity are secret accomplices” (2001, p. 191) Also, archetypes and essences in the perspective I present here are not defining categories. The soul, or consciousness, may be seen as a defining category for all human beings, but any and all archetypes may arise in all souls at different times. If I say, “Leonid is a Trickster” I am not defining him, but pointing to a certain cluster of qualities that he might manifest at certain times in particular contexts. The negative political ramifications of essentialist discourse are contingent upon categorizing objects according to a single defining essence or limited number of necessary qualities. Categorization and definition are not how archetypes are used here. As Tarnas (1993) points out, in the late Jung and archetypal psychology, archetypes are “more mysterious than a priori categories—more ambiguous in their ontological status, less easily restricted to a specific dimension...” (p. 425). They are “enduring patterns or principles that are inherently ambiguous and multivalent, dynamic, malleable, and subject to diverse cultural and individual inflections, yet [they] possess a distinct underlying formal coherence and universality” (Tarnas 1993, pp. 405-406).
- *Universalism, decontextualisation*: I am not saying that every worldview can be rendered in terms of a single set of categories or archetypes or that we can find exact equivalences between traditions. If we define archetype broadly as “the fundamental *apriori* forms that pattern experience” then we have to admit that there are different archetypal systems or archetypal languages, suited to the particular context in which they arise. The archetypal language of Tibetan Buddhism includes anthropomorphic deities, such as the five Buddha families.

In Islam, which shuns imagery of God, and which springs from the moment the Archangel Gabriel commanded Mohammed to “Read!” the archetypal forms are the Ninety-Nine Names of God.<sup>18</sup> These different archetypal worlds are each unique expressions of the indeterminate creativity of Being. In this respect, my perspective is closer to Spinoza and Dreyfus’s (2000) “two-world antiessentialism” which can recognize certain distinctions as stable for “a certain form of life” while also recognizing that other forms of life will give rise to other distinctions. There is no metaphysical, meta-world claim as to the universally applicability of any discourse that might arise from any archetypal experience. However within a particular path, or *logos* (archetypal language), it is possible to apprehend the objectivity of the archetypal Forms that constitute that path and to distinguish these forms of knowing from ordinary knowledge. Alain Badiou captures the crux of this seeming paradox well: “Every name from which a truth proceeds is a name from before the Tower of Babel. But it has to circulate in the tower” (quoted in Almaas 2004, p. ix).<sup>19</sup> Which is to say that “reality itself tends to unfold in response to the particular symbolic framework and set of assumptions that are employed by each individual and each society” (Tarnas 1993, p. 406), but also that reality unfolds according to an order that is intrinsic but that renders itself knowable only within somewhat plastic forms, which are not given a priori.

Many postmodern thinkers in diverse fields now admit that essentialism in some of its forms is useful and possibly unavoidable (see for example, Sayer 1997, Ram 2000, Gelman 2005). If, as Sayer (1997, p. 455) argues, “some kinds of essentialism are certainly mistaken and even dangerous [while] others are not, and are indeed an important resource” the crucial question becomes: when is essentialism a cage and when is it a path of liberation and fulfilment? I think the crucial issues in this regard are reification, the capacity to distinguish basic and representational knowledge, and the ethical commitment to continually hold the latter (which includes all theory) lightly and tentatively. Basic knowledge is always in the present moment; metaphysical systems are comprised of representational knowledge.

Julian Meryck (2003) distinguishes between theory of practice and the practice of theory, and argues that the latter is often disabling for professional practitioners. He critiques the trend in theatre and performance studies for the practice of theory to take precedence, in terms of both attention and assumed credibility, over the theory of practice. He argues that theorists often fail

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this topic, see Almaas (2004, pp. 567-582), where he attributes the existence of different kinds of archetypes to the fact that they arise within different *logoi* (archetypal languages or wisdom traditions).

<sup>19</sup> “The fact that a symbol possesses an indefinite number of aspects does not mean that it is imprecise at all. Indeed it is its reading on an indefinite number of levels which confers on it its extreme precision” (Nicolescu 1997).

to listen adequately to what practitioners have to say, or prematurely reframe their statements to fit a theory that may not be appropriate to the questions being asked. The question which my project addresses is grounded in particular, palpable experiences and established theatrical traditions with effective working languages. It is not a metaphysics feeding on nostalgia for an elusive, longed-for presence (the primary target of Deconstruction) as much as it is a phenomenology of the immediate experience of presence and an investigation of its qualities. It is not concerned with a truthful representation of the world so much as it is concerned with a vital and creative engagement with the world in order to bring forth new possibilities. And while it deals with essential and universal dimensions of experience, it does not assert that this perspective will have universal appeal or explanatory power.

In summary, my inquiry is not metaphysical but practical. It seeks a more effective outcome within particular performance traditions, and the development of those traditions. It is concerned with knowledge that can be lived and enacted. The kind of knowledge I present is inseparable from cumulative practice. My perspective cannot be equated with essentialism, humanism and “metaphysics of presence” in the sense that they are normally understood; it is an essential and archetypal perspective that is coherent within a postmodern framework. If anti-essentialism “opposes essentialist discourse in the name of alternative concepts of difference, performativity, contextuality, agency, and embodiment” (Cohn 2004) then the epistemology I am presenting here is not such an essentialist discourse, because it embraces these concepts fully, while allowing for embodied and contextualized experiences of essence.

### ***Archetypes, Aperspectivism and the Diamond Principle***

Each archetype is also a perspective, and a ‘good’ archetype—a useful or meaningful one—is always pointing beyond itself, and so in the process revealing its limited applicability, its context, i.e. revealing itself as one possible perspective, a concept clothing presence (or even a presence clothing absence). Aperspectival or integral consciousness is not, therefore, negated by thinking archetypally; we are still capable of appreciating and integrating many different perspectives while remaining aware of the limitation of each, even when a perspective is archetypally grounded. In practice this means engaging perspectives and archetypes playfully, just as David Latham did in neutral mask. The objective feeling of the archetype can be seen as a call to deepen our subjectivity and our playfulness. The one inescapable perspective is that of the totality of soul, because it is the location and medium of each person’s awareness at each moment, and the soul is fluidly dynamic, ambiguous and multidimensional. Thus the knowing I am describing is not only aperspectival, archetypal and directly experienced, it is always already situated.

Now, if each archetype constellates an entire perspective in the consciousness, we might ask if there is *an archetype of aperspectivism?* Is there an archetype, a principle, which can allow us to

discriminate and live aperspectivity itself? Almaas contends that most spiritual paths employ one or two aspects—they operate from a single perspective or a combination of a few archetypal perspectives—yet there are paths which employ all the aspects, many points of view, in an integrated way, without privileging a particular aspect (Almaas 1998a). The most well known of these is the path of Vajrayana Buddhism, associated mostly with Tibet. Vajrayana means Diamond-, Jewel-, or Lightning Vehicle. Almaas (1998a) sees his method, the Diamond Approach, as being of the same type, “diamond” indicating here multi-facetedness, integration, conceptual clarity, sharpness and a simultaneous multi-perspectivity and aperspectivity.<sup>20</sup> We might say then, that the archetype of aperspectivism (and an appropriate vehicle for the revelation of reality in a postmodern universe) is symbolized by the diamond.

It is interesting that a similar symbol, or central metaphor, has emerged in qualitative research, that of *crystallization*, which is in harmony with this perspective to a significant degree:

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of ‘validity’ (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves<sup>21</sup>), and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and we doubt what we know. Ingeniously we know there is always more to know (Richardson 2000, p. 934).

In the Diamond Approach, the diamond is not merely a symbol, but a substantial Form that appears in the manifold of the soul, a coherent gestalt of basic knowledge. The manifest inner forms can be considered metaphorical, and from the perspective that the archetype is unknowable in itself, the essential forms *are* metaphorical. But to think of them as metaphors does not negate their coherence or revelatory effectiveness.

Inspired by the Diamond Approach, I began, in this research, to include ‘flowers and jewels’ as identifications in the neutral mask work, and this has proved to be a rich resource for some actors. Working with flowers is something that women actors particularly seem to relish. Identifying with a flower seems to have an uncanny ability to evoke a particularly feminine power, which is not at all sentimental, but profound and fecund. Flowers are the potent end-point of the plant’s growth, and the point of pollination through which it reproduces itself. As one female actor put it, “flowers are sex.” Some women find this identification the least abstract. This is one area in which gender differences seem quite distinct: men tend to offer pretty, greeting card flowers, at least initially. Women do not seem to have any trouble with jewels however, as the following account by a woman actor suggests. It describes her identification

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<sup>20</sup> The emergence of diamond in inner exploration seems to be frequently connected to the integration of many perspectives or qualities. See for example Grof’s (1987) experience of Diamond Consciousness (p. 145-147) and also LeBlanc (2000).

<sup>21</sup> Clearly in the perspective I am presenting “texts” do not “validate themselves” if texts are taken to be representational knowledge, but each perspective arising from an archetypal Form does in a sense validate itself because, as Hillman points out, the archetype constellates perceptions and perceiver, revealing its presence in the ‘data’ and the ‘subject’.

with a ruby. I quote it at length because it conveys the diamond principle and the red essence beautifully, as a lived experience rather than as concepts. It shows that the mask can evoke a depth of experience and insight that can take many years to achieve in other contexts.

*I felt every molecule, every structure, every reflection of light—its red, hot heart, its glinting peripheries, its beauty, its strength, its complex structure, its TRUTH. I felt joy up there performing and I was certain that what I was offering was a gift. I felt every little molecule, every little facet, every colour, and how those colours felt—how some were hotter than others. It was an experience where every sense was involved. I felt hot in places and not in others, I felt sharp in places and smooth in others. I also felt the core of the ruby and its insides as well as its exterior. What was great about that experience was that I wasn't a performer performing something. I was just something. Actors say how they can be completely on, or in the zone. I didn't quite know what that felt like. I guess it's a feeling of being completely in the moment. That's how I felt at that time. I felt completely absorbed in the experience and free in the experience. I didn't care what the audience thought but at the same time I felt that what I was doing was worth looking at and worth the audience's attention. It felt really good and really full. It was very rounded. I didn't feel like I'd left anything unexplored. I felt like inside I had captured everything I could possibly capture about the ruby.*

*It felt like a living breathing entity. It was very human because it had a complex structure and it was unpredictable because of that complex structure. There were so many little hidden nooks and crannies, and I think that's a lot like what a character might be. It's multi-layered and it's electric. It's vibrant and vital, like there's this bright, rich, red colour and its vibrant and then it might tarnish and cloud over but it only needs to be polished and that richness and that fullness comes out again. There's a lot of hidden beauty. It can blind you if the sun goes into it. It's sharp sometimes and it can be smooth. It's an object yes, but once you put it inside my human form, all of its rich, sharp, rough, vibrant, vital complex qualities came through me. I felt very powerful but not in a power-hungry way but in a trusting way. I felt I completely trusted whatever was happening. Often I don't trust whatever is happening. And it was such a wonderful feeling to be able to embody an inanimate object and actually find its animation by putting it into my human form. That was really kind of cool.*

## **PARTICIPATORY KNOWING**

To put a natural form inside a human form, and to discover the animate qualities of an (apparently) inanimate thing, is the essence of research by mime, and knowledge by identity. The example above encapsulates many qualities of the way of knowing I am suggesting. It is embodied, multifaceted, alive, rich in imagery, paradoxically precise and ambiguous at the same time. It proceeds from a precise yet ultimately unknowable central archetype, which is multivalent and many-sided in its manifestations.

Ferrer (2001) describes participatory knowing as presential, enactive and transformative. It is presential in that it is “knowing by presence or identity” and in that it transcends intentionality: “*subject and object, knowing and being, epistemology and ontology are brought together in the very act of participatory knowing*” (Ferrer 2001, p. 122, italics in original). It is enactive in that “following...Maturana and Varela (1987) and Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991)...[it] embraces an enactive paradigm of cognition” as opposed to a representational paradigm. Participatory knowing is “the bringing forth of a world or domain of distinctions cocreated by the different elements involved in the participatory event” (Ferrer 2001, p. 123). Finally, it is transformative because participation in transpersonal events or spiritual phenomena tends to bring transformation and because personal transformation is necessary to fully understand such events (Ferrer 2001, p. 123). The epistemic perspective I have presented clearly has these characteristics. It is knowing by doing, being and playing, and is therefore also in harmony with perspectives on knowledge articulated by Stanislavski, Grotowski and Lecoq. It is additionally grounded in a precise differentiation between the forms that are arising from the living “transient now” (basic knowledge) and those based in past impressions (ordinary knowledge).<sup>22</sup>

Participatory knowing is transformative in part because, as Tarnas (1993) indicates, in this approach, knowing the world more fully involves uncovering the unconscious influences upon one’s own worldview and deepens to reveal the archetypes patterning these influences. There is

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<sup>22</sup> I can now return to the question of Wilber’s presentation of vision-logic and its difference from my own understanding of it. According to Wilber vision-logic is:

- Aperspectival, integrating many perspectives while privileging none.
- Grounded in the present (atemporal)
- A whole-body event
- Open to an influx of transpersonal energies and archetypal or essential forms
- The capacity to interpret the meaning of single events by virtue of discerning their place in the whole.

My perspective incorporates additional elements:

- It involves a distinction between basic knowledge (immediate experience) and representational knowledge (conceptual abstractions from past experience) and emphasizes the former.
- It emphasizes the individual soul or psyche as the ground of all knowledge and experience, and stresses that knowledge can be most solidly grounded in the personal situation, that is, in the context given by the individual.
- It includes an understanding of the archetypal forms as the ground of the soul and as the primary hermeneutic tools used in the inquiry.
- It proceeds via “archetypal saturation” and expanding personal, immediate experience rather than by an analytic-synthetic approach to other already articulated points of view (which can only mean an engagement with representational knowledge).

Wilber’s preference is apparently for the grand conceptual scheme representing hierarchies of structures and perspectives. His engagement with the aperspectival world-space is oriented towards building a single vision which integrates as many perspectives as possible. This is an interesting project in itself but it remains strangely modern, theoretical and representational. I do not think the vision of vision-logic is amenable to a static map, no matter how many perspectives it “integrates.” Like acting knowledge, it is much more at home in lore than in theory. The vision of vision logic is always in flux, a response to the needs of the moment, and while it can make use of representation, the texts that it creates will be outdated by tomorrow. As Stanislavski wrote “What does it signify, to write down what is past and done. The system lives in me but has no shape or form. The system is created in the very act of writing it down. That is why I have to keep changing what I have already written” (Benedetti 1998, p. xxii). Wilber by comparison seems still committed to representational knowledge: he is first and foremost a mapmaker, a model builder. He often seems to me to be trying to fix horizons in place for us all.



a gradually increasing freedom from identification with the rigid and opaque conditioning structures in the soul— whether phenomenological (for example, Kant), social and political (for example, critical theory), personal-psychological (Freud), cultural and so on. Disidentification from these structures opens access to basic, immediate knowledge and the *archai* which make up the ground of the soul and the world.

The process of coming to know reality more fully is therefore also one of coming to know the archetypes which are the patterning principles of that reality, and of the human mind and soul:

...it is only when the human mind actively brings forth from within itself the full powers of a disciplined imagination and saturates its empirical observation with archetypal insight that the deeper reality of the world emerges (Tarnas 1993, p. 434).

This process is endless; it does not reveal knowledge in the form of certain statements of fact so much as it provokes a deepening immersion in the numinous Forms, and the mystery that underlies them. Yet this immersion in the Forms allows us to make very fine, clear and integrated distinctions and refines the hermeneutic power of vision-logic.

Almaas's essential aspects are a good hermeneutic reference point because the coherent phenomenological gestalts associated with each particular quality provide very distinct guidance as to what archetypal aspect is operating at any moment. When we attend to our experience, we might recognize the affect or quality directly, as presence, or we might experience its effect on our soul. The more we have opened ourselves to basic knowledge and its archetypal forms on all possible dimensions of our experience, the more complete the interpretive (or revelatory) power of our developing vision-logic.

Clearly in this understanding of knowledge, "a developed inner life is...indispensable for cognition" (Tarnas 1993, p. 434). In participatory knowing

the spirit of nature brings forth its *own* order through the human mind when that mind is employing its full complement of faculties—intellectual, volitional, emotional, sensory, imaginative, aesthetic, epiphanic. In such knowledge the human being 'lives into' the creative activity of nature<sup>23</sup> (Tarnas 1993, p. 435).

If the key is experiential saturation in the archetypes, what a training then is the neutral mask! How profound the saturation and how broad the range of archetypal experiences it offers the actor! The following account, by one of my co-researchers, is typical of the transformation the mask can catalyse, and indicates what it might mean to 'live into the creative activity of nature' and to know by participation.

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<sup>23</sup> This approach "incorporates the postmodern understanding of knowledge and yet goes beyond it. The interpretive and constructive character of human cognition is fully acknowledged, but the interpenetrating and all-permeating relationship of nature to the human being and the human mind allows the Kantian consequence of epistemological alienation to be entirely overcome" (Tarnas 1993, p. 435).

*What I discovered was that before I did mask, I was a body and a mind. But you go into the mask and start finding the elements in you and the colours in you and the trees in you, the archetypes in you, and you start to realize that it's not just these separate parts but it's a whole. ... Doing the mask work was like connecting with everything and realising that I had bones and blood and skin and that I'm a working being. But at the same time there is colour in me. You look inside and there's colour there, and there's also water and fire and earth...and it's all the same stuff. You get to wake up all those different things in you. It's so hard to explain...I became so much more aware of me as a piece of the universe. It sounds so lame but it's true. I started to connect more with everything around me, the simple things. Everything is so simple and yet in that simplicity is such complexity. And in the mask you get to go and just explore what is so complex about these simple little things.*

In other words, in the neutral mask, the actor comes to know her participation in reality, and reality's participation in her experience.

The question remains of how to best allow nature to 'bring forth its own order' in the context of researching essential experience in acting. What method will be most likely to evoke a world of distinctions that is enabling for my own and other actors' artistic practice. This question is explored in the next chapter.

## *Chapter 5*

# **TRANSPERSONAL HERMENEUTIC- PHENOMENOLOGY, INQUIRY AND NEUTRALITY: A METHOD**

I now need to flesh out my method and relate it to established methodologies, then describe the specific research processes and the narrative that unfolded from my application of this method. In this chapter, I articulate an approach to research that draws on some of the methods adopted by or developed within the transpersonal field. I describe how I have adapted these approaches to the particular demands of my project, to develop an approach that includes the visceral, emotional, cognitive and essential dimensions of experience, that is enactive, collaborative, practical and open-ended. I then describe the research process itself, and how the interpretations presented in the following chapters emerged from this process.

Transpersonal researchers use a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods (Anderson & Braud 1998). Those most congruent with my epistemology and topic are derived from hermeneutic phenomenology (Von Eckartsberg 1998b) and partly from heuristic research (Moustakas 1990). Hermeneutic Phenomenology is a development within the phenomenological tradition begun by Husserl, associated with Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, among others. Hermeneutics originally referred to the interpretation of scripture. Hermeneutic phenomenology, however, is concerned with the interpretation of the 'text' of existence or the "lifeworld" (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 11). It shares a number of assumptions with the epistemic perspective I have outlined above, namely: that there is a presence prior to signification (discourse); that signification can bring forth new meanings and experiences without ever 'exhausting' Being; and that meaning is always situated in a particular concrete context (which I identify with the personal soul, but which is thought of as 'concrete, historical existence' in hermeneutics) (Lye 1996). Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology, like transpersonal theory, does not accept as fundamental the Cartesian subject-object split enshrined in Husserl's notion of intentionality, and emphasizes instead that "the world comes into existence for us in and through our participation" (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 11). It is also "very much a form of inquiry into how texts can and should be applied" and, in this approach,

“determination of meaning is a matter of practical judgement and common sense, not just abstract theorising” (Crotty 1998, p. 91). Merleau-Ponty also brought to this tradition an appreciation of the importance of the role of body and embodiment in meaning-making, asserting that “the acting body always already understands its situation as well as its own possibilities quite before we pay explicit attention to it” (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 12). Von Eckartsberg sees in the development from Husserl to hermeneutic phenomenology a transformation in the notion of intentionality

from consciousness to culture-building acts, from value-free phenomenological reflective analysis under the self-imposed disciplines of several steps of bracketing (epoches) to passionate value-engagement and existential commitment. We move from the primacy of knowing to the primacy of life praxis, to *enactment* (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 14, italics in original).

Central to most hermeneutic research is the notion of the “hermeneutic circle,” which hinges upon the assertion that “in order to ‘understand’ one must ‘foreunderstand’, have a stance, an anticipation and a contextualization.” In other words, “in order to understand something one needs to begin with ideas and to use terms, that presuppose a rudimentary understanding of [that thing]” (Lye 1996). In the hermeneutic process one ‘leaps into the circle’, aware that we always already approach any ‘text’ as an historically constituted being, with prejudices, discourses and suppositions that guide our interpretation of the text. Far from being seen as obstructions, what we bring to the inquiry makes possible our first interpretation or understanding. Through making our assumptions explicit and challenging them through ongoing encounters with the ‘text’, we continually revise our interpretations, gradually bringing forth “thoughtful poetising” which “is in truth a topology of Being” (Heidegger, quoted in Crotty 1998).

Although “there does not seem to be...a clearly outlined procedure to follow in hermeneutic phenomenological investigations” (Von Eckartsberg 1998b, p. 50), as hermeneutic phenomenology has been adopted by psychology (Valle 1998) and the human sciences generally (Van Manen 1997), researchers have formulated some specific methods for approaching texts and facilitating significant and rich new interpretations of phenomena. In transpersonal studies, these methods have been adapted to the particular nature of the transpersonal phenomena being studied. Anderson (1998) has synthesized hermeneutics with Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic research to develop a transpersonally-oriented hermeneutic approach she calls *Intuitive Inquiry*.

In this approach, the researcher begins with their own perspective on the problem, and then “enters the circle of interpretation by engaging in the text daily and recording both objective and subjective impressions” (Anderson 2000, p. 36). The researcher employs heuristic techniques of *immersion* (engaging the question as fully as possible in one’s life, at all levels, in all situations), *indwelling* (exploring inwardly in all the factors of the topic), and *incubating the data* (retreating

from focused inquiry to allow intuitive insights and crystallizations of understanding to emerge). She also uses hermeneutic techniques such as open, reflective listening, as well as a skill Anderson (2000, p. 38) calls *trickstering*, which is the embracing of not-knowing, paradox and bewilderment with playfulness and humour. Using these skills, the researcher spirals through cycles of interpretation, explicating her own assumptions, engaging and analysing the 'texts' of others. I adopt additionally Van Manen's (1997) suggestion that the researcher engage not only the research participants' accounts but also any other text that illuminates the topic, including biographies, experiential anecdotes, literary sources and journals.

Anderson views the interpretive cycle as one of refining the "lenses" with which one views the topic. (This is a metaphor suggestive of the Cartesian dualism of reality and framework and seems to me somewhat out of place in hermeneutics; I prefer Ferrer's formulation of the process as the cocreation of useful distinctions.) There may be a moment of illumination or breakthrough, in which the lenses or distinctions crystallize. This new interpretation is then explicated and expressed in a text that is a creative synthesis of the understanding that has emerged. The text can employ a range of genres in order to facilitate an experience of "sympathetic resonance" in its intended audience (Anderson 1998, p. 93). To achieve this hermeneutic phenomenological texts can include anecdote, poetry, descriptions of lived experience and autobiographical writing (Van Manen 1997). Both Van Manen (1997) and Moustakas (1990) suggest that writing (and rewriting) is itself an important hermeneutic method for deepening and refining one's understanding.

I draw upon these approaches in formulating my own, but adapt them further. This adaptation is necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, many of these methods are intended for the study of a particular phenomenon experienced by the research subjects and (sometimes) the researcher; that is, they deal with 'what?' questions. My project, in contrast, is profoundly enactive, always already in a state of development and change. The central point of my research is not to provide a representation or a thick description of the experiences central to my work, although this is one aspect of it. I am interested in 'how?' questions as much as I am interested in 'what?' questions. My purpose is a renewing act of 'creative mythology', an interpretation born of practice that gives rise to new practice, and to new and deeper variations on the essential events which motivate the inquiry. Clearly 'what?' questions come into this inquiry, but of greater concern are how the crucial phenomena arise or are blocked, what they mean, and how they can be carried forward, enacted, and applied.

My role, therefore, differs from that of a researcher doing traditional hermeneutic phenomenological research in psychology. Such a researcher does not usually deliberately and actively facilitate for others experiences of the phenomena they are researching. In this project, however, I often sought ways to co-create certain kinds of events and experiences with my co-researchers. In relation to their performances and my own, my role was in some ways

pedagogical and certainly directive, although always within a spirit of sensitivity, co-operation and collaboration. Also, paradoxically, actors can appear to those watching to be very present without recognizing this presence themselves, as was the case in my experience of ‘finding the mask’ with David Latham: he pointed out the power of the work, and I recognized presence in myself. At times it seemed appropriate, in terms of the development of the work, to do the same for my co-researchers. Even when I was observing John Bolton’s students, there was a dialogical exchange. In his classes, John would refer to comments I had made in discussion with him outside of class, and I was invited to offer feedback as were all the actors and one observing teacher. (John believed, and I agreed, that my presence would be less obstructive if I was included in group discussions). More than simply investigating an experience, then, in my research, I was discovering through communal engagement different understandings of how to (co)create certain kinds of events.

Another reason for adapting more established methods is that the communal nature of theatrical work has significant advantages over the interpretation of experiential descriptions. Despite the growing appreciation of intersubjectivity in qualitative research, transpersonal studies’ concern with private experience still lingers and phenomenological methods which examine first-person accounts of inwardly experienced transpersonal phenomena are congruent with this concern. But experiences of essence in performance are markedly not merely inner but usually communal. Ideally, the locus of the event is the shared space of the theatre or studio. As David Latham often told us: “You feel it, the audience doesn’t feel it: not theatre. You don’t feel it, the audience feels it: theatre. You feel it *and* the audience feels it: great theatre.” My concern, then, is with a certain kind of “great theatre.” Furthermore, the training sessions and rehearsals of this research, like much theatrical work, were characterized by ongoing dialogue, a persistent orientation toward the communal expression and reception of experience, the profound immersion and personal engagement of all involved and a spirit of open inquiry. When theatrical work is carried out in this vein, the studio itself constitutes an effective hermeneutic vessel.

Clearly, the hermeneutic process becomes richer and more complete through a reflective engagement with the texts of the tradition and the texts arising from the studio work—my journals, my co-researchers’ journals, transcripts of interviews and so on. My method differs from the more established hermeneutic ones primarily in my use of these materials. Van Manen (1997), Anderson (2000) and phenomenological psychology (Valle 1998) each emphasize working with *descriptions* of lived experience, whether written or transcribed from interviews. Although I did use this kind of material, this approach had limited usefulness for my research. It proved very difficult to actually draw accounts of essential experiences from the actors involved, partly because these experiences are characterized by ineffability, but also because actors are acutely aware of (and often express) the limited usefulness of ‘reducing it to words’. Asking my co-researchers to describe what the experience was like when the neutral mask really lived, for

example, would provoke looks of confusion, frustration and even disdain. Many seemed to be thinking “Why would he ask that? What use could it be for me to describe it?” I did often feel like a phoney asking the question. I have trained in the mask. I know what it is like. I know also the feeling of ‘stepping down’ that happens as the sacred, unitive completeness and life of the experience is collapsed into pale shadows like ‘sacred’, ‘complete’ and ‘alive’. How could I ask the actors to articulate their experience for me when their arresting performances were first and foremost a rich articulation of their experience? It was as if I was to ask Mozart, after hearing his *Requiem*, to describe the experience it expressed. If we need to ask such a question, we simply have not been listening.

The open, receptive listening of hermeneutics proved far more useful applied to the *presential* ‘text’ of the work in the studio than to the texts *representing* that experience. The process of the creative work itself continually provoked new insights. The work in the studio is communal, dialogical, and multi-dimensional, encompassing theory, practice, tradition and innovation, pedagogy and receptive observation. Whether the work was heading in a fruitful direction or not determined far more by the communally apparent events in the studio than by analysis of written reports. How an exercise or rehearsal suggestion affected the actors’ bodies, whether they commanded my and each other’s attention, the quality of attention, presence and atmosphere they created, and their immediate feedback, mattered more for my unfolding understanding than did their summary reports or journals at the end of each project. I thus gave greater weight to my own visceral experience of understanding in the studio than to my own journal entries.

In many cases, in the hermeneutic spiralling of enactment, dialogue, invention, refinement and re-visioning in the studio, crystallizations of insights and new exercises, expressions and ways of seeing would come ‘out of nowhere’. Furthermore, I would find myself *inventing interpretations particular to the moment* for pedagogical or creative reasons. Whether these interpretations were ‘valid’ didn’t matter as much as if they worked. If they worked, they might seep into our practice and language, undergoing refinement and connection to other elements of our emerging vision. But also, sometimes, I knew, without any doubt, that a certain insight was ‘valid’ *even if it did not work the first time I tried to enact it*. It would arise with a quality of directness and completeness, more like a simple perception than a cognitive achievement. When an insight arose in this way, I was prepared in some cases to work for prolonged periods to bring forth the possibilities it contained. (Stanislavski, remember, after he had been working on the system for eighteen years, wrote that it had not yet shown any of its real results.) Often the logic underlying an insight was ‘reconstructed’ later, as I discerned in retrospect how it (as a part) fitted within the text of my theatrical and spiritual lifeworld as a whole, and as I discovered ways to enact it more effectively and to bring out its potential. In many ways, this process continues with *all* of the distinctions and insights that comprise the vision I present here. Moustakas (1990) implies that such a

process is normal within heuristic research when he places the explication and creative synthesis (presentation) stages after the illumination stage.

Valle (1998) has stressed that intentionality, which implies that consciousness as subject always has an object, and which is fundamental to phenomenological research, is frequently transcended in transpersonal experience. He points out that “certain types of awareness...do not seem to be captured or illuminated by phenomenological reflections on descriptions of our conceptually recognized experiences” (p. 99). As Merleau-Ponty asserted, we are not “fully able to penetrate the sources and origins of our meaning-making” (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 13). Valle also recognizes that one of the difficulties of transpersonally oriented research is that many transpersonal experiences provoke insights without objects or concepts, direct transconceptual perceptions that are “self-validating” (1998, p. 103). This certainly captures my experience of the kind of insights I have described above, which are actually very common in the theatrical work of this research. I would argue further that excessive reflection and conceptualization during the process actually impedes these kinds of insights, which are in my experience the most useful ones.

If I was to work in a way that facilitated such insights then, like Brook, I needed a coherent frame of reference that could operate in the background, facilitating insight, awareness and unfoldment without derailing my or my fellow actors’ immersion in the work. I realized that it was possible to use, for this purpose, the orientation of neutrality. It seemed to be an exemplar for the kind of knowing and mode of research in which I was interested. The mask process is enacted, embodied, participatory, dialogical and communal, and oriented toward experiences of essence. The knowledge it yields is tacit, immediate, integrated with action and intuition. Further, I could marry this orientation to Almas’s process of Inquiry, which is intended provide a path of understanding while one is immersed in daily life. It involves orienting oneself toward experience according to a particular set of attitudes, which are deeply affined to the orientation of neutrality. This is the last and perhaps most important aspect of my method: during the creative work, in the background, I was practicing Inquiry in way that was informed by my experiences in the mask, but which incorporated action, embodiment and communal experience far more than Inquiry does.<sup>1</sup> In this section I describe the enabling attitudes of Inquiry, relating them to my fundamental reference point of the neutral mask, and demonstrating their correspondence with hermeneutic phenomenological methods.

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<sup>1</sup> Action and expression are clearly far more central to my process than it is to Almas’s Inquiry, which mentions only in passing certain dimensions of experience that are fundamental to the art of the actor (posture, gesture, action, vocalization and so on).



## NEUTRALITY AND INQUIRY AS HERMENEUTIC PROCESSES

Inquiry is an open-ended exploration of experience, which takes no point of view to be final, and remains open and curious about the structures conditioning one's own point of view. It is an approach to the discovery and integration of the soul and Being (particularly their divine or numinous qualities). Inquiry has much in common with hermeneutic phenomenology, yet it expands upon the possibilities of philosophical hermeneutics by including, within its horizon of meaning, the writings and practices of depth psychology, especially object relations theory (for example Kernberg 1976), transpersonal theory and various spiritual practices and visions. It enacts a non-intentional or non-dual perspective. Further, although it is supported by the archetypal dimensions described above, it also encodes in its practice a non-essentialist perspective, aperspectivity, which deliberately disrupts the relation between the interpreting subject and the 'signifiers' that emerge in experience, thus discouraging reification of defining meta-narratives for the self and identification of oneself as a fixed, separate subject (Usatyński 2001).

The integrated set of qualities or attitudes that make Inquiry effective allow phenomena and meaning to arise with as little obscuration by personal prejudice and conditioning as possible. They ground one's exploration of experience in intimate aesthetic appreciation, rather than in any externally imposed criteria. These qualities include, among others, openness or 'not-knowing', dynamic questioning, a love of truth, personalness and the capacity to distinguish past impressions from the living forms present in experience (Almaas 2002). I will describe the first four of these qualities only, as I have already discussed distinguishing ordinary and basic knowledge in the last chapter.

### *Openness and Not-knowing*

Inquiry occurs in a context of radical openness. This means that as one inquires one is open to all possibilities, does not defend any particular position, and postulates no final destination or goal. 'Not-knowing' is one element of this openness, which is connected to the essential aspect of space. Space plays an important part in the mask work, as Lecoq points out: "Essentially, 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. It allows him to watch, to hear, to feel, to touch elementary things with the freshness of beginnings" (Lecoq 2000, p. 38). Referring to the exercise of 'Waking Up' he writes: "Some students have a tendency to first move their hands, then their feet, to discover their own bodies, when all along an extraordinary dimension is being offered to them: space" (p. 39). In Inquiry too, it is the dimension of space, of fundamental openness, that allows us to view our experience with the freshness of beginnings (Almaas 1992).

Such an attitude is integral to hermeneutics, in which the empathic reading of texts requires “openness and receptivity.... The author is speaking to us and we are listening” (Crotty 1998, p. 109). In Almaas’s case the author is Being (or the Source of Being), which reveals itself through its effect on our soul. “This process...is also called reading, or reading oneself.... The soul reads the truth as the truth is revealed” (Almaas 2002, p. 375). We need to be open to events, to loosen our attachment to ordinary knowledge, so that the meaningful insights and connections can arise. As Brook says “Not knowing is not resignation; it is an opening to amazement” (1998, p. 26).

This openness is not a concept. In fact, at a certain level of the experience of space, the entire manifest world can appear to be nothing but concepts which are transparent, not to any concrete ‘signified’ (which could only be a concept in any case), but to a nameless, nonconceptual dimension of experience which is baffling to the mind. This dimension makes possible a very radical openness, in which all concepts become valid according to their usefulness rather than their relationship to any external, stable reality: “If we take any concept to be applicable all the time, it becomes a rigidity that freezes the dynamism [of the soul] and blocks the openness of inquiry” (Almaas 2002, p. 85). Inquiry therefore is always open to discovering how beliefs and assumptions (our ordinary knowledge) are patterning experience (basic knowledge). It looks at what patterns and structures are present in, and limiting to, the fundamental openness of the soul.

However, neither these patterns nor ordinary knowledge as a whole are rejected. In Inquiry, ordinary knowledge is relativized by the more encompassing context of basic knowledge, which is characterized by immediacy and presence, yet, “ordinary knowledge always originates from and operates within basic knowledge” (Almaas 2002, p. 85). By attending to ordinary knowledge (for example, a belief that the neutral mask unites the personal and the universal) in the context of basic knowledge (for example, an awareness that, in this moment now, while wearing the mask, there is not a sense of being at all personal) the contingency of our ordinary knowledge is revealed, opening a space for new knowledge, which in the next instant becomes ordinary knowledge as new basic knowledge—new experiences—arise. In terms of phenomenology, this relativization of ordinary knowledge relates to (but is not identical to) the phenomenological reduction or bracketing of Husserl, which involves “suspending judgement as to the existence or non-existence of...content” resulting in a “transvaluation” of the “thesis” (which corresponds to ordinary knowledge) (Jones 1975, p. 265). The point is not to reject ordinary knowledge. As Gadamer puts it: “Tradition and history [in this case personal history] are not barriers to understanding, rather they are indispensable to it. ... [H]uman beings not only come to know through the hermeneutic process but are formed and constituted by it” (quoted in Woolfolk et al. 1988, p. 17). Understanding through Inquiry requires this dynamic interaction of basic and ordinary knowledge, of past impressions and current experience. The same kind of

orientation is evident in Lev Dodin's approach to the system, in which "everything that belongs to yesterday is repudiated in the name of the new and yet goes into the new" (quoted in Shevtsova 2004, p. 38).

### ***Personalness***

The second attitude necessary for Inquiry is personalness. Meaningful knowledge cannot emerge if one is not genuinely interested and motivated in a personal way. In modernity, objective knowledge is often associated with the attempt to efface personal prejudice, which is often assumed to require the exclusion of the person from the picture altogether. Although this positivist perspective is now considered "as dead as a philosophical movement ever becomes" (John Passmore, quoted in Wilber 1998b, p. 146), it lingers in attitudes that ascribe greater validity to knowledge that is impersonal, material and amenable to mechanical measurement. Such a notion of objectivity would appear to be a significant obstacle when creative practice is the means and goal of the research. How can there be any aesthetic exploration without the full and honest inclusion of one's personal response? On the basis of the understanding of the soul I have presented, a personal connection is not a liability but a necessity.

Richardson (2000) points out that feminist researchers in the social sciences have demonstrated and acted upon the idea that "the personal is the grounding for theory." In this approach, the "boundary between 'narrative' and 'analysis' dissolve[s]." The central metaphor of feminist research methods is "Theory is story" (Richardson 2000, p. 927). Research in this mode puts the personal experience of the researcher, her responses, values, aspirations, struggles and so on, at the centre of the research. It remains aware that all knowing is partial, local and dependent upon the historical context, but acknowledges that "partial, local, historical knowledge is still knowing" (Richardson 2000, p. 928). From this perspective, impersonally expressed knowledge is clearly a convention; it denies the soul, which is the means by which any and all knowledge arises in the first place. The inclusion of the person in their fullness makes the investigation more honest, complete and meaningful. It is not possible to do this fully—abstractions and generalities are useful and important tools—and I am not suggesting that the personal dimensions should be narcissistically indulged, only that the assumed connection between the effacement of the person and objectivity is untrue and that to write and inquire personally does not indicate a lessening of rigour.

There is a deeper meaning to the inclusion of the personal element, which is that it relates to an essential aspect, the Personal Essence, which is associated with functioning, worldly involvement, development and integration (Almaas 1988). It makes possible a personalization of all the aspects, which makes possible the inclusion of these aspects in everyday life and functioning (this aspect is explored in detail in Chapter Eight). An impersonal inquiry is bound to lead to knowledge that is too abstract to be *applied* to my own artistic practice. Grounding my

research very strongly in my personal situation, interests and values may limit its relevance—it may be useful to others only in so far as they share my values, interests and circumstances. But the work is likely to have more value, strength and validity in its own milieu, and perhaps in other worlds too (Stanislavski's vision served his personally felt values but has proved useful in many contexts). In the neutral mask, many actors discover, as I did, that when we feel most unique and personal is precisely when our actions have the most universal appeal and resonance.

### ***Intelligent Dynamism and Questioning***

In order for Inquiry to proceed we must allow not-knowing and also the possibility of knowing. This results in a questioning, a dynamism moving toward greater knowing. For Almaas, the desire to know in the human soul is the equivalent of the creative dynamism of Being itself, which is always unfolding toward greater knowledge and understanding (Almaas 2002, pp. 104-105). The existence of a natural dynamic movement toward greater understanding is also recognized in traditional hermeneutics:

“In our everyday lives we grasp entities in terms of a tacit understanding of what it is to be, and we are constantly driven to make that understanding explicit and revise it on the basis of passing encounters and collisions. The hermeneutic approach to fundamental ontology, far from being a technique for uncovering meanings in an alien text is just a more rigorous and explicit version of the movement towards clarity and depth which makes up life itself” (Guignon 1983, p. 71).

When dynamic questioning is present, and ordinary knowledge is accepted in a context of basic knowledge, there is “an organic, free intelligence that can operate while taking the nature of ordinary knowledge into consideration” (Almaas 2002, p. 119). This intelligence is an intuitive and synthesizing responsiveness to the totality of a situation, inherent in the dynamism of the soul and reality as a whole.

The existence of such an intelligent, responsive dynamism that orients the soul toward greater wholeness, balance and integrity is fundamental to the transpersonal orientation. In Grof's model the psyche innately moves toward wholeness, and this movement is inseparable from its spontaneous healing intelligence (Grof 1987, pp. 238-249). For Wilber psychological growth has “the same goal as natural evolution: the production of ever-higher unities” (Wilber 1980, p. 100). Without this intelligent dynamism the attitude of radical openness I have described would not make sense. But if such an intelligent and integrative dynamism is available, openness is the best possible attitude, as Grof indicates with regard to therapeutic work:

The basic strategy leading to the best therapeutic results requires that the therapist and the client temporarily suspend any conceptual frameworks, as well as any anticipations and expectations about where the process should go. They must become open and adventurous and simply follow the flow of energy wherever it goes, with a deep sense of trust that the process will find its own way to the benefit of the client (Grof 1985, p. 377).

A similar concept now exists in systems theory, *autopoiesis*, which describes the capacity of living systems to renew themselves through changing their structures in response to their environment. Almaas argues that the soul is an autopoietic system and, in the right conditions (which, in part, I am currently describing) she naturally unfolds toward wholeness and the integration of her full potential (Almaas 2004, pp. 555-560).

The intelligent dynamism of the soul can be intensified by engaging the questions that arise as part of this dynamism, questions that have felt meaning in regard to the overall context, *which includes the inner life of the researcher*. “A question has to have heart to it, a living force...[which] doesn’t have to have words” (Almaas 2002, p. 107). Much of my understanding of theatre has emerged in the midst of practice, when a visceral question in me meets the atmosphere and attitude of openness. As Almaas suggests, this situation activates an organic intelligence, sparking insights and creative action. For example, many times when I have approached teaching and acting as an exploration, I have experienced my self either doing or saying something that integrated previous experiences or insights in a new way, effectively presenting me with new knowledge. (I am sure this experience is familiar to many.)

In this project, I applied this principle by engaging the meaningful questions that arose in me and ignoring those that lacked ‘heart and life’. The living questions I explored through as full a practical investigation as possible, during which I allowed myself to have, at times, no idea where the work was going. In this state of ‘not knowing’, it was important to maintain my engagement with the question and my attention to the arising details of the moment without pushing the work in the direction of the known.

Another facet of the intelligent dynamism is that the questions, insights and synthetic visions that arise cohere archetypally. Particular aspects or archetypes dominate consciousness at different times, giving rise to a series of questions, observations and experiences that turn out, when the archetype crystallizes in awareness, to all be related to that archetype. That particular archetypes are central to our experience at different times, and effect our inner and outer life as they move into consciousness is a belief found in Sufism (Bakhtiar 1994, Inayat Khan 1999), Grof (1985), Tarnas (1993, pp. 438-439) and the Diamond Approach (Almaas 2002, pp. 161-169). Frequently, within the seemingly chaotic flux of open experiential exploration, an archetype or aspect crystallizes a meaningful gestalt, making sense of previously bewildering events, thoughts and feelings. For this reason, this thesis is organized according to essential aspects that pervaded my experience of the research process at different times and crystallized my understanding of various experiences, practices and theoretical writings.

## *Love, Beauty and Knowledge*

The solution to the dilemma of relativism, according to Wilber, is to restore to importance the interior dimension of the individual, the domain of meaningful experience. Modernity and postmodernity each deprive the world of depth; modernity reduces all phenomena to objects and postmodernity places them all on the same level, as a play of surfaces (Wilber 1998b, pp. 135-136). The solution is the reinstatement of experiences such as beauty, love, value, significance and so on, as *real*. Wilber writes that the “validity claims” of this domain of knowledge are, at least in part, “aesthetic,” (1996, p. 122). James Hillman makes a similar point, that “a full depth psychology expressing the nature of psyche must also be a depth aesthetics” (1989, p. 300). He writes that

the question of evil, like the question of ugliness, refers primarily to the anesthetised heart, the heart that has no reaction to what it faces, thereby turning the variegated sensuousness of the world into monotony, sameness, oneness. The desert of modernity. (Hillman 1989, p. 304)

When they first hear of the neutral mask, many actors assume that neutral implies blank, neutered or dead, as if stripping away habitual, conditioned attitudes will reveal a world of inert and meaningless matter. In fact we find the opposite: the neutral mask is a doorway to “the variegated sensuousness of the world.” The belief that the world is at root inert, dead and meaningless is not objectivity but anesthetization. The objectivity that is relevant here must include the heart and its capacity to know what is beautiful. Such objectivity is merely the freedom from sentimentality characteristic of the courageous heart.

Meaningful knowledge for the individual is inseparable from that individual’s *appreciation* of that knowledge. In a very specific sense, the knowledge must be beautiful, it must be loved: “when we appreciate something for its own sake, we call it love” (Almaas 2002, p. 125). According to Almaas, this is the most important factor in Inquiry, which he expresses as “loving truth for its own sake” (p. 126). It is important to understand that by “truth” he means not a representation, not a statement or idea, but the Platonic Form of truth, which might express itself as an insight, or as the unknowable Mystery underlying all manifestation (“Absolute Truth”) (p. 129). This truth will of course be basic knowledge, an experience in the present, not an abstract idea. In this sense, love of the truth is love of the phenomena that are arising in the moment, as expressions of reality: “inquiry is the aesthetic appreciation of what our being reveals” (p. 324).

This attitude is the opposite of the postmodern “*épistème* of unmaking” with its “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Tarnas 1993, p. 401). Richardson writes that the core of postmodernism is “the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the ‘right’ or privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism suspects all truth claims of masking...” (2000, p. 928). Postmodernism also tends to dismiss the

notion of truth altogether. It is important then to recognize that in the archetypal perspective I am presenting, not only are truth claims a mask, but even very deep truths—in fact all manifest phenomena—are masks that at once conceal and reveal reality. Reality expresses itself through the masks of phenomena: “mediation is transformed from being an obstacle into the very means that enable us to participate in the self-disclosure of the world” (Ferrer 2001, p. 173).

Ferrer, expanding on Tarnas, argues that what is needed in this case is not “a hermeneutics of discovery (of pre-given meanings and objects) or a hermeneutics of suspicion (of distorting and contaminating factors), but of a hermeneutics of the heart (of love, trust and communion with reality)” (2001, p. 173). Why should we regard inquiries founded in doubt and suspicion more highly than those motivated by love, trust and delight in the myriad ways that reality reveals itself? Is this not a remnant of the modern mind’s dissociation, its denial of human *inner-ness*? Descartes’ *cogito*, remember, was prefaced by his fear that even his knowledge of mathematics may be perverted by a malignant demon (Descartes et al. 1996)—and in so far as it perpetuates this paranoia, postmodernism is an expression of the spirit of Descartes. The great rationalist might have felt more confident distinguishing between the creations of malignant demons and those of the angels if he had recognized that, as Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan puts it, “the clue is beauty” (1994, p. 34) or, as Hillman puts it:

beauty is an *epistemological* necessity.... As well, beauty is an *ontological* necessity, grounding the sensate particularity of the world. Without Aphrodite [love], the world of particulars becomes atomic particles. Life’s detailed variety is called chaos, multiplicity, amorphous matter, statistical data.... Phenomena need not be saved by grace or faith or all-embracing theory, or by scientific objectiveness or by transcendental subjectivity. They are saved by the *anima mundi*, by their own souls and by our gasping as this imaginal loveliness. The *abh* of wonder, of recognition, or the Japanese *shee-e* through the teeth. The aesthetic response saves the phenomenon... (1989, pp. 302-303).

In the mask, objectivity is derived from each person’s own aesthetic perception: a particular action is right when it is in harmony with the mask and when it works as theatre. There is then a quickening, a vivifying of actor, audience and space, and an aesthetic arrest; even as I am enlivened within, I am transfixed. There is objectivity too: it is not that with love, or the appreciation of beauty, the observer descends into mere personal preference; without love, there is *only* personal preference, incidents and events without meaning. Without an aesthetic sensibility, there is no possibility of apprehending what is neutral at all.

To make the same point in scientific terms: approaching the world without the ‘instrument’ of an open heart, without aesthetic sensitivity, will mean that certain data are not revealed. This limited approach will only reveal data that support the conclusion that the universe is a massive, impersonal machine without soul or intelligence. Approaching the world with our full human capacities rather than as a dissociated intellect reveals a very different vision.

Imagine you are the universe, a deep, beautiful, ensouled universe, and you are being courted by a suitor. Would you open your deepest secrets to the suitor—that is, to the methodology, the epistemology—who would approach you as though you were unconscious, utterly lacking in intelligence or purpose, and inferior in being to him; who related to you as though you were ultimately there for his exploitation, development, and self-enhancement; and his motivation for knowing you is driven essentially by a desire for prediction and control for his own self-betterment? Or would you open your deepest secrets to that suitor—that epistemology, that methodology—who viewed you as being at least as intelligent and powerful and full of mystery as he is, and who sought to know you by uniting with you to create something new? (Tarnas, quoted in Ferrer 2001).

Here Tarnas points out the creative rather than representational nature of knowledge in a participatory epistemology. Love as a way of knowledge leads not to a static representation of a pre-given universe, but brings forth new possibilities for experience in co-operation with that universe's inherent capacity for order—for beautiful, meaningful and integrated form. It evokes (this is Hillman again)

creative insights...exciting perceptions arising from our involvement[, which] come at the raw and tender edge of confrontation, at the borderlines, where we are most sensitive and exposed—and, curiously, most alone. To meet you, I must risk myself as I am (1989, p. 283).

The appropriate dictum, then, is not “Know Thyself through reflection” which gives the impression of a static accomplishment but “Reveal Thyself.” Such an approach leads not to

Enlightened Man, who sees, the seer, but Transparent Man, who is seen and seen through, foolish, who has nothing left to hide, who has become wholly transparent through self-acceptance; his soul is loved, wholly revealed... (p. 283)

And this revelation is endless. Here the horizon is not mistaken for finality, it is simply the cutting edge of an infinite unfolding.

I am aware that the idea of a necessary relationship between love, beauty and knowledge can provoke uncomfortable reactions, and appear to be pure romanticism. And in fact, the perspective I am developing here is in complete agreement with Keats' famous dictum—for Almas a thing is beautiful in so far as it is transparent to essence, just as for Plato something is beautiful in so far as it partakes of the Good (Plato 1951, pp. 93-95). But it is also in harmony with contemporary transpersonal methods. Braud (1998, pp. 223-224) demonstrates that the role of beauty, empathy, clarity, vividness and inspiration and other “emotional qualities” are increasingly appreciated in science, psychology and transpersonal theory. He argues for an expanded notion of validity that recognizes the connection between *validity* and the Latin *valere*—“to have worth or be strong.” He suggests that the “intellectual, somatic, emotional, aesthetic and intuitive modes of knowing” be considered as “different facets of one gem.” Validity is here a matter of the “completeness, coherence and integration” of these modes. He recognizes that such a mode of knowing is a capacity of the intellect in its ancient sense of *nous*



rather than its contemporary sense of discursive thought. My perspective, drawing primarily on Almaas, is a variation on what Braud is suggesting. The relationship between the *nous* and the everyday intellect is discussed above as the relationship between basic and representational knowledge. What Braud calls modes of knowing are in my presentation dimensions of the soul, and the qualities of empathy, clarity and inspiration he mentions relate to the essential aspects. It should be clear then that my approach does not negate the intellect but is in fact based upon the *nous* and its capacity to make very clear and precise distinctions in experience.

The cornerstone of this capacity is knowledge of the essential aspects. Almaas's detailed phenomenology, the closeness of the aspects to normal human feelings, and the detailed understanding of the psychological issues evoked by each aspect greatly enhance the possibility of making clear and precise interpretations of what is occurring. Watching a performance, or performing myself, I might feel that something is 'working', that it is beautiful in some way. I can ask "in what way is it beautiful?" I may, by inquiring into my own experience, come to the direct apprehension of a quality of presence, with all the hermeneutic connections that implies. I may discover (whether watching or performing) that I am feeling pleasure, or delight, or truthfulness, or steadfastness, or strength, or that I am apprehending presence without any qualities at all, perfectly clear and seamless. If the performance is not working then I may discover that I am feeling less beautiful forms, such as resistance and restraint, which are not essential aspects but nevertheless are forms of basic knowledge. I might then ask "what is being resisted?" and so on. Aesthetic sensitivity, openness and discrimination of the qualities of basic knowledge work in harmony, and knowing can hardly proceed at all without openness to our love of beauty and Being. Awareness of the aspects of essence allows the knowing, loving and being to attain a richness, multifacetedness and precision that transcends romanticism.

## **THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In my research, the process of Inquiry operated, as far as possible, in the background, as an orienting frame of reference and intrapersonal process, in a similar way to Brook's attunement to hierarchies of quality. With this orientation, I immersed myself in creating, evoking and experiencing, within the theatrical traditions with which I am familiar, the emergence of essence in theatrical events. I kept journal records for this entire process and, when I worked collaboratively, my co-researchers shared their experiences and insights with me through their own journals, interviews and discussions, which I recorded and transcribed. I also immersed myself in the writings and lore of the Stanislavski tradition and neutral mask, and in systematic spiritual work, including daily meditation, monthly discussions with my teacher, two or three retreats a year and frequent Inquiry with other Diamond Approach students. This ensured that my creative exploration stayed anchored in the theatrical world on the one hand and in a systematic and guided spiritual practice, on the other. The hermeneutic circle therefore

encompassed three major ‘texts’—my ongoing personal and collaborative creative practice, my ongoing spiritual practice and the writings of the theatrical tradition.

I began with a nine-week investigation at Wiseworld Studios, a dance/theatre venue in inner city Melbourne, exploring for myself as an actor many different avenues of psychophysical training and essential experience, including exercises drawn from or suggested by Grotowski’s late work (Lendra 1991, Grotowski 1995, 1997, Richards 2001), Meyerhold (Barba et al. 1997, Bogdanov 1997, Levinski 1997), Chekhov (1985, 1991, 2002), my earlier work with David Latham (drawing on Pisk 1976) and the neutral mask. Mostly I worked alone, but explorations with the mask were only possible when others were present (the mask requires an audience) and nine weeks of working with intense processes alone in a studio relying only on your own guidance is something like a recipe for madness. So, I invited some actors who had worked with me previously to join me on an informal basis twice a week. Their feedback, discussions and participation in some of the processes with which I was working helped me to maintain balance and a sense of contact with the theatre community while still challenging myself at deep levels.

In the time leading up to this ‘Wiseworld investigation’, my Diamond Approach work had focused on the aspect of personal love. This had been a very deep and intense investigation, touching all areas of my life and work, and it carried into the studio, highlighting a thread of inquiry about love and acting that had begun prior to my training at VCA. Immersing myself in theatrical essential events at that time, wherever I looked, love seemed the key; it was the archetype that was constellating my inner and outer worlds, and so seemed to be the most crucial aspect for my research. This thread of inquiry, described in the next chapter, extended through the subsequent projects and yielded many interesting insights and practices. It also brought forth more questions and the need for other interpretive distinctions and concepts. The Wiseworld investigation also provided many significant experiential reference points for the subsequent collaborative work.

Working alone and engaging with written texts is not, however, an adequate challenge to one’s own prejudices and interpretation. I knew that, in order to bring a greater rigour to my hermeneutic circle I needed to work with ‘masters’ (by which I mean exemplary representatives and custodians) of the traditions I was engaging. My teacher, Jean Berwick, was of course a master of the Diamond Approach, and throughout the research she constantly illuminated and challenged the horizons of my understanding of essence and its aspects. But I also needed to work with masters of the Stanislavski tradition and the neutral mask. Two wonderful opportunities arose, with John Bolton, the Head of Acting at VCA and a teacher in the Lecoq tradition, and Leonid Verzub.

John invited me to attend his entire neutral mask course with his first year students. Every day for a few months, I sat in on John’s classes and was able to hold conversations with him and

with Fiona Battersby, the VCA Head of Movement. I also held formal interviews with the student actors and John himself. Thematic analysis of these interviews with the students contributed in important ways. They clearly revealed two apparently necessary conditions for numinous events in the mask: the shedding of all preconceived ideas and ‘the disappearance of the image’. The former allowed me to make connections between the neutral mask and basic knowledge in the last chapter, and the latter crystallized my interpretation of the ‘I’ and Active Analysis, which is cornerstone of Chapter Seven. My discussions with John yielded many new insights and understandings. Most crucially they brought into focus for me the nature of tradition (how one’s own teacher’s steadfastness and generosity is a resource for one’s students), the importance of maintaining an impeccable focus on theatre while respecting the personal significance of theatrical work, and centrality of freedom in the neutral mask. John’s classes also illuminated clearly the value for actors of specific and precise observation and feedback, gave me a greater understanding and appreciation of Lecoq’s approach, including the *via negativa*. Most importantly for the narrative of my research process, John’s work also revealed for me the theatrical and numinous potential of identification with colours.

When I trained with David Latham we did not work with colour. By the time I first experienced colour in the mask in John classes, I was already immersed in Almaas’s understanding of the colours as essence. But the encounter with colour in those classes and in my own mask work affected me strongly, enriching my appreciation for the aspects of essence and filling out my understanding of them. After encountering colour as essence in my own experience in structured inner inquiries, what a joy it was to see the whole spectrum come to life so magnificently in the studio! How vibrant, full, alive, expressive, creative, free and abundant the experience of colour could be! How embodied! The colours no longer seemed to me to be markers or means on the path of spiritual development, but to be best appreciated in and of themselves alone. They simply express part of the beautiful potential of creation and life, in precisely differentiated qualities. I realized, as I watched and as I became the colours myself, that my relation to essence could be more like an artist than a scientific observer, more celebratory and direct. More crucially for this research, because identification with colour in the neutral mask was one important place at which the horizons of the Diamond Approach and theatrical work fused, colour provided a rich language for my investigation. It made possible a number of new exercises, suggested ways of reinterpreting the Stanislavski system and became the driving force behind the creation of *Palaces in Ruin*.

The opportunity to work with Leonid Verzub came through a group of students I had taught in one of the VCA’s part-time courses. The group asked me, at the end of their course, to continue to teach them. Not wanting to take on the task of devising a year’s programme, and sensing an opportunity, I told them about Leonid, who I knew was living in Melbourne but not working. Within a week, one enterprising student had set up a year’s training with him, which I decided to

attend, making a fairly (but not completely) smooth transition from teacher of the group to their classmate. We worked with Leonid for an entire year, from twice a week at the beginning, to nearly full-time by the time we presented our performance, *Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters: a fantasia on Chekhov*. Leonid taught us Active Analysis through translators, which we came to understand was a great loss. One day we emerged from class to find a Russian woman on a low wall outside the room. She told us that she had been passing by our studio when she overheard Leonid. She stopped to listen because it was such a joy to hear his beautiful and evocative language. Despite the difficulties of translation, the classes were a profound and demanding (at times impossibly difficult) encounter with the living Stanislavski tradition. Thus I was able to engage deeply with my two major theatrical sources.

After three months observing John's work and six months working with Leonid, I began to work collaboratively to create a performance, *Palaces in Ruin*. I invited four actors with whom I had worked previously (two from Leonid's classes and two other former students) to work with me for three months as I attempted to apply what I had learned from John and was learning with Leonid to create a performance event that immersed the participants in presence. We trained intensively in the mask, and in Active Analysis, drawing deeply on Leonid's work. We also used many of Michael Chekhov's exercises and many drawn from Bella Merlin's very useful *Beyond Stanislavsky* (2001).

In this project and in subsequent studio work in which I took a director-pedagogue role, I made a number of ethical commitments. I decided that my research would only involve exercises (or a recognizable variation of exercises) that were already established within the theatrical traditions I worked in. Given the profound influence of spiritual traditions upon actor training, this still offers a very wide scope for exploration of essential experience. But I decided that I would make no attempt to teach spiritual material, because I am not truly qualified to do so. I also decided to work, as far as possible, without pushing my co-researchers for a particular result and to be as sensitive as possible to the direction of their own individual processes. I explored in an open-ended manner, allowing connections to emerge organically in the background, rather than attempting to implement pre-conceived connections made during theoretical reflections. A number of my monthly sessions with Jean also included discussions about my work with the co-researchers, and provided the opportunity for me to reflect on my role and re-examine its ethical dimensions.

Working with a group of four actors, I developed *Palaces in Ruin* from etudes on colours as atmospheres. The performance itself was a series of six etudes based on yellow, pink, dark blue, black, deep red and grey. A simple narrative emerged in the work; this was not our focus, but once it emerged it drew much of our attention and energy. My primary intention was to infuse the work with the beauty and numinosity of colours as forms of presence. I wanted to find the inner and outer forms through which the colours as presence could be experienced, not only in

the actor's bodies and voices but in the space as a whole. This happened effectively in many moments of the play, and a number of audience members remarked on an intensity that pervaded the experience as a whole, but the reception of the work was hampered by the sketchy narrative and by my own incomplete conception of the theatrical dimension of the work and the performers' precise relationship with the audience. Discussions with my co-researchers afterwards centred on the strange liminal space that the performance inhabited between theatre and ritual. I realized that *Palaces* preferred neither the spiritual experience nor the theatrical. In many ways the horizons of each endeavour overlapped somewhat discordantly rather than fused. Important questions remained about the relationship between the luminous experience of presence (in this case the colours) and character, narrative and imaginative world.

These questions pervaded the next three loops of the hermeneutic spiral, rehearsing *Dear Sisters*, *Sweet Sisters* with Leonid, a two week full-time exploration of elements of the mask work in early 2004 and weekly studio explorations for the remainder of that year. In the latter two projects my co-researchers were one actor from *Palaces*, two former students who had not been involved in that performance or Leonid's work, and one student from John Bolton's classes who had since left VCA. In searching for a more complete understanding of the relationship between presence and the theatrical dimension identity, play and autonomy became central concerns, as did the archetypes of the Magician and the Trickster.

The crystallization moment of the research, the crucial fusion of horizons, happened during the last project, at which time I was reviewing the materials—journals, interviews and discussions—from all the prior research, as well as re-engaging with the writings central to my source traditions (Stanislavski, Copeau and the Diamond Approach). The horizons of these traditions and our work in the studio came into alignment and eventually fused around the archetype of identity, which clarified the questions raised by *Palaces* and the central question about creating theatrical events marked by numinous presence. The weekly studio sessions served as an ongoing laboratory which helped to ensure that this new understanding remained grounded in practice and experience. This fusion of horizons, and the new exercises and interpretations which both constitute it and were brought forth by it, is the subject of my final three chapters on the Centre, the 'I am' and Dual Consciousness respectively.

Other important distinctions emerged in the research—organicity, will, intelligence, mask as an archetype, neutrality—but proved less resilient in the hermeneutic process, and were either discarded or integrated into my emerging vision as minor players. In the end the distinctions around which I structure the thesis (which correspond to archetypes or essential aspects) were those that proved most fruitful for our unfolding practice, most integrated with the Stanislavski tradition, most integrating of the totality of my previous training (including the Copeau-based work), and that seemed to offer the most potential for the realization of my ideal of a theatre of essential events.

I have attempted to communicate these archetypes and the understanding they comprise through descriptions of exercises, experiential anecdotes, first-person accounts of performance and Inquiry experiences, poetry, quotes from the texts of my source traditions, discussion and analysis. I have not attempted to present a complete system or synthesis. A complete vision such as that given by Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov is the work of a lifetime, not a three-year thesis. An enactive, participatory inquiry such as this can only make incremental advances based on those distinctions cocreated by the forces in which the researcher participates. These advances will not necessarily be linear additions to a seeming ladder of knowledge, but more like the illumination of some points or facets on a crystal, making possible a revisioning of tradition which reflects an organic process of growth. The next four chapters explore four facets of the crystal, beginning with love.

PART 3 ~ NEW  
DISCOVERIES AND  
INTERPRETATIONS FOR  
EXPERIENCING ESSENCE IN  
ACTING

*Love and Identity in the Stanislavski Tradition*

## Chapter 6

### LOVE AND THE FOOL

As a teenager, I took a public acting class at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. One evening, sitting in the studio waiting for the class to begin, I noticed a quote written in blue on the whiteboard. It was from Michael Chekhov and it said something like: “Love in the actor’s soul has a power which cannot be fathomed.” This seemed to me a strange and radical idea: what did love have to do with acting? But it gripped me somehow and remained inside like a magnet, or an itch. It was the first bead on a thread of inquiry. The second appeared at VCA.

*1991. David Latham’s neutral mask class. My first journey in the mask. Halfway through, after a series of fantastic fairy-tale adventures, I find myself lost, not in a dark wood but on a beach, staring at the ocean with seemingly no way forward. I feel dry, empty, lost and meaningless. After a long time, I realize that if the journey is to continue, I have to go into the water.*

*In the depths, I find sharks circling, and a school of smaller but still vicious fish. I am devoured and torn apart. I become the frenzy - the intensity is close to Fire, and like Fire it consumes me, annihilates me.*

*I find myself in an immense Stillness, Silence and Peace, which I somehow know as the arms of God. My body is lying on the floor of the huge studio, but I have forgotten it. I have no image of myself, only the faintest thoughts, in the background. I lie there for a long time. I only want to be here. I lie there for a long time, drinking in that Peace, that Embrace. I can’t move. I don’t know how I’ll get up. I have no reason to leave this place. After a long time, I am told “Do it with love,” and sent back. I get up and take off the mask.*

*David says that I was lying there for so long that he thought I had died. I told him that I had.*

*He said “No. I thought you had actually died.”*

*“I did.” Then I realized that he thought that I had actually died. I told him, not without embarrassment, that I had been in the arms of God.*

*“Did you receive a gift?”*

*“No.”*



*"Are you sure?"*

*I thought for a while. "He told me to do it with love," I shrugged.*

*David said: "That's your gift."*

The third bead on the thread was my discovery of the theme of love in the writings of Chekhov and Stanislavski. Both emphasize the fundamental importance of love for the art and craft of acting. Chekhov (1977, pp. 20-25), drawing on Steiner, distinguished between erotic love, blood love, true human love, and Divine Love. True human love is selfless, personal and without cause, and Divine Love is "the kind of love with which God or the Trinity loves...." He saw art and the theatre as a battle between these last two kinds of love and the "small ego": "Our kind of love, the creative person's love, must be all-pervading and expand us; the small egos of our life only contract us. These two cannot co-exist; sooner or later one or the other must be victorious in the battle for our creative souls". The "true professional" loves everything in the theatre because of the magical world that it opens for him. Stanislavski (1988) goes further: love is the means to overcome all artistic obstacles. It is the same thing as creative genius; it is the art within the actor. The studio itself is "a flame of unquenchable love" (pp. 115-116) to which the teacher comes "armed hand and foot with weapons of love" (p. 137). The actor "can only hope to progress and grow more proficient in his art when he himself begins to introduce his pure and self-denying love into every moment of his creative work" (p. 205). Love "helps to evolve the sensitivity of your subconsciousness"; it is "the basis of your life and the centre and foundation of your higher 'I'" (p. 183). It helps the actor to develop a sense of proportion (p. 207) and is even an aid in elocution lessons (p. 229)!

Clearly love is vital to the system, yet hardly any commentators mention it (Margarshack, who translated and edited the volume I am quoting, did not include it in his index). This is possibly because Stanislavski's later writings do not place as much importance on love as the work I am quoting, which was written between 1918-22. But it is also possible that personal discomfort plays a part, especially amongst academic writers: love seems such a nebulous and personal thing, somehow too elusive, subjective or sentimental for a serious thinker to address. It is understandable to pass over these passages in silence: perhaps Stanislavski and Chekhov are romantics, or merely sentimental. What sense can we make of what they say? How can we speak of love with certainty? How can we understand it, how explore it? Perhaps it is preferable to leave its mystery untouched. Love and reason, the heart and the head, seem to be almost opposite principles, different realms.

*Love is the astrolabe that sights into the mysteries  
of God. Earth-love, spirit-love, any love  
looks into that yonder, and whatever I try to say  
explaining love is embarrassing! Some commentary  
clarifies, but with love the silence is clearer.  
A pen went scribbling along, but when it tried*

*to write love, it broke. If you want to expound on love,  
take your intellect and let it lie down  
in the mud. It's no help.  
You want proof that the sun exists, so you stay up  
all night talking about it. Finally you sleep  
as the sun comes up. (Rumi 1996, p. 228)*

Perhaps it is a foolish thing to attempt to write about love in an academic thesis. Yet, the theme of love has emerged repeatedly in my research, becoming increasingly fundamental to my vision of acting, and I do not have the luxury here of choosing silence over commentary, even if it is clearer. Also, Rumi's playful warning is itself talking about the nature of love. So, in this chapter, with Rumi's perspective kept in mind, I will try to flesh out some ways that love can be important and useful in acting. I will trace my inquiry into the role of love in acting and argue that its presence or absence in theatrical work has practical implications.

In this research, two primary approaches to a theatrical exploration of love emerged: identification with the archetype of the Fool in neutral mask, and improvisations on the atmosphere of love, using Almaas's phenomenology of the aspect of personal love as the basis for atmosphere. The most intensive investigations in this area were conducted during the Wiseworld exploration from August to October 2002, and during the training and rehearsals for *Palaces in Ruin*, July to October 2003. These explorations revealed that when love infuses an actor's work it affects, among other things, her organicity, rhythm, vitality and capacity for belief and imaginative absorption. It thus evokes qualities traditionally valued and encoded in actor training systems. The understanding that emerged in these explorations was applied and developed in a particular etude in *Palaces in Ruin*. The specific qualities of this scene confirmed that love has much to offer the actor, if it can be accessed. I do not address the question of how to access it in detail, except to offer the exploratory exercises I developed as one possible approach, and to make some further observations about transmission. The initial insights and experiences have remained useful and applicable in all my subsequent work, although the process has continued to expand and unfold, as more connections are made, more profound experiences emerge, and ideas and practices are honed to a greater simplicity. I will describe each approach and the experiences and understanding they have evoked so far.

## **THE FOOL**

I never encountered the archetype of the Fool in David Latham's classes. My first experience of it occurred during work with a student on Romeo's soliloquy beneath Juliet's balcony ("But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?"). The student had studied mask with me and I asked him to find an archetype for Romeo in this scene. I was surprised when he chose the Fool, but as he performed it became obvious what a perfect choice he had made: Romeo has been pining hopelessly for Rosalind, enduring the affectionate mockery of his friends, but then

falls for Juliet at first sight. He enters her garden, where he could be killed, without a second thought, and with little hope of any reward. Perhaps he expects to catch a glimpse of her, or to enter her room. Perhaps he just wants to be nearer to her. In any case, he has lost his head to love and become the Fool.

As I watched, however, it was not the appropriateness of the archetype for the scene that I was drawn to, but the qualities the Fool seemed to bring to the actor's performance. It was marked by joyous spontaneity, authenticity, a fullness of feeling and the sweetness of love. There was a sense of integration, freedom and psychophysical unity. It was the same quality that came through in the neutral mask, but with an additional, special quality of sweetness, vulnerability and personalness that seemed to release barriers both in the actor and in my own reception of the work. In retrospect, what I saw in this actor was a very complete state of organicity, of *experiencing*.

I knew the state of organicity as a kinaesthetic memory within my body, yet my performances rarely attained this state, and I had not experienced the same degree of absorption, freedom and arresting momentum that my student showed as the Fool. I thought the Fool might be a key to unlock these qualities. Considering this, I recognized that I was deeply afraid of looking foolish as an actor. I thought of myself as a serious actor. I gave myself high-minded justifications for doing theatre. I wanted to do it right and serve a worthy cause, and was unable to shake the inner criticism that seized on these intentions. I knew many other actors who seemed to be afflicted with a similar earnestness; although they were intelligent, well trained and hard-working, their performances seemed to be limited by a seriousness that seemed to ensnare their deep inner life in an opaque rigidity. I could appreciate many things in these performances but I was rarely enlivened by them, and I went to see them mostly out of a sense of duty. Romeo as Fool was the opposite: how human, how vulnerable, how alive the actor was! The living flow of forms articulating his body resonated in my own; my muscles mirrored his movements and I could not help but participate in his experience. I began to understand how the actor is close to the Fool, and the Fool close to the Lover.

Inspired to investigate the archetype more deeply, I discovered useful resources on the Fool in Jungian and esoteric writings on the Tarot (Anonymous 1993, Arrien 1995).<sup>1</sup> One text from the perspective of Christian Hermeticism claims that the Fool is love: its esoteric name is AMOR, love as the opposite of ROMA, meaning the Catholic Church as a symbol of doctrinal authority (Anonymous 1993, p. 591). The only authority the Fool recognizes is love. It judges nothing that arises, and makes no comparisons. Wholly loved, and wholly loving, it has no fear. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Tarot is popularly known as an approach to fortune telling, it is actually a map of spiritual development and exercises derived from Sufi sources (Shah 1984) and adopted in the West by Christian Hermeticists, among others (Anonymous 1993). Each Arcanum is an archetype.

image of the Marseilles Tarot (the oldest known deck) the Fool is represented as setting out on a journey. A dog tears at his trousers but the Fool is unafraid and pays no attention to it. He continues, fuelled by love, to move forward into the continually arising and dissolving forms of the journey. The Fool is the only Arcanum without a number, indicating that it represents a principle beyond the transformative sequence represented by the other Major Arcana. Perhaps it is the Fool who transforms and love that is the foundation of the journey, the principle that underlies all the other Arcana. Just as the neutral mask undertakes the journey, transforming into what it sees—becoming the sea, the mountain, the desert—while remaining neutral, so too does the Fool become, on his journey of transformation, the Magician, the Tower of Destruction and so on, until he reaches the final Arcanum, which is the World, whose nature is love. The Fool is the principle of the ecstasy of experience for its own sake; it is rapture in the unfolding forms of experience (Arrien 1995).

In the studio intensives of this research, beginning with the Wiseworld investigation I explored the Fool, identifying with it myself and watching many others. My approach was the same as for any other archetype in the neutral mask: to move from personal experience to the universal, as David Latham had taught me. I based the preparatory exercises on the indications given in the sources above. (Later I used various versions of the Marseilles Tarot image as the basis of the identifications.)

#### Exercise: Becoming the Fool

Lie on the floor and relax. Let yourself be still, empty and receptive.

Remember a time when you were afraid to do something but you did it anyway, just for the love of the experience, when you wanted to experience something very much, and even though it was scary, you went ahead and did it, ignoring that you might have hurt yourself, or looked foolish. Maybe it was the first time you kissed a certain person, or the first time you kissed any person. Maybe it was diving into a pool for the first time, or going onstage, or sneaking out at night as a teenager.

Whatever memories or images come to you, let them come.

What's the feeling at the centre of the memory, the image? What's its centre, its essence?

Connect it with your breath. Connect it with the spine. Let it play through the fingers. How does it move? What's the gesture at the centre of it? Find it in the fingers and toes.

When the connection is made, you stand up.

In the empty space, you put on the mask. You turn around and you are the archetype.

Through many repeated experiences of this exercise, and analysis of participants written accounts of experiencing and observing it, clear and consistent characteristics of the Fool emerged:

- It has a childlike sweetness and naivety about it that endears it to an audience. It makes no pretence of knowledge, status or importance, but acts instead from an abundance of openness and vulnerability.
- It has an unqualified appreciation of everything it encounters. Like a lover enraptured by her beloved, the Fool embraces everything it perceives, everything that arises in its experience, without regard for logic, opinion, labels, or judgement. It unreservedly loves and appreciates the specific and unique nature of every form that arises. The world appears to it as alive, beautiful, transforming and transporting, as something to be adored, celebrated and engaged as it unfolds. It is clear that it is love—not love of an object but love of, and *as*, the living flow of forms.
- It is ‘full-on’. It takes tremendous energy to sustain such an extreme level of flow in action. The actor feels as if she is always at the very edge of her capacities, expanding through internal and external boundaries and limits, continually innovating, unfolding new rhythms and gestures.
- It is drawn to boundaries. It loves to meet and be met by *surfaces*, to be in contact with matter and absorbed in the rich variety of sensations and experiences possible only through the resistance of matter, of a surface. “What is it with the Fool and the floor?!” one actor exclaimed after watching a few identifications. This account gives a sense of this:

*Even though I am continually moving out (my energy and actions are always expanding outward) or maybe because of it, I feel that I love being bounded and enshaped, having something for my body and my energy to push against. I feel the floor beneath my feet and its resistance is a comfort. It gives me existence. It is like the touch of a person. I am oriented to the concrete things, form, reality. There is something erotic about any contact, but it is dynamic, not indulgent—you don't get stuck with anything.*

- The Fool tends to relate directly and openly to the specific, particular space and audience. The Trickster is the only other archetype that I have seen do this in the neutral mask. All the other archetypes inhabit a kind of ideal space, not engaging the concrete characteristics of the studio and the objects in it. The

Fool looks straight at the particular audience and is interested in them not as audience, but as specific, unique forms.

- It is highly rhythmic. The floor and other surfaces also offer the chance to discover rhythmic sound, and the Fool's movements are more musical than any other archetype, its footfalls, slaps, falls and pauses seem to pulse, to beat.
- It seems never to move in straight lines, but always in circles and spirals: it whirls, tumbles and rolls.
- It is marked by asymmetries and is not 'tidy' or constructed, which seems to give it a human quality.
- Paradoxically it also evokes a feeling of physical integration and co-ordination as well as a sensuous inhabiting of the body. As one actor reported "Normally I feel like my legs are 'down there' and I'm not in them, and that the head is separate from the body, but in the Fool it's all one. You don't even think about it. It's just like everything is included." Like a child, the actor as the Fool seems co-ordinated 'from the inside' as a whole, not by way of the controlling centre in the head directing a right placement of parts.

The following is my own account of watching one actor as the Fool:

*2002. Wiseworld Studios. The actor stands alone in the space. She puts on the mask and turns and immediately a huge, light, rhythmic river of unpredictable energy propels itself, body and spirit, into the space. Like a smooth explosion, she accelerates forward toward the audience as if delighted to discover them.*

*On her way to us, she discovers the joy of her feet on the floor—an unexpected delight! Her feet feel the texture and hear the rhythm of their meeting with this fabulous new friend: the floor! "How wonderful to be met like this!" she seems to say. "What a miracle, to be able to bounce and bound and fall and—what else can I do?—I can fall, tumble, bounce back up again. I can bounce back up so far that I fall in a whole new way!"*

*A waft of air distracts her and without pause or transition she is following it, discovering beautiful new rhythmic waves of movement, delighting in them as if each one is a whole new playground. She doesn't grasp them, she doesn't hold onto them. She is flowing, expanding into the next thing. The possibilities are so vast and all so wonderful that each must tumble one over the other in a never-ending outpouring of vibrant, throbbing rhythms. And every rhythm is a new discovery, a new line through space that flows out like a bubbling stream that could be followed infinitely.*

*Now stillness happens, and somehow with the same energy she is now pouring her interest and delight, her force and substance, into exploring the miracle of being a little bit still: "Oh...how interesting is*

*this?!” Waves of laughter rise and fall among the audience. We are delighted in her unreservedness, and a little incredulous, as if wondering when she will limit herself. When will the outpouring end? It’s almost too much. We want it to stop but we don’t. We are challenged, unsettled, and delighted.*

*She is still but her body position is dynamic. Out of her easy, alive release comes a new rhythm, a kind of dance that becomes a lunging play with the curtain of the studio. The audience senses danger: “Oh no, she’s crossing boundaries, the neutral mask doesn’t do things like this!” We laugh and she hears us, turns to look at us, discovering that she has an effect: “I pull the curtain open, they laugh! I pull the curtain closed, they laugh! Motion and sensation are connected to sound and feeling: how wonderful, how many possibilities!”*

*She doesn’t stay with the same trick. Continually, a new rhythm flows effortlessly out of the one before. She moves on, seeking out some other boundary, and finds: walls! Walls can be bumped into, fallen against, rolled on like floors, fought with, frightened. You can run up them too, surely. She tries this, but it leads to a variation on running into them and she finds herself on the floor watching butterflies bounce through the sky above. By now the actor is physically spent, although it seems that imaginatively she could go on forever. She turns and takes off the mask.*

The following is my account of performing the Fool:

*2002. Wiseworld Studios. In the preparation I am remembering times when I acted foolishly, when I acted in spite of fear, as well as times when I didn’t cross a boundary because of fear. The foolishness of trying to avoid looking foolish strikes me and I laugh at myself. As I sense into the essence of it, I remember situations where I have felt love flowing between people really freely. I sense an outpouring of radiance. As I turn in the mask, this radiance comes through in my hands, which start to whirl and bounce. As I turn around, I’m already moving. The main thing seems to be to move. I run. It’s scrappy, messy. My habitual impulse is to tidy it up, but that would feel fake, proud. I go to the window. There’s light pouring through it. I find myself jumping at the light. The critic is there telling me I’m an idiot but even that is just part of the flow. It has no effect. I run away from the window in a circle. I jump, feeling connected through my body, sensuously inside my muscles and blood. I feel how it seems to demand a total physicality, a complete expression of the life-stream through the body. I feel, at times, really co-ordinated. There are somersaults and backward falls. I keep returning to the window. It is a continual outpouring, continual flow. My serious, controlled persona is obliterated in this goofy, floppy, jumping, stumbling, rampant, running powerhouse of bouncing love, smoothly and rhythmically bouncing from one thing to the next, never resigning himself, never going inward. How immediate, how obvious, how bewildering is love! How messily human! The idea of being a serious actor is hilarious. But then, from this place, everything serious is hilarious.*

These explorations brought a deeper understanding of the Fool and confirmed that it was a powerful way of accessing organicity. Taking this understanding into structured exercises and

performances is not a matter of applying the analysis so much as remembering the experience with the body and imagination, of ‘tuning oneself’ to it, and allowing it to inform the work.

At the time of these explorations my movement training regime was largely based on biomechanics exercises, drawn from Gennadi Bogdanov’s videotaped five-day workshop on Biomechanics and Rhythm (Bogdanov 1997). After working with the Fool for several days, I recognized, as I did the biomechanics work at the start of a session, that the elements I had been observing in the Fool corresponded in detail to important elements of biomechanics. It is worth mentioning these correspondences briefly, because Meyerhold’s training system is specifically oriented toward developing in actors the capacity for ‘total theatre’—for performances that are playful, expressive, virtuosic, and supremely theatrical. The correspondences therefore point to the potential of the Fool for evoking in the actor a state that combines pre-expressivity and organicity.

Biomechanics emphasizes the following elements (Barba et al. 1997, Bogdanov 1997, Levinski 1997):

- Students are first led to discover their playing surfaces - the floor, the walls the ceiling, to see their potential as playing partners.
- The actor must orient to the space, to see what is really there. The Fool is one of only two archetypes performed in mask which naturally and spontaneously relates to the particular space and audience.
- Every action must have rhythm. The biomechanical actor even chooses a song, which must continue inside of them during the exercises, in order to evoke this quality of innate rhythm.
- Everything comes from the feet, which has the effect of connecting the body as a whole - note also the student's comment about “being in” her legs. As Meyerhold famously said, “if the tip of the nose moves, the whole body moves.”
- The controlling point is in the solar plexus. The centre for the Fool is, if anything, the heart, but in both cases the locus of control is shifted from the head.

I began to do the biomechanics work while remembering the experience of the Fool - sometimes *as* the Fool. The elements Bogdanov tries to impress upon his students suddenly came together. The Fool offered a way into the biomechanical work that integrated its various elements in a unified meaningful gestalt: the actor as Fool, as love. This points the possibility that immersion in the experience of the Fool archetype, and continual engagement in training



and rehearsal 'as the Fool' could gradually train the body for theatrical organicity in a similar way to biomechanics.

## **PERSONAL LOVE, THE PINK ESSENCE**

The second doorway into the exploration of Love for the actor made use of Almaas's teachings on the essential aspect of personal love and Michael Chekhov's teachings on atmosphere (Chekhov 1991, pp. 26-36). Personal love is one of a number of different Forms of love known in the Diamond Approach, (each with its own phenomenology, effects and associated psychological, epistemological and existential issues). These Forms include universal, boundless love (associated with the holding environment in infancy and issues of trust), merging love (connected to the symbiotic stage with the mother or 'dual-unity') and passionate love. Almaas's teachings on personal love and the practices and inquiries pertaining to it are extensive. The following account, which presents the understanding I drew upon in the atmosphere improvisations and clarifies what I mean by love as an aspect of essence, is based on the teachings I have received in person, my own experiences, and Almaas's published writings (2002, 2004).

Like any other aspect of essence, love is a presence, a sense of Being with a particular quality.

Love is the experience of the essence of who we are as a pure and authentic presence. It has the feeling tone of liking, of appreciation, which is an enjoyable and pleasurable experiential affect. This pleasurable appreciation becomes more clearly discerned as Love when we recognize the other properties of its presence (Almaas 2002, p. 251).

It feels soft, sweet, boundless and emancipating. It has a fullness, ripeness, and juiciness that can seem to be the very substance of aliveness. In the jargon of the Diamond Approach it is referred to as *the pink essence*.

It appears in the inner touch sense as a soft and caressing texture, almost like baby skin or talcum powder. It appears in the inner visual sense as a beautiful and luminous pink, either as a shapeless medium or with a shape like a flowing pink stream, a pink cloud, or cotton candy, or a pink rose. It appears in the inner taste as a heavenly kind of sweetness, an uplifting taste that makes us realize why we associate love with sweetness. It appears in inner olfactory sense as the scent of a rose or jasmine, delicate and so transporting. It appears in the inner auditory sense as the gentle delicate buzzing of bees, tinkling of bells, or a melodious enchanting sound (Almaas 2004, p. 137).

Even though, as Almaas acknowledges, we may not be aware of the presence in such rich detail, with such a multi-faceted inner perception, most people are able to perceive at least one or two of these elements. "All of these perceptual properties," he writes "form a unified gestalt that we term the essential aspect of Love..." (2002, p. 251).

When the pink essence arises it 'quickens the soul', provoking it to unfold and reveal more of its reality. Love influences our consciousness by bringing a genuine appreciation of whatever arises

in our experience. As love impacts the soul by carrying it toward wholeness, it brings the soul up to the boundaries and divisions that exist within it through its conditioning, negativity and ignorance. These are the veils of which the Persian mystic poets speak, which are revealed and shed as love moves the soul toward unity.

This rending of veils is a freeing-up of the soul's tendency to move toward wholeness, which is the same thing as the quickening of the soul, as the revelation of the whole. This unveiling has its own organic rhythm. It cannot be controlled or redirected; it can only be resisted, through physical tension and psychological defences. As the soul allows the presence and flow of love within it, it is as if love nourishes the consciousness so that it begins to throb, pulse or quiver, as if love were its very fuel, its fundamental energy, the force that drives the universe—a living rhythmic energy, a boundless, beating heart.

A second effect is unification: “love unifies—it is an expression of oneness...of the unity of Being” (Almaas 2002, p. 34). The attitude of the lover is an orientation toward unity, toward oneness. The lover feels naturally pulled toward the fulfilment of greater wholeness, a magnetic pull to the Beloved. In many schools of mysticism, it is said that the soul naturally loves the Beloved, the Mystery, its Source, and that ultimately all our longings are echoes of the longing to unify with our Source. In the Diamond Approach, this is also thought to be the case, but the pink essence is also understood to affect the soul by moving it toward unity on all levels; love dissolves the splits and divisions in the psyche. It heals the splits between body and mind, bringing psychophysical integration. Love is related also to the path, to the journey. There is a certainty, as love infuses the soul, that ‘you are on the right track’. Love is like a beacon: you understand with every fibre of your being ‘This is the right way, the right action’.

The following account from my own inquiry may give a sense of how these elements can arise in experience.

*2002. A personal inquiry. Sitting in my chair, alone in my room, I sense the presence and substance of my foot, specifically the bones in my foot. I notice that I am thinking of ‘bones in my foot’, that there are words and concepts in my head which I am substituting for a direct experience of my foot. Seeing this, my head clears, and my presence in my foot, my awareness of it, becomes more substantial, full and nuanced. I can feel coolness and warmth. Staying with the warmth and becoming curious about it, I start to feel warmer and more full in my chest.*

*What is this warmth and fullness? As the question arises, I notice that I am losing my head: I feel light in my head and full in my heart. I begin to feel a little drunk, a little ‘foolish’, sweet and childlike. I am aware of being on the edge of the sweetness, slightly separate. A thought comes: “Surrender.” I feel a liquid letting-go in my torso, as if my insides are melting. I begin to feel loved, personally loved, inexplicably: I wonder who loves me and why? I don’t know: there is love here and it feels personal. Nothing else matters. I feel like I am loving something, but what? Perhaps just sensation itself, my*

*capacity to sense—Being perhaps. I love that I am, that there is existence. I love the subtle currents within my field of sensation.*

*Staying with the current of love seems to carry me down into a deeper, more solitary place, a grotto within. I love this grotto inside me too. There is a feeling of potential, and then of space. My image of the grotto expands, becoming a cavern with sunlight streaming in.*

*There is a faint fear. My belly feels more full and rounded now, and the sense of liquid in it is becoming more still. I realize I am afraid of cessation. I notice a self-image holding itself rigid above the stillness, not wanting to let go fully, not wanting to fully absorb the pleasure, sweetness, drunkenness, yumminess of this pool inside me now—it is too close, too personal, my ego thinks. I will lose my capacity to stand above others. I'm in danger of the humiliation of being happy. Superego judgements arise: be more serious, be more sensible and sober. I return to the sensations, loving the experiences that emerge. Love is no longer an object in my awareness. It is just that the truth, reality, experience is delicious, beautiful. Interesting: suddenly my heart is feeling full too, and I feel fully here.*

## **THE ATMOSPHERE OF PERSONAL LOVE**

My initial intention in working with the atmosphere of Personal Love was to explore its potential for acting generally, not as a source for specific scenes but to “nourish the roots,” as David Latham would say. This is a different use of atmosphere to that proposed by Chekhov, who applied it to particular scenes. My idea was to move from atmosphere to personal presence, as a way to evoke and release organicity. The following exercise is my variation on Chekhov’s original formulation (1991, pp. 32-34).

### Exercise: Improvising in the Atmosphere of Love

Stand in the space so that you are aligned, relaxed and open. Let your belly and your breath be soft. Imagine that the space is filled with a beautiful sweet pink love. See it in the space between us, around us, filling the room like a soft, luminous-pink fairy floss, sweet and delicate. You might imagine situations which suit this atmosphere: a mother alone with her newborn baby, two lovers alone for the first time, whatever images arise, you just allow them. Imagine this atmosphere, this sweet love and tender appreciation. Most of all imagine it as a presence filling the space. Let yourself begin to breathe in harmony with it, and stand in harmony with it. Then begin to move in harmony with it, first your eyes, your fingers, small movements. Your movements radiate the atmosphere back into the space, and the atmosphere inspires your movements. Gradually expand your movements, make sounds, speak, let scenes develop, imaginary worlds you can create and drop, all in harmony with the atmosphere of sweet, delicate, fluffy, personal pink love.

We also performed some identifications with pink in the neutral mask, just as we would with any other colour, although the atmosphere was the primary approach. Similar qualities appeared in both cases: softness, innocence, delicacy, and a sense of integration. The actors moved with a powerful sense of smoothness and continuity. They reported feeling pliant and resilient, a sense of self-acceptance and absorption—sometimes becoming so absorbed that they forgot they were being watched. Like the Fool, working with the colour identification and the atmosphere evoked a sense of delight in the emerging experience, but without the Fool's sense of relentless energy pushing outward: it was a smoother gentler kind of experience than the Fool identification, although there was still a sense of expansion.

The following is my account of the experience of the atmosphere exercise, based on three performances of it over a three day period.

*2002. Wiseworld Studios. As I begin, I see images of a nursery, a beautiful imaginary childhood. There is softness in the space. It is very subtle, very flowing. I notice some fear, of making a fool of myself. And a fear of feeling love, of opening up that part of myself. As I begin to move I feel a sense of 'being together', and of 'coming together'. It is a felt integration, but it's personal. Integration is too technical-sounding a word for it: 'coming together' is better. There is also a sense of being carried. The flow seems to be taking me into myself, into a more complete, freer, more integrated sense of me. My movements are childlike in the sense that they feel loose but all-at-one, sensitive all over but not afraid, flexible and involved. There is, most notably, an absence of the seriousness, earnestness or self-importance I usually saddle myself with. I have no desire to make pretty pictures with my body, to be seen any particular way. I'm just playing.*

*I don't have the usual sense of the audience, like they are one big judge who I have to please. I feel that there is just a flow between us, without negativity. Imagine working in the theatre if the whole thing was not about judgement but simply about appreciating the richness of our world, creation, each other. Imagine being universally and unconditionally liked—that's the feeling. I feel liked, with no danger of not being liked, and this seems to affect my movements: they are smooth, free, without doubt, without concern.*

*The movement unfolds into something like a clown-musical. I remind myself of a friend who is a natural clown, who often seems to have no concern what others think of him. I have greatly missed this freedom, life, fluidity, self-acceptance, newness, and creation in my life. It feels so heart-stoppingly simple: love is Being itself in action. It makes no sense to seek the audience's approval or love, or even to seek an object, a beloved. I feel more constant as a subject, more complete and present. A line from Rumi comes into my mind: "Is the one I love everywhere?" It is a genuine question—curious, astounded, and joyous...*

*This question deepens my experience. I seem to drop into a place where I can be more real. I wonder: what do I truly love? What is true, to me? What is really, substantially true? What do I personally love? I begin to move in spirals, the movements swirling up from below: uplifting. It becomes a smooth*

*and rapid whirling, like a dervish. There is a sense of fearlessness, abandon. It starts to move into a kind of rapturous space, where I'm not sure of anything and don't really care. When I stop whirling, I find that I am still-in-movement, and my inner world feels substantial, like the presence of a solid enclosing wall—black, peaceful and very real. This is a level of experience I haven't had before.*

By the end of this exercise, I had forgotten about theatre and acting, lost the sense of the audience, of play. I lost even my familiar sense of myself. Nevertheless, there is something here for us as actors: the aesthetic integrity of my movements, freedom from the imagined judgement of the audience, flow, and play are all a part of the event, and each is important for the actor.

## **CONNECTING THE HEART, GENITALS AND EYES**

A third way of investigating love's potential for the actor also presented itself in the midst of the Wiseworld investigations. Having worked with the Fool for some time, I knew that it rarely moved in straight lines; it is all circles and spirals. As I became familiar with the sense of physical co-ordination and integration it brought, this sensation began to remind me of exercises from my training at VCA. In our movement classes we had consciously explored, through simple improvised movements, the connections between different parts of our bodies. The feeling of intelligent integration gradually evoked was similar to that evoked by the Fool. I began to think of the Fool and love as opening connections in the body, as if every part could communicate with every other part. Then, I recalled a particular teaching I had been given about personal love in the Diamond Approach: the loss of connection with this aspect was associated with a psychological, energetic and physical disconnection between the genitals and heart; sexuality becomes split off from the spontaneous flow of love, leading to conflicts between sex and love. Realising personal love involves reconnecting these centres.

I began to incorporate very specific circular movements of the head, heart and pelvis, into my warm-up. As I performed each movement I would attend to the kinaesthetic, emotional and energetic ripples in the other centres. I moved each centre with a sense of 'loose connection', because this leaves room in the body for the ripples to occur. This small addition to the warm-up strengthened the feeling of connection between the heart and genitals, and evoked a more complete sense of organic integration, as if pathways of communication were being laid down in the body, like an intelligent web. It developed into the following exercise, a variation on one David Latham taught me.

### Exercise: Connecting the Heart and Genitals

Stand in alignment with the eyes on the horizon.

Turn the head gently and slowly to the left, then down to the floor (the nadir), up to the right, over to the zenith, then come directly down the front to nadir then back up to the horizon.

Connect the movement to the breath, allow it to affect you: what do you feel? If images and associations arise out of the movement, what are they? Feel the ripples of the movement in the other centres.

Then make the same movement with the chest, as if looking with the centre of it. And then the same movement with the genitals.

Notice how you feel in your body.

Now, feel into the centre of your chest, into your heart. What feelings, rhythms and impulses are there? In harmony with these rhythms, letting the movement arise out of them, move the chest forward and back, just a little. Gradually expand the movement, without forcing, just allowing it to come from the rhythms that are there in the heart. Allow it to expand until it you are moving through the room. Allow any feelings or associations to be connected to the movement, but don't get caught up in them. Continue until you feel that you are moving fully and freely from this centre. Then come back to stillness in alignment.

Repeat this process with the genital centre.

Now feel the connection between the heart and the genitals. First, move one then the other: the genitals lead, then the heart leads. Then they begin to work in concert. It's like there's dialogue, or perhaps a marriage. Move in such a way that you can explore this connection. Allow the movement to expand—perhaps even to acrobatic levels—until the connection is very free, full and un-constructed.

This exercise mediates powerful experiences of organicity. Later, I found that other actors working with me also had strong experiences. They responded very positively to this exercise, and their experiences confirmed my own. They felt childlike, positive, adventurous, and their movements looked new, full-bodied, and full of life. There was a sense of juicy vitality, erotic without being sordid. Whenever I work with this exercise, the room attains an alive, thriving atmosphere and most participants comment on how much they enjoy it.

At times the process can become too internalized. The actors' eyes can glaze over, suggesting a loss of outward awareness, which is crucial if the work is to retain a theatrical dimension. I played with connecting the eyes for a few days, before suggesting this to the group as well. In my own work I discovered that my eyes needed simply to receive, not to be passive but awake. Joseph Campbell (1991a, p. 177) writes of the relationship between the eyes and heart in the medieval notion of *amor*:

For amor is neither of the right-hand path (the sublimating spirit, the mind and community of man), nor of the indiscriminate left (the spontaneity of nature, the mutual incitement of the phallus and the womb), but is the path directly before one, of the eyes and their message to the heart

He quotes the troubadour, Guiraut de Borneilh:

*So, through the eyes, love attains the heart:  
For the eyes are the scouts of the heart,  
And the eyes go reconnoitring  
For what it would please the heart to possess.  
And when they are in full accord  
And firm, all three, in one resolve  
At that time perfect love is born  
From what the eyes have made welcome to the heart (p. 177).*

For myself and for the other actors, including the eyes tended to evoke, initially, feelings of vulnerability and a fear of the highly delicate and intimate (non-physical) contact which becomes possible. Staying with the vulnerability and connecting the eyes again frees up the head, loosens defensive thoughts, and ushers in an exquisite quality of freedom, openness, intimacy, and life. The body is robust and vital; passionate involvement merges seamlessly with softness, smoothness and co-ordination.

*2002. Wiseworld Studios. I am aware that this new variation in exploration involves much more than personal love. Other aspects are present in the experience, other flavours and qualities are flowing in me. There is love, but also joy, intimacy, warmth, sensuality, merging, passion, fullness, personalness, autonomy and resilience. The relationship to the outside world is no longer one of encountering boundaries or even of rapture with objects, as it might be with the Fool, but of merging in a sensuous, smooth, energised, passionate intimacy. All sense of constructing the body disappears. I am no longer fighting the body, no longer controlling it. I am the body. There is a thoughtless, implicit, boundless, smooth acceptance. And there's love, a joyous sweeping love for being in movement, in this place, for being alive, even for the floor. It brings me again to a place of being very absorbed, of feeling melted and relaxed like a baby. When I rest, face down, I remember footage I have seen of Cieslak at rest during training exercises (Teatr Laboratorium 1972). I wonder if he was feeling something like this or something far beyond it. I notice that I am comparing myself to an ideal—my image of Cieslak—and that this is taking me out of the experience, bringing me to the surface. Noticing this, I relax into the flow again. Then in deep, fluid satisfaction and contentment I melt into the floor, merging with it. I am not thinking of love, or the Fool, or Cieslak or body-and-essence. These concepts are like the splintered debris of a shipwreck floating on the surface of a juicy, delicious ocean. I am doing, I am being—what's the difference? You could call it playing, you could call it moving for the love of it, but names are a travesty here—naming it is like trying to hang your hat on a rainstorm.*

## THE THEATRICAL POTENTIAL OF PERSONAL LOVE AND THE FOOL

The three exercises I have described above—the neutral mask identification with the Fool, improvisation in the atmosphere of personal love, and connecting the genitals heart and eyes—invoke different archetypes: the pink essence as atmosphere is a very specific state, connecting the centres involves a range of essential aspects as well as love, and the Fool belongs to a different archetypal language. But each in some way reveals the theatrical potential of love. I would like to now flesh out this potential more precisely, focusing on personal love and the Fool.

The last exercise did not include a specific theatrical dimension, as the Fool and personal love improvisations did, being grounded in mask and Chekhov's atmosphere exercises respectively. It is interesting that I began to think of Cieslak, and to let go of him as an ideal in that process, because Cieslak lived through Grotowski's movement away from performances into dedicated spiritual work, and became an actor without roles or a theatre (Taviani 2001). My emphasis is on essential experience with a specifically theatrical dimension so, while recognizing that it has some value as a warm-up and training exercise, I will leave the 'connecting centres' exercise out of my analysis.

Experiences of the Fool and personal love have a number of elements in common, each of which is widely valued in acting. Identifying with the Fool or improvising in the atmosphere of personal love evokes a release of the head as a censoring and controlling centre, bringing a kind of intoxicated *appreciation of the present living moment*, aiding in the "total bestowal of [the actor's] powers on the transient now" (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 151). There is no striving toward any perfection or ideal, but a sense of play and spontaneity. The Fool simply loves to move, explore, discover, and play in the world that is actually there before him, and the pink aspect carries the soul toward the truth that is arising now, without comparing it to some other more pleasant or idealised experience. ("I never understood what teachers meant when they would tell us to play," one actor told me, "but if I think 'do it with love' then I find myself playing.") The absence of comparative judgement and the appreciation of what is arising in the moment together facilitate a sense of deep absorption in the imaginative moment. This absorption appears easily and frequently in both cases.

There is in each a quality of *continual outpouring, continual flow and expansion*, a seemingly boundless capacity for creativity and innovation in rhythm, action and gesture, for revealing boundaries and going beyond them. Michael Chekhov wrote: "If I were to be asked what the most characteristic feature of our kind of love is, I would name its constant process of expansion. For it is not merely a state of mind. It is never static" (1977, pp. 23-24). As one Sufi teacher puts it: "The lover always says *still further I am*" (Bair 2002). The Fool, in its expansive outpouring,



comes up to boundaries and if possible moves *through* them. It is not that the Fool *wants* to go through boundaries; it actually loves to experience all phenomena fully in themselves. When it encounters a physical boundary, one that won't dissolve, like the floor, it doesn't aggressively try to destroy it, but has a playful love affair with it. As the Fool, the actor plays with the surface, appreciating it, feeling its texture, exploring its nature and potential in many different ways, beating out rhythms with it, composing rhythmic songs out of the meeting between her feet and the floor. If the boundary is one that can dissolve or unfold, the same kind of appreciation quickens the movement. Love is understood to work in the same way in Almaas's approach: when a student comes up to an internal boundary, such as a painful truth that has been resisted for a while, the method of inquiry mirrors or expresses the action of love. It appreciates and explores the resistance and even the pain—its texture, solidity, affect, shape, quality—not to get rid of it, but simply to appreciate what is presenting itself to consciousness, what is truly there. In a similar way, the imaginative world of the Fool seems to respond to the Fool's appreciation of its manifestations by transforming continually to reveal the next thing, which the Fool also completely loves and appreciates. In this way, love is the source of its inexhaustible inventiveness.

The Fool and love are both *rhythmic*; their expansive flow always has a strong rhythmic quality. It is like a pulsing, throbbing river of life, just as if, in the soul, love is the heart and life is the blood that surges through it. Some actors found that an improvisation became a continually expanding, developing dance. The rhythms can develop and accelerate to approach the rapturous, ecstatic excess of the dancing *yurodivij*, the holy fool, in Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*. The rhythm is never merely dance however; it is that the energy of the archetype itself pulsates and demands a rhythmic form. The dance is *necessary*, demanded by the exuberance of the Fool's love. Love is its justification, its inner content. In fact, in the state of the Fool, when the soul is experiencing Love, it makes little sense to speak of inner content and outer form: the energy and the form are the same thing. Love is not a cause or a result but the action itself. As Jean Berwick put it in a teaching session:

Creativity is the manifestation of love. Being in touch with love is the same as creativity. We tend to associate the energy and the movement with love and think the form is separate, but the energy and the form are not different. ... It is personal and universal at the same time.

Finally, both evoke a strong sense of physical and inner coherence—a sense of co-ordination and organic intelligence which, when it emerges fully, moves toward the grace we associate with great clowns like Chaplin. Love and the Fool can therefore be used to experience, embody and enact qualities that are highly valued in actors: lack of comparative judgement, absorption, continual expansion, a unitive positive affect (liking or loving, be liked and loved), rhythmic pulsation, and physical integration and co-ordination.

I should be clear that I am not saying that the Fool and personal love can be equated, nor that these two archetypes are the only way to access these qualities. In a discussion, Jean Berwick pointed out to me that the Fool seemed to express the yellow aspect, joy, as much as the pink. Essential joy is bubbly and delightful. It is another heart quality and so a Form of love. If I compare how pink, yellow and the Fool *move* in the neutral mask, the Fool contains yellow's bubbly rhythm as well as pink's smoothness. Both joy and love have sweetness, rhythmic pulsation, and the sense of intoxication or 'losing one's head'. So the Fool can be equated with neither. It is clearly very problematic to attempt to define an archetype in terms of another archetypal language, and I am not attempting to do this.

Jean also pointed out to me that all aspects of essence involve continual expansion. Looking at the qualities of the actions evoked by the Fool and personal love listed above, I realized that they are common to all essential aspects; experiences of essence in the Diamond Approach all involve an absence of comparative judgement, unity or non-duality, and positive affect, and they all bring the body into form in different ways. So some of the qualities I discern may be to do with being in a state of essence generally, and not specific to these archetypes, which might then be considered doorways to organicity. Yet the Fool and the pink essence can be distinguished from other aspects such as essential peace, strength, and will, and other archetypes like the Warrior and the Magician, in that they strongly *foreground* the qualities of rhythmic pulsation, play, light-heartedness, and the unity of action, impulse, energy and form, as well as the *appreciation* of all forms. These qualities do seem central for the actor: who must play with spontaneity, absorbed in a world of imaginary forms, unite her inner impulses and energies with her physical actions, and present all rhythmically, so that it is infused with life and musicality.

## **LOVE IS NOT A SUBTLE ARGUMENT: THE LION'S ROAR**

Ideally these qualities could infuse an actor's work independently of the content of the scene, just as behind every mask is the neutral mask, and just as the Fool in his journey of love, transforms into all the Arcana of the Tarot. For this to happen, the actor must be able to remember (to *re-member*, to put together again) the experience of being the Fool or love, and to allow it to infuse her playing no matter what the content. Each of the approaches above offers the actor the possibility of deep, psychophysical immersions in a state of organicity. As with the neutral mask identifications generally, something of the experience can carry through to performance through the depth of the personal, imaginative and physical connection the actor makes with a particular essence. The actor gets to know the state intimately and has easier access to it: her muscles remember, as Lecoq puts it (2000). This connection serves as an experiential reference point. She also learns through immersion in this state, discovering how she blocks it, what supports it and so on.

Yet, as useful as this immersion is, and however clearly these exercises revealed the potential of love for performance, I knew that more understanding was needed. The experiences above are approached through performance craft, but that does mean the actor can find the same quality in a different performance score. My experience with breathwork, meditation and the Diamond Approach, as well as the neutral mask, demonstrated time and again that profound experiences of essential states, even when they leave an imprint on the body, do not guarantee that I am able to perform in these states. One of my co-researchers reiterated this for me after her involvement in these exercises. She described how she warmed-up well before a performance, and attained a deep state of freedom and organicity, only to freeze up under the gaze of the audience.

Grotowski (2001d) warns against becoming caught in pleasant experiences and avoiding difficulty:

...most often the people who practice so-called 'improvisation' are plunged in dilettantism. ... For working on improvisation, one needs bloody competence. It is not goodwill which will save the work, but it is mastery. Obviously, when mastery is here, appears the question of heart. Heart without mastery is shit. When mastery is here, we should cope with the heart and the spirit (p. 297).

The question of the relationship of mastery and love is a complex one. Certainly, if my question is how to bring the essential aspect of love and all its qualities into performance, I am concerned with a kind of mastery.

But what form can the process of mastery take and what practices support it? Firstly, I would like to point out that Grotowski's understanding of mastery is intimately bound up with punishing physical training suited to men far more than women (Wolford 1996) and, as we have seen, a privileging of individual spiritual development over theatrical events. Secondly, I do not think an opposition between heart and mastery is necessary. I would draw the distinction between distorted love on the level of the personality, which feels like a sickly sweet sentimentality, and essential love which, if it is allowed to affect the soul, soon takes her to the difficult and terrifying experiences of the journey:

*The way of love is not  
a subtle argument. The door there  
is devastation.  
Birds make great sky-circles  
of their freedom.  
How do they learn it?  
They fall, and falling,  
they are given wings.* (Rumi 1996, p. 243)

I recognize that in the background of my work is the practice of Inquiry, on the one hand, and the mask on the other. Within my improvisations, therefore, although I used less defined and demanding physical vocabularies than Grotowski, there were specific frameworks that prevented mere indulgence from taking over: neutrality and Inquiry repeatedly realign one to the

experience of the love. My experience of working in this way was that it evokes deepening experience and access to the state. I am also aware that this process occurred for me in the context of my relationship with teachers who are themselves masters. The exercises I have suggested may be useful as part of an ongoing process of immersion, but I agree with Grotowski that such improvisations need to be married to specific, increasingly difficult challenges if they are to be more than mere experiences. These challenges can be physical, but the teacher can also challenge the student more directly regarding the authenticity with which she carries out an acting task.

The teacher's or director's capacity to discriminate *actions arising from and imbued with presence* from actions expressing ordinary knowledge, and their willingness to be truthful with the students about their perceptions appeared, in my experiences with John Bolton, Leonid Verzub and David Latham, to be far more important than the particular exercises used. (And if love is the action of Being, of presence, then what the teacher is discriminating is the presence or absence of love.) Sometimes a student can hear the teacher's feedback and attempt to apply it, but repeatedly fail to recognize the difference between being present and remaining safe on the level of the known. In these cases, I have seen all three of the above teachers extend the challenge to a profound confrontation, refusing to accept performances in which expansion and presence are absent. Hillman writes:

According to *Physiologus* (the traditional lore of animal psychology) the lion's cubs are stillborn. They must be awakened into life by a roar. That is why lions have such a roar: to awaken the young lions asleep, as they sleep in our hearts. Evidently the thought of the heart is not simply given, a native spontaneous response, always ready and already there. Rather, the heart must be provoked, called forth, which is precisely Marsilio Ficino's etymology of beauty; *kallós*, he says, comes from *kaleo*, "to provoke." "The beautiful fathers the good." (Plato, *Hippias Major*, 297b). Beauty must be raged, or outraged into life, for the lions cubs are stillborn, like our lazy political compliance, our meat-eating stupor before the television set. ... The more our desert the more we must rage, which rage is love" (1989, p. 304).

Such a "lion's roar" is very much a part of the tradition, and often linked to elements of love I have described above, or to beauty. Lev Dodin speaks of awakening the *pulse* of the ensemble:

Sometimes you have to have as strong a will to stir and release an actor's creativity as you would need to strangle it. I also get very upset when I see a production where the only pulse beating is that of the director, whereas the other thirty people who are on stage may also have a beating pulse; and these pulses united are not just thirty pulses, they are much, much more. It is like the notion of critical mass in physics, where this mass comes to a certain point and there is an explosion. We very often see that the fuel is used, but it doesn't burn (Dodin, quoted in Delgado & Heritage 1996, p. 74).

Lecoq speaks of awakening the student actor's poetic sense: "We must grapple with them if we are to lead them to a place of pure poetry. ... When they lack imagination we must goad them

with fantastic visions of beauty, with the madness of beauty” (2000, p. 23). “Roar, lion of the heart,” says Rumi “and tear me open!” (1996, p. 160).

This ‘roar’ is not purely instinctual however. I would argue that it is primarily an act of discrimination. I remember David Latham placing me in the centre of a circle and demanding that I execute one real action that affected my partner. He kept me in the circle for half an hour, asking the other students after each attempt, “Did he do it?” “No,” they replied, until, at my wits end, I stopped quoting my intellect with my body and actually *did* something. Like Herrigel’s Zen archer who looses a true shot, I felt like the day had begun. Phillippe Gaulier, a colleague of Lecoq, demanded that his students be present at the moment they began work, or they would have to sit down and watch for the rest of the class. For all the integrated complexity of Stanislavski’s system, perhaps his most famous pedagogical tool was to boom “I don’t believe it!” repeatedly from the director’s desk, even at the first moment of an actor’s entrance. I have seen John Bolton remain equally steadfast with students, refusing to blur the edges of his perceptions to let the student off the hook. With each unsuccessful attempt he would increase his energetic engagement. It appears to me that the teacher grounding their feedback in their own discrimination of presence and essence becomes a form of transmission: the student learns to recognize presence in herself and understands that the teacher is most interested in that dimension of her; she is challenged to work at a deeper level.

More than anyone perhaps, Leonid exemplified for me the quality of being ‘lion-hearted’. Leonid is the closest link I have to the Stanislavski system and yet his is the least obviously systematic approach I have encountered. In retrospect I can see that he refused to allow process, system or technique to stand above what he called “the living material” (we actors and Chekhov’s plays). He was transmitting to us, through the force of his passion, the living material he had digested from Chekhov, Stanislavski and his own teachers. His teachers were always ‘close’ to him: he referred to them often with obvious devotion. His words came to us blood-filled and pulsing, replete with the rich nourishment of his tradition and his fecund, flourishing imagination. With him, it was as if many elements—his unreserved passion for the theatre, his tradition and the artistic potential of each of us, his willingness to be himself warts and all, and so on—all played in concert, inseparable from the beating of his heart and the vitality of his soul. This seemed to have a direct impact on the feelings and the being of those who worked with him. John Bolton also told me that what allowed him to “push” his students (although to me it appeared that John did not so much “push” as simply refuse to lie about whether the student had accomplished the task in presence) was his memory of his own teachers being unwavering with him, and his deep appreciation of them for it. The personal, human confrontation seems crucial if the path of love is to be one also of mastery, and this confrontation is, I would argue, an expression of love, not least in its refusal to turn away from a boundary.

## THE PINK ETUDE IN PALACES IN RUIN

The question remained of how this exploration of love could be carried into performance, and of how to realize love's potential in a theatrical event. I explored this question in *Palaces in Ruin*. This performance, as I have mentioned, we devised from etudes on atmospheres of different colours. Personal love, or the pink essence, became the basis for an extended scene. The following account of rehearsal indicates the process of transforming the exercise into a theatrical performance.

*2003. Rehearsals for Palaces in Ruin. We have worked with colour in the mask and performed some identifications with the Fool archetype (which were not very successful). We begin to work with pink as an atmosphere, imagining the space being filled with a soft fluffy, sweet pink appreciation and adoring love.*

*At first, I direct the four actors to contact the quality individually, just moving alone in harmony with the imagined atmosphere. But, as usually happens with the Fool in mask, they soon begin to seek physical contact, in this case with each other. As they make contact, there is a weakening of the atmosphere, a retreat from its expansiveness, a binding of flow. The degree of vulnerability and intimacy evoked by the atmosphere is unusually strong, and it seems that physical contact intensifies it, and evokes defensiveness. I suggest that they begin with eye contact only and when the contact is real in the atmosphere, let it develop further. One couple begin playing like children, fearlessly, with a tenderness and intimacy free of cliché or showing. The other couple plays 'handsies'.*

*Through the contact the atmosphere deepens as if it is now a deeper shade of pink. I suggest to the actors that this is happening, and they seem to come more into their bodies, more into the moment. After a while I decide to follow this deepening further and see where it goes. I suggest that the atmosphere is now "pink honey." The actors start to play out lovers' scenes, as if lying together on a Sunday afternoon in the sunlight, quietly chatting, one's head resting in another's lap, in the garden after dusk. They appear completely undefended, authentic and smoothly spontaneously in communion with each other. They seem to have forgotten me. They seem so much in love, so intimate, and yet there is nothing distinctly sexual, and nothing sordid.*

*Watching it is very intense. I notice an impulse in me to interfere or stop it. I wonder why. I realize that I am afraid of such an intense intimacy, afraid of its power: my god, they might fall in love! They might start to take each other's clothes off! I notice these reactions and attend to what's really happening: they seem relaxed and happy; nobody is pushing themselves; nobody is transgressing appropriate boundaries. So I relax and stay with it.*

*The sound of their voices as they talk gently to one another is magical. I cannot understand what they are saying but their sweet murmurings carry a fine and buoyant music: an inimitable song of intimacy. This inimitability is such a fantastic quality, something I see often in the mask: a breaking through of*

*utterly new forms, rupturing the crust of category. When I see this it's like my breath rushes out of me into this rupture, this limen. It teases with the possibility that if my spirit was exhaled completely into that place, there would be no categories left, only light.*

*When the etude ends the actors are in raptures. They tell me it was amazing, fun, pleasurable, deep, "better than drugs." One actor tells us that she could smell roses and taste the sweetness. (This actor actually had some experience of the Diamond Approach and of working with the aspect of personal love, but smelling and tasting it is a new experience for her.) The impact on me as an outside observer was so powerful—emotionally, physically and imaginatively—that it seems strange that anyone would not smell the atmosphere, so palpably and intensely did love pervade the space.*

*We begin to transform the impro into a scene. We need circumstances as the basis for an etude. Images and ideas have been arising in me as I watch—justifications, worlds that this love might arise in—but they are not convincing me yet: what situation could possibly justify such a sea of intense and delicate love? The most obvious is that they are on drugs, but I reject this idea: our culture is so impoverished in its awareness of non-ordinary states of consciousness that any rapture is assumed to be drug-related, and I don't want to reinforce this mindset. Other images come: they're out camping, by a river, at dusk. The sunset is pink, the air is balmy, the silence is magical. Nature evokes such rapture, at times, perhaps.*

*We begin with this and I feed things in as they occur to me. Fireflies begin to buzz over them against the pink sky. The actors pick up my suggestions and follow them easily, and the atmosphere remains strong and palpable. I don't know where it comes from but, when they find themselves looking at a firefly that has landed on someone's shoulder, I say: "You notice it's a fairy; you discover they are all fairies." The actors don't flinch at all at this absurd suggestion. Without hesitation or censorship, the improvisation flows effortlessly into a hilarious scene: the discovery of a flock of pink fairies, who sing and dance and cause mischief by crawling down someone's trousers. When they leave, they leave behind fairy dust, which intoxicates everyone (we did not avoid drug connotations in the end, unfortunately). The fairy dust briefly turns one of the girls into a fairy herself—or was she just pretending? The line between fantasy and reality is so far gone it is hard to tell.*

*The scene is so believable, so effortless and rich and human. They are so immersed in the world that I am actually astounded. How can something like this work? The level of performance is realistic, not melodramatic or surrealistic. How can it be believable? When the impro finishes, the actors too are astounded, bewildered. They feel "trippy." There is much laughter and delight at the whole experience. How absorbed we all became! "My god that was so full-on!" one actor says, "I was actually believing in these fairies and wondering where they were coming from. It freaked me out."*

This became a central scene in our performance, worked out in great detail according to specific actions and 'what ifs' (circumstances). Although in public performance the scene, with its very precise form, did not have the intoxicating power of the initial improvisation, the qualities of absorption, belief, flow and communion remained. For many audience members, this was their

favourite etude. Leonid Verzub thought that the scene was improvised, despite the detail we had worked for in its composition. One audience member remarked that there was no way it should have worked—it seemed far too ridiculous—and yet it did: a believable, realistic scene in which four friends deal with a visitation by intoxicating fairies.

Reflecting on the process of creating and performing *Palaces in Ruin*, revealed, as I mentioned in the last chapter, my confusion over the relationship between the essential dimension (which manifested in a very full way in neutral mask and in the particular form of atmosphere improvisations I used) and theatrical elements like conflict, character and narrative. Theatrically, the most successful etudes in *Palaces* were those based on pink and grey (which I did not present as an essential quality, but as an atmosphere of heaviness, boredom and banality). In each case, the atmosphere was a player in the scene, an object with which the *characters* struggled—it overwhelmed, amazed or oppressed them—and this struggle was incorporated into the score of the scene in very specific ways, using the processes of Active Analysis. We eventually realized that the piece came to life as theatre when we individually identified with other colours in our relationships with the atmospheres.

Love had proven very useful as an inspiration for the content of one scene, and had inspired very playful and inventive devising and wonderful performances, but I had not really understood how love, or any of the other aspects of essence could function theatrically in all scenes. *Palaces in Ruin* was certainly an event marked by theatricality and by presence, sometimes at the same time, but it was in many ways unique and idiosyncratic in how the relationship between theatre and essence was structured within it. Character and narrative were not fully realized, and I was not sure what I had learned about creating an essential event with, for example, a Shakespeare or Chekhov play. I was no longer sure what that might mean. Also, I was not sure how much the show's quality of presence could be attributed to our attention to detail and my application of Active Analysis, which I was learning from Leonid.

As an individual actor, I felt that I could draw upon love on the pre-expressive level, engaging it behind the 'character', as it were. At times in my work with Leonid and in studio explorations, I felt that remembering love or the Fool could give my performance a sense of rhythmic vitality and creative expansion, a sense of play, and a quality of smooth, unbroken flow. Love did seem to facilitate a living communion with the imaginary objects and absorption into the 'transient now' of the imaginary world. But I also discovered, both in *Palaces in Ruin* and in subsequent work with Leonid, that the depth at which I and my co-researchers were able to 'do it with love' depended upon the clarity, logic, and integrity of the structure I was performing. A specific character made it easier, as did an unbroken, logical line of action in clear, specific circumstances. I loved acting more when these elements were in place. When I believed in my actions and could feel 'I am', the love was freed more fully.



Clearly love was an important and useful ingredient, but I needed more understanding in the area of craft, and how essence and the theatrical dimension interacted. In discussions following *Palaces in Ruin*, the actors reported the importance for them of the work we had done with Michael Chekhov's "Imaginary Centre" exercises, and how it evoked the theatrical dimension so easily and clearly. This element became more important in later studio work, eventually providing the key for the crystallization of insights described in the chapters that follow, which offer a new interpretation of the Stanislavski tradition, in which presence, essence and theatricality are more completely integrated.

## Chapter 7

# THE DIVINE SPARK: CENTRE, IDENTITY AND IMMEDIACY

The *atman* is the dancer,  
The inner Self is the stage.  
*Shiva Sutras*, 3/9-10

In the previous chapter, I described how I investigated the theatrical potential of love through immersion in studio investigations and the creation of *Palaces in Ruin*, as well as through critical reflection on these events, and how they were experienced by my co-researchers, the audience and myself. This investigation revealed that love could evoke useful and appealing qualities and capacities for the actor. It also brought forth novel variations on established exercises (incorporating the understanding of the Diamond Approach into neutral mask, movement and atmosphere exercises) which were effective in evoking deep experiences of organicity and essential love, as well as effective devising processes. But this ‘forward arc’ of the hermeneutic circle, as is expected in hermeneutic research, also exposed the limitations of my interpretation (put simply, that love was the key to a theatre of essence), raising questions about the relation between essence, and the theatrical dimension. The process of creating *Palaces in Ruin* also presented the seed of the next cycle of interpretation, however, because in our work with Michael Chekhov’s Imaginary Centre, which was a small part of our training and rehearsal process, I had glimpsed fleeting events that were both theatrical and essential, where patterned presence (essential form), character and dramatic conflict emerged together. I also saw moments like this in Leonid’s classes, although I struggled, initially, to understand the process through which they occurred. The crucial catalyst for my re-interpretation and further cycles of investigation was my discovery of this passage in Ramacharaka’s *Raja Yoga* (1934, p. vi):

The Yogi Masters teach that there are two degrees of this awakening consciousness of the Real Self. The first, which they call “the Consciousness of the ‘I,’” is the full consciousness of *real* existence that comes to the Candidate, and which causes him to *know* that he is a real entity having a life not depending on the body—life that will go on in spite of the destruction of the body—real life, in fact. The second degree, which they

call “the Consciousness of the ‘I am,’” is the consciousness of one's identity with the Universal Life, and his relationship to, and “in-touchness” with all life, expressed and unexpressed.

If the Imaginary Centre promised to be the point at which essential presence and theatricality intersected, in this passage I perceived a possible convergence of the visions of Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov and Almaas. This convergence became the foundation for further investigations in the studio throughout 2004, and for the findings presented in the remaining chapters. By excavating the influence of Ramacharaka, a spiritual source shared by Stanislavski and Chekhov, and bringing transpersonal theory and Almaas's psycho-spiritual perspective to bear on their work, I present a new interpretation, combining practical innovations and theoretical reflections, which explicates spiritual possibilities within Active Analysis that have not previously been articulated or theorized.

The key to this interpretation is that these practitioners share strikingly similar conceptions of the self, the common elements of which are succinctly expressed in Ramacharaka's passage above. Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Ramacharaka and Almaas each conceptualize a limited, superficial self, and two aspects or degrees of realization of the true ‘I’. The first self is called the ego, the personality, the everyday or egoistic ‘I’. The second is the “real self,” the two degrees of which are the ‘I’ and the ‘I am’. Stanislavski, Ramacharaka and Almaas all use exactly this terminology, although Almaas usually refers to the first true ‘I’ as the Essential Identity, the Essential Self or the Point, and to the second as the Personal Essence, or the Pearl. He writes: “The Personal Essence feels like ‘I am,’ while the Essential Self feels like ‘I’” (Almaas 1988, p. 267). It appears to me that Chekhov was clearly influenced by Ramacharaka, as were all at the First Studio. His concepts are slightly different, having transformed through his encounter with Steiner, but the ‘I’ and the ‘I am’ in Ramacharaka correspond, at least phenomenologically, to the “Centre” and the “Creative Individuality” in Chekhov's system (see Chekhov 1991).<sup>1</sup>

The false ‘I’ is associated with habit, the already known, and trivial concerns; it is more limited, more coarse, less real and less conscious than the true ‘I’, which is the centre of the self, but is also conceptualized as higher and deeper. Stanislavski for example, told his students: “...the trivialities of your lower ‘I’ [prevent] you from reaching that state of concentration in which your higher ‘I’, your creative intuition, is waiting for you” (1988, p. 191). The “egoistic I” must be renounced and the system is designed to bring about this renunciation (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 110, 115); its purpose is to help the actor contact the true ‘I’ which is the “innermost depths....the core” (Stanislavski 1961, p. 77). This “mysterious ‘I’” resides “deep in man's soul...in the centre of our being, in the realm of our inaccessible superconscious” (Stanislavski

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<sup>1</sup> Compare also Ramacharaka's account of the ‘I’ (1934, pp. 22-22) with Chekhov's description of the Centre (2002, pp. 7-8)

1961, p. 81). It is related to presence in the here and now, immediacy, significance, depth, mystery and the actor's talent.

In the next two chapters I will explore this territory, explicating various understandings of identity and personhood within the Stanislavski tradition. I will use key concepts from Almaas and Ramacharaka to draw new connections between Stanislavski and Chekhov, which illuminate the process of Active Analysis, and suggest new possibilities for acting and essential experience. This chapter takes up the theme of the 'first degree of awakening', the true 'I'. I focus initially on Chekhov's Centre, elucidating its phenomenological affinity with Almaas's Essential Identity on the basis of first hand accounts from my journal and studio experiences with my co-researchers. Almaas's vision of the psychological dimension of this aspect, in which narcissistic issues predominate, is then used as the basis for an exploration of how the Stanislavski system, and particularly Active Analysis, enacts or encodes an understanding of how the experience of the 'I' is evoked or blocked. These theoretical reflections clarify various practices in the Stanislavski system and Chekhov technique and give rise to new exercises for evoking and practicing the phenomenal qualities associated with the Centre and the Point. The next chapter explicates the relevance for the actor of the 'second degree' of awakening, focusing on Stanislavski's 'I am' and comparing it to the phenomena explored here.

## THE DIVINE SPARK

Chekhov introduces the Centre in the second exercise of *To the Actor*:

Imagine that within your chest there is a center [sic] from which flows the actual impulses for all your movements. Think of this imaginary center as a source of inner activity and *power* within your body. Send this power into your head, arms, hands, torso, legs and feet.... See that all the movements you make are actually instigated by that power which flows from the imaginary center in your chest.... Gradually, you will experience more and more of that strong feeling which may be called an actor's presence on the stage. While facing the audience you will never be self-conscious (Chekhov 2002, pp. 7-8).

He also suggests moving the Centre from the chest, where it bestows a sensation of an "ideal body," to other parts of the body, as an aid to characterization. The Centre can also change shape, texture, and colour. A change in the Centre creates a change in character, in the actor's sense of identity.

In the first lesson of *Raja Yoga*, on the 'I', Ramacharaka writes that the 'I' is "the 'Divine Spark' within each of us" (1934, p. 14) and that to realize it the student should

see himself as a great Centre of Consciousness.... Then will come to him a new strength.... He will be able to look the world in the face without flinching, and without fear, for he will realize the nature and the power of the 'I'. He will realize that he is a centre of Power—of Influence (p. 21).

In Almaas's work, the aspect of essence which functions as the centre of the self is the Essential Identity. It, too, is related to presence and a lack of self-consciousness, as well as being a source of impulses. Writing of the state of realization of the true 'I', Almaas writes: "The presence is the center [sic] of the self, from which all creativity, initiative and action arise" (Almaas 2001, p. 84). The Essential Identity is also the divine spark within; it is that point at which Being touches the soul (Almaas 2002, p. 161). It is perceived directly as a spark, a shining point of light. This is why Almaas refers to it as the Point.

One experiences oneself as a brilliant point of light, conscious and aware. Since one is a dimensionless point, one feels singularly definite, but with no sense of boundaries. The Essential Identity feels like a concentrated presence, a precious and pure presence of consciousness, with the characteristic of self and identity. The sense of definiteness, singularity, uniqueness and preciousness are so lucid and complete that it is not possible to appreciate without having the direct experience. Visually one might see some beautiful image like the image of a brilliant star. But this hardly conveys the profound feeling of significance of the experience (Almaas 2001, p. 141).

The experience of one's true identity as a radiant point of light is not confined to the Diamond Approach. The *stillpoint* in Christianity and the *atman* in Hinduism, both manifest as a pinpoint of light that is the both centre of the self and the true 'I' (Almaas 2001, pp. 442-455).

The Essential Identity is the archetype or Platonic Form of identity. The Point affects the consciousness in definite, palpable ways. It brings specificity, focus, authenticity and spontaneity (related to a lack of self-reflection). One feels a sense of freedom, lightness, joy, excitement, a playful and adventurous attitude toward life, and an appreciation of one's own preciousness and uniqueness. One can also feel indestructible and completely authentic. There is a sense of being a definite living presence, a lucid, singular and radiant point of awareness (Almaas 1988, pp. 270-277). As with Chekhov's Centre, the Point's 'natural home' is in the chest, but it can appear anywhere in the body or even out of it, in any colour.

*1999. A session with my teacher. I feel that I need something. Jean asks what I need. Love. I need love. But it is more than that. It is like the love as the whole point of everything—not just a wave of love but the love-point. Jean says "let yourself want that." I think "ok" and a deep wanting opens up right through the core of me. I feel that nothing else matters. I say this, sobbing deeply. A few times Jean says "Really let yourself want." I say "I feel like I'm going to burn up with it." Jean says "Let it burn you up." I say "I don't even know what I want really. But I want it more than anything else ever, because it is the only thing that matters." Nothing makes sense without it.*

*I felt the heat flaming through me like a jet-stream, it moves along my spine and then into a hot point on my chest. I feel my body opening. I feel the painful absence in my chest. The flame increases in intensity to an impossible degree and then, suddenly, I am aware of something in my chest. I sense it, rather than seeing it, as if it is hidden in a fold in the fabric of my inner images. It's not an image: it exists. In comparison to it, my body is unreal, an image. Amazing! It's just there. It's too small to be*

*an image. It's too small to get involved in all my stuff. I begin to laugh uncontrollably: "It's insane!" Jean laughs too for a while, but I can't stop. I say "It's like a huge cosmic joke. You search and search and yearn and yearn and then what you find is the tiniest—nothing, and that satisfies!! THAT solves the problem!" I laugh so long and hard that Jean asks if I am alright.*

*After a while, Jean directs my attention back to my body. I feel light and good, joyous. Soon, I am much more peaceful. I feel like I don't have to climb a mountain for humanity any more. Jean says "That must be a relief." I say "Yes, but it's as if the person who would be relieved isn't here. All those problems, they are just problems. They don't have any final reality. I kind of know this, but to really feel distant from them is different." This is odd to think of—how that rather small thing was so utterly significant and effected me so strongly. Odd to think of the duality of it too.*

*Afterwards, I feel totally different. My body feels good, light. It is ok to just sense it. I feel a real freedom in the sensing. The first effect of the Point's appearance is to relativize all my problems and concerns, so that they appear, at the moment I first discover this new experience, to be very funny. It reveals how mental I usually am, because the experience is not mental: the speck is "too small to be an image" and more substantial than a concept. In the rare moments when it appears after the session, I find I can function fearlessly, because it gives me the feeling of being timeless and indestructible.*

When I experience the Point, it makes sense of Chekhov's Centre. Although my work with the Centre is not as intense and distinct as my initial experience of the Point, neither have any of my subsequent experiences of the Point been so dramatic, and the experiential similarities are unavoidable: both the Point and the Centre are the centre of my identity; they are distinct, specific, radiant presences, that give confidence and a sense of excitement, of *being here, now*.

Just as Chekhov's Centre provides the capacity to shift my sense of identity, by identifying with imaginary characters, the Point "provides the capacity to situate one's awareness in any form or dimension of Being" (Almaas 2001, p. 147). It gives us the capacity to *identify*, and is the source of the feeling of identity in the personality. When, in the Diamond Approach, the student realizes this aspect, she is able to feel not only "I have Essence"—which has become accessible earlier on the journey—but also "I am Essence." She feels it as her own nature and identity. With Chekhov's Centre, the identification does not shift to a different dimension of Being but to a different character.

## **THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE IMAGE**

The most important psychological issues connected with the Point are those of narcissism, as it is understood by ego psychologists like Kohut, Mahler and Kernberg. These issues include: feelings of alienation, meaninglessness and insignificance, self-centredness, self-consciousness, a pre-occupation with how we appear to others, the need for constant feedback to bolster a feeling of self-esteem and significance, a distorted sense of our capacities, feelings of being

helplessly false and lacking in authenticity, and extreme emotional reactions (such as uncontrollable rage) to not being seen and appreciated (Almaas 2001, p. 4). Almaas believes that narcissism exists to some degree within every personality, not only those with severe disturbances. He has found that, as his students approach the experience of the Point, many narcissistic issues arise powerfully before largely disappearing when the student experiences and integrates the aspect. For this reason, he sees “the narcissism of everyday life” as an absence of self-realization: “Narcissism is the condition that results when the self identifies with any content of experience to the exclusion of the awareness of its fundamental Being” (Almaas 2001, p. 36).

The contents of experience with which we normally identify, largely unconsciously, are self-images based on past-experience. Object relations theory has shown that “all ego structures are based on identifications with impressions from the past” and therefore, if narcissism arises from alienation from awareness of its Being—which is presence and so *not* an impression from past experience—“ego cannot be devoid of narcissistic traits” (Almaas 2001, p. 26). The self- and object-images which are related to identity are gradually integrated in ego development into a coherent self-representation.

This self-representation is then taken to be the self (Almaas 2001, pp. 49-61). The self-representation, and the behaviour associated with it, correspond to the “lower ‘I’” of Stanislavski and the everyday personality of Chekhov. Awareness of the Essential Identity, which is a centre of presence, is obscured by identifying with self-images, which are based in the past. These self-images, and the self-representation as a whole, are not simply mental pictures, but are actually based on the body image. They are inseparable from the physical impressions of past experience and our reactions to them. It is the self-representation that is effaced by the neutral mask in its demands to release the character armour and do all as if for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

When the Point first arises it may be perceived, paradoxically, as an object. One may feel: “I have a true ‘I.’” The student may actually see the luminous spark in the heart. But this is only one stage of the process of its realization. The embodiment of the aspect follows, as the student begins to take on its qualities:

When one is completely being the Essential Identity, the experience no longer takes the form of being or seeing a point of light. The sense of size disappears, even the feeling of identity disappears. Self-realization becomes a matter of being, purely being.... There is a sense of simplicity and innocence, of just simply being. It is not a matter of being oneself and knowing this by reflecting on the experience of oneself. There is no reflection on the state, no desire to analyse it.... It is being prior to conceptualization (Almaas 2001, pp. 345-346).

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<sup>2</sup> One of the few articles published on the neutral mask demonstrates that one of its main psychological effects is to place stress on the body image (Turner 1981).

The following account suggests how such a shift can occur while acting:

*1997. I am in a workshop with a teacher in the Lecoq tradition. We are playing a game, improvising, and suddenly I find myself playing the father at a country wedding, looking at my daughter. The teacher asks me to sing to my daughter, whom I am losing forever. As I start to sing I become self-conscious and I begin to construct myself, to try to control how I am seen. He picks up on it straight away, ruthlessly, and directs my attention back to my daughter, suddenly I come into the scene, feel emotionally moved and vulnerable, naked. The response is that this is the right way. I realize that from that place, I can't see myself, so I can't control how I am seen. It's terrifying but I have shed a feeling of stickiness, and I feel more clarity; I'm a more honest presence. I am still aware of myself, but not as an image.*

A similar juncture is traced with all essential aspects: a particular aspect is frequently perceived as an object in the inner vision. Joy, for example, can arise as a yellow, bubbly presence. In the process of integration, as the student develops the capacity to become joy fully, it disappears from view. As one comes to embody it, it is no longer seen within, only expressed. The student is able to act from its perspective, *as joy*. This is sometimes experienced and conceptualized as a descent of the aspect through the centres: when joy arises in the belly centre we are able to simply be joy. Ramakrishna, the famous Hindu saint, recognized that this transition is in some ways a loss. "I want to taste sugar," he said "not to become sugar" (quoted in Grof 1998, p. 27).

Lecoq, I think, saw the danger of wanting to "taste sugar." He warned against the danger of looking for "self-enlightenment" in acting and asserted: "There should be no sense of the body...feeding parasitically off what it should be conveying" (Lecoq 2000, p. 67). When the actor realizes that truth of the Sufi adage 'what you are looking for is doing the looking', she no longer sits rapt in her own reflection.

*2001. Working with a friend trained in Lecoq's tradition on finding my clown. "Make us laugh," he says. I do some stupid things. No response. "It's boring," he says. "Make us laugh." I try all kind of tricks and strategies and continue to fail miserably. I want to disappear into a hole in the ground, but I keep having to try to be funny, to be a funny person. Eventually, after half an hour of work that leaves me sweating with shame and terror, I accept that I'm doomed to failure: there's nothing I can do to make him really laugh. I can't really control how he sees me. I do the next exercise, anxious about failure but resigned to it. He laughs. Success! I think that I have found something and I try to keep it in the next moment. The laughter stops dead. He gives me another task: "Walk across the stage and slip on this banana peel." I'm mortified. How absurd! But there's no escape; I just do it. He laughs himself silly, but I don't feel good about it. I, the actor who wants to be adored, am getting nothing, no "narcissistic supplies," as Almaas would say. Why is he laughing? I have no idea. He can see something I can't. He is seeing something funny that I can't see and it's me. As soon as I think I see it, he stops laughing. Why this feeling of humiliation? I have no control and huge anxiety. I feel so stupid*



*and the stupider I feel the more he laughs. Hilarious. Later he tells me “Your clown—he’s so smart, and so anxious” and doubles over laughing again.*

*During the work and afterwards the sense of immediacy is amazing. I notice everything around me. I feel much more in the midst of the world, which is brighter, closer.*

*In this work, I felt more naked and vulnerable and exposed than I ever have before. Not in my very deepest breathwork sessions confronting death, nor in work with Jean, have I every felt such a sustained confrontation with my pride and egotism, my vulnerability and helplessness. I wonder about ‘great directors’ and ‘holy actors’ who never make comedy: who makes the greater sacrifice, the martyr or the clown?<sup>3</sup>*

*I remember a comment David Latham made after one of our final year performances, a tightly choreographed, expressionist piece. He said “You all need to learn how to die out there. What you need to do next is clown.”*

We also find the disappearance of the image in the mask work. In the process of identification the actor will first make a personal connection with the image, whether it is Fire or Blue or jelly, then *feel into* its central quality and allow that quality to play through the body and breath in little ways. Then, in the mask identification itself, the image becomes secondary or disappears from view. Connecting the image with the breath and body is a little rehearsal, a warm-up, in which the actor partly sees the image, and partly becomes it. In the mask however, the duality between impulse and actor, image and mask, is greatly lessened or disappears completely. The release of the image as object often marks the crucial shift in ‘finding the mask’. John Bolton’s actors were almost unanimous on this point:

*I start with a visual image so I can get the rhythms, but then I just sort of sink myself in and lose the visual image.*

*I find images get in the way.*

*I’ve never had an image of an ocean, or anything like that. Because that means you’re thinking while you’re doing it. Which is not really how it should work, I think.*

*Instead of seeing with my eyes, I was seeing with my body. I wasn’t picturing it and adapting my body to that picture.*

*It’s deeper than imagination—more like instinct.*

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1994, p. 166): “The jester can plug into the mentality of the people much better [than a monk], and if he or she is a good jester, then he/she is able to convey wisdom by using very simple methods of expression.... Maybe it is better to be a jester than a monk. A monk tends to be sanctimonious, and that is a danger of spirituality.”

*When it's too visual it takes me out of myself.*

Working with the Centre in *Palaces*, the cast and I discovered that, once its qualities are felt, it is best to let go of the image. It is even possible, as with the mask identifications, to *imagine without an image*. This direct leap is in some ways better. It avoids an inward focus that cuts off the actor from contact with the space around her.

*2003. In rehearsals for Palaces in Ruin. We are working with the Centre. I am guiding my co-researcher-actors through Chekhov's exercise and I realize that they are looking inward, at themselves. Working alongside them, it occurs to me that we need to look outward from the Centre.*

*I try it. The Centre in my chest begins to feel like it is not just the centre of me, but also the centre of the room, of my whole world. Imagining light, energy and impulses streaming out from my chest, insights occur to me: the Centre is how we are here, it is by the Centre that we perceive. The light from the Centre is "the light that sees, not the light that is seen" (Inayat Khan 1999, p. 114). I stop trying to see the Centre, and perceive it more by being it, by feeling in touch with it. This brings the sensation of contact with everything and an insight: the Centre is how we contact the space and our partners.*

*I lead the actors in this direction, and once they have a sense of it we have a great time contacting each other through different centres: a woman who sees the world through her contracted backside meets a man who sees the world through his knees. She's all tight and right and wrong, he's all free feeling and free will. It's dramatic even if they just look at each other.*

Michael Chekhov also recognizes that the self image must disappear, but for him it is the disappearance of the character image. The actor

*has given to his image his flesh and blood, his ability to move and speak, to feel, to wish, and now the image disappears from his mind's eye and exists within him and acts upon his means of expression from inside him. This is the whole aim of the creative process (Chekhov 1991, 155, my italics).*

This phase of Chekhov's process is associated with the emergence of the "Divided Consciousness," when the actor becomes the observer of his own work, and the "Higher Ego" takes possession of the material the actor has created in the preparatory phase.

For Stanislavski, the disappearance of the self-image is the moment of the emergence of 'I am', at which stage the actor changes, in her imagination, "from the place of observer to that of active participant."<sup>4</sup> In order to do this she must shift her attention from herself to what is surrounding her: "You no longer see yourself as an outside onlooker, but you see what

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<sup>4</sup> Carnicke recognizes the connection between this moment in Stanislavski's work and Chekhov's, and cites both as examples of *experiencing* (1998, p. 108).

surrounds you.” This condition is inseparable from the “feeling of being” (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 25-26).<sup>5</sup>

*1992. In rehearsal for the Gentleman Caller in Williams’s The Glass Menagerie, I discover that to avoid the contracted, unpleasant feeling of watching myself act, I have to do everything I can to bring the character’s world to life—devouring photos of the era, books written then, filling out all his inner and outer objects, his dreams, the expectation of others, his memories. Every time I focus on ‘the character’, I lose the easy, definite feeling of being there.*

For Stanislavski also this is the moment of inspiration, when ‘something other’ comes into the performance.<sup>6</sup> In his work, the strength of the state of ‘I am’, the feeling of being and “actual presence” in the circumstances of the imagined world go hand in hand with superconscious feeling (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 12, 27), just as for Chekhov the disappearance of the image is the moment of the full emergence of the Creative Individuality, Divided Consciousness and inspired acting.

Although the next chapter focuses on ‘I am’, I would like to make one point about it here, in relation to the character-image. Benedetti, drawing on accounts of Stanislavski’s last years of work at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, describes the ‘I am’ as “the point when the borderline between me and the ‘character’ is blurred...” (1998, p. 9). Accounts of the state of ‘I am’ are scant in Stanislavski’s own writings, at least those in English and Benedetti has a great advantage of being able to read Russian well, so he may have good reason for this formulation. Nevertheless the fullest account I have been able to find in English, in the first part of *Creating a Role*, differs from Benedetti’s description. Here Stanislavski does not write of merging between the actor and the character. He writes that ‘I am’ “is the point where I begin to feel myself in the thick of things, where I begin to *coalesce with all the circumstances* suggested by the playwright and by the actor” (Stanislavski 1961, p. 26, my italics). If we think of ‘I am’ as being mainly a merging of actor and character, we think of it in terms of self-image and character-image, and this would be incorrect and may block the emergence of the feeling of being. The crucial point is that ‘I am’ emerges at precisely that moment that the character image disappears.

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<sup>5</sup> Although the writing I am quoting here (Stanislavski 1961, Part I) comes from the stage of Stanislavski’s work apparently dominated by ‘round-the-table analysis’, this document clearly emphasizes the inner imaginative process that the actor conducts alone. In this inner preparation, the actor imagines herself within the circumstances of the play.

<sup>6</sup> Stanislavski and Chekhov are speaking of different stages of the process. In Stanislavski, ‘I am’ marks the end of the first third of rehearsal. In Chekhov the emergence of the Creative Individuality is the culmination of the whole process. I will discuss these differences in more detail in the next chapter.

## FINDING AND FORGETTING YOURSELF IN ACTIVE ANALYSIS

This point is crucial because this understanding is carried through into Stanislavski's final explorations, including Active Analysis. We might say that the Stanislavski tradition contains an implicit understanding of the relation between the self-image and the true 'I'. Its methods point to a recognition that the true 'I' is presence (immediate, in the here and now) without self-reflection, and that the egoic 'I' is sustained by both self-reflective inner activity and external affirmation. Active Analysis enacts this understanding in three main ways: by focusing on immediacy, on the state of 'here, today, now'; by consistently refusing to engage in the actor's attempts to shore up their own self-image; and by redirecting the attention of the actor away from her narcissistic self-obsessions and toward engagement with incredibly rich and detailed evocations of the problems of the character. The way these problems are imaginatively structured also shows a precise understanding of the narcissism of the ego, and replaces this narcissistic ego-activity of the actor with the narcissistic inner action of the character. This section will consider these three elements of Active Analysis, in relation to the 'I'.

Carnicke tells us that "'Here, today, now,' resounds throughout Stanislavsky's writing" from the period when he was working with Active Analysis (1998, p. 156), and Merlin writes that the power of this process is its "immediacy" (2003, p. 35). As early as 1920, Stanislavski recognized that "The most powerful objectives are those that have the quality of immediacy"; these objectives "engage the whole organism and take possession of the actor's feelings" (Stanislavski 1961). Active Analysis demands of the actor that she be present, that she *be here now*. In other words, the actor must begin work with her true 'I' and not the egoic self. (I am not saying that the actor has to be self-realized; the presence that characterizes the true 'I' can be present to different degrees.)

Lev Dodin also puts great emphasis on immediacy and authenticity. He contends that he took from his teacher Boris Zon (a student of Stanislavski in the period of Active Analysis) not so much acting methods but a sense of "the endless capacity for life of something alive" (Shevtsova 2004, p. 38). Aliveness and authenticity are the two central and strongly linked concepts in Lev Dodin's approach, in which authenticity has nothing to do with photographic realism. It is as central to the making of a postmodern fantasia like *Claustrophobia* as it is to *The Cherry Orchard* and it is inseparable from immediacy and presence. As Shevtsova interprets Dodin, "something is 'authentic' if it is felt in the moment and done precisely as it is felt" (Shevtsova 2004, p. 38).

There are different approaches to this presence. One is akin to the approach taken in neutral mask by Lecoq, and has long since become a part of theatre lore, in Australia at least: actors are taught to 'leave their everyday self at the door'. This approach seems to originate with

Stanislavski, who told his actors to free themselves of all their preconceived notions and to shed the coatings of their private life at the door of the studio (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 120). In fact, Stanislavski and neutral mask work seem to approach similar states of being through different methods. In the mask, actors find neutrality by shedding their personal idiosyncrasies and all preconceived notions, and arrive thereby at a state of inner calm, in which they have access to universal actions and essential qualities. They become the mask who lives outside time, for whom there is only the present. Similarly, in Stanislavski's system:

The first thing an actor must do on entering the rehearsal room is to shed all the ties that bind him to his private life. ... A feeling of great calm must fill his heart.... Here in this 'now', there exists no other life than his creative life; here is only the powerful life of his spirit... (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 150).

This "purge of the conditional" results in "nobility" (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 200). The neutral mask was also known as the noble mask.

In the mask and Active Analysis, therefore, the connection between shedding the self-image and coming into the present is recognized. Almaas writes that "the veil of personal history is the self-representation" (Almaas 2001, p. 63). So when Stanislavski tells his students that in the studio they must forget their everyday concerns, and when the actor puts on the neutral mask, which has no past and does everything for the first time, both are strategies aimed at presence, at being 'here, today, now', which is exactly the feeling of the Point: "A brilliant point of presence and awareness takes form in the endlessness of space, with the inner recognition: 'I am here now'" (Almaas 2001, p. 345).

If one path to this immediacy is to shed the everyday self, via the mask or by awakening the Centre through the imagination, another approach is apparent in the work of Lev Dodin and the actors of the Maly. Dodin speaks of the "training of the heart and nervous system" so that the actor is able to spontaneously receive and respond to the nuances of the living moment (Shevtsova 2004, p. 39). He speaks to his actors of the importance of the self and of having access to their spiritual life during rehearsals, but *this does not seem to involve any shedding of self*. Instead it emphasizes immediacy *and* personalness. The *etudes* "always involve the actors' personal sense of something...as he or she perceives it in the given moment" (Shevtsova 2004, p. 51). This quality of responding to the circumstances authentically, anew, is maintained even in performance, to the point that the actors will sometimes vary the staging according to their response on the particular night (Shevtsova 2004, p. 69, 129).

That such an approach is an intrinsic element of Active Analysis is confirmed by Knebel, she considered that Stanislavski's purpose in introducing this device was "to harness the living immediacy of [the actors'] responses to the creative process and thus attain the subtly integrated and unconstrained improvisational expertise that he had striven to attain all his life" (Polyakova 1982, p. 352). Merlin indicates how this might look on a day to day level:

Because the research [of Active Analysis] is always ‘Here, Today, Now’, the actors took stock of their personal frames of mind each night, noting if they were tired, preoccupied, ill, or just not in the mood. This state then served as the first piece of information, from which the necessary adaptations could easily be made” (Merlin 2003, p. 34).

This is not “leaving the self at the door” or “shedding the personal”; it relies upon coming from the personal—entering presence not through a process of letting go but of *recognizing and allowing where you are*.

Such an approach is more akin to David Latham’s process: the actor works through the personal to the universal depths. It also mirrors Inquiry, in which ordinary knowledge, associated with the personality, is embraced in the broader context of basic knowledge, which is presence, and in which the student does not attempt to bring about a particular state but ‘finds out where she is’. Almaas conceives this in terms of becoming aware of one’s centre, of where one is centred. He calls this ‘following your personal thread’ (see, Almaas 2002, pp.150-173). Building on Almaas, we can see the process of cultivating immediacy in Active Analysis in terms of Chekhov’s Centre. That is, once the actors have worked with the Imaginary Centre and clearly experienced its qualities of presence, specificity, spontaneity, adventure and so on, it is possible to draw upon this experience and vocabulary to reveal another way of becoming present, as in the following exercise.

Exercise: Discovering the centre, or finding out where you are at

(This is my development of Michael Chekhov’s exercise, developed during training for *Palaces in Ruin* and in subsequent studio work. It should follow clear and effective work with Chekhov’s Centre exercise which I quoted earlier.)

There are two ways of entering the right state to begin work, of becoming present. You can leave behind all your everyday trivial concerns, and imagine the centre of presence and awareness coming into your chest, and in that way become truly ready to play, or you can completely accept where you are, be aware of it and acknowledge it, and come from there. You can *find out where your Centre actually is*. Maybe you are shitty as hell, maybe you are terrified, or bored, or you’re in love. Whatever you feel, wherever you are at, you start where you are. You could think of Jack Nicholson, who seems to me to be someone who always works from ‘where he’s at’.

Notice where you are at. Feel for where your Centre is. Now, come from there. Begin however you want to, move or don’t move—whatever expresses where you are at. Express it as fully as you can without departing from yourself. As you move, you may find that you shift, your Centre goes somewhere else. Just let yourself be changed. And fully explore or express wherever you find yourself.

After some progress has been made with this exercise, I will incorporate music, which shifts the Centre and encourages play.

The difference between this exercise and Chekhov's is quite marked. The Centre feels more real and definite when it is discovered rather than imagined, and so doing this exercise reveals how successful the actor has been in the first exercise, whether or not she has been able to really shift her Centre using her imagination. In this second version, the actors will usually feel a much greater sense of authenticity, and the room becomes imbued with deep feeling. Shedding or bracketing everyday concerns seems to lead to a more impersonal quality of presence, one less infused with the fullness of feeling. On the occasions I have used this exercise, the studio took on an atmosphere like those I remember in David Latham's classes: there is a feeling of autonomy; everyone is able to be themselves equally. Wherever they are at, whoever they happen to be today, their state is accepted and appreciated, and becomes the starting point of their creativity.

Once this exercise has been experienced, the Centre and 'where you are' become living concepts that can be applied to performance tasks such as character mask or rehearsal. These simple phrases become a technically specific language. For example:

*When you look at the mask, it shifts you. You still come from where you are, but where you are is different, because the mask has shifted you.*

*Don't try and shift your centre—just go through the sequence of actions and see where it takes you.*

Extending the notion of the Centre in this way helped me to make sense of a particular aspect of Leonid's work: he seems to be able to perceive where you are centred when you do not know yourself. In class, his demonstration of shifting his own Centre was stunning in its clarity and specificity. As he moved it to the tip of his tongue for Mercutio, to the tip of his saber (actually his finger) for Tybalt, to his penis for Romeo we saw entirely different Leonids, with entirely different energetic structures—still Leonid, but now Mercutio-Leonid, Tybalt-Leonid or Romeo-Leonid. He clearly has an acute sense of where an actor's Centre actually is and also *where it is able to go*. He told me that the most important thing as a teacher and director was to recognize "the material" you had to work with, meaning the actors and the kind of transformations they can authentically make. If you tried to wear a daily mask with Leonid, he would ignore it and begin work with where he felt you *authentically* were. He repeatedly demonstrated an uncanny ability to find a connection between the actor's state and the circumstances of the character. At times he would use unusual and extreme strategies to shift us—becoming angry, bawdy or bewildering. We would often know where he wanted us to go, and try to be there, but he frustrated all attempts to *fake* the movement of the centre. In other words, he frustrated all our attempts to *act*, as we commonly understood it. As soon as the shift

happened however, he would instantly drop his strategy. “*Am! Am!*” he would say “Good! Excellent!” Often the actor would look perplexed because they hadn’t done anything: Leonid had moved them.

One of the comments often made in our group was “This work doesn’t seem to be about acting at all!” Leonid derailed all our attempts to project an imagined image of the character. All work had to be ‘in our own person’. If we began to ‘act’ as we understood it he would tell us “You came in very well!” (i.e. before we started to act the scene), or draw attention to any action in the scene that was free of narcissistic posturing. “You read well. You sat well. You are sitting very well now,” he would tell us, as we sat listening to his critique, staring blankly back at him in complete confusion. In retrospect it seems that Leonid was drawing attention to those moments when we were not watching ourselves but were truly in communion with an object, free from self-consciousness. These were exactly those moments when we felt that we were not acting anything.

After these etudes, Leonid would deflect our requests for some advice about how to perform better. Instead he would entice our attention away from our self-image into the world of the play, painting emotionally rich and poetic pictures of the character’s situation and problems, full of concrete details, inspiring aspirations, human problems and specific obstacles (Knebel’s major book, not yet translated into English, is titled *The Poetry of Pedagogy*). After this, we would play the scene again. If we asked him for feedback on our acting, he would often say something like “If you want to be a good actor you should learn how to suffer well!”

*2003. A rehearsal of Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters, with Leonid. Playing Yepikhodov, the scene where I throw myself at Dunyasha in Act 3 of The Cherry Orchard. Leonid tells me that Yepikhodov just wants a sign from her, anything at all. He keeps piling more circumstances on me, more tasks. I play it and I finish feeling fragmented, humiliated, desperate, ashamed, unsatisfied, impassioned. I think I’ve done a terrible job, although there was much laughter from those watching. Leonid likes it. Later it occurs to me that I assumed that my feelings were to do with my acting, but it makes sense that this is how I would feel in Yepikhodov’s situation. It might not be about me, about the one who wants to be seen as a good actor.*

Part way through our year of work we attended a festival of student theatre in which two of our classmates were performing. At this stage most of us were completely at sea with Leonid’s classes. We did not know if we had learnt anything at all. We must have seen fifty or more actors perform that night and we realized to our amazement that our two classmates were *doing something distinctly different from every other actor* (I am not saying better, but *different*). Neither of them projected any performance, neither did anything for show. They had no ‘little plus’, as Stanislavski would put it. Yet they were simply, organically alive on stage, relaxed and responsive



in their muscles. I felt, watching them, that there were human beings on the stage, and that I could relax and be human myself. How had this happened? Interpreting his process in the light of the Centre, I contend that Leonid, by frustrating all our attempts to turn ourselves into actors, by the poetry of his pedagogy, had made us forget ourselves. If the disappearance of the self-image is the culmination of Chekhov's process, and marks the arising of 'I am' in Stanislavski's earlier imaginative approach, then my interpretation is that Active Analysis *begins* with the *disappearance of the self-image of the actor as an actor*.

For me, in his capacity to build worlds that entranced us all, Leonid expressed the archetype of the Trickster. The Trickster is related to the Fool but also combines elements of the Magician. In the neutral mask, it combines circular movements with surprising diagonals, whole body locomotion with complex gestures, naivety and wonder with knowledge and creativity. The Trickster figure in mythology is often the creator of the universe, but also a part of the universe: he builds a world which then traps him and often turns against him. He both tricks and is tricked by others. His created illusions, his tricks, often, like his own body, turn against him. He is the immanent creator, the uncreated presence, caught in the brilliance of his own creativity but never completely, because he never forgets the illusory nature of the world, or his ability to transform it. He is the shapeshifter who can never be pinned down and is defined by his very elusiveness. He knows the ways of others because they are part of him, and delights in the joke of his own suffering and lowliness. He slips easily across categories, or dissolves them: he can be at once male and female, wise and lowly, sacred and profane (Combs & Holland 1990, Campbell 1991b, Mazis 1993, Singer 1995).

In the neutral mask, the archetype is approached, as usual, through personal memory.

#### Exercise: Identification with the Trickster Archetype

Trickster: Remember a time when you were the queen of chaos, a prince of disorder, when you played the edge between chaos and order perfectly. You might have been messing with someone's mind, playing a practical joke, dancing around a topic in conversation. A time when you played things on a knife edge and really enjoyed it.

(The rest of the preparation follows the pattern described for the Fool.)

From this simple preparation, the many complex elements of the trickster archetype usually emerge. Actors will fight against their own bodies, take delight in disaster, enjoy their suffering and the suffering of others. Everything is a game but the more the game is played the more it traps the player, and this is in many ways the task of the actor (and the director): to build a world that traps her, that forces her to respond as if true, a world that seems alive, that has an effect. She remains aware of the illusion, but creates that illusory world so fully and so brilliantly that she becomes caught in it—she treats a child as if it is a stick, creating the illusion it for

herself and the audience, and then the stick turns against her, becoming sick, dying; she feels real pain and cries real tears, but always enjoys the joke.

In our work with Leonid, the two sides of the Trickster were contained in the roles of the director and actor, with Leonid playing out the Trickster as creator, who builds the world, and we actors playing out the Trickster as participant, who knows the world is not fundamentally real but who experiences it as alive, and cannot help but act *as if* it is alive. I think Leonid placed such emphasis upon awakening our imaginations so that we would be able play both roles for ourselves, to forge a living environment with our bodies and imaginations so that when we saw our beloved in the play, we would not think of how to act but how to hide the pounding of our hearts that their presence has provoked.

My interpretation of Leonid's process as deliberately geared towards making us forget ourselves is not simply an attempt to impose some order on the chaos of working with him. The few texts that are about or influenced by Active Analysis in English specifically articulate a similar logic. Irina and Igor Levin's *Working on the Play and the Role*, drawing on Tovstonogov and Katsman, demonstrates how in Active Analysis the conflict between characters and their objectives are always based on how the leading character (the one who initiates the conflict) *sees herself* or how she *sees the other character* (Levin & Levin 1992, pp. 26-27). The objective is reformulated according to narcissistic logic: *I am maintaining my ego identity by attempting to be seen and appreciated for who I think I am, for a self-image*. The useful thing about this approach is that the more fully this process is engaged and realized, the less attention and energy that actor can give to maintaining their own egoic self-images.

Declan Donnellan's *The Actor and the Target* (2002) can also be considered an addition to our understanding of Active Analysis, because although he does not name his approach as such, Donnellan acknowledges the profound influence on him of the actors at Lev Dodin's Maly Drama Theatre, with which he has had a long association. His understanding also has a clear affinity with the approach the Levins describe (the Maly actors studied at Leningrad Theatre Institute, where Irina Levin was also a student). Donnellan contends that acting cannot be taught, that it is part of our nature, but it can be blocked. Actors usually express the state of being blocked in a limited number of ways (he offers eight) such as "I don't know what I'm doing" and "I don't know who I am" (Donnellan 2002, p. 11). These different problems are all inseparable facets of the state of being blocked, like the legs of a spider.

For Donnellan, the problem for the actor is that these statements give much attention to the 'I' and none to what he calls the *target*. He does not think that knowledge of the 'I' is truly possible or even useful for the actor, but he recognizes that the usual identity is maintained by an active process driven by a constant concern with how we are seen (Donnellan 2002, p. 103) and that this process blocks our engagement with the here and now: "I can see things, or I can try to

control how things see me. I cannot do both at the same time” (Donnellan 2002, p. 83). Stanislavski echoes this when he says that the “life of the human spirit...cannot be ‘exhibited’; [it] can only be produced spontaneously or as the result of something that has gone before. One can only feel them [sic]” (Stanislavski 1988, p. 288). We cannot ‘exhibit’ something that is not an object. We cannot exhibit our true ‘I’, only a self-image. The self-image of the actor must disappear: “For the actor, we are what we see” (Donnellan 2002, p. 54).

He offers advice on how the actor can forget herself by finding the target. The target is what Stanislavski calls the object. The world of the character into which Leonid drew us is, in the terminology of the system, made up of inner and outer objects. Donnellan’s approach is a very detailed and specific analysis of how we are blocked by attention to the everyday ‘I’ (the actor as object) and freed by our attention to the objects that comprise the world of the play, which are dynamic, specific and transforming. Donnellan’s view here recalls Stanislavski’s discovery of the “exceptional importance of the part played by the *object* in helping me to get into the state of ‘I am’” and the importance he placed on “living” and “animate” objects (Stanislavski 1961, p. 27).

It is Donnellan’s brilliant contribution to realize that the actor cannot avoid the narcissistic machinations of the ego, and to show with great clarity and in detail how these machinations can be placed in the service of creating a new ego-identity, that of the character. To facilitate this, Donnellan distinguishes between ‘I’, about which it is not useful to ask questions, and ‘me’, which is a useful starting point. ‘Me’ refers to the self-images when they appear as objects. ‘Me’ is not the centre of the consciousness, but the many, ever-changing images the character has of herself: Shakespeare’s Juliet sees herself as a madwoman in the tomb, for example—that is, as an object, a target. She is in dynamic relationship with that target. She fears it and wishes to avoid it (Donnellan 2002, p. 117). The target or object can therefore be a self-image. It can also be what in ego-psychology would be called the object-image (what Juliet would like Romeo to be, or not be) or anything that Juliet is in contact with. Donnellan understands that Juliet is constantly creating ‘who Juliet is’ by presenting the image of Juliet that she wishes to be seen (by Romeo for example) and hiding the image of what she does not want to be. The actor can then identify with the character by doing ‘what the character does’ to maintain her identity. Donnellan’s advice therefore depends on an incisive and detailed understanding of how the ego of the actor works, and of the role of objects and self-image in maintaining the ego identity.

In Donnellan’s terms, then, I would say that much of Leonid’s brilliance lay in building targets for us. But the language is not quite right, because ‘target’ does not appeal to the feelings. We might say that Leonid, the director-Trickster, built *worlds* designed to appeal to each actor’s specific nature, traps for the feelings and imagination, tailored to seduce the real person before him into tearing her face away from the image in the pool (the image of herself as an actor) and looking outward again. “Forget yourself!” Eleonora Duse told the young Eva Le Gallienne, “Forget yourself! It’s the only way!” (Le Gallienne 1973). In summary, I am arguing that Active

Analysis encodes a detailed and specific understanding of how to forget your everyday self and act from your self-as-presence, with immediacy and authenticity. I am also suggesting that this understanding is entirely congruent with spiritual understandings of the 'I', object relations theory on narcissism and Almaas's synthesis of both, and that understanding Active Analysis in these terms clarifies its logic and coherence.

## **THE POINT, PLAY AND THE PRE-EXPRESSIVE**

I would like now to take this hermeneutic of the 'I' one step further and relate it to what Eugenio Barba calls *pre-expressivity* and, through the pre-expressive, to play. Pre-expressivity "deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is, with how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention..." (Yarrow 1997, p. 1). It is not related to the content of the scene as much as it is to the means of communication, to the particular underlying form through which the forms or actions of the specific performance are most powerfully communicated to the audience. In this sense it is also related to play, in Lecoq's sense, and to theatricality.

In Stanislavski's system, the inner creative state or the creative mood serves as an underlying layer. In his later work Stanislavski spoke more of 'here, today, now' than of the inner creative state. Both denote a state in which the actor can begin to do creative work. Shevtsova points out that the idea that there is a state "of psycho-physical-spiritual fusion understood to be the necessary condition for performance" (Shevtsova 2004, p. 40) still holds sway with Lev Dodin, as it does with many others. This necessary or underlying condition is associated with at least some of the qualities Almaas ascribes to the Point, the Essential Identity, the true 'I', such as identity, presence, spontaneity, aliveness, specificity and focus. Although these states are usually described by Stanislavski in psychological and phenomenological terms, "in the System [sic], 'the life of the human spirit of the role' is continuous with 'the life of the human body' on stage. In short, inner content (emotion) is inextricably linked to outer form (action)" (Carnicke 1998, p. 148). These underlying conditions must therefore have a physical component.

Chekhov writes not of a underlying state but of the "requirements of the profession," the first of which is "the extreme sensitivity of body to the psychological creative impulses" (2002, p. 2), which recalls Dodin's "training of the heart and nervous system." Many of Chekhov's exercises aim at awakening the body to a condition of aliveness, expressiveness, and sensitivity; they cultivate numerous qualities that the actor's movement must have in any dramatic form or situation. Among these are the feelings of ease and form, and mastery of composition (akin to musicality), which includes rhythm, tempo, energetic preparation and sustaining, crescendo and diminuendo. In *To The Actor*, the exercises for developing these qualities follow on from the

experience of the Centre and in some cases are connected to it (Chekhov 2002, pp. 7-10). From Barba's perspective, Chekhov's exercises pertain to the pre-expressive level.

Barba (1991, 1995) attempts to ground his analysis of the pre-expressive, and therefore the creation of presence, in *bios*, in purely physiological terms, relating it to "extra-daily" movement elements such as a "dilated" and "decided" body, a precarious balance of tensions and so on. The 'same' sequence of actions can demonstrate pre-expressivity or not. For example, I can point at you in a daily manner, or I can point at you with an open, relaxed body with a clear form in a position of precarious balance. From the point of view of Chekhov's technique, I could point with a feeling of form and ease. My point could ride a preparatory radiation of energy before the movement and a sustaining one afterwards, and it could have a clear and rhythmic crescendo and diminuendo. Chekhov works with image, sensation and energy, whereas Barba describes only the concrete, physical dimension, and for this reason he has been criticized as materialist. John Martin (1997) points out that although Barba "formulates beautifully all these elements... [and] although he has been observing all this for years and years, he refuses to, or is incapable of, formulating a training to pass on this knowledge. He leaves it all hanging in the void, not absorbed or integrated even into his own actors."

Barba's avoidance of the non-physical very likely contributes to the lack of integration of his understanding into practice that Martin asserts. He does not seem to consider that presence may be a discernable phenomenological reality, which can be concretely experienced by the actor, and that the movement qualities he observes may arise as a result of a powerful manifestation of presence. If presence is considered to be a cultural construction, a concept that can be communicated by material signs alone—which is exactly what, from my point of view, presence is not—then it makes sense to retreat to a materialistic explanation and description. But through this typically postmodern manoeuvre, Barba traps himself on the surface and forgoes the possibility of speaking directly and simply on the level of experience. It is possible that to think, teach and direct in this way leads to the actor taking on the explanatory concept as a self-image; that is, she reifies herself, and so prevents the direct experience of presence. Yet it is possible that it is exactly this direct experience that will harmonize and vivify the pre-expressive elements Barba has so astutely discerned. Michael Chekhov suggests as much: the more elements the actor switches on (feeling of ease, preparing and sustaining, and so on—notice that all the elements of Chekhov's technique are felt qualities, not specific forms), the more likely she is to experience "inspired acting." When this central light illuminates, all of the other elements light up automatically, as inseparable aspects of one gestalt (Chekhov 1991, p. xxxv-xxxvii). Martin also suggests that non-material elements are crucial to the arising of the pre-expressive, to presence in performance. He speaks particularly of two: "alert playfulness" and "joy," which is his translation of the Sanskrit *anand* (Martin 1997).

That there is an intimate relationship between pre-expressivity, presence and spirit is acknowledged by Ralph Yarrow in his introduction to two issues of the *Contemporary Theatre Review* devoted to “Presence and pre-expressivity” (Yarrow 1997). It is much more useful if we take “presence” in this case to be a phenomenological and ontological fact, a real event, and an experience, than to view it as a cultural construction. It allows us to engage the actor’s and audience’s own experience without explaining it away or denying its possibility. It allows us to ask if perhaps pre-expressive movement in its full form might require the arising of a particular quality of presence, or can perhaps serve as an invocation of this presence.

I think that pre-expressivity, while it cannot be identified with a particular aspect, might be related to the excitement, playfulness, adventure and specificity of the Point, and I wonder if the elements Barba describes might come alive and crystallize for the actor through the Point in the same way that biomechanics did for me through the Fool and personal love. The effect of the Point on the body is to give it a sense of lightness, freedom, aliveness, exuberance of expression, and specific form—think of the movement of a child at eighteen months, as she attacks the world with a feeling of excitement and invincibility, even grandiosity. Also, consider that the Point is not a particular identification; it provides the soul with the *capacity to identify* with any level of being or essence, and also to disidentify from the personality or self-image. A child can therefore demonstrate the above movement qualities while it is playing at being mother, a tiger or Luke Skywalker, just as a performer can demonstrate pre-expressivity while playing a commedia character or Hedda Gabler.

In Almaas’s understanding, the essential aspects are available to us in childhood but we gradually lose touch with them as the personality develops. Different aspects dominate consciousness at different periods, supporting the child’s development. The Essential Identity is the most prevalent aspect during what in ego psychology is known as “the practicing period,” when the child is around 12-18 months old. At this time, as Mahler describes it,

the world is the junior toddler’s oyster. ...the child seems intoxicated with his own faculties and with the greatness of his own world.... The chief characteristic of this practicing period is the child’s narcissistic investment in his own functions, his own body, as well as in the objects and objectives of his expanding ‘reality.’ The child concentrates on practicing and mastering his own skill and autonomous...capacities. He is exhilarated by his own abilities in his expanding world and quasi-enamored [sic] with the world and his own grandeur and omnipotence.

Almaas, after quoting this passage, comments: “We could not have described the experience of the Essential Self [Identity] more eloquently” (Almaas 1988, p. 271). Those who have worked or trained in an acting school might also find, if they substitute “acting student” for “child” in the above passage, a very apt description.

On the physical level, this experience is marked by an excited, playful and creative exploration of one’s own physical potential. Almaas writes: “at the beginning of its realization, this aspect has a

dynamic quality, an excitement and activity similar to the child running around full of activity and joy” and so “locomotion [is] part of the development needed for its full manifestation” (Almaas 1988, p. 273). Grotowski writes that “Organicity is linked to a *child-aspect*. The child is almost always organic. Organicity is something one has more of when one is young, less of as one gets older” (Grotowski 1997, p. 91). Embodying the true ‘I’—at least at some stages of development and in some situations—is related to a greater physical responsiveness and expressivity than embodying our everyday self, our personality. You could say that our everyday self goes with daily expressivity and our true ‘I’ goes with pre-expressivity.

This would be to approach pre-expressivity, play, theatricality and composition from the opposite direction to Barba, which is exactly what Stanislavski and Lev Dodin do. For Stanislavski “there are no laws of composition when there’s life. ... The most important law of composition is: the greatest possible amount of truth, the greatest possible amount of vitality. The rest will follow naturally” (Polyakova 1982, p. 316). For Dodin, authenticity in the theatre is the “‘living life’ of performing, that is, of *play* itself” (Shevtsova 2004, p. 38). Dodin told Maria Shevtsova “that the theatre plays what ‘in life, would have happened in another rhythm, on another nerve, and in another plastic expression’” (Shevtsova 2004, p. 40). He seeks a union of theatricality and aliveness, and that theatricality is sought not through a codified system of movement like biomechanics, but through the authenticity of the actors, through their capacity to be responsive and creative in the transient now.

In my experience, the more clear, intense and luminous one’s sensation of presence as ‘I’, the more accessible and desirable the pre-expressive qualities of playfulness, specificity and openness become, and the more the actor moves toward embracing the theatrical dimension. The body begins to long for specificity, freedom, release and the dynamism and adventure of precarious balance, because these express the Point, one’s own potential, in a clear and harmonious way. Extreme expressiveness might not always be appropriate to the situation. Self-realized individuals generally don’t move like commedia dell-arte actors, but the commedia dell-arte actor is responding to the truth of the theatrical situation, which offers the possibility of freely expressing particular range of the human potential, through a created, imagined situation. To be authentic implies different behaviour in different situations. Stanislavski’s feeling for truth is a feeling for stage truth: it encompasses the imaginary and the actual situation, and is inherently playful. For the Point to manifest in the theatre means to engage in an adventurous, spontaneous, moment-to-moment exploration of the potential of theatre. The next chapter will return to these themes in greater depth, in the context of exploring Stanislavski’s ‘I am’.

The following exercise, developed during the research, with which I now begin many rehearsals and teaching sessions, show how the experience of the Centre opens into theatrical play. My presentation of the exercise is from the perspective of my own experience, rather than as direct instruction. Leading others in this exercise would require following the unfolding experience of

the group closely and allowing the instructions to develop in collaboration with that unfoldment.

Exercise: Imaginary Centre, Point and Play

I begin by becoming present. I bring my attention to the here and now, focusing awareness within a small circle just broader than my body. I sense my feet and legs, my hips, my torso, my chest, my arms and hands, my head, my breath, my heart beating in my chest. I notice what emotions are present, what thoughts, what impulses to action. I look for a sense of touching each thing I am aware of, a sense of contact: am I letting myself be touched by things?

I expand my circle to include the other actors, to include the room. I try to sense their insides, their inner world. I extend my field of attention to touch each object in my awareness. I expand it to include the world outside—imagined conversations in the supermarket down the street—then worlds beyond this one: heaven above and hell below.<sup>7</sup>

I reduce the circle of attention back down to the room, then to my body, to just what's here, now. I feel for a sense of presence.

I feel for my centre, my 'I'. Where am I now? I do this intuitively. Maybe I'm deep in my unconscious, ahead of myself, drifting away. Wherever I feel I am, I invite my Centre into my chest. I feel myself arrive. I am really here. I imagine it as a speck of light, a radiant condensed spark of presence and existence: I am specifically, unmistakably, indestructibly *here, now*, in this space. The spark in my chest, my presence, is how I am aware of everything.

My presence fills the space. But I'm not thinking about presence or space.

From the centre, I begin to move—broad, expansive movements. *I* move. There is nothing automatic, no inertia. Everything is new. I move only for the experience of being.

I try to make every movement *specific*, to make sure it has a specific ending, a specific beginning, a specific rhythm, quality, and energetic arc. ("Generality is the enemy of all art"—one of Stanislavski's famous aphorisms!) As I do this, many of Chekhov's elements 'light up': preparing, sustaining, crescendo, diminuendo, the feelings of significance, form and the whole.

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<sup>7</sup> This is based on Stanislavski's perennial "circles of attention" exercise. Leonid began many classes with it, as did Katya Kamotskaya during Merlin's training in Moscow (Merlin 2001, p. 106-107).



Every movement lets me be here in a different way, every movement transforms my sense of myself. Different flavours and feelings flow with every new gesture. I am not working to impress anyone. I am not ‘working’ at all. I am *being*, exploring all the possibilities of my being. I’m like a little kid who’s so full of himself, so excited about being in the world, I can’t wait to express the next thing, which is the same as discovering the next thing. I am a *play of being*.

Soon I feel all kinds of possibilities and I want to explore them all. All the possibilities of interaction with the other actors: how I can use their rhythms in relation to my own, how our relations in space make greater meanings and bring more subtle feelings. All the possibilities of my presence/centre: who am I when it is high above me, in my knees, in my bum, in my groin, bouncing in front of my eyes? What happens if I contact a partner with my Centre dangling there? What relationship exists when she has her Centre in her hips like that?

It is interesting to consider the above exercise alongside two other passages. The first is a Hindu guru, talking about the experience of the *atman*. The second is from a conversation with the cast of *Palaces*:

Know yourself as you are—a mere point in consciousness, dimensionless and timeless. You are like the point of the pencil—by mere contact with you the mind draws its picture of the world. You are single and simple—the picture is complex and extensive. Don't be misled by the picture—remain aware of the tiny point—which is everywhere in the picture” (Nisargadatta Maharaja, quoted in Almaas 2001, p. 450).

*2003. In discussion with the actors weeks after the project. I ask them: where is the Centre in the mask? They all agree: nowhere and everywhere. I remember Meister Eckhart: “God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”*

## CONCLUSION

The interpretation I have developed here is not intended to be reductionist. The various concepts I have explored each have their own nuances within their specific contexts. This interpretation emerged through the encounter between my unfolding practice in the studio and the various perspectives I have explicated here. As I attempted to understand the various approaches and visions in myself, some of these experiences and their concepts began to coincide at certain points in my experience and working processes. Like overlapping constellations that share some stars and not others (the stars of Orion’s Belt are also the base of The Saucepan), Ramacharaka, Almaas, Stanislavski and Chekhov, converge at one star which they variously call the Centre, the Point, the ‘I’, ‘here, today now’, immediacy, and authenticity. This particular star occupies one place and one (multi-faceted) meaning in the universe of my

work now, while retaining its nuances of meaning with the other differently constellated contexts.

This *co-incidente*, apart from giving rise to the new practices I have described and bringing clarification to Active Analysis and the Stanislavski tradition, is also a point of convergence of essential presence, and theatricality; the Point is a timeless centre of essential presence. Moved to a particular place in the body it creates character. Allowed to remain its own place, it brings an authenticity and realism to the performance. The connections I have drawn here offer many avenues for further research, particularly in the area of pre-expressivity, theatricality and play. The Centre is a key to essential and theatrical performance but only one element; for the actor, as for the spiritual adept, it is the 'first degree' of attainment. In the next chapter, I explicate the meaning of the second degree, and the convergence of theatrical and spiritual themes upon another concept: the 'I am'.

## Chapter 8

### **'I AM' & THE PERSONAL ESSENCE**

Working with the Centre, in the expanded sense I have given it in the last chapter, is an effective approach to working in presence and with theatricality. The Centre can also give the performer a sense of fearlessness, playfulness, creativity, excitement, spontaneity and freedom. Our work with Leonid certainly included these qualities at times, but there were many others that characterized the performances, and processes that did not make sense in terms of the Centre. For our performances under his guidance were marked by fullness, personalness, and substantiality, and by an organicity that seemed deeper and more relaxed than we had attained in *Palaces in Ruin* or my studio investigations. The confrontation of my understanding of the Centre with the experience of Active Analysis with Leonid demanded a fuller interpretation, a more complete understanding, and an investigation of the meaning of the second degree of awakening of the 'real self', the 'I am'.

For Stanislavski and Chekhov, a psychophysical state infused with the qualities of the Centre is the appropriate place from which to *begin* work, and although the presence of the Centre (or 'here, today, now') should infuse all stages of rehearsal and performance, it is only one facet of the work: both of them describe a further development. For Stanislavski this is the state of 'I am' and, for Chekhov, the experience of divided consciousness and the conscious experience of the Creative Individuality.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will elucidate the meaning of Stanislavski's 'I am', drawing again upon Almaas's phenomenology and theory of an aspect of essence, the Personal Essence. The connections I draw between Stanislavski's 'I am' and this aspect then serve as the basis for a new interpretation of the theatrical dimension of Stanislavski's work, which I compare to the more overtly theatrical approaches of Lecoq and Chekhov. I argue that Stanislavski's approach is inherently playful and theatrical, but his preferences for qualities associated with the Personal Essence—contact, fullness, personal-ness, autonomy and truth—underlie his uniquely demanding process, and ultimately evoke a different quality of theatricality.

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov's terminology overlaps at times. Sometimes he writes of the Creative Individuality as one facet of the "Higher Ego" (Chekhov 1991, p. 15-19) and at other times he uses the terms interchangeably (Chekhov 1985, 2002). I will use "Creative Individuality" to refer generally to both. The distinctions Chekhov draws at some points do not affect the interpretation I offer here.

Again, I would like to stress that I am not identifying Almaas's 'I am' with Stanislavski's in a way that attempts to efface their nuances and the different contexts in which they appear. But I am using Almaas to illuminate and re-constellate Stanislavski, to re-interpret his system in ways that foreground its potential for the creation of essential theatrical events, and so explicate the clarifying distinctions that have emerged through the hermeneutic process of this research.

## **'I AM' IN STANISLAVSKI AND ALMAAS**

I have already described how the state of 'I am' occupies a central place in Stanislavski system, that it is synonymous with *experiencing*. Yet Stanislavski's presentation of 'I am' is elusive, complex and multidimensional, and develops in subtle ways over the course of his life, shifting in relation to the new devices the system generated as it evolved. As a synonym for experiencing it is related to "inspiration,' 'creating,' 'creative moods,' the activation of the subconscious" and it "expresses a totality that cannot be broken down into component parts" (Carnicke 1998, p. 107). At times 'I am' is identified with the inner creative state (Stanislavski 1961, p. 34) and in fact it may be useful to think of Stanislavski's initial central concept, the creative mood, developing into the more complex concept of the inner creative state, and then into the multidimensional and elusive 'I am'.

In so far as 'I am' is synonymous with the creative mood, the inner creative state and experiencing, all the elements of the system feed into it and are inseparable from it. In this respect 'I am' incorporates relaxation, circles of attention, public solitude, communion, sense of truth and so on—all the elements that are contained within experiencing. As with the inner creative state, if any element of it is disturbed or missing then all the others are affected and 'I am' is lost. But 'I am' also integrates all these qualities with the specific content of the role (the particular through-line of action in the particular given circumstances for the sake of a particular super-objective).

When Stanislavski first introduced the term 'I am' in 1914, he claimed that entering this state was "the initial, crucial problem for the actor" (Benedetti 1999, p. 224), and he maintained this position in his final formulations of the system, in which the first third of rehearsal is devoted to attaining this state, (Stanislavski 1961, p. 254, Benedetti 1998, p. 107). The most important aspect of the first stage of this work, one which is continually refined, is "laying the physical rails"—finding those physical actions that are logical and believable in the circumstances, in the sense that the body accepts the sequence as organic: "Logic, consecutiveness, truth, faith, set in the state of being 'here, today, this very minute' is now further grounded and fixed.... All this taken together produces the state of 'I am'" (Stanislavski 1961, p. 254). Once it is established, it serves as the foundation of all further work, and "the 'sincerity of emotions' can grow in an organic, natural way. ... All this work will continue, be developed, endlessly enlarged until he is

in full contact with his role” (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 24-43). In his final formulation of the system, Stanislavski describes how this expansion occurs in three stages, finally bringing the actor into contact with the audience and the theatrical dimension (Benedetti 1998, pp. 6-12).

*1992. At VCA, rehearsing Jim, the gentleman caller, in The Glass Menagerie. Early in rehearsal, the director does an improvisation with me on ‘putting someone at ease’. By good fortune it goes well and I connect deeply with the basic action. For many weeks after this, the director’s time is taken up with the other scenes and I am able to work alone. I begin to go over the line of physical actions of my role, following the process Stanislavski describes at the end of Creating a Role (1961): I act out the sequence of simple actions and I flesh out Jim’s world (the circumstances). I go over the physical line of the scene many times, letting the circumstances (the inner objects) fall into place slowly and organically. I pare away all that is false and unnecessary, searching for more truthful behavior, behavior that I can believe in. After many of these etudes, I begin to sense ‘I am’. I can feel my feet on the floor, I breathe naturally and appropriately without thinking about it, I know where I am, who I am. I can be in the imaginary situation, make choices there. I feel myself standing in that world.*

*In rehearsal I notice ‘I am’ disappears at one point: when I remember Laura from school. The director wants me to stand up at this moment. I can’t justify it; I don’t believe it. I go to David Latham for help. He listens to me describe the problem and asks me “Where do you breathe?” I notice that I breathe in just before I stand up. He says “I think the thought comes earlier, maybe when he first sees her.” I try it out: when I first walk into the Wingfield’s apartment I think “where do I know you from?” The question enters with the breath and stays within, a living inner object, until it is answered, and it is then this energy that justifies standing up. After this there are no major breaks in my sense of truth—although the work remains far from complete.*

*In performance, I am looking at the world of the play—the back alleys of St Louis, my memory of the World Fair in Chicago, myself in the future as an executive in radio—but I’m not looking at myself as an actor. I feel in touch with what surrounds me, in touch with myself, but without seeing myself. I feel like anything could happen in the scene, and I could react to it as if it were in the world of the play, or not.*

*The performances take place in a studio that is a barely converted warehouse. On the back wall of our ‘stage’ is a sliding door. One night, at a delicate moment in our scene, the door slides open and a security guard stares in past us at the stunned audience. He closes the door, and the scene continues without any disruption to its rhythm. We don’t react. He wasn’t in our world. He didn’t seem as real as Laura, as the fresh smell of (imaginary) rain. The feeling of being extends through the world of the play. ‘I am’ touches and fills out all objects, inner and outer. To think in terms of separate objects is not accurate now: there is simply a seamless living world.*

The experience of ‘I am’ is very different to ‘here, today, now’. Just as for Ramacharaka the ‘I am’ is an expansion of the ‘I’, Stanislavski’s ‘I am’ is an expansion and filling out of the

experience of the transient now. If the feeling of the Centre and 'here, today, now' is immediacy, then the feeling of 'I am' is a fullness of being an actual presence. It has the quality of immersion and being in touch with the concrete things surrounding you, inside and out. All the elements of the system begin to be felt fully as part of a single gestalt: relaxation, the richly imagined circumstances, the unbroken line of action, the pull of the superobjective, public solitude. The role does not merely happen, it is not merely lived through, it is *experienced* consciously as a unbroken whole, a whole that can be expanded and enriched endlessly.

In the Diamond Approach, the phrase 'I am' refers to a particular essential aspect, the Personal Essence, which is characterized by qualities of being, fullness, contact, personalness and autonomy. Many spiritual writings seem to draw a clear distinction between the personal and the spiritual, associating the latter with impersonal Being, and guiding students to realization through the transcendence of their personal life. However some traditions emphasize a personal realization of Being. This is particularly true of the Sufi tradition, in which the ideal—at least in some Sufi schools—is the person who lives a normal life in the world which is inseparable from their spiritual life (Inayat Khan 1999). The aspect of Being that makes this possible is known in Sufism as the "True Ego," the Incomparable Pearl, or the Pearl Beyond Price (Almaas 1988). For Almaas, the pearl is not only an image; the Personal Essence is, phenomenologically, pearly—it can feel smooth, radiant, rounded, precious and rare—and so it is often referred so simple as the Pearl. When Pearl appears as symbol and substantial inner phenomenon in Hinduism, Taoism and possibly other traditions, it is usually associated with personal realization (Almaas 1988, pp. 115-126).

At the centre of the Pearl is the Point, but they are two different realizations. The Pearl is the development that allows Being to exist as an individual with a personal life in the world. Someone who realizes the Point can be very saintly but with little capacity or interest in life in the world, like Sri Ramana Maharishi, whose central realization was of his true identity and whose main teaching was to inquire into the question "Who am I?" (Ramana Maharishi 1995). At one stage in his life, absorbed in his 'I', he literally forgot to eat, and his body had to be nursed back to life (Ramana Maharshi [sic] 1988, p. xiv). By contrast, a person who realizes the Personal Essence will function very well in worldly life, have personal interests and so on. Hazrat Inayat Khan would be such a person, who was self-realized while also an accomplished musician, father, husband and head of a large international organisation (Inayat Khan 2000). How this difference in orientation can be played out in the domain of acting will be discussed in latter part of this chapter.

The Pearl is a Platonic Form of Being, the archetype of personhood, the true individuation of Being in the world; it is Being manifesting as a person. It is related to functioning and personal human life. Almaas offers a detailed account of the various psychological issues that arise in the course of its development, drawing on Mahler's accounts of the separation-individuation

process in childhood, as well as other object relations theorists (Almaas 1988, pp. 127-174). The four primary qualities that are inseparable from this aspect are: personalness, autonomy, being and contact.

The Pearl is also associated with development. It is the only aspect of Being that develops, as the many other aspects of Being are personalized and integrated into it. The development it can undergo is for all practical purposes endless. There can be a continual expansion and enrichment of the consciousness, an ever-greater fullness of Being infused with contactfulness, autonomy, and personalness. This process involves a refinement and enrichment of the essential aspects through struggle with the vicissitudes of life, as if an alchemical process of mixing presence and the personality gradually builds a new being. The more the Pearl develops in this way the more the individual is able to manifest the qualities of essence in her life, work and relationships. It is both a ‘second birth’, and a process of maturation.

Just as these qualities are integral to the Personal Essence, so too are they integral to the ‘I am’ in Stanislavski’s sense (and, to a lesser extent, to Chekhov’s Creative Individuality). When Stanislavski writes directly about ‘I am’ the qualities that he mentions most often are the sense of being, the sense of the ‘nearness’ of other beings and objects, and the endless capacity for development and enlargement. I will explore these qualities in relation to Almaas’s phenomenology of the Pearl, under the headings of Being, contact, autonomy, and development. Discriminating these particular qualities of the ‘I am’ opens up fresh possibilities and perspectives.

### ***Being and Substance***

This is one of Stanislavski’s most evocative descriptions of the emergence of ‘I am’:

...I not only feel [the other character’s] actual presence among all the imagined circumstances but I also feel keenly that the world of things has, as it were, come to life. The walls, the air, things are bathed in a living light. Something true has been created and I believe in it, and as a result my feeling of ‘I am’ is further strengthened. At the same time I am aware of a kind of creative joy. It turns out that a live object is a force in creating the sense of being (Stanislavski 1961, p. 27).

Although in this passage he mentions many qualities—actual presence, coming to life, a sense of being, a living light, truth and belief, and creative joy—it is ‘the feeling of being’, synonymous with truth and belief, that dominates his accounts of ‘I am’, and is his constant reference point.<sup>2</sup> When the feeling of being is strong, he feels “truth” and can believe. Truth, belief and the feeling of being reinforce each other (Stanislavski 1961, p. 30).

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<sup>2</sup> The importance Stanislavski places on the feeling of being in this state is recognized by Benedetti, who translates *ja esm* as “I am Being” (Benedetti 1998). I use ‘I am’ because this is the more common translation and because it preserves the connection with Ramacharaka’s original English, as well as with the other spiritual texts that often use this term.

Speaking directly about the experience of Being can sound simplistic, clichéd or tautological: it is a feeling of really being there, being real and solid, truly existing, not as an idea or a logical deduction ('I think therefore I am') but as a profoundly significant palpable awakening; it is a fullness and continuity of the sense of existence, an ongoing solidity; it is like coming to ground within and discovering the basic ontological fact of one's continuing presence. 'I am' is consciousness of the *fullness* of living Being, an "in-touchness with Universal life." All of the preceding description is (to the best of my knowledge and experience) accurate, but probably has limited usefulness.

Another way to approach Being is slightly obliquely, through substantiality: the feeling of being is the feeling of being substantial. It is a similar feeling to the quality that comes to the fore in the neutral mask identifications with materials.

*2003. In John Bolton's class watching the students work on materials—mercury, toothpaste, aluminium foil—I am drawn to their wonderful substantiality. I am not only seeing the image, I am sensing the oil, the toothpaste, as if the material becomes atmosphere. There is something really there in the space, something real. The students themselves seem more solidly present, more real, more down to earth and grounded. They have more weight, more substance. They matter.*

*That night, working with Leonid on The Cherry Orchard, my scene is not going well. I feel awful: there is no thread of truth, the circumstances keep floating off into space, and I cannot find believable actions. I feel frustrated and disgusted with myself, and I suddenly become aware of these feelings as substances: I am swimming in a nauseating sea of sluggish, sticky goo—falsehood. I am not talking metaphorically; the experience is sensual and specific. For the rest of the night I attend to the play of substances in the space, the battle of the materials, as Lecoq would say. As different scenes are played out what is substantial in the space changes. Mostly the substantial content relates to the struggle of the actors. But every now and then, there is the wood of the orchard, the shining yellow-gold sunshine of love and hope in the Gayev's childhood, the heavy weight of their stubbornness and defensiveness about Lopakhin's plan. I notice the substance of my inner objects, the substance of my fellow actors, the materials that inhabit the space, inside and out. Inner objects need weight, texture, flavour, density and so on; if they are to matter, they must be matter—non-physical matter. I think of Lev Dodin's phrase again: "Stanislavski made an enormous discovery, which is that theatre is not a place where you demonstrate your skills, but a spiritual substance" (Lev Dodin, quoted in Ostrovsky 1999).*

Almaas asserts that, when experienced via the inner senses, not only the essential aspects but also emotional and ego states can be experienced as inner material, with a taste, a smell, a sound, a texture and so on: resistance is like rubber, human vulnerability feels like "a stream of water washing you from the inside" (Almaas 2002, p. 317) When through the refinement of our perceptions, we perceive inner substance, everyday phrases like smelling fear, burning with rage, tasting the bitterness of defeat and so on, cease to be metaphors (in which the image stands for the feeling) but feel true on the level of inner perception (the feeling and the substance are inseparable). Lecoq recognized this: he would direct his students toward Bachelard's writing because he "analysed the materiality of the imagination" (Lecoq 2000, p. 44).



### Exercise: telling the story of a substantial experience

The first exercise I ever did with David Latham was this: tell a small group a story of an experience in your life that had a powerful emotional charge for you. Then swap stories and tell someone else's story as if it is your own.

I sometimes now ask students to think of an experience that felt *substantial and meaningful*, rather than emotionally charged. Telling a story can then feel like passing on something substantial, from the original storyteller, to the actor, to the audience.

*2004. Teaching. A student is telling someone else's story, about hiking in the Himalayas, as if it is his own. Nervous, he corrects himself a few times, because he is trying to get the details right, but when he gets to the essence of the story—after six days of waiting, the clouds clear and the peak of Everest is revealed—the substance of the moment is carried to us. We believe it is his story. I feel in myself the “huge earth” he feels, the radiance and wonder he feels, the rapture. It is literally as if he has given us a real, solid object, a truth, that was originally only in the storyteller's heart, but which spread to the actor's heart and then to ours. It is simple, but it's worthwhile. He experiences it, and so do we.*

A second area in which the feeling of being or substantiality can be applied is in character work. Much character work focuses on external form, on finding character through posture, rhythm, vocal placement and so on. But just as becoming a particular substance in the mask gives rise to particular external gestures and actions, external forms evoke corresponding changes in inner qualities (this is Stanislavski's principle of psychophysical unity). Those with a talent for performing characters very different from themselves seem not to remain with the external appearance but *to intuit the substance*. They relax and open the muscles of the torso in such a way that the form can impact more deeply, giving rise to a particular felt and sensed flavour, texture, density, solidity-fluidity-viscosity, and/or temperature within. They do not remain satisfied with the form but allow the form to bring forth particular substances within and as themselves—they seem to allow these substances to settle into them, to be slowly digested. Similarly an actor who is able to sense on this level, to develop their inner sensitivity in this way, discovers a touchstone that is not monolithic, but as varied as creation.

When Stanislavski speaks of “feeling” in the system he usually uses the Russian word *chuvstvovat'*, which means “to sense, to feel, to understand and to become aware of” (Carnicke 1998, p. 174). The suggestion is that feeling is always palpable as sensation. This is not to say that the feeling of substance is not subtle, as Stanislavski suggests superconscious feelings must be (1961, p. 82). Subtlety and substantiality are different categories. Essence feels more subtle *and* more substantial than our usual perceptions.

## **Contact**

For Ramacharaka, 'I am' was *in-touchness* with all life, inside and out, and this is the distinguishing quality of 'I am' in Stanislavski: "full contact" with the role, the other characters, the imagined circumstances and eventually the audience. In his writings on 'I am', Stanislavski also emphasizes "the sense of nearness": the actor feels the actual presence of the people around her, she "coalesces with the circumstances of the role."

It is not sight and sound, but the sense of nearness of an object that helps us to feel existing reality. ... The more I experiment with creating people mentally, meeting them, feeling their nearness, their actuality, the more I become convinced that in order to reach the state of 'I am', the external, physical image...is not so important as its inner image, the tenor of its inner being (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 24-27).

He places extraordinary importance upon sensing the nearness and "feeling the soul" of the other character "through radiations of will" (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 27-29), which he calls communion. When an actor has mastered communion she has developed "grasp" (Stanislavski 1980, pp. 215-222). Chekhov advises his actors to develop this grasp by imagining "invisible hands" and sending out "your whole inner being toward [the object]" (Chekhov 1991, p. 10). These practices draw upon Ramacharaka's ideas on prana but are not exactly identical: concepts of communication and communion, radiating prana and radiating will, grasp and receptivity interweave in very fluids ways in Stanislavski's presentation. I believe that this is because he does not distinguish between the experience of prana, which can be sent and received, and contact on the level of Being, which is experienced as direct; nothing needs to be sent or received because there is no experience of distance.

Leonid took us through two exercises focusing on communion with another person. In the first we had to imagine another person as having an entire inner universe, full of stars and planets, and to try to explore this inner universe, to project ourselves into it and feel it. This was connected with silent improvisations. The second involved silent communication using 'inner fluids'.

*2003. Leonid's Class. Leonid has us sit in a circle and try to negotiate leaving the circle with someone, with nobody else noticing. We have to use our 'inner fluids'. We barely understand what he wants and fail miserably. He demonstrates: "There is someone I want to leave this circle with me." He is silent for minute, rubs his head, waits. He is active and full of feeling. After a while he looks at us all. "Who is it?" We can't tell. He points to one girl. "Oh my god!" she cries, "I could feel that inside me, but I didn't want to say." It is early days and I am sceptical, but later, after nine months working with Leonid on Chekhov's plays, our sensitivity to 'inner fluids' becomes almost ridiculous. At times there is so much unspoken communication going on between members of the ensemble (much of it unrelated to the performance) that some visitors to the rehearsal room find it unbearable, as if caught in swirling undertows of feeling.*

Merlin describes similar exercises (Merlin 2003, pp. 149-150) and both Merlin and Carnicke both mention exercises with radiation and communion occurring at an advanced level in Moscow acting schools (Carnicke 1998, p. 142, Merlin 2001, pp. 74-76). When I discussed this exercise with Leonid, he said it was necessary so that we could play the scene between Masha and Vershinin in the third act of *Three Sisters*, in which they are in silent communion through the walls. He didn't ascribe any special meaning to this work, echoing Stanislavski's assertion that it is simply developing a technique for doing "what is natural and intuitive in ordinary life" (Stanislavski 1980, p. 221).

### ***Autonomy and Aloneness***

One of Stanislavski's first discoveries was the effect of centering the attention on stage. When the actor disengaged from the audience, diverted her attention away from the "black and terrible hole of the proscenium arch," and maintained a defined circle of attention on stage, she "ceased to be afraid of the audience." This became a central element of the inner creative state, which is "better than life" in one respect: the feeling of public solitude, which is "a marvelous sensation" in which the actor feels the audience as a sounding board but is free from any desire to gratify them (Stanislavski 1980, p. 262). When we are 'alone in public', we are free to respond but not blown about by our reactivity. Notice that this state is dependant upon disrupting the object relation with the audience: the actor ceases to be a "shell" (Stanislavski 1980, p. 263), seeing the audience as the object who will gratify his narcissistic need for approval, and so is able to experience a completely different relationship with them: one that is based upon invisible streams of contact which, like a sounding board, change moment to moment (p. 262). That is, the contact is always in the now.

But why should 'aloneness in public' accompany such rich contact? This can be theorized in terms of the third quality of the Personal Essence: autonomy. On the level of essence, autonomy is not felt in relation to something or someone else; it is a state of non-identification with any object relations, with any self-image or object-image. The positive affect of this state is a feeling of autonomy and aloneness. In it, one feels freedom, maturity and individuation but alone, without any inner relationship to any person. Fear of aloneness is therefore an obstacle to the realization of the Personal Essence, because it requires the loss of all internalized past object relations, with which we have kept company for so long. When aloneness is accepted,

[o]ne can be in intimate human contact, but feel completely alone within.... One can be in a social setting, such as a party, and be totally alone. One is then the Personal Essence without boundaries, and without their basis of internalized object relations. Only in such a state of pure and total aloneness is complete contact possible (Almaas 1988, p. 416).

Because all inner coercive forces are based upon object relations, which are based in the past, autonomy and freedom arise when there are no object relations governing the consciousness. The student realizes “My autonomy is the freedom from object relations.... Aloneness is being me. Aloneness is freedom” (Almaas 1988, p. 416). The actor realizes that if she can “close the circle of attention” and free herself from the desire to gratify the public, she feels beautifully alone and autonomous in front of the audience.

### **Autonomy from the Critic**

One category of object relations that particularly disrupt the sense of autonomy are those that relate to internalized judgments, expectations, and criticisms. In theatre lore the faculty of self-criticism is personified as “the critic,” sometimes called “the inner critic.” Not many actors realize that this personification comes from Stanislavski: it appears in *Building a Character*, during Kostya’s character study presentation (Stanislavski 1988, pp. 11-21). Most actors have experienced the power, brutality and debilitating effect of the critic (see, for example Merlin 2001, pp. 143-147). At times my own critic seems to have devoured the knowledge, expectations and ideals of Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brook, Chekhov, Meyerhold, my own teachers, my peers and countless others, and he applies every expectation to the performance: “You’re not breathing right! You don’t have a clear action there! You aren’t playing with joy! I don’t believe it!” and so on. With penetrating insight and perceptiveness, he finds fault in everything.

Many acting teachers recognize the importance of finding ways to liberate the actor from such self-criticism. Some use methods drawn from new age techniques such as Neurolinguistic Programming, which attempt to change the judgement from negative to positive. Such an approach still engages object relations; it merely shifts the identification from a negative to a positive object. For this reason, although such a technique may have some other beneficial effect, it is likely to separate the actor from presence and from contact with her partners in the living now. Some teachers prefer not to speak of the critic at all but simply create an atmosphere of love and acceptance, which lessens its impact. Others use the *via negativa*, which focuses the insight and discrimination of the critical faculty upon the work, rather than the person (“bad acting doesn’t make a bad actor”).

Sulerzhitsky developed a unique approach. In the First Studio there was an actor who suffered from debilitating self-doubt. He was duly encouraged, given positive feedback and so on. As Stanislavski tells the story:

In order to not repeat the same encouragement all the time Sulerjitsky [sic] printed a poster with the following: ‘X is a very talented man’. This poster was nailed to a stick and as soon as X grew the least bit doubtful of himself, the poster would be carried in procession through the rehearsal room. The process of the opening the door, the comically serious appearance of the one who carried the poster caused general laughter. Fully aware of the importance of his mission, the bearer of the poster would pass out

through another door. The atmosphere of the rehearsal was refreshed, X became happy, and the rehearsal would go on with a new lease of life (Stanislavski 1956, p. 537)

This kind of approach works well in terms of facilitating autonomy because it sends up the entire notion of self-judgement, whether positive or negative.

The Diamond Approach has a detailed and comprehensive approach to the critic (Brown 1999) which, interestingly, may actually have been influenced by Kostya's critic in *Building a Character*.<sup>3</sup> The following exercises draw on Almaas's method (known to as 'defending against the superego'), but expand and adapt it for actors. (The first exercise builds upon one I learned from David Latham.) Dealing with the critic in these ways is an effective approach to establishing a state of autonomy and freedom. An actor who is constantly reacting to doubt cannot enter the state of 'I am'. Learning a simple internal version of the first exercise below was one of the most important events in my development as an actor.

#### Exercise: Stop

1. Standing in neutral, find the horizon. Then find, on the inside first, the gesture "Go Away!" (the hands come up to the sides of the chest and push forward vigorously straight ahead).
2. It is important to remain in alignment, to connect personally with the action, and to push away something or someone big enough to engage your deep reserves of strength, but not so big that you have no effect. Complete the gesture. The energy should flow into the action and not be trapped in the face. Once this has happened, say "Go away" with the action so that the energy of the gesture goes through the words.
3. Each actor stands alone, one after another, in front of the group, or performs some simple task.
4. Identify what judgements came up. It's usually along the lines of "You're boring," "You're not good enough," "You're doing it wrong" and so on.
5. The actors stand in a group and the teacher or one fairly confident person pretends to be the critic. She starts articulating all the judgements. At the same moment, all the actors do the gesture and say "Go away!" or "Stop." The critic collapses, silenced.

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<sup>3</sup> Almaas worked with Gestalt therapists, and Gestalt psychology as developed by Perls was definitely influenced by Stanislavski's writings. Almaas claims he learned the basics of his approach to the superego from Henry Komman, a Fourth Way teacher but he also references *Building a Character* in his first full length book (Almaas 1998a). I have been unable as yet to discover the details of Stanislavski's influence on the Diamond Approach, but I suspect Kostya's critic is the key to it.

6. The actors notice how they feel in their bodies.

In stages, you can build up this practice to the point where one actor faces the entire class as they play an audience of critics (perhaps they are actors who wanted your job). “Stop!” says the actor, and they all fall silent.

Exercise: Miming Presence with Defending

1. Find the horizon and alignment. From this neutral posture, feel for where in your body you feel most present (this is the Centre).
2. Notice the quality of your presence.
3. Connect it to your body and breath. ‘Mime’ the quality. Just as in the mask you connect with an element or archetype and become it as fully as possible, so too with the quality of presence you feel. With your body you find the form. As the presence transforms, so does your movement. (This is simply free creative play, but connected to your centre. It can also be seen as a variation on Lecoq’s *mime de fond*.)
4. When a judgement comes in, notice how it affects your sense of presence (it usually fragments, diminishes, or destroys it). Defend using the “Go away” gesture and words: Stop! Ssh! Back off! Use just the right force to silence it.
5. Feel for your centre/sense of presence. Return to free play. When a judgment enters, instantly defend again.
6. Gradually progress to defend just with words, then with purely inner gesture and thought, then *without any inner action, but just by remaining present*. This is the best way to defend: I notice a judgment, I do not react. I stay grounded in the here and now.
7. Do this exercise with a loose structure (a movement, vocal or acting score, perhaps simple story or joke telling), then with a scene.

My experience and that of those who have worked with me, is that these exercises are among the most effective there are for enabling an actor to be present, confident and autonomous in front of an audience. A number of my co-researchers reported that progressive work with them weakens the experience of judgement to a significant degree and allows them to be more present. I believe that this synthesis of the understanding of the Diamond Approach with performative methods, as an effective way for actors to establish the autonomy from inner judgement that characterizes essential experience, represents one simple but important outcome of this research.

## **Autonomy, Freedom and Contact in the Neutral Mask**

Some actors discover the state of freedom, autonomy and non-judgement in their early experiences with the neutral mask, often in the exercise of 'waking up for the first time'. It is difficult to convey the beauty of this experience for the audience and the actor. The exercise is simple: the mask wakes up and explores the world. But when the actor resists the temptation to relate to herself as an object (becoming fascinated by her hands and feet, for example) or to portray an emotion, and truly discovers her world as if for the first time, an atmosphere of moving clarity and freedom enters the space. Her actions embody a freshness, an unimpeded flow of presence. One actor describes this experience:

*It was great, wonderful. It seemed such an honest thing to do. It was just me in the space, by myself, with no outside comment or pressure, no baggage. I felt really calm. I was just really in it, doing it for myself.*

It is interesting that masks are also associated with presence and contact. The distinctive quality of a living mask is of being met by it, contacted (as discussed in Chapter Three).

## ***Contact, Being and Public Solitude***

Autonomy, being and contact are therefore profoundly interrelated, not only in theatrical terms, but psychologically and phenomenologically. Autonomy from the audience means the possibility of contact with them. In public solitude the audience ceases to be a critic or a source of narcissistic approval but becomes a sounding board, a living presence with whom the actor constantly exchanges invisible streams of communication.

*2000. The Hole in the Wall Theatre's production of Medea. Performing the Messenger. I have struggled intensely with the epic speech about the fate of the Princess and Kreon. The director has challenged me in many ways, and made very specific demands in terms of rhythm and phrasing. I have not been able to experience the truth of the situation, and have felt fake as I have fought to reconcile my desire for the state of 'I am' and the demands of Greek tragedy. I have tried to stay with the images, with my scene partners, to imagine a world to justify the epic actions I must play. On this last night I decide to cast off the director's demands and allow the work to be what it is once I step into that world, those images. Suddenly, a few lines into the speech: 'I am Being'. I feel in touch with all of the images, dynamically engaged in the horror of the situation. I suddenly have time, and control and freedom. I feel enormous, and I feel aware of the audience. I know just how long to hold this pause, exactly how to play the cadence (the outer form is not radically different). I feel completely autonomous. I am free from the expectations of the audience (and the director) and yet in contact with them and the imaginary reality both. My contact with my inner images seems to mediate the audience's contact with the imaginary world; the images have 'carry'. I see that the logic of this situation is theatrical. I am free to be the*

*Messenger when my message is not only for Medea. For a short time, it is as if I can touch every point in the theatre. I feel a sense of awe for actors who can play whole roles in this way.*

The much misunderstood ‘fourth wall’ becomes clearer now: it does not shut out awareness of the audience, but disrupts the narcissistic object-relation in which the actor seeks approval for the image she is projecting. This makes possible a relationship based on a communion in presence, a relationship of true contact. (In the example above, my obstacle was the internalized object relation with the director and his expectations; ‘I am’ could only arise once that internal relationship was released.) The usual object relation with the audience is dissolved using the device of the circle of attention (the fourth wall), which makes possible the state of ‘I am’ and therefore true contact and communion. ‘I am’ in its fullest sense, is therefore to coalesce with *both* the circumstances of the role and with the audience. It is unity.

## **‘I AM’, PLAY AND THE THEATRICAL DIMENSION**

This section elucidates the relationship between ‘I am’ and the theatrical dimension. In my account of performing in *Medea*, the autonomy of ‘I am’ arose through defending from the director-as-inner-critic, and this autonomy immediately opened out into contact with the audience. This points to how, for the actor, the experience of ‘I am’ opens into the theatrical dimension, which is frequently associated with play. Play is an important concept in performance studies, and many theorists have addressed it in depth (Schechner 2002). I will base my discussion upon the understandings of play offered by theatre practitioners, primarily Lecoq (2000) who presents a very clear account of the nature of play for the actor, and whose formulations are adequate for my interpretation.

For Lecoq, “a true understanding and knowledge of the theatre inevitably requires a profound experience of play” (2000, p. 97). Play occurs, he writes, “at the point when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators using rhythm, tempo, space, form” (p. 29). It is related to “creation” as opposed to “expression”:

...a person expressing himself is not necessarily being creative. ... Unfortunately, many people enjoy expressing themselves, ‘letting it all hang out’, forgetting that they must not be the only ones to get pleasure from it: spectators must receive pleasure too. ... The difference between the act of expression and the act of creation is this: in the act of expression one plays for oneself alone rather than for any spectators. I always look for an actor who ‘shines’, who develops a space around him in which the audience are also present (Lecoq 2000, p. 18).

Play for the actor, is therefore related to the inclusion of spectators in the actor’s experience, the shaping of that experience into an aesthetic, communicative form. In this sense it is related to pre-expressivity (Barba), and to composition, in Stanislavski’s and Chekhov’s sense. Play also refers to the capacity to improvise within a given structure—play as in “the play of a bicycle chain” in which “there is enough slack or flexibility to allow for freedom of movement” (Murray



2003, p. 68). And in this sense, it is also the capacity for “constant improvisation” which Chekhov calls “the real beauty of our art” (1991, p. 19). Clearly then, play is not limited to comic performance but is as relevant to tragedy and psychological drama as to any other genre.

This understanding of the theatrical dimension can be expanded through an understanding of the archetype of the Magician, which encapsulates the capacity to shape a performance for an audience. The Magician is the principle of “clear and well-timed communication” (Arrien 1995). He conjures something out of nothing, creates illusions, weaves spells.

Exercise: Identification with the Magician Archetype

Magician: Lying on the floor, remember an event when your timing was perfect. It could have been a perfectly timed joke, a sublime sporting shot, a seduction, playing music. Remember a time when you hit the mark exactly right, when your communication was perfect.

(The rest of the preparation follows the pattern described for the Fool.)

The Magician’s movement has great variety in rhythm, shifting from sudden to sustained, and from direct to indirect space in surprising and highly co-ordinated ways. While the Fool emphasizes circles, the movement of the whole body through space, and unbroken flow, the Magician’s movement highlights the diagonals across the body, the space between body and kinesphere, and clear contrasts. For the actor, if they can make the connection, the Magician can be a doorway to a fine theatrical sensibility, to the mastery of the theatrical dimension. From the Magician the actor can steal the quality of the ‘Great Actor’—she who, whether she *experiences* her role or not, is able to establish contact with the audience and seemingly direct its attention at will.

The Magician, the Trickster and the Fool make up what I have in this research come to think of as ‘the theatrical triad’ because, although the mask itself foregrounds the theatrical dimension and its laws, these three archetypes distil and amplify the qualities of play, relation to the audience and composition. Together they offer a rich perspective on acting and the theatre. The Fool is the principle of loving experience for its own sake. It is absorption in created forms just for the love of it. The Magician is the principle of creating an illusion, of transforming reality, creating something out of nothing. And the Trickster is the creator who is caught in his own creation, who is neither one thing nor the other, neither visible form nor invisible source. The actor must enter the imaginary world for the love of the experience, become absorbed in it and communicate it with clarity and precision. If the Fool bestows the capacity for continual improvisation, it is the Magician that specifically emphasizes composition and its importance in holding an audience’s attention in an imaginary reality, and the Trickster that captures the irreducible ambiguity of the creator-created caught in his own creation.

Stanislavski was first and foremost a great actor, and clearly able to hold the attention of the audience, and the elements of play that Lecoq refers to are all present in his system: continual improvisation, inclusion of the audience and composition. The difference is not in whether Stanislavski's system is playful and theatrical but in his *approach* to the theatrical dimension, and how apparent play is. For Stanislavski, by and large, play only emerges fully at the end of a long process, whereas for Lecoq it is the means and the destination. Although Active Analysis proceeds by means of improvised play, and includes the theatrical dimension from the outset more effectively than the earlier devices, even in its processes the theatrical dimension emerges fully only in the last stage of rehearsal. And even at this stage the performance might not be overtly theatrical, in the way that Meyerhold's were, for example. The theatricality of the Stanislavskian actor might be directed toward the illusion of transparency; it might be a magic that hides itself. In the light of Oliver Sayer's experience (described in the second chapter) in which he hardly noticed Stanislavski at all before becoming aware of the presence of his "towering genius," Stanislavski appears as an inverted image of the Wizard of Oz. Like a great Sufi for whom the highest station is the 'invisible sage' (Almaas 2004), the public appearance is of a natural and ordinary human being, while the man behind the curtain is a great Magician. Perhaps it was Stanislavski's own personal mastery of the theatrical dimension that led him to emphasize life and truthfulness more than theatricality in his writings and pedagogy. For life and truthfulness were the aspects that deserted Stanislavski and which he had to learn anew. It is harder to teach what comes naturally to us, as many actor-teachers—including John Bolton, David Latham and myself—have discovered.

That Stanislavski understood the importance of play is certain. Benedetti shows how, in his last years, Stanislavski articulated in more detail how the 'I am' develops to incorporate play as rehearsals expand. In his last years, he differentiated it into three states, with each phase of rehearsal oriented toward one of these:

- The first phase of rehearsal aims at the state of 'I am Being' (Benedetti's translation of 'I am') in which the subconscious becomes active and there is immediacy and aesthetic discernment in the actions.
- The second phase aims at "the Third Being," which is a merging of the actor-person with the physical actions and circumstances of the role.
- The third phase aims at the "Creative Actor in the Play" which is related to the composition of the performance and clear communication with the audience (Benedetti 1998, pp. 6-12).

Carnicke also points out that *experiencing* is a playful state, encompassing both experience of role and experience of creating in front of an audience (1998, p. 120).

Clearly, it is a mistake to confuse Stanislavski's early concern with photographic realism or his naturalistic productions with his theatrical ideal, as if this ideal somehow excluded or devalued the theatrical dimension. Stanislavski's ideal was always a *theatre* of experiencing, that is "to create on stage the living life of the human spirit and the reflection of that life *in artistic, scenic guise*" (quoted in Polyakova 1982, p. 257, my italics). Tommaso Salvini was Stanislavski's exemplar of experiencing because "with every performance he experienced anew, created anew" (Polyakova 1982, p. 199). The goal of the system is "a union in beauty...among all who take part in the theatre on both sides of the footlights" (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 163); an actor's work on himself can lead to the "tremendous power of bringing about a complete fusion of the stage and the auditorium" (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 119).

In the goal of the third phase of rehearsal, the Creative Actor in the Play, Stanislavski clearly incorporates elements of Lecoq's ideal of the playful actor, the one who is able to create with rhythm and space, in touch with the universal poetic sense, who creates a space around her which includes the audience. The development through the three stages of rehearsal can be seen as an ever increasing capacity to play.<sup>4</sup> The Creative Actor in the Play also incorporates the significant elements of Chekhov's Creative Individuality. Just as the 'I am' is a fullness and expansion building upon the immediacy of 'here, today, now', the Creative Individuality (also a 'Higher I') is an expansion and enrichment of the presence of the Imaginary Centre, as this passage shows:

Thanks to this power you are able to feel to a high degree that which we previously called your real presence on the stage. Considerable changes which you cannot help experiencing take place under the influence of this powerful other *I*. It is a higher level *I*: it enriches and expands the consciousness (Chekhov 2002, p. 87).

Like the 'I am', the Creative Individuality also bestows the capacity for constant improvisation within a detailed form, is associated with purified aesthetic feelings and is capable of "straddling both sides of the footlights" (Chekhov 1991, p. 19, see also Chekhov 1985, pp. 86-91).

Working with Stanislavski's approach, my experience is that once 'I am' is firmly grounded in terms of its circumstances and logical sequence of events and the role can be experienced, the attention naturally moves to the theatrical dimension. After 'I am Being' comes 'I am playing with our shared Being'.

1995. *A couple of weeks into the run of Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, at The Hole in the Wall Theatre. In the parts of the performance where I feel 'I am', I am experiencing more and more room, as the anxieties and efforts of creating the role fall away. I begin to notice deeper nuances and to*

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<sup>4</sup> Carnicke (1998) points out that although Stanislavski used play (*igrat*), the Russian word for acting, as a term of derision, this was a rhetorical strategy. Active Analysis demands play. As it is practiced at the Maly, Shevstova (2004) describes it as "research-during-play-into-play."

*feel the audience response to the action more fully and clearly: I breathe with less effort in a particular moment, and we share a moment of poignant stillness; I lift my head to watch my fellow actor on a certain line and he gets a laugh for it. If I don't look at him, there is silence.*

*I still experience the role in these moments, but I am now playing with these currents of energy, dancing with the audience, exploring: what opens presence and contact in the space between us, filling it with rich and beautiful feelings, and what brings back the smaller me, the cut off one? I realize that cutting the audience out of my consciousness takes effort, that it is a state of resistance and denial. It is denial of the theatrical dimension, which denotes the true state of affairs: I am surrounded by other beings who have come to share this experience.*

### ***The Roots of Play and the Feeling of Truth***

Why did Stanislavski take this long route to the pleasure of play? Lecoq writes:

*Play may be very close to replay [of lived experience] or may distance itself through the most daring theatrical transposition, but it must never lose sight of the root anchoring it to reality. A large part of my teaching method involves making students understand this principle (2000, p. 29).*

Here he gives us two crucial ideas about play and the theatrical dimension, which can serve as the basis for an illuminating comparison between Stanislavski and Lecoq. The first is that play must have its roots in reality; the second is that play involves “distance” from lived experience.

The first idea is one that both men share. The actor must connect with truth, rooting her play in reality, in lived human experience. The theatrical dimension in itself can transfix an audience, for a time at least. Nonsense games like ‘a bag, a rag’,<sup>5</sup> improvised orchestras<sup>6</sup> or abstract movement improvisations can capture the attention and work upon the audience purely on the level of rhythm and form. But unless the play is wedded to truth, to a heartfelt purpose and true human experience, the performers will eventually come to the surface, lose touch with their essential experience, and be boring. A brilliant Magician can hold our attention with tricks, but the motor for the audience will be trickery and nothing else: “*How did he do that?*” they will ask, and that is all. Many of Beckett’s short plays work brilliantly apparently on the level of rhythm and space alone, but even these works become empty and boring if we do not grasp the truth, the heart, the lived reality, of Beckett’s work, which involves a dynamic struggle with emptiness itself in which the theatrical dimension is a weapon used by both sides of the battle. One could say that play should have its roots in shared human experience: the root system extends deep into the

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<sup>5</sup> Stand in a circle. One person says to the person next to them “A bag.” That person relays it on, or passes it back, saying “A rag.” “A bag” goes one way, “A rag” goes the other. They have to find *complicité*, the game, play.

<sup>6</sup> One person begins as an instrument of an orchestra, making a simple musical phrase they can repeat. Others join in one by one. The idea is for the song (or symphony) to unfold and makes sense as an integrated whole, as a complete artwork. The point is for the actors to play.

actor and deep into the audience, and that turns out to be the same place: our common humanity.

Stanislavski, however, emphasizes the connection with human truth to an extraordinary degree. It occupies the first two stages of rehearsal, during which he puts down a whole root system and attempts to ensure that the root system of each actor is connected with all the others, and that each serves the trunk of the playwright's superobjective. This process is guided by the actor's sense of truth, and by their belief in the truthfulness of their actions: *if I was in this situation, here, today, this very minute, what would I do? Given the imaginary circumstances, if they were real right now, does my action ring true? Am I able to believe in it?* Any action that is superfluous or false must be pared away, or circumstances imagined that make each action necessary and believable.

Michael Chekhov, discussing the Creative Individualities of the great Russian directors, wrote that truth was Stanislavski's pre-eminent quality: "he was obsessed with, virtually possessed by, what he called the 'feeling of truth'" (Chekhov et al. 1977, p. 38). Often Stanislavski's sense of truth is considered to be a modernist notion, one which assumes a fixed photographic representation, despite his unequivocal connection of the feeling of truth to the *magic if*. Even Chekhov thought that "Stanislavski's truth" was photographic realism and was confused by it (1977, pp. 50-55).<sup>7</sup> A close reading of his presentation reveals a sense of truth that is profoundly *process-oriented*, never fixed, and fluid enough to encompass the theatrical dimension.

In the Diamond Approach the discovery and development of the Pearl proceeds by virtue of a developed sense of truth, which depends upon experience of the essential aspect of truth (Almaas 1988). This aspect is also a Platonic Form, not a final statement or concept. It guides the soul toward discovery of her true nature, and may guide different souls differently; what is true in one case may not be true in another (Almaas 1987). The aspect gives the individual the capacity to discern what is true in a particular context and moment. It is a heart quality, full of warmth and humanness. It is golden in colour and has the lustre and solidity of gold (Brown 1999, Almaas 2002). Almaas's understanding of truth can help the actor to apply Stanislavski's process.

#### Exercise: Sifting true from false

While working on colour or materials in the neutral mask, the actors identify with gold.

In simple improvisations or free movement, feel for what is true and what is false. Feel for the quality of gold. Pare away everything else. Just as, following Michael Chekhov,

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<sup>7</sup> Chekhov also thought that Meyerhold and Vakhtangov had a greater sense of theatricality. His arguments with Stanislavski may have partly inspired the older man's highly theatrical productions late in life (Burning Heart, 1926 and Dead Souls, 1932) and his passion to apply the system to the classics. In any case, it is clear that between Chekhov's departure in 1924 and the old master's death in 1938, Stanislavski had deepened and refined his understanding of his pre-eminent quality: No longer 'truth for the sake of truth' but the *truthfulness* that arises from an unbroken line of actions that is logical in relation to the circumstances (Stanislavski 1961, p. 254).

actors can move with the Feelings of Form, Ease and Beauty, they can move with the Feeling of Truth, of Gold. Some actors will connect with the idea of paring away the false, others may be blocked by ideas of false and true, and will connect more with the colour, or the material.

Once this process has been experienced it can be applied to etudes: where was the gold? What was false?

Provided the actors can connect with gold strongly in neutral mask, this simple exercise can open up and refresh Stanislavski's whole process. Working with this exercise in *Palaces in Ruin* and subsequent studio work, its first effect was to lead actors to pare back any sense of showing (any 'little plus' as Stanislavski would have said), to evoke a relaxed, open body and focused state of mind. As this exploration continued, false actions, performing or 'faking it' even made some actors feel nauseous (the false is not digestible!). A natural appreciation of truthful action arose.

But 'truthful action' soon becomes meaningless unless it meets specific circumstances. Working with this quality in *Palaces*, I began to question the situation of the etude more deeply and honestly: *what is this scene about? What is its heart and value? What is this character really about? What do I really want to do with this scene? Do I know why I am really putting this performance on?* Awakening an acute sense of truth seems to lead naturally to the ever more detailed questioning characteristic of Active Analysis. Just as improvised etudes using one's own words eventually lead the actor to feel the need for the author's text, they also lead her to seek out the circumstances that make the action necessary, because these provide the banks through which the feeling of truth can flow. Although I was not able to test this fully in this research, the implication is that, if the actor can stay with this difficult and demanding process, the exciting presence and immediacy of 'I' at play in the situation can mature into the fullness, warmth and solidity of 'I am'.

Clearly truth in this sense is not a modernist notion and has nothing to do with photographic realism; it can be applied far more broadly. Any given circumstance an actor is required to incorporate, whether it is textual or stylistic, can be filtered through the feeling of truth. Chekhov expresses this clearly: the feeling for truth includes many facets, including the style and genre of the production (1991, p. xxxix). A truthful wave goodbye in a farce will not be truthful in a tragedy. Yet the questioning provoked by a love of truth (as gold, as a quality of presence) can extend smoothly from the logic of the imaginary situation to the logic of the theatrical production.

### ***Distance, Disidentification and Personalization***

The second distinction that must be made between the theatrical dimension in Stanislavski and Lecoq hinges on 'distance'. Lecoq emphasizes play as distance: "more distance between the actor's ego and the character performed...allows the performer to play even better" (Lecoq

2000, p. 19). “My pedagogic purpose,” he writes “is always to oblige the students to play characters as distant as possible from themselves (p. 65). This need for distance extends even to the mask: it must not fit too closely to the face of the performer. When the theatrical dimension emerges in Stanislavski’s process, it is not associated with a distance from lived experience or the character, but with being in *full contact* with the role and its world, and play emerges from within this contact. Stanislavski would reject the need for distance and its consequences, such as encouraging actors to play roles far from themselves.<sup>8</sup>

This difference can also be theorised in terms of the Point and the Pearl. As the Point, it is possible to see the personality as an object, as if from a distance; as the Pearl, the personality is slowly metabolized into Being. The Point provides the capacity to *disidentify*, which can feel like the distance of which Lecoq speaks.

*1999, a few days after experiencing the Point in my session with Jean, I am performing a rehearsed reading. During the performance I become aware of the speck, or spark, of Being in my chest. I am aware that I am being authentic, but I am also separate from the situation of the play, unemotional. I am present, but I am not in touch with the imaginary reality. I’m in touch with my own Centre and I am speaking from there, but the conditioning circumstances are not felt. There is distance. I am not ‘in-touch.’ I have no ‘inner grasp’.<sup>9</sup>*

The Pearl provides the capacity for absorption, in which there is no distance emotionally or phenomenologically, but total personal involvement. The essential aspects become personalized. ‘I am Fire’ in neutral mask (in which there is, ideally, for Lecoq, some distance) is not the same as ‘I am, personally, Fire’ in which Fire is inseparable from who I individually am, as much a part of me as my arms and legs. In the former case, the person is gone; Fire has entered the empty space opened by the mask. In the latter, Fire is inseparable from the being of the actor-role: fire burns in me as me. There is roundedness, immersion. There can still be *disidentification*. This is not distance but a *recognition* that one is not ultimately the content or form arising in any moment. It is an epistemic insight more than a phenomenological event. In this way, disidentification (a capacity of the Point) bestows playfulness while involvement comes from the Pearl and bestows the sense of ‘I am the role’.

This is a simple experience but a very difficult point to communicate. Perhaps it can be clarified by invoking some traditional metaphors. At a deep level of experience of the Pearl, when the

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<sup>8</sup> Brook also believes that an actor must have distance from the character, and that distance and presence go together (1987, p. 66).

<sup>9</sup> In the previous chapter a number of exercises with the Centre opened into a sense of contact, which is not characteristic of the Point, but I take this to be like the transformation of the Point into the Pearl, or in Chekhov’s terms the emergence of the Creative Individuality, and in Stanislavski’s terms the expansion of the state of ‘here, today, now’ into ‘I am’.

ego boundaries are recognized as mere concepts, the state of oneness arises. The Pearl is then felt as a cell in the larger body of Being, as a wave of the ocean. There is differentiation but no distance, no separation (Almaas 1988, p. 457). The feeling of 'I am' arising in *Medea* was like this: Being extended throughout the theatre, and Messenger-Ashley was a wave of that same Being, defined not by a spatial limit but an individual flavour.

## THE POINT AND THE PEARL IN THE LECOQ AND STANISLAVSKI TRADITIONS

The Pearl and the Point, employed as hermeneutic distinctions, can illuminate much more about the differences between Stanislavski system, and the more overtly theatrical approaches of the Copeau tradition, Meyerhold and Michael Chekhov. To demonstrate this, I would like to continue the comparison between Stanislavski and Lecoq, because I believe their ideals can be most clearly related to the Point, in Lecoq's case, and the Pearl, in Stanislavski's. In making this comparison I want to make very clear that am not ranking these approaches. Lecoq's crystalline conception of the dramatic territories and levels of play in terms of their specific spatial and gestural languages, and his practical pedagogical brilliance in communicating this, comprise a unique, brilliant and extraordinarily comprehensive contribution to the art of the actor. For much of his work, there is no equivalent body of knowledge in the Stanislavski tradition, as far as I know. The aesthetic delight actors can communicate in the Lecoq tradition is truly wonderful. And sometimes, I think, the qualities of 'I am' are foreign to the playwright's or deviser's aesthetic. Sometimes the wonder and delight of play is the central concern, as with the clown perhaps. The simplicity and delight of a mask at play has its own unique value. Leonid told me that the 'system' of Stanislavski arose to deal with the new demands made by Anton Chekhov's plays and their like, and that if you want to perform David Williamson,<sup>10</sup> the system is not necessarily going to help you. So, I am not interested in establishing a hierarchy, but I am using this comparison to illuminate the specific nature of 'I am' and the particular demands that it makes when it becomes a theatrical ideal.

In successful performances grounded in the Lecoq tradition one can recognize a wonderful sense of play, immediacy, adventure, creativity, delight and exuberance.<sup>11</sup> The uniqueness of each actor shines through. There is an exquisite, even thrilling sense of the pre-expressive, of

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<sup>10</sup> David Williamson is a prolific and popular Australian playwright, whose plays usually focus on topical issues, and contain characters who represent typical points of view, and do not have a highly developed inner life or complex subtext.

<sup>11</sup> I am basing my analysis here on a few performances I believe to be exemplars of the two traditions. These include, among others: Theatre-At-Large's *Cyrano* at the 1997 Festival of Perth, Theatre de Complicite's *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol*, John Bolton's *Grimm Project* at VCA, 2004, a number of performances by The Four Noels, a Melbourne-based comic trio (Lecoq); the MAT *Seagull* at the 1991 Melbourne International Arts Festival, The Maly Drama Theatre's *Gaudeamus* at the 1996 Festival of Perth, Grigori Dityatkovsky's *Children of the Sun* at VCA in 2001.



theatricality—all phenomena associated with the Point, with the ‘T’. But one does not characteristically feel the fullness of the characters, the sense of Being, of personal contact, and communion (the qualities associated with the Personal Essence). Lecoq turns a sharp theatrical lens onto the shared life of humanity. In his dissection of the movement and dramatic logic of the clown or *commedia dell’arte*, he gives us the overview of a surgeon; we can see clearly that “yes, we are like that.” But do we ever say: “that’s me, *personally*”? Watching Dityatkovsky’s *Children of the Sun* at VCA, as the performance went on, I felt my defences falling away one by one. I saw myself in each of the characters, and each of the characters in me; I saw my family, my friends. Sulerzhitsky knew the value of being personal. He taught those at the First Studio that “man’s innate humanity comes into play the moment you give at least a bit of attention to the personal life of others” (Vakhtangov 1982, p. 41).

Do we ever, as audience, feel deeply vulnerable with Lecoq’s performances? Vulnerability, according to Almaas, is an unavoidable element of true personal contact, because true contact requires the absence of defensive ego structures. The Point feels indestructible; the Centre makes the actor fearless in front of the audience. It is possible for experienced meditators to avoid feeling vulnerable by entering states of transcendence, but it is impossible to be personal in such states. At *Children of the Sun* I felt softened, vulnerable, humanized. “Vulnerability in openness indicates the presence of beingness” where beingness, is intimate, full and personal, not impersonal Being (Almaas 1988, p. 87). Vulnerability is also referred to by Almaas as the human essence, or the water essence: when we are truly personal we are as vulnerable, full and open as water (Almaas 2004, p. 139). Do we ever, with Lecoq, swim in the water of our humanity, as we do in the Stanislavski tradition? Gordon Craig said of Stanislavski’s art “a more human result would be difficult to find” (Benedetti 1999, p. 189). With the actors of the Maly, at the end of *Gaudeamus*, I felt like a waterfall had gone through my soul: their passions had flooded the auditorium. Lev Dodin’s most persistent motif is water. It features prominently in many of his productions and the Maly’s *Play With No Name* is played partly in a large pool of water (Shevtsova 2004, p. 59, 140). When Simon Callow saw their *Cherry Orchard* he “never stopped weeping from beginning to end” because it was so “emotionally communicative.” He saw “a stream of human life...eddying, flowing, now babbling, now murmuring, sometimes torrential, sometimes placid” (Foreword to Shevtsova 2004, p. xiii). The living Stanislavski tradition seeks to touch us personally, to transmit human experience through contact, to make us feel our exquisite vulnerability to life and to each other.

To make a brief diversion from comparing Stanislavski and Lecoq: we can make similar distinctions between Stanislavski and Chekhov. These two disagreed on whether an actor should use his own emotional material or that of imagined characters. This disagreement makes sense if Stanislavski understood that feelings could be personalized and sought this personalization, while Chekhov thought that artistic (superconscious) feelings were impersonal. And in fact, he

says exactly that (Chekhov 2002, p. 89). Stanislavski, knowing about personalization, saw no contradiction between the essential and the personal: for him the personal can be essential and universal. The essential, reached through the purification of all egotism (all ordinary knowledge) can be personalized—absorbed into the sense of ‘I am’. Chekhov no doubt personalized many qualities pertaining to the theatrical dimension, but the feelings of his characters remained separate from his own sense of self. He writes more in terms of distance—for example, observing oneself “as an outsider” (Chekhov 1991, p. 156)—than in terms of an inseparable wave. He speaks of the Creative Individuality as a *divided* consciousness (as opposed to a doubled consciousness). He also drew a clear division between the Creative Individuality and the everyday self (Chekhov 1991, pp. 15-16), whereas Stanislavski called for the transformation of the actor into a “full man” (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 97).

To return to the Lecoq-Stanislavski comparison: The Pearl/Point distinction can also be seen in the pedagogical styles of the two traditions. Lecoq taught the same material in the same way, for decades; the curriculum is clearly conceptualized and systematic. Leonid Verzub, by contrast, seems at times to work without method, directly, in a different way for each individual, as did Stanislavski, in practice (Gorchakov 1994, Toporkov 1998). Leonid takes into account the fullness of the student’s life and character, not only in his responses but in the exercises he sets. He begins a class with “My darlings, I have missed you so much” and sweeps us into his passion until the translator orders him to stop and go home. When an actress finishes an etude he might say “Claire, you are a very beautiful woman. Very clever. I love you very much,” before he suggests richer and deeper circumstances to play. Lecoq would say, typically, “Oui, bon” or more often “Non, c’est ne pas vrais.” Lecoq maintained distance from his students in public just as he liked to see them maintain some distance from the mask; he was not someone students could approach if they saw him at a café (Wright 2002). Leonid, on the other hand, would be deeply offended not to be approached. Stanislavski saw his teaching as a heart-to-heart transmission. Even before he became ill at the end of his life, he met and taught students at his home (Benedetti 1999). He coached Michael Chekhov as they ate dinner together (Chekhov et al. 1977).

### ***Making Wine***

Finally we can see the same distinction in the two traditions’ different understandings of the possibilities of the development of a performance and the corresponding approach to rehearsal. For Stanislavski the ‘I am’ is not only the culmination of the first stage of rehearsal and a touchstone throughout the process, but it is “endlessly enlarged” during the life of the play. For Lev Dodin, a hallmark of the Stanislavski tradition is that the play has a life. Once a production is in the Maly’s repertoire it is continually developed. It is performed as long as it is growing and alive (Shevtsova 2004, pp. 48-50).

The Personal Essence is the essential aspect associated with development. This development is described by Almaas, as largely a process of “metabolizing impressions,” of sifting the false from the true in our past experiences, of digesting the true into the substance of our soul (Almaas 1988, p. 164). This truth then functions as nourishment for the development of the Pearl. To say it differently, the more we are able to discern what is true and what is false in our experience, and to accept and act according to what is true, the more we will be able to develop the qualities of a mature individual, such as autonomy, being-ness, contact and personal-ness. The development of ‘I am’ is “achieved gradually” according to Stanislavski, via “incredible self-honesty, patience and discipline” (Stanislavski 1961, pp. 25-26), and it proceeds via the sense of truth. The fuller exploration of the personal and the interpersonal life in Stanislavski’s process, and his demand for a substantial, integrated personal world of the character, via the actor’s own personal sense of truth, thus mirrors the development of the Pearl in comparison to the realization of the Point.

The former is a much slower process, requiring the friction of personal involvement and struggle (Almaas 1987, pp. 132-141). “Who has a lion’s heart and will not shun affliction?” writes a Sufi poet (Hafiz 1995, p. 95). “If you want to be an actor, learn how to suffer well,” says Leonid. This struggle leads to the actor-role—the actor cannot feel where her own life ends and the character’s begins. It leads, also, to a richer, fuller substance in the role, as the Maly actors understand. Shevtsova (2004) describes how Pyotr Semak felt great anguish for years in the role of Stavrogin in *The Devils*. His struggle eventually gave way to a sense of freedom. When Shevtsova interviewed him in 2001—*eleven years* after the production was first performed—he told her that “the substance he now feels it holds is only a recent development.” Shevtsova comments that “the comparison with wine...is irresistible” (2004, p. 49). The comparison with Sufism is also irresistible: the wine which leads to the mystic drunkenness of the Persian poets is nothing but essence having gone through the maturing process of personalization, so the imagery of wine and pearls often go together.<sup>12</sup>

*Angel, say praises at the door of love’s tavern,  
for inside they ferment the essence of Adam* (Hafiz 1995, p. 103).

*The ruby wine we took from that pale hand  
turned to pure regret and remained in our eyes like pearls* (Hafiz 1995, p. 92).

This development leads to the kind of theatrical experience that Callow had watching the Maly, in which “the connectivity of the actors was almost tangible, an organic tissue.” They “somehow fused themselves into a single body without having lost their individuality” and became “some

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<sup>12</sup> For example, one publication on the great Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan is called *A Pearl in Wine* (Inayat Khan 2000).

kind of collective conduit for the life force.” “The experience of the production,” he writes “no matter how stylized, is always deeply human. There is nothing *out there*... simply the sum total of the artist’s contribution both as people and players” (Foreword to Shevtsova 2004, p. xi-xiii).

## CONCLUSION

My interpretation of Stanislavski then, in the light of Almaas and Ramacharaka, that his system involves a process of expanding and deepening presence, from the specificity and spontaneity of the Point, to the fullness of the Pearl. Stanislavski’s affinity for the qualities of the Pearl make them the means by which the theatrical dimension is approached. If our ideal is akin to the Point then play can happen quickly provided it has at least one foot in reality; if our ideal is akin to the Pearl, then play becomes important only after there is full contact, being and personal immersion—not one foot in reality, but everything, with the roots of the performance expansively drawing nourishment from the living, transient now. In my experience, through the stages of rehearsal, the sense of contact and being gradually expands to encompass not only the circumstances and actions of the role but the moment to moment reality of the particular theatre and audience. Expressed from another point of view: the consciousness of the actor expands and becomes more substantial as it digests first the character’s lifeworld, then the production elements, until it finally comes into full contact with the life of the audience. Active Analysis begins with play, with ‘here, today, now’; it begins with the living immediacy of presence of ‘I’. This ideally remains a quality of the work throughout all performances. But by means of continual questioning, the intentional consistent disruption of the usual egoic relation with the audience via the circle of attention, the fleshing out of the world, the sifting of true action from false according to the sense of truth, and the active engagement with a meaningful and logical sequence of tasks united with the meaning of the play—via this process, the ‘I’ expands to become ‘I am’, the life of the human spirit in scenic guise. At this stage the actor lives the experience of the play with the audience as she communicates it. She responds creatively moment to moment to the waves of feeling that flow from the living “sounding board.” Play becomes inseparable from lived experience. Playful presence therefore develops, through a long and difficult process of assimilation of true experience, into a boundless experience of playful substantial being, a shared revelation of our human nature, a conscious “sea of human forces” (Stanislavsky 1988, p. 92).

This interpretation makes explicit many of the essential qualities of Stanislavski’s ‘I am’, gives it greater specificity, and places it at the heart of the system where, as a synonym for *experiencing*, it belongs. It also crystallizes the meaning of my experiences working with Leonid, including the ease, depth, and fullness that marked the performances at their best, their wonderful theatricality even when deeply personal, the sense of deep inner contact between the actors and the intense struggle preceding the emergence of any substantial moment of acting. As the second facet of

the illumination precipitated by my research process, it also serves as the foundation for my explication, in the next chapter, of dual consciousness, which is the final element of the Stanislavski tradition that I believe is crucial for a theatre of essential experience.

## *Chapter 9*

# **DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS, THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY AND ESSENTIAL PROCESS**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Stanislavski's system does not exclude play or theatricality but subsumes it into 'I am' in distinct and specific ways, and I brought greater specificity and concreteness to this concept by interpreting it as an expression of the Personal Essence, a state of presence incorporating many qualities that resonated with Stanislavski's aesthetic sensibilities. This chapter explicates the meaning of dual consciousness for a theatre of essence, building upon the argument so far. Dual consciousness has been a central issue in the discussion of the nature of acting since Diderot first formulated his famous paradox (that the actor is both herself and not herself at the same time). Stanislavski, Grotowski and Chekhov all speak of the doubling of consciousness as a pinnacle of achievement for the performer. Christine Edwards (1966) and more recently Carnicke (1998) and Merlin (2001) have discussed how dual consciousness is integral to the Stanislavski system, with Carnicke suggesting that in experiencing the actor's awareness *alternates* "between the artist and role" (1998, p. 108) and Merlin identifying dual consciousness with the differentiation between the character's personality, energy and behavior and her own (2001, p. 223). This chapter draws on these writers, but it theorizes dual consciousness differently, not as an alternating awareness, or a differentiation of personality and character, but as state of differentiating basic and ordinary knowledge, presence and representation, which reveals the potential of dual consciousness for a theatre of essential experience. Drawing on the material presented in the preceding chapters and Grotowski's writings on Art as vehicle, I present a new understanding of this state which synthesizes and develops many of the elements discussed so far and offers interesting possibilities for a theatre infused with presence. I also describe the practices emergent from the research process (mostly reformulations of existing exercises), as well as suggesting a plan of work that develops one of Stanislavski's own by incorporating the distinctions I have elucidated in this thesis.

Perhaps because Stanislavski did not emphasize distance, for many years his system was commonly thought to exclude dual consciousness and was therefore conceptualized as standing

at the opposite pole to the those perspectives that emphasized divided consciousness (such as those of Coquelin, Diderot, Brecht and Chekhov). More recently, Carnicke has pointed out that the notion of a simple fusion between actor and character belongs more to Strasberg's Method and is more properly associated with early thinking and experimentation at the First Studio than with Stanislavski's system (1998, p. 122). Chekhov famously argued with Stanislavski over whether it is helpful for the actor to see the image of the character as they perform. He claimed they came to no agreement on this but their mature points of view are actually very similar: in the ideal state, there is an objective observer who regulates and sculpts the performance.

Stanislavski indicates the importance of dual consciousness in two passages in his writings. In the first he describes how this doubling is part of a full experience of the inner creative state. He quotes Salvini: "An actor, lives weeps and laughs on the stage and all the while he is watching his own tears and smiles. It is this double function, this balance between life and acting that makes his art" (Stanislavski 1980, p. 267). The second passage describes Kostya's creation of the Critic. After the performance, Kostya recognizes that his consciousness was doubled and that this helped his performance: "I was my own observer.... Strangely this duality not only did not impede, it actually promoted my creative work" (Stanislavski 1988, p. 21). When in this state, the actor is experiencing her part but is also able to analyse the elements of the inner creative state and "make corrections."

Chekhov writes more extensively on divided consciousness but his perspective is fluid and ambiguous. At times he writes of three 'T's': the Creative Individuality, the everyday self and the character.

The character, which the actor initially sees as if from the outside, has feelings and thoughts very different to the actor's own, and an 'independent life and will'. The character image, as we have seen, disappears in the later stages of rehearsal when, paradoxically, 'Divided Consciousness' arises and the actor 'stands beside his creation', viewing it 'objectively' (Chekhov 1991, pp. 155-156).

The everyday 'T' is the material which the higher Creative Individuality takes in hand, from which it creates the character; yet this material (the totality of the everyday self—feelings, temperament, abilities and inclinations) is purified in the unconscious by the Creative Individuality before it puts it to use.

The Creative Individuality 'sculpts the character' during the performance, yet the everyday self is also a 'common-sense regulator' of the higher self and is responsible for 'the protection of the forms' of the performance (Chekhov 2002, p. 88).

Chekhov's conceptualizations also change fluidly depending on the stage of work he is describing. He also seems to merge the Creative Individuality and the everyday self in his descriptions of Divided Consciousness, where he speaks not of three parts to consciousness but two.

In Bella Merlin's training in Moscow in 1993-4, she encountered a similar formulation of Divided Consciousness in her work with Vladimir Ananyev. Ananyev discriminated three facets of the actor's self: the Person, the Actor and the Character. The Person represented the connection to a higher consciousness, it "remained constant, unchanged by the variables of audience and performance as a kind of centred, holistic being" (Merlin 2001, p. 81). The Actor corresponds to a mastery of the theatrical dimension. It responds to the moment-to-moment variations in situation and ensures clear communication with the audience. The Character is separate from both, but connected to them. In performance the Person and the Actor are combined, and this combination holds the character "in its hand": as with Chekhov, three facets of the self become two.

In *Performer*, an extraordinary text on Art as vehicle, Grotowski brings the paradox of doubling and its relation to essence succinctly and beautifully into focus:

It can be read in ancient texts: *We are two. The bird who picks and bird who looks on. The one will die, the one will live.* Busy with picking, drunk with life inside time, we forgot to *make live* the part in us which looks on. ... To feel looked upon by this other part of yourself (the part which is as if outside time) gives another dimension. There is an I-I. The second I is quasi virtual; it is not—in you—the look of the others nor any judgement; it's like an immobile look: a silent presence, like the sun which illuminates all things—and that's all. The process can only be accomplished in the context of this still presence. I-I: in experience, the couple doesn't appear as separate, but as full, unique.

In the way of Performer - he perceives essence during its period of osmosis with the body, and then works the process; he develops the I-I. The looking presence of the teacher can sometimes function as a mirror of the connection I-I (this junction is not yet traced). When the channel I-I is traced, the teacher can disappear and Performer continue toward the body of essence. ...

I-I does not mean to be cut in two but to be double. The question is to be passive in action and active in seeing (reversing the habit). ...

Performer should ground his work in a precise structure—making efforts, because persistence and respect for the details are the rigor which allows to become present the I-I. The things to be done must be precise. *Don't improvise, please!* (Grotowski 2001a, p. 378).

In 'Art as vehicle', therefore, there are also three elements:

- The immobile, illuminating presence (the bird that looks on).
- The doer (the bird that picks).
- The precise structure of songs and actions.

## ESSENCE, STRUCTURE AND THEATRICAL FORM

For Grotowski, the dual consciousness he describes allows an essential (or *essentializing*) process to occur: the actor moves toward the body of essence. But this process cannot happen in a



vacuum; a precise structure is required. Working with the Centre exercise I described in an earlier chapter, moving into playful self-expression, I began to feel this need.

*2004. Playing from the centre. I begin to notice that sometimes I feel present and sometimes not. Sometimes our play is beautiful and sometimes it's sickly sweet, sometimes it feels truthful and sometimes self-indulgent. I begin to appreciate degrees of beauty, truthfulness, resonance and depth in our actions, our transforming creations, and I feel a longing for a greater contact with each of these qualities.*

*At the same time I feel the need for two things, for two different containers: I want to meet something solid and to be seen. I want a form and a holding space. I want a script and an audience. I want to be in a mask, defined by a structure. I need a challenge. I need a struggle.*

Chekhov also indicates the need for a structure:

The power of inspiration is always more intense than the means of expression, said Dostoevsky. It needs restricting. That is the task of your everyday self. ... It fulfills the mission of a common-sense regulator for your higher self... Upon the common sense of your everyday self devolves the protection of forms that have been found and fixed for the performance. Thus by the co-operation of both the lower and higher consciousness, the performance is made possible (Chekhov 2002, p. 88).

The Creative Individuality must have a clear form to engage, just as the neutral mask must have a clear image or task. The form must be as specific as possible. In the passage above, Chekhov thinks of the 'restricting structure' as the 'forms that have been fixed for the performance'. In his technique he emphasizes characterization; he discovers and fixes form largely through the notion of character (using, for example, the Imaginary Centre and Imaginary Body). Stanislavski fixes form primarily by establishing a logical through-line of action in the circumstances directed toward a particular super-objective. The living structure his system aims to create is integrated and holistic, uniting inner and outer, individual and ensemble. In the neutral mask, the demanding form is the image, like Fire, waking up, or blue.

Working with challenging structured tasks (demanding forms) while observing oneself in presence is a method of essential development well-known in Sufism and Gurdjieff's Work. The student attempts to be as aware as possible, to 'remember herself' (the 'I' that looks on) while she accomplishes a task. This cultivates, as Grotowski says, the body of essence. This practice is also used in the Diamond Approach. The task need not be an artwork. It can be completely menial—cleaning windows or digging ditches—so long as work is done with attention and self-remembering. As essence (the subtler, higher quality) descends into the action, the performance of the task can become like an artwork—beautiful, creative, and transparent, an expression of something beyond the task. Such a process is applicable to any human endeavour and is certainly possible in the theatre. Brook's approach seems to be something very much like this practice. He devises and rehearses in openness, through trial and error, with the attitude that 'there are no secrets' while attending to the hierarchies of quality that manifest.

Brook does not, however, address the question of different aspects of quality on the same 'level', and he does not relate his hierarchies of quality to the performative structure. In Grotowski's *Art as vehicle*, this relationship is crucial: the sequence of the songs creates a 'Jacob's Ladder' by means of which the doer undertakes a journey *to* essence and then, following the descent, *with* essence, in action. The ladder is built out of songs and actions and has a specific purpose: the essential development of the doers. In the course of his long explorations, Grotowski discovered the effect of the songs on energy seats in the body, and presumably put them into an order that made sense to him or which was discovered through trial and error. Each song activates a different energy seat in the body, and each successive seat is another step towards subtlety. This is, as Grotowski says, a process in "verticality" (1995, p. 125). The songs (and their accompanying actions) are the vehicle for an essential journey.

Yet, as we have seen, Grotowski's intentions are not artistic or theatrical. Is such an essential journey possible within a theatrical structure? What relationships between essence and the theatrical forms are possible? In *Palaces in Ruin*, I tried to devise a theatrical form that embodied an essential journey through specific qualities. I wanted to create a work that included the audience, characters and an imaginary world, that was more theatrical and playful than either Brook or Grotowski but also infused with essence. Each etude was devised around the atmosphere of a particular colour, from which we built an imaginary world. Yet, I was not able to discover or create a clear relationship between the dramatic narrative and the essential journey. In fact, for reasons that may be entirely personal and which are still not clear to me, in the work's final form, the characters in the narrative moved from a state of blessing to a state of despair. My decisions about the sequence of etudes/colours were based on my theatrical instinct (my sense of satisfying rhythm, crescendo, climax, and so on) and on the narrative that emerged through improvisation. The question of the relation between theatrical form and essential journey was not satisfactorily resolved and, in retrospect, to accomplish such a task in the time frame and particular situation was simply not possible.

It is interesting to consider, however, what kind of essential structures might potentially be implicit within conventional theatrical texts. It is obvious that most plays do not, like Grotowski and Richard's song sequence, proscribe a journey through particular energy seats or qualities of essence. But if we consider some famous texts in terms of their progression of atmospheres and qualities, as Chekhov advises actors to do and as he tells us the actors at the Moscow Art Theatre did (Chekhov 2002), some *do* offer a similar journey (on one of many possible levels of interpretation). *Hamlet* moves from the confusion of Claudius' court to the profound peace of "the rest is silence." *The Tempest* unfolds from a spirit of bitter revenge in the opening storm and shipwreck to the luminous grace of Prospero's awakening into forgiveness and the lovers playing chess. A play therefore, *can* proscribe a journey to states of essence that shine through the dramatic resolution, but this line of inquiry requires much more exploration on the level of

dramaturgy and theatrical form than was possible in the context of *Palaces in Ruin*. Our explorations on the level of acting yielded richer possibilities, springing from our explorations of the Creative Individuality.

## **THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY AS IMMOBILE PRESENCE**

One afternoon during the training and devising period for *Palaces in Ruin*, we began to explore the Creative Individuality through spatial relationship, with one person standing in for their everyday self and another for their Creative Individuality. We experimented with different relationships, searching for a sense of harmony and rightness. We tried facing our Creative Individuality, standing in front of it, behind it, and beside it. We played both roles, experiencing their different qualities. We used this ‘role play’ as a form of embodied inquiry and contemplation of the concept. Through dialogue, repetition, trial and error, we clarified and harmonized our understanding. We discovered a number of characteristics:

- The Creative Individuality stands *behind* the actor, but is actually inseparable from her field of experience, encompassing it.
- It is enormous. It fills the space, encompassing everything, including the audience.
- When it is there, the actor feels safe, supported, relaxed and resourced; and the audience feels much happier.
- The character and the everyday self cannot be effectively distinguished in this form of investigation. They occupy the same position in the gestalt: that of the frontal, decided self—effectively that of the mask. We could not find a place for a ‘third’ self in this exercise. This makes sense of the merging of the Actor and Person in Ananyev’s perspective, and of the Creative Individuality and everyday self in Chekhov.
- The mask or character, as in the state of ‘I am’, extends to encompass the space. Every mask implies a world. The character or mask is like the wave emerging out of the world-ocean: it is inseparable from the world, and an individual expression of it.
- The Creative Individuality does not do anything, but it sees everything. It is an ‘immobile presence’ that makes us feel that we are ‘looked upon by another part of ourselves’. It corresponds to the neutrality of the neutral mask, just as the character corresponds to the particular mask identification’s image.

These insights have proved durable in subsequent work. Some months later, in studio explorations, I had the following exchange with an actor (who had not participated in *Palaces*), following a scene which she had played in great detail and very well:

*Actor: My god, it's like riding a knife edge. You have to have so much attention. It's like I'm above myself saying "You can't go this way. No, not that way." Every moment I'm resisting the temptation to waver.*

*Me: Yeah, it's divided consciousness. Your creative individuality stands behind you, or above you.*

*Actor: Yeah, but it's not like it does anything—it's just there.*

*Me: Yeah that's right—it's just a presence. But it reveals the way, or at least what's not the way.*

The Creative Individuality has become for me, Grotowski's "bird who looks on," the "sun that illuminates all." It is this part that gives "another dimension" to the performance. This dimension does not enter through doing or through any deliberate inner activity, but through presence, awareness. It is here that essence and technique unite. Sergei Bekhterev, one of actors of the Maly Drama Theatre, considers technique to be the "very act of watching a performance closely" (Shevtsova 2004, p. 44). His preparation for a performance, and the foundation of its development, is simple awareness, attention.

Recognizing the stillness (the *non-doing*) of the Creative Individuality clarifies some difficulties we had during *Palaces in Ruin* working with Chekhov's feelings of form, ease, beauty and the whole, which are cultivated by the actor deliberately moving 'with the feeling'. One actor, who also worked with Leonid, did not like these exercises because he thought that they could only induce self-consciousness, something that Leonid had been slowly eradicating in us. These exercises, like many others in Chekhov, use the imagination to work upon the state of the self-as-actor directly. This distinguishes Chekhov from Stanislavski. The latter's training exercises challenge the actor to relax and to monitor their relaxation in performance, but he rarely or never uses the imagination to work exclusively the pre-expressive dimension in isolation from the particular imaginary circumstances of the play, as does Chekhov. All inner and imaginative activity is directed towards the achievement of tasks in the given circumstances. In Active Analysis the actor's action relates to her super-objective in the world of the play; her object is never her self *as an actor*. When working with the Stanislavski system, such 'self-manipulation' becomes immediately obvious. Seeing the creative individuality as an immobile presence made possible for us a more seamless synthesis of Chekhov's exercises with the overall approach of Active Analysis: rather than attempting in performance to move with a particular feeling, the actor simply observes *in terms of the relevant quality*. She does not manipulate her acting but gives attention to her actual immediate experience. The Creative Individuality as objective observer can reveal what she is *already doing* to block the desired qualities and separate herself from the transient now (for example, "I am holding my shoulder muscles, I am pushing that action a

little, I have forgotten to breathe”). When the actor notices this (active) blocking, she can generally stop doing it.

## THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY AND THE SPECTRUM OF ESSENTIAL QUALITIES

It is here in the realm of the actor, rather than the director or playwright, that the essential possibilities open up, through dual consciousness and this re-imagined Creative Individuality. Where is the potential for essential experience and transmission for the actor in a play that portrays turmoil, conflict, strife and ignorance? Or in a play that portrays the absurd and mundane? Or in characters that are ignorant, foolish or evil? Chekhov suggests a possibility not in the performative structure, but on the pre-expressive level, not in the *what* but in the *how*. He writes that when the actor plays ugliness or violence, she must play them with the feeling of beauty (Chekhov 1991, pp. 56-57). The actions of the dramatic conflict can be enacted artistically, in a way that draws out their essential qualities: their beauty, their truth, their passion and their humanness. It may mean drawing out the brilliance, compassion, or integration of the playwright’s vision or the artwork as a whole. This is like the arc of descent in Grotowski’s process, as the actor carries the finer, higher energies encountered during the ascent into the coarser energy of the body. But it is not so much an “itinerary in verticality” beginning with ascent as it is a horizontal journey, extending the exploration to what lies behind and within the action. Chekhov indicates the role Creative Individuality can play in this process:

I observed the psychology of an actor who was constantly drawn to evil, negative characters. Strangely enough, the more expressively he performed them, the more sympathetic they became, remaining nevertheless unmistakably evil. His secret became clear when I understood that the basic aim of his Creative Individuality was to vindicate the human condition (Chekhov 1991, p. 17).

We might say that the above actor, on the pre-expressive level, infused his work with compassion.

The Creative Individuality is the unique creative nature of each artist; it is *individual*. Viewing the Creative Individuality in terms of essential qualities, we could say that each actor will embody certain qualities more easily and more completely than others. If an actor has retained in herself some contact with a particular aspect of presence then this can become the foundation of her work, a profound resource, which is inseparable from their presence and artistic identity. In Russell Crowe’s work, the robust vitality and strength of the red essence shines through. Does he not, in all his performances, illuminate the courage, strength and robustness of those he portrays? The exquisite lightness, ease and bubbly evanescent inventiveness of Chaplin suggest yellow: he finds the joy, the delight, and heart-full sweetness in poverty, sadness and disaster. Garbo’s famous autonomy (not least from directors and other actors: witness her amazing *non-*

*reaction* to Barrymore's histrionics in *Camille*) as well as the fullness of being she conveys and her very *incomparability* suggest the Incomparable Pearl. Ethan Hawke, as a final example, seems to have the quality of human vulnerability, the water essence.

Much time is wasted in acting schools trying to get actors to awaken qualities they do not seem to have access to, when strong contact with and access to *one living quality of presence* can serve as a doorway to organicity (and perhaps the foundation for an entire career). I am not saying that no other qualities are needed, but access to one quality can be a doorway to other qualities of presence and being, and perhaps this could serve as a more fruitful route. Almaas writes that an aspect can be a complete teaching in itself, leading the soul all the way to Being (Almaas 1998a). Similarly, access to any quality of presence can light up the other qualities of the actor's creative presence. Recognizing such a quality in oneself can be a true compass through an artistic life; an actor doesn't have to try to be like Chaplin or Garbo if she knows her own natural qualities. Grotowski makes the point much better than I can:

*What is the quality of submission to your own destiny? One can catch the process if what one does is in keeping with himself, if he doesn't hate what he does. The process is linked to essence and virtually leads to the body of essence. When the warrior is in the short period of osmosis body-and-essence, he should catch his process. Adjusted to process, the body becomes non-resistant, nearly transparent. Everything is in lightness, in evidence (Grotowski 2001a, p. 377).*

"Know why you create," Dr Dorn tells Kostya in *The Seagull*, "or your art will destroy you."

This is not to say that other qualities cannot be developed. Later in our work on *Palaces*, when the performance had a rudimentary through-line, we imagined the Creative Individuality standing behind us as we performed. We deliberately divided our attention, giving ninety-five percent to our action and five percent just to witness the whole. We discovered that, as the Creative Individuality, we observed our performance *in terms of the elements of technique that we had connected with deeply in training and rehearsal*. Training is in part a training of attention, but it is also an awakening of certain *qualities (or modes) of being*, which become accessible as *ways of seeing*. Once I have performed many exercises on relaxation, for example, I know what it feels like in my muscles, as a way of being, and can see my performance in terms of it: where am I holding tension? Once I have experienced essential truth deeply I can do the same: what is false and what is true in this moment of the performance? Once I know the sensation, the quality of the feelings of Form, Ease and Beauty, contact, public solitude, or any element of technique that can be *felt as a quality of my presence*, the Creative Individuality can illuminate my performance in terms of this aspect. We discern clearly where that quality is embodied in our performance, and we can sift away its opposite (meaning that we stop doing whatever we are doing to block the particular quality).

As a result of this discernment, the desired quality, which is not an action but a quality of being, increasingly infuses the performance. As the quality touches our field of experience, we can

develop a strong wish to embody it. The immobile presence, the sun that illuminates all things, the one who looks on, *begins to live*, and as it does so it rebalances, develops and refines the performance. This is Grotowski's perspective, but I am saying, additionally, that *the immobile presence has facets* and that these facets illuminate the performance in different ways and allow it to live in different ways. In Platonic terms, the performance begins to partake of particular Forms. In Almaas's terms, essential aspects become manifest, affecting the quality of the soul, the field of consciousness as a whole, and its many dimensions, including the physical form.

Each school of acting will of course focus on different qualities, usually those its founder embodied or idealized. It will develop exercises to wake up these qualities in its students. I have argued that Stanislavski was oriented to the Personal Essence and the qualities that are central to its development: truth, compassion and human vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> All the elements of his system seem to support the emergence of the fullness and integration of the Pearl. Chekhov, in his supreme mastery of the Centre, his endless inventiveness, the brilliance of his playfulness, and his capacity to disidentify from his own everyday self and identify with a completely imaginary body image, reveals the qualities of the Point and "brilliance" (see Almaas 2002). These aspects, which I perceive at the heart of the approaches of Stanislavski and Chekhov, each include, at least potentially, all the aspects of essence, all the colours of Being—the Pearl can manifest in any colour, so too the Point—and this allows their systems to be very rich and complete.<sup>2</sup>

In *Palaces in Ruin*, we each imagined the Creative Individuality differently, as a palace or a stained glass window, for example. What if we think of Michael Chekhov's "Chart for Inspired Acting" (Chekhov 1991, p. xxxvi) as being like a stained glass window?

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<sup>1</sup> His system seems also to have incorporated much from Sulerzhitsky: his boundless optimism, faith and love, are qualities associated with the aspect of Boundless Love, also called Living Daylight. Living Daylight is related to what is known in psychology as the "holding environment," and our access to it depends upon whether in infancy we enjoyed a holding environment that was embracing, accepting, trustworthy, imbued with unconditional love and supportive of our organic development (Almaas 1998b). Such an environment is exactly what Suler created at the First Studio, that greatest of all theatrical nurseries.

<sup>2</sup> Each of the aspects can be personalized. In other words the Personal Essence can be experienced as Personal Strength, Personal Will, Personal Compassion and so on. Similarly, we can experience every aspect as our identity, as "I am truth" or "I am joy". In each case the radiant centre (Point or Pearl) will take on the colour, affect and so on, of the relevant aspect.

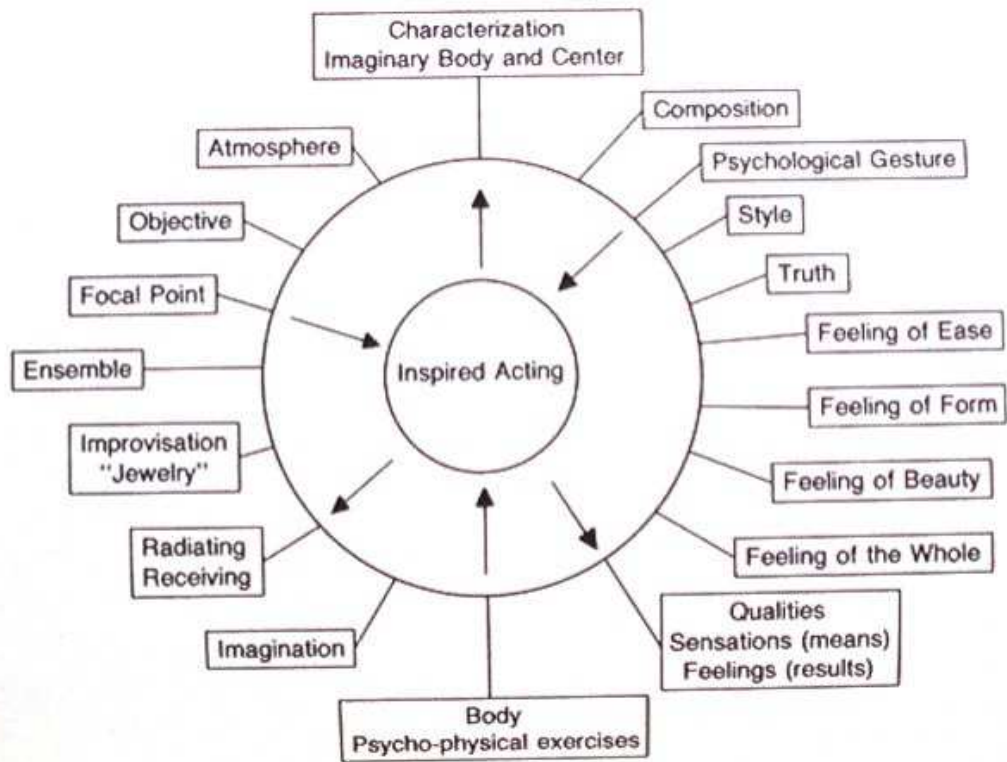
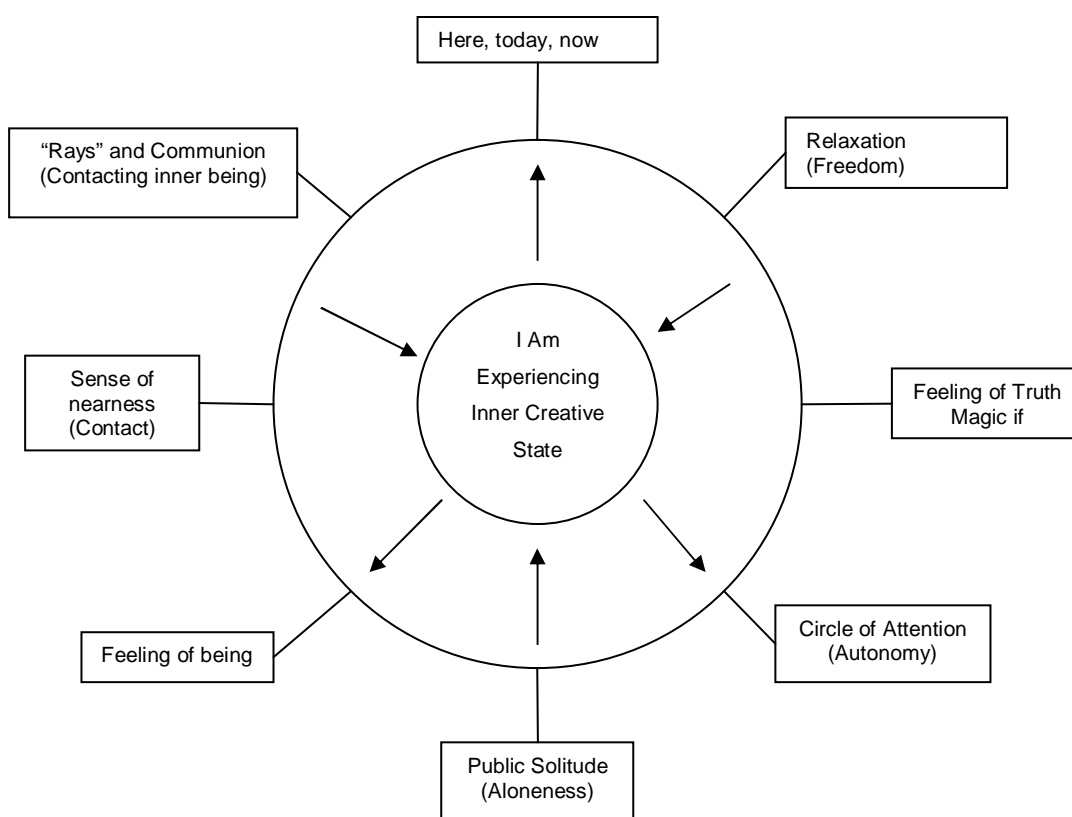


Figure 1: Diagram by Mala Powers of 'Michael Chekhov's Chart for Inspired Acting' (in Chekhov 1991, p. xxxvi).

In Chekhov's words, if you light up a few of the bulbs the central bulb, "Inspired Acting" will illuminate and then light up all the others. Similarly, if one traces the feeling of 'I' all the way to the Essential Identity, playfulness, delight and so on will result. Or if one stays present to the personal feeling or the desire for contact, the Personal Essence will eventually emerge and with it autonomy, the feeling of being, freedom and other qualities. The central aspects can be approached via the qualities that they integrate, or the essential aspects that are close to them. If we place Stanislavski's ideal at the centre, the elements of the system become elements of the state (or devices to achieve a quality or state); they are both pathways to fruition and the substance of that fruition.





**Figure 2: My representation of Stanislavski's system as qualities and devices centred around 'I am' and the Personal Essence.**

This chart is incomplete—through-line of action and super-objective, related to integration, are necessary elements of the system, for example. A graphic representation of the full system incorporating my reinterpretation would be too far complex (for Stanislavski's own chart of the system, see Carnicke 1998). The above diagram does however suggest how the various devices of the system are skilful means of evoking a certain state or quality of being; they enact an understanding of what that state is and how it is blocked. The devices may not be effective, and will very likely block the actor's talent, if they are applied without a deep experiential sense of the quality of living presence each device is related to. The chart also suggests the "closed circle of interdependent concepts" that Carnicke discerns in the system, rather than the "teleological line" many of its proponents emphasized (1998, p. 168).

It is important to recognize that conceptualizing the Creative Individuality as an independent entity is a rhetorical device, despite the use of terms like "divided consciousness." When the experience of presence as the Creative Individuality or 'I am' is very complete, it is difficult to speak of two 'I's' at all: the actor is so fully present that her whole field of consciousness is infused with Being. Grotowski writes that the two sides of this double consciousness are not experienced as separate but "full and unique." That is, the facets of the presence, or the colours

of the stained glass window, are not actually experienced as ‘standing behind’ (or above) but as a presence within the action. The two ‘I’s of the ‘I-I’ are different dimensions of our being, not separate entities or identities.

The conscious presence of the still, non-active dimension of Being allows our usual capacities to transform. When the inner creative state is strong the actor can, without coming out of the role, dissect her state and correct mistakes, as Stanislavski said. The closest everyday function we have to this is our sense of self-judgment or criticism, the inner critic. The Creative Individuality, in the expanded, faceted meaning I am giving it, is similar in that it can illuminate many different facets of the performance. It can observe it in terms of the elements of the inner creative state, the system as a whole, Chekhov’s technique, the essential aspects and so on. But the Creative Individuality differs from the critic in three main respects: the critic is *active*, its judgments always invoke criteria from the realm of ordinary knowledge, and it takes the actor out of the moment; the Creative Individuality is *silent and still*, it illuminates *through presence*—not through criteria from the past but through living qualities that can be experienced in the transient now (basic knowledge); and it brings the actor into the present and a discerning awareness of its living details.

In the understanding of acting as an essential process emerging for me from this research, then, the performance is a way to live and express whatever qualities and degrees of essential presence the actor has access to or has cultivated in herself. It is not intended to develop the actor spiritually or to inscribe for her a journey to essence. If Chekhov’s Centre and Stanislavski’s ‘here, today, now’ are really *presence*, and if the state of ‘I am’ is truly a state of *Being*, then through their training and rehearsal the actor has already undertaken a journey to essence. Essence is already accessible in the actor and in the form of the work, as ‘I am’, as the Creative Individuality. Certain qualities of presence are available to the actor as part of this state, whether because they are still available to the actor personally, or because they have been awoken through the training or rehearsal process. When a particular facet is present in consciousness, the presence or absence of that facet in the action is illuminated. The performer adjusts herself to experience the aspect more fully in her action, and so essence appears in the midst of her doing. She ‘makes live the part that looks on’, Being infuses action, she experiences essence, superconscious feelings, and because the audience is included in her consciousness, so too do they. What she has discovered in private (whether solo or group work) is placed in the service of a public communal experience. In this approach, the appropriate metaphor for the actor’s relationship to essence would not be a vertical, out-and-back journey, but a horizontal unveiling.

## TAKING A FOCAL POINT

I believe that an established device, ‘taking a focal point’, can be adapted (or re-contextualized) to enact my new understanding, although I have not as yet had the chance to test it rigorously in rehearsal. ‘Taking a focal point’ means to adopt particular lenses of awareness while rehearsing or playing. Chekhov suggests taking a particular “ground” (for example, atmosphere, ease, radiation) as a focal point of rehearsal and repeating the scene until that quality is mastered (1991, p. 153). David Latham worked with a similar process but in his own way: once we could play the basic line of actions (tell the story) he would ask us to focus on something specific as we played a scene. The focal point could be related to the world of the play (in which case it brings certain inner objects into the foreground of awareness), the quality of our playing (the theatrical dimension) or sometimes both. It might be ‘loss’, ‘love’, ‘the future’, or even ‘the furniture’ or ‘music’.

### Exercise: Taking a focal point

Once there is a clear through-line of action, play the scene with a particular focal point. Don’t try to do anything, just notice what you notice and allow it to affect you.

The focal point does not have to be a facet of essence or an archetype. Depending on the play, and the individual qualities of the director and the actors, many different focal points can be worked with. Truth can take you very far, as can beauty, love, contact, intelligence and mastery.

In the *Palaces in Ruin* rehearsals,<sup>3</sup> we discovered that an effective application of this exercise, capable of awakening awareness of the theatrical dimension and the actor’s theatrical intelligence (awareness and intelligence become almost the same thing), is to make the ‘five percent focus’ the sense of contact with the audience. Just as in Active Analysis the actors try to sense into one another’s inner being, so with the audience in this exercise. In our experiments, the actors began to demonstrate a greater sense of the performance’s true measure, a greater sense of objectivity, certainty and clarity about composition. These experiments seemed to verify that, as Chekhov says, through the Creative Individuality the actor “acquires a new ‘organ’” (2002, p. 91).

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<sup>3</sup> We did not successfully carry this process through to performance, largely because of my lack of clarity, mentioned previously, regarding the theatrical dimension of that performance.

### Exercise: Deliberately contacting the audience

Move from contacting sensation, to contacting inner and outer perceptions/objects, to contacting feeling, to contact with the ‘inside’ of the audience. Attend to the quality of contact with the audience as you play the scene.

## **TOWARDS A WORKING PROCESS**

I have used Stanislavski, Chekhov and Grotowski to draw together a vision of how dual consciousness, the Creative Individuality and an understanding of elements of technique as related to qualities of presence can be drawn together to fashion an approach to acting as an essential process. If we reconnect this vision now with Active Analysis (which is itself, in practice, a synthesis of Stanislavski’s and Chekhov’s ideas) it might be expressed like this (drawing on Stanislavski 1961, pp. 253-255):

1. Where is your centre? To begin work, find out where you are (Centre, Point, ‘here, today, now’).
2. Give your attention to the present moment, the actual reality that surrounds you.
3. Decide on the structure to play: what has to happen for the story to be told? What events and actions have to happen, in what order? What is the world? What do the characters see?
4. Play it, in presence (like the Fool, play for the love of the experience only, without judgement).
5. Build the sequence of actions and the world (the given circumstances) in more detail.
6. Keep playing and building the world, repeating this sequence.
7. Build the world in such a way that you forget your concerns about acting (Like a Trickster, create a world that comes alive and works on you, that ‘traps you’.)
8. Use the state of ‘I am’ as your touchstone: do you feel a sense of being, contact, personalness, and autonomy? (this invokes and enacts ‘I am’ and the Pearl)
9. When the basic through-line is felt and believed in, in the state of ‘I am’, go over and over it, sifting the true from the false, the gold from the lead (this invokes the development of ‘I am’).
10. Go over the through-line with different focal points (this invokes and enacts dual consciousness, Creative Individuality, ‘I am’ at stage of ‘the Creative Actor in the Play’):
  - Those that relate to the spirit of the play (or performative structure), its themes and super-objectives, and why you are performing it at this time and place.

- Those connected with the theatrical dimension: contact with the audience, rhythm, space, radiating, receiving and so on (like a Magician, find the perfect timing and shape).
- Those that relate to any quality of presence that seems appropriate. Use colours, elements of Chekhov's or Stanislavski's systems or anything you think might refine and deepen the life of the production: Green, Fire, Vulnerability, Mercury, Silence.

11. In all this sift true from false, being from activity, immediacy from distraction, living presence from known concept.

This process is a deepening and expansion of contact:

- Initially you are in contact with the rehearsal room, your partners and your own condition
- Then you are in contact with the world of the play, the character's circumstances and your transformed stage partners.
- Then you are in contact with the world of the production, the lighting, sound, style.
- Finally you come into contact with the audience, with their inner depths.

This process of rehearsing a performance is intended to bring about a refinement and increasing richness in the living essential qualities of the performance and the conscious reach of those qualities. The actor's experiencing of the role, the world of the play, and the theatrical dimension should become subtler, more substantial, more radiant, more integrated, and more essential. It offers the actor the possibility of expanding the range and fullness of the qualities, of colours, textures and flavours they experience, as essence impacts the soul. As Stanislavski would phrase it, the performance should increase in the depth and measure of superconscious feeling it brings forth.

This rehearsal plan, which envisions acting as an essential process, builds upon my explication, using Almaas and Ramacharaka, of the spiritual resonances of 'I am', Chekhov's Centre, and dual consciousness. It is not a complete rehearsal process and must be read in the context of the larger body of knowledge about Active Analysis and the Stanislavski system; and it draws strongly on the existing writing and lore. It is not intended to be revolutionary interpretation, but an expansion of the hermeneutic horizons of the traditions from which it arises, one that, by orienting itself clearly toward essence, and developing clear distinctions regarding essence, makes the already spiritually-oriented practices of these traditions more effective.

It incorporates one of the distinguishing insights of the Diamond Approach, that *presence, essence and Being arise in different facets, aspects or qualities*. This insight, applied to Stanislavski's and Chekhov's techniques, expands and enriches the notions of dual consciousness and the Creative Individuality, the latter becoming a faceted immobile presence, a capacity of Being. Each actor's Creative Individuality can then be understood in terms of the qualities of presence that are most accessible to them. It becomes not only a useful interpretive device, but also a touchstone for the individual's process of development. This vision has yet to be put to the test in any conclusive way, although our experiments during *Palaces in Ruin* suggest that it will be workable, at least to some extent, after further investigation. This plan, represents then, at the end of this turn of the hermeneutic spiral, the emergent horizon of the research process, the last interpretation, to be challenged in the next arc of investigation, after the completion of this formal stage of research.

### ***DEAR SISTERS, SWEET SISTERS***

This account demonstrates how some of the themes of this chapter—dual consciousness, the immobile presence and non-doing—can be integrated into the process of performing and result in a state of experiencing essence in the midst of the theatrical dimension.

*2003. A performance of Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters at the Chapel Off Chapel Loft Theatre. The scene between Trofimov and Ranyevskaya from Act Three of The Cherry Orchard, when they argue over her decision to return to her lover in Paris. Leonid's work on this scene has been, for many of us involved, awe-inspiring. His analysis of the unspoken dynamics, and the way he has used 'the material' (the actor playing Ranyevskaya and myself, and the relationship between us) is amazing. We suddenly found ourselves in a very effective scene and very close to the state of 'I am'.*

*On this particular night, I am noticing my physical tension. At the same time I notice impulses in me to give the scene a 'little plus', to do something for show. As I notice the impulses without acting on them, my sense of 'I am' is strengthened. I feel the audience more acutely. I feel more vulnerable. I feel more space, more time. Soon, nervousness returns, and muscular contractions. Again I observe without reacting. I don't tell myself to relax. I just notice how my reactions take me out of the situation. 'I am' strengthens again. I feel contact. The situation becomes concrete, literally. The inner objects feel solid in me: what Paris means for Ranyevskaya, the sordid side of her nature, the suffering she has put her family through. I notice my anger at her and my frustration. Something in me grasps after the emotion. I notice that too and it lessens.*

*As this process continues, I suddenly find myself 'believing': my body is reacting as if the situation is real, my mind is reacting as if it is real, my inner motive forces—mind, will and feelings—all fall into concert, and are directed toward the situation. I feel very vulnerable, emotionally open and exposed, but I have no reaction to this. I no longer feel divided or dual at all. Everything around me, whether*

*imaginary or 'real', begins to feel real. It is all infused with the pearly quality I have felt sometimes in my Diamond Approach work. I am utterly autonomous from the audience, personally involved, concretely, substantially real. I am not carried away—I can feel my feet on the floor—and yet 'I am'. If I analyse the experience, then logically I can recognize that I am dual, but there is no experience of division.*

*It doesn't last long. I come to an action that I don't believe and suddenly there is the familiar contraction and the goey unpleasant flavour of falsehood. But while it lasted I felt that I really existed. And afterwards I thought that this is why I am an actor, for this experience. It may not have the dramatic catharsis of the neutral mask but, in this experience, presence was so complete, so personal that there was nothing else. It was as if the background presence I felt in the mask was for a few brief moments foregrounded and global, condensed and personalized, and somehow also communal. Observation as technique, non-reactive attention to the elements of the system I had really felt in myself, 'made live the part that looks on'. And my experience of this is not of a division between stillness and movement, being and doing, but their co-emergence.*

## *Chapter 10*

### **CONCLUSION: ESSENCE, ACTING AND THE SPIRITUAL**

John Martin writes that although Western actors are highly trained “these actors seldom reach that immensity of power in the Noh or Kathakali actor” (1997, p. 52). In my neutral mask training at VCA, I saw and experienced Western actors embodying an immense and beautiful numinous reality in theatrical moments as spiritually powerful as any I have seen. From that point, I wanted to create performances that expressed a similar numinosity. In conclusion, I will first recount how this research unfolded my understanding of how to do this. Then I will discuss its significance for qualitative performance research, acting and actor training. I will also discuss a possible pitfall of the interpretation that has emerged in this research, spiritual materialism, and suggest ways to avoid this outcome. Finally, I discuss the significance of the research for my personal artistic journey.

#### **RECOUNTING THE RESEARCH JOURNEY AND OUTCOMES**

The impetus for this research came from my experience of the effect of the Diamond Approach on my own acting, and my realization that Almaas’s conceptual formulations allowed me to investigate and articulate that realm of numinous experience with greater specificity and precision. His distinction between basic and ordinary knowledge, the links he makes between the spiritual domain of essence and the felt experience of presence, and the insight that this presence differentiates into specific, knowable qualities, made possible an investigation of the potential of these different aspects for the actor. After reviewing the spiritually and essentially-oriented practice and writings of the Stanislavski and Copeau traditions of acting, I immersed myself in these practices. Building upon them and combining them with insights from the Diamond Approach, I investigated the potential of love for the actor. Specific practices emerged from this investigation, which proved to be effective doorways to experiences of organicity, and showed love to be a source of many qualities that are widely valued in acting.



The creation of *Palaces in Ruin*, however, revealed the need to incorporate a greater understanding of the relation between craft, the theatrical dimension and essence, and suggested that Chekhov's Centre could prove a key to the union of theatrical play and essential experience. Work with Leonid Verzub also brought forth experiences that were both essential and theatrical. Discovering Ramacharaka's passage on the relationship between the 'I' and the 'I am' precipitated a fusion of horizons (in hermeneutic terms) between my own experience and my source traditions, and provided the impetus for a new interpretation of the Stanislavski system which elucidates and expands upon its spiritual dimensions.

This interpretation, the primary theoretical outcome of this research, is presented as a creative synthesis of experience, practice, theory and analysis, in Chapters Six to Nine. It explicates the ways that Stanislavski tradition is specifically oriented toward spiritual experience, but brings a greater specificity to what this means by defining this experience in terms of essence, basic knowledge, and specific essential aspects. It demonstrates how the Stanislavski system supports such an interpretation and encodes an understanding of how to act in such states. It also suggests specific developments, both conceptual and practical, to orient the application of the Stanislavski system more fully toward essential experience. Concepts from the Stanislavski tradition—the 'I', the Centre, the 'I am', Creative Individuality, I-I and dual consciousness—are reinterpreted and resituated within the explicitly spiritual and psychologically sophisticated contexts of transpersonal theory and the Diamond Approach, giving them greater conceptual precision and spiritual resonance. These reinterpretations are married at many points to either new exercises, or new variations on established exercises. Neither the interpretation I have presented nor the investigations I have described are intended to be conclusive or complete. I have not attempted to present a tidy systemic synthesis but a record of an unfolding process of inquiry into essence as an experience and event in the artistic life of the actor, and a portrait of the current stage of unfoldment of that inquiry.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH FOR POSTMODERN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

I will now discuss two areas for which my research may have significant implications. The first is qualitative research generally within a postmodern context, and the second is how actor training and acting generally are approached. To consider, briefly, performance research in a postmodern context. Firstly, I contend that hermeneutic phenomenology—with its emphasis on being as it is lived in the world, the co-creation of meaning by tradition and lived experience, the radical embodiment of all meaning and cognition and the inseparability of values, action and knowledge—is well-suited to research into performance. Performance research has theoretically drawn upon social constructivist thinking, deconstruction and critical theory in ways that seem

to sever academically-oriented practitioners from non-academic ones, and performance theory from the rich traditions, such as Stanislavski's, that could nourish it. I would argue that if hermeneutic phenomenology could give rise to appropriate and accepted methods for performance research as it has furnished suitable methods for psychology, the field would be much richer for it.

The second point I want to make regards postmodern qualitative research generally. In the third chapter, I argued that acting was a way of knowing congruent with transpersonal perspectives on knowledge, which propose a participatory epistemology. I demonstrated that in both cases (transpersonal and theatrical) knowledge is acquired by virtue of a personal journey of transformation that involves immersion in the transpersonal dimensions of the soul, including the world of nature, and that this immersion revealed nature's processes and forms to be archetypal. I argued that the perspective that arises from such a journey is congruent with a postmodern worldview, in that it is multi-perspectival/aperspectival, situated, sensitive to the construction of the subject on many levels and at home with ambiguity. But it does not reject the possibility of experiencing essential, archetypal or universal forms, and in fact its hermeneutic precision depends upon such forms. Nor does such an epistemic perspective give rise to the postmodern dilemmas of relativism or loss of depth; it is in fact grounded in an experience of value deeper than mere personal preference or conditioning, and this experience of value is itself deepened and transformed by the journey.

I drew heavily on Tarnas's (1993) argument that the dilemmas of the subject-world relationship posed by the Cartesian-Kantian paradigm, and engaged so dynamically by critical theory and postmodernism, logically point toward depth psychology. Tarnas traced how these dilemmas might be resolved through considering the philosophical implications of the experiences that occur in the transpersonal depths of the psyche. My particular addition to this fecund perspective is to relate it to mime and performance, neutrality, the integral-aperspectival structure and the Diamond Approach, and to demonstrate the parallels between these perspectives. Just as Tarnas grounds his perspective in the embodied experience of Grof's subjects, my approach grounds it in the bodily experience of the actor in the neutral mask, and the collective event of the theatre of mask class. Simply put, I offer another injunction for the paradigm of transpersonal knowing, one that strikes me as highly congruent with Ferrer's (2001) call for a greater emphasis on transpersonal events in preference to the experientialism which he believes has marred transpersonal thinking up to this point.

The implications of the transpersonal paradigm for postmodern research are radical. My research approach reiterates and, I believe, re-formulates these implications more specifically. Along with Tarnas, I am effectively suggesting that the difficulties of postmodern research and critical theory require not further excavation of the construction of 'the subject' but a profound journey on the part of the postmodern researcher herself. What seems needed is inquiry not into

the subject as object but the *subject as subject*—each of us, personally. I am suggesting that the ascendancy of ordinary, representational and theoretical knowledge needs balancing by a profound engagement with basic knowledge, with immediate experience. The general thrust of this perspective is of course widely articulated within the field of qualitative inquiry, but the psychological, transpersonal and archetypal dimensions of such an approach are not normally acknowledged, even though they seem, according to the logic of my argument in Chapter Four, to be unavoidable.

It is understandable that academic researchers might attempt to avoid these archetypal dimensions because, although these levels of the journey give the knowledge it yields a validity more certain than personal preference, they are normally encountered only through processes of personal transformation that are deeply confronting, intimate and painful, not to mention highly visceral. In my case, the emotional and energetic effort required by this project has been immense. The process of spiritually-oriented self-inquiry operating alongside spiritually-oriented artistic praxis, while attempting to meet the rigorous demands of academic research, in a communal art form, while filling the overlapping roles of teacher, student, performer and researcher, challenged me very deeply. There have been periods of such personal confusion, struggle, stress and such profound inner de-structurings and re-structurings, that the process has seemed, at times, impossibly difficult and complex. The temptation to close down the openness so central to my approach, to work at a greater distance and adopt a decided point of view was strong. And yet the process has also been profoundly regenerative and integrative for me, as well as transformative, educational and artistically relevant for my primary co-researchers. This suggests that one of the ways this thesis could be relevant for an audience beyond the theatre is that the approach I have adopted might be useful in the formulation and implementation of improved methods of inquiry in a variety of fields.

This thesis is also, therefore, in part, a plea and a polemic, advocating a shift of attention in the field, away from exclusively systemic abstractions, away from the mechanical and the conceptual, and toward the demands and aspirations of the heart. I have tried to ground my concepts and theorizing in the deeply felt distinctions of basic knowledge rather than abstract representations, and to demonstrate the hermeneutic effectiveness of doing so. I have also tried, as is usual within transpersonal studies, not to stray too far from the language of the academy, to build bridges within and through an accepted mode of discourse, while at the same time attempting to expand that discourse and to render more acceptable within it phenomena that it currently marginalizes, such as essence, presence, Being, archetype and love. I believe I have demonstrated that these phenomena need not be marginal, but can be central to an inquiry that is not only personal, aesthetic, practical, and embodied but also academically rigorous, conceptually discriminating and historically and theoretically informed. I have shown, I believe, that such an approach need not descend into a naïve humanism or essentialism. In fact, when

this approach is wedded to personal transformation that extends to archetypal levels, it can mediate a deep appreciation for the multi-layered complexity of perspectives that reality accommodates.

## **SIGNIFICANCE FOR ACTING AND ACTOR TRAINING**

Turning now to acting and actor training: the thesis has shown that certain archetypes and aspects of essence are effective hermeneutic ‘lenses’ that can not only illuminate the nature of acting generally, but which can also facilitate deep experiential insights into the approaches of Stanislavski, Chekhov and others. These same aspects also reveal certain points of integration between these approaches. Almaas’s understanding of the psychological issues surrounding particular aspects, and his phenomenology of essence, make it possible to theorize how these systems invoke essential events and experiences, to apply these processes more effectively and to discover precise and workable points of synthesis between them.

Each archetype offers a doorway to a certain realm of experience and understanding for the actor. Love and the Fool open up organicity, absorption, flow, endless creativity and rhythm. The Essential Identity brings immediacy, specificity, the mastery of identification and disidentification, centredness, and spontaneity, and illuminates Chekhov’s Centre and elements of Active Analysis. The Personal Essence offers personalness, contact, being, fullness, humanness and vulnerability. It clarifies Stanislavski’s approach and the nature of ‘I am’ and experiencing. Understanding the relationship between the stillness of being and the activity of the personality, and the role of essence in dual consciousness (the state of I-I in which one I—the Creative Individuality—is spiritual and the source of essential presence in the work) opens up the possibility of carrying these insights into the rehearsal process. It also presents the possibility, when conjoined to an understanding of the archetypes at the centre of the various systems, of a broad and encompassing framework with which to view and apply these systems.

The application of this understanding needs to be handled carefully. My intention is not to suggest that the archetypes I have described and delineated should be adopted in any prescriptive or dogmatic way. Nor do I believe that the language of particular spiritual systems or their particular techniques should be brought into the studio or rehearsal room, except in so far as they can be effective without calling attention to themselves. Many acting teachers have spiritual sources for their work of which their students are unaware, and I believe this is the correct approach. As Brook says “What comes through comes through, there is nothing I do to make it so.” A very great deal can come through, but I believe that whatever cross-fertilization occurs should be permitted to emerge organically, in response to the demands of the particular group and moment, within the normal mode of discourse of that group.

I am not therefore, suggesting a new system of acting is needed. I have drawn attention to the importance of presence and essence within systems that are already established and accepted. I hope that by articulating this inquiry and the experiences that comprised it, this research can facilitate a shift in focus for other practitioners, so that they can develop a greater sensitivity to, and appreciation of, the beautiful qualities of presence within their creative work, their collaborators and themselves. The links Almaas establishes between basic knowledge, essence, presence and spirituality, and the further links I have made to the neutral mask, ‘for the first time’, ‘here, today now’, authenticity and other widely understood distinctions within acting lore, should also help practitioners to determine when living tradition falls into conceptual system in their own work. These elements of my research should also help theorists to articulate crucial distinctions more clearly and to unshackle themselves from some of the more limiting totalizing narratives of post-structuralism. I hope that this work awakens in others not a love of theory but an appreciation of its important but limited role in the living transmission we receive from other human beings.

David Latham once said to me: “People say that they teach the Strasberg Method, or the Stanislavski system, or the Chekhov technique. I teach the actor. If you do have a system, it will be in you. You should have forgotten it in a way. *Train the bloody actor!*” Techniques can be learned, a living tradition must be digested, and made part of our own living structures. A recognition of the importance of living presence, and its various qualities, and its inseparability from the human person herself, from the living soul, can help us as teachers to recognize and nourish the qualities of our students, to be more creative with the processes we have digested and to give our own qualities scope for expression. This requires us to remember that essence is not an object. Recognizing our central qualities means recognizing something so close to us that we have been seeing with it rather than seeing it. A sense of value, intimacy and appreciation is inseparable from the experience.

‘System’ is a bad word for the body of understanding, the living torch, that Stanislavski transmitted, because it seems to imply the possibility of sidestepping the messily human, intuitive, trial and error elements of creative work. Working with Leonid showed that nothing could be further from the lived experience of the Stanislavski tradition. To master the system is to allow yourself to be transformed, refined, deepened, awoken, so that profound potentials of your soul are activated and integrated. The same can be said for Chekhov’s approach, and Lecoq’s. If we are open to the possibility that these very different approaches are each working to cultivate our soul, then we are paradoxically more able to be free of technique. I am not a Stanislavski actor, or a Chekhov or Lecoq actor. I am that actor who has cultivated these particular capacities of my nature. I am myself, drawing on my own essential strengths.

This is why David says his work is about ‘nourishing the roots’. The techniques and tools do not disappear, but we gain a dimension deeper than technique, and this deeper dimension is the

same for all techniques—the ground of our own Being, in all the various flavours and colours of its numinous potential. I do not study a system; through the system I study myself. More than practicing skills, I cultivate myself. The ‘artless art’ of which Herrigel’s Zen Master spoke is the art of being, within the special context of one’s art-form. My art more easily becomes artless if I can feel the ground beneath it, which is me and also beyond me. Which is to say, if I can paraphrase the famous *koan*: *If you meet Lecoq on the stage, kill him*. Stanislavski too, although that may be more difficult, he was a giant of a man. But really, if he or his system appears in front of you when you are acting, you should kill him too. The proper place for a teacher is behind us, out of sight. Insofar as we have digested their teachings, they have become part of us, absorbed into the multifaceted presence of our Creative Individuality.

## **SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM**

Although this thesis has focused on essence, I would like to argue here that essence, too, should be ‘left behind’. Certainly the archetypes I have described are important. Love, Identity, ‘I am’, the Magician, Trickster and Fool are all rich resources, which can be integrated into the more complete approaches of Stanislavski and Chekhov. But if they become reified and separated from the creative process, or from an attitude of open exploration, and begin to be considered as ends in themselves, they will cease to be transparent to the transcendent and cease to be living resources. The same can be said for essence, presence and Being, whose deeper ground is a mystery beyond such categories. Thus, while a sensitivity to these phenomena is undoubtedly useful, if they become sought after as objects, then the actor will be engaging in “spiritual materialism” (Trungpa 1973)—the pursuit of spiritual achievements to shore up and bolster the ego. This would be worse than a complete lack of consideration of the spiritual dimensions of acting, because such reification and objectification of essence and presence necessarily transforms the experience into ordinary knowledge, mere concepts bereft of exactly those qualities to which the concepts apply.

I think it was this danger that Lecoq had in mind when he wrote: “In our work the search for self-enlightenment and spiritual bliss has little attraction. The ego is superfluous” (2000, p. 19). A love of the spiritual turns easily into spiritual materialism, as the sublime becomes a memory and an artefact of ordinary knowledge. Emerson said of Swedenborg: “It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescent images of thought. True in transition they become false if fixed.” (quoted in Hunt 2003, p. 33). I think I fell into this trap, to some degree, in *Palaces in Ruin*: in the attempt to evoke an essential event, I began to grasp after it as if it was an object, to evaluate whether we had succeeded in evoking it. This made sense on one level: I was engaged in research, attempting to answer a particular question. But in doing this, I had brought the concept of essence into focus in front of me and forgotten the broader, more encompassing essential presence that was the ground and source of the whole process within me. I believe this

is why actors tend to avoid naming and analysing their experiences: they recognize the danger of basic knowledge becoming ordinary knowledge, of reducing what is more precious (and indeed the source of their talent) to mere concepts, which can then be mistaken for the thing itself.

I would like to draw attention to two ways of avoiding spiritual materialism, both already a part of the traditions I have dealt with. The first is to maintain the attitude of play, the subjunctive mood of Huizinga and Campbell, the child-like naivety Stanislavski advocated and embodied. One can research a certain question, but the exploration must always overflow the bounds of the research, like the Fool. Play loosens categories, even categories like God and essence. In play, concepts cannot grip us in the same way; questions and intents can be held lightly within the overall rhythm of the work. The second is to adopt an attitude not of *seeking* enlightenment, essence or self-development, but of devotion and surrender to whatever emerges. This relates to the attitudes of openness and love I mentioned in the Chapter Five. The attitude of openness also implies *endlessness*. The artist is continually ‘bracketing’ any temptation to finality or closure in the creative work. This is a cornerstone of spiritual theatre for Lev Dodin: “Unfortunately searching and aspiration have been replaced in theatre by the cult of being content once you have reached a certain goal. But when you reach a goal, art ends” (quoted in Ostrovsky 1999). Stanislavski knew this also: “Above all,” he said “the art theatre must not stop experimenting” (quoted in Benedetti 1999, p. 180). The very beginnings of his system were a fight against “fossilization” (Stanislavski 1956, p. 459).

This is why, although I have demonstrated that certain essential aspects and archetypes are effective hermeneutic categories and creative resources for the actor, I argue now these categories must be sacrificed to the complexity, flux and creativity of the lived process. If we try to base our theatre on any fixed notions or past experiences (ordinary knowledge) we become spiritual materialists, assigning the place of the mystery to the known. Yet the Forms we apprehend are useful within an overarching ‘structure of anti-structure’, an unending quest, an openness to endless creativity (“continual improvisation”) and continual renewal. To quote Lev Dodin once more: “everything that belongs to yesterday is repudiated in the name of the new and yet goes into the new” (Shevtsova 2004, p. 38).

## **ARCHETYPAL MASKS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE**

At various points in this thesis I have emphasized the importance of the personal dimension, and the research question sprung from my personal artistic ideals and aspirations. These ideals have transformed as a result of this research. The reader might wonder, as I did, reflecting on this research narrative, what happened to the profound catharsis and archetypal forms of the mask. There are clues in my account of performing in *Dear Sister, Sweet Sisters* at the end of the

previous chapter, and in “Love and the Fool,” where I describe letting go of Cieslak, Grotowski’s famous protégé, as an ideal.

In that exercise (“Connecting the Heart, Genitals and Eyes”), I touched upon a particular essential experience that I believed I had perceived in (or projected onto) Cieslak, which I aspired to and which, after I experienced it, no longer exerted such a magnetic pull upon my psyche. (I am not in any way suggesting that I can compare myself to Cieslak. I cannot. I am discussing his inner meaning for me.) I realized I could ‘get there’ through the acting exercises and that, as important as it was for me personally, I actually did not need to be an actor, making theatre, to do so. I realized that I had been seeking essential experience for myself personally through acting, and I needed an audience to be seen as being ‘like Cieslak’. I wanted my organicity, depth, connectedness, and luminosity to be seen, as his had been seen and lauded around the world. But once I saw these qualities in myself, however briefly, I no longer cared as much if others saw it in me. As these particular narcissistic needs no longer warped my perception of theatre to the same extent, I began to wonder afresh what acting meant to me. It was no longer about the profound cathartic organicity of the mask.

Only in retrospect is it possible to see what happened to the archetypal dimensions of the mask in my research journey. The answer is there in my account of performing in *Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters*:

*...I felt that this is why I am an actor, for this experience. It may not have the dramatic catharsis of the neutral mask but, in this experience, presence was so complete, so personal that there was nothing else. It was as if the background presence I felt in the mask was for a few brief moments fore-grounded and global, condensed and personalized.*

Within the archetypal forms mediated by the neutral mask, which makes such demands on the body, is presence, basic knowledge, or Being. And in the performance above, I was experiencing this presence, briefly, not particularly as a sharp-edged, universal archetypal pattern, but as a pervasive, rounded personal Being-ness. The sense I have is that this grounded pearly presence is at least as precious as the spiritual heights of the mask and Cieslak, and that it mediates contact with the audience in a way that the impersonal experiences of essence do not. Paradoxically, this experience was at the same time personal and free of self-concern. And unlike the neutral mask, which is only a training tool, and Grotowski’s remarkable creations, which he eventually removed from public view altogether, in this state there was no tension with theatre as I conceived it. There was character, play, narrative, conflict, an imaginary world *and* an essential event.

Almaas (1988) writes how the Pearl brings a sense of ordinariness, and an appreciation for normal, worldly life which, through the Pearl, can be lived as essence. Grof (1998) describes how many of his participants, after discovering the Void as the source of all creation, realized



that in union with it, in absolute transcendence, they could not make love, go windsurfing or eat apple pie, and that no matter how perfect that condition is, it is incomplete. I find myself, after this research, no longer as interested in profound shattering encounters with the *mysterium tremendum* as I am appreciative of performances that are playful and contactful personal encounters, integrative of the fullness of Being, and full of love and respect for Being, but also for other persons and presences.

I am also aware that if I reify the Pearl and make of it a new ideal, that this aspect too will become opaque, blocked by ordinary knowledge. I certainly hope this thesis and the transformations it has wrought in my practice, and the practice of my co-researchers, can benefit others. I hope that it can help artists to turn their attention away from the technical, materialistic and systemic and toward the infinite richness of the qualities of human presence, toward the personal process of transmission between teacher and student, actor and audience, and toward archetypal dimensions of this presence, so more Western actors can approach the spiritual power of the Noh actor, and audiences can begin to appreciate the different qualities of spiritual presence of the Western actor. I hope that this thesis and the incomplete researches it describes can make some small contribution to this difficult, perhaps unending, task. But this aspiration is situated within a larger openness:

*2005. Teaching Character Mask. I arrive at class without enthusiasm. I have been writing all day. Trying to draw together these last three years of thinking about theatre, doing it, reading about it. I have been writing about presence, and essence and love, and now the words feel dead. They don't inspire me. If it's not about that, what's my theatre about? I feel like I have promised a banquet and arrived with nothing to offer but empty husks. I notice these feelings. I allow them to be there as I wait for the students to arrive. What am I doing here? I watch them warm up. I look at the masks, that have given me so much joy, but not today. Why do we do theatre? I realize that, right now, I don't know. I search my mind for answers, I think of those masters that have inspired me, but neither their answers nor their examples inspire me now. Why do we do it? I wipe the slate. Forget all that I've thought in the past, all that I've written about it. What's this class right now? What are the possibilities? What can really live here today? I feel myself become very present, open, curious and adventurous. I feel a flame ignite inside me: I wonder... Not satisfied with old forms, working in a spirit of creation and discovery, I begin the class. It comes alive. In the warm up I discover many things about the Centre I haven't seen before, and work with it in a new way. The improvisations are alive, dynamic and full of unexpected feelings, atmospheres and actions. For this class, theatre becomes a window on the unknown and the invisible.*

The emancipating attitude in the class above is the same as it was in the neutral mask in my first year of training: *I do all as if for the first time. I bring myself into the present. I have no past.* This approach is a game: of course I do have a past and a psychology, and it will all come through. But I forget

it all so I can be present here now, in the studio, rehearsal or performance. If I am present then it is possible that the theatre I make will be spiritual or essential, enacting and drawing upon a domain beyond my everyday egoic preferences, without falling prey to spiritual materialism. If I am present then I am not identified with the old, the known, but my accumulated practice is available to me, not as a system, but as a living organism. I have an inner stillness that is timeless being and paradoxically, this stillness is a dynamic presence: openness in the transient now. Stanislavski knew the connection between the now and the spirit, and I give the last oft-quoted words to him:

Here, in this 'now', there exists no other life than his creative life; here there exists only the powerful life of his spirit. ... [Actors must] know how to observe, create and build their creative 'now' without thinking of tomorrow. ...[F]or it is only in that 'now' that he has acquired all the powers that are active in him (1988, pp. 150-153).

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: PRACTICAL INVESTIGATIONS UNDERTAKEN IN THIS RESEARCH AND RESEARCH MATERIALS GENERATED

#### 1. Wiseworld Studio Investigation, August-October 2002

This was an investigation of performative approaches to essential experience by immersing myself in neutral mask and movement, biomechanics, and exercises taken from Grotowski and Michael Chekhov. It involved daily solo work, for three to four hours, followed by an hour or more of journal writing. Acting colleagues and former students attended on an informal basis twice a week to witness mask work and participate in exercises.

*Research Materials: 'Wiseworld Journal'*

#### 2. Observation of John Bolton's Neutral Mask Course at VCA, April- June 2003

I observed John Bolton's three-hour classes daily for his entire neutral mask course, keeping detailed journal records, and conducting interviews with students who volunteered to be involved in the research after being invited in class to approach me if they were interested.

*Research Materials: 'VCA Neutral Mask Journal' including records of class exercises, impressions and conversations with participants; transcripts of 30-60 minute interviews with fifteen students and two extended interviews with John Bolton.*

#### 3. Training with Leonid Verzub in Russian School of Acting (Techniques of Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov & Maria Knebel), February-October 2003

Two three and a half hour sessions a week in a group of thirteen actors, taught by Leonid Verzub (translators: Lila Zarnowski, Ben Rotenburg and Joseph Sherman). Topics: *experiencing* in one's own person, character and text, using the plays of Anton Chekhov.

*Research Materials: 'Verzub Journal', transcripts of two extended interviews with Leonid Verzub (translator: Greg Ulfan), notated class scripts.*

**4. Training, Devising, Rehearsals and Performance of *Palaces in Ruin*, July-October 2003**

With actors familiar with my work, approached directly by me to participate in the research. Training processes included neutral mask, Active Analysis and Michael Chekhov technique. The performance ran for an hour with no interval, and involved six etudes developed from improvisations on atmospheres, in which the atmospheres were colours, which the actors had previously experienced in the neutral mask. The performance took place five times between October 3-5, 2003 at Rechabite Hall, Northcote, Victoria, before invited guests and members of the public. Due to the illness of one of the actors, I also acted in this performance.

*Research Materials: 'Palaces Journal' (including training and rehearsal plans, records of work, relevant conversations and audience responses); journal writings by the actors; transcript of extended discussion with the cast following the performance; poor quality video recording of the performance.*

**5. Rehearsal and Performance of *Dear Sisters, Sweet Sisters: a fantasia on Chekhov*, directed by Leonid Verzub, October-December 2003**

A three-and-a-half hour performance, with one interval, using material from Anton Chekhov's *Seagull*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, performed four times between December 18-21, 2003 at Chapel Off Chapel Loft, Prahran, Victoria. I performed the roles of Petya Trofimov, Yepikhodov and Kulygin, as well as co-producing the performance.

*Research Materials: 'Dear Sisters Journal'; notated rehearsal script.*

**6. Mask Journey Intensive Studio Investigation, March 1-13, 2004**

Daily four-hour explorations with four invited actors (two former students, one actor from *Palaces in Ruin*, and one student from John Bolton's neutral mask course the previous year) focusing on journey work in the neutral mask, and the connection between Joseph Campbell's (1993) monomyth, essential experience and the theatrical dimension.

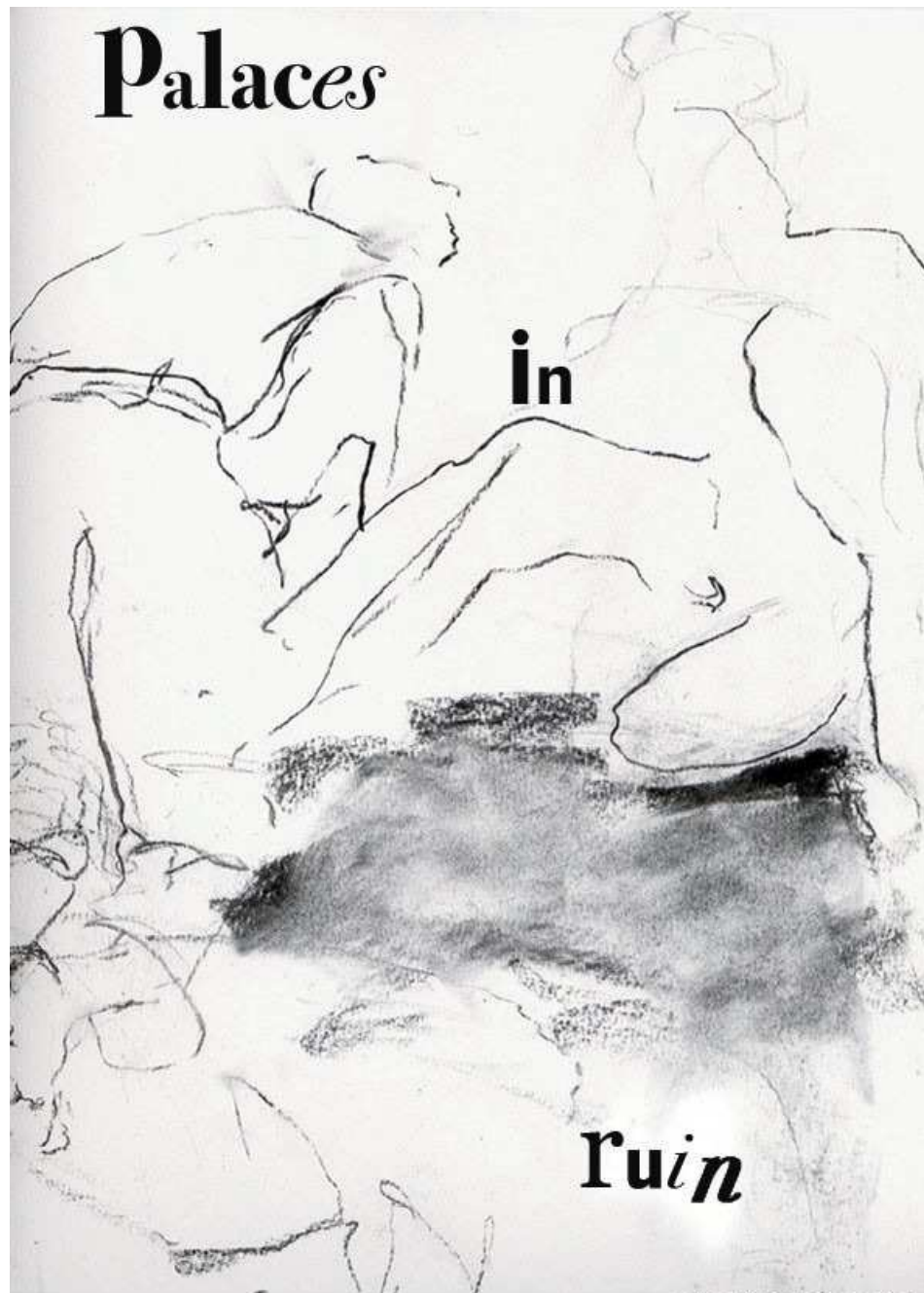
*Research Materials: 'Journey Intensive Journal'; seven hours of videotape records of work and discussions; transcriptions of discussions; written reflections on videotaped mask work; journal writings by the four actors.*

**7. Weekly Studio Investigations, March-December 2004**

With the four actors from the previous investigation, weekly three-hour sessions exploring Chekhov's Centre, play, essential experience and the specific elements of the theatrical dimension, including character, play, composition and contact with the audience.

*Research materials: 'Journey Group Journal'*

APPENDIX 2: PROGRAMME FOR *PALACES IN RUIN*



artwork by rebecca bell

directed by ash wain  
performed by bree pickering, guy kable  
joel sprake & tamara searle

rechabite hall, westbourne grove, northcote (opp old town hall)

oct 3 at 6pm & 10pm, oct 4 at 6pm & 10pm, oct 5 at 6pm

bookings essential: 9486 4331 or [ashwain@alphalink.com.au](mailto:ashwain@alphalink.com.au)

tickets \$10/\$15

## **Scenario ~ Six Etudes**

### **Prologue: The Kind of Grace I Want / Playground**

*Joe in some place and time where our wishes can be freely spoken.  
The four children at a playground, some time before tea.*

### **Never So Content**

*Grown up, out camping by a stream.*

### **Love's Sanctuary**

*Same night, in the darkness*

### **Rupture**

*A few years later, in Beth's dream*

### **Old Wineskins and the Wine-dark Sea**

*The same time, in the house the three now share.*

### **A Canberra State of Mind**

*Months later, in the house.*

Etudes are repeated improvisations based on themes, which gradually assume a more precise and repeatable form.

Much of the text is by Rumi—in the English versions of his poetry by Daniel Ladinsky or Coleman Barks—or Rainer Maria Rilke, in Stephen Mitchell's translation. In "A Canberra State of Mind," Greg reads from *Realms of the Human Unconscious* by Stanislav Grof. Beth's Canberra monologue by Ash Wain. The remainder has been composed by the director and the performers. The song "I can sing a rainbow" is by Arthur Hamilton. The "Baby Elephant Walk" melody was composed by Henry Mancini.

## **Director's Notes**

There's a story, a fairly simple one, and there's a poem, rough-hewn and ragged, within the story. Four friends grew up together, fell in love, wished for things they barely understood, felt Grace come and then seemingly go. If Grace comes and goes, how do you live? Do the shifting moods of the world decide for us our happiness or misery? By what laws or logic, if any, does the world bring us blessing or suffering, communion or exile? What would you do if you found yourself in Hell, with no idea why?

## Cast

Joe ~ Ash Wain  
Tess ~ Tamara Searle  
Greg ~ Guy Kable  
Beth ~ Bree Pickering

The part of Joe was created and developed by Joel Sprake. Due to illness, his role is being played in this season by Ash Wain.

Poster and Artwork by Rebecca Bell

## Biographies

**Guy Kable**, is from Newcastle where, with Newcastle University Theatre, he performed roles in *Offending the Audience* and *The Legend of King O'Malley*. He moved to Melbourne in 2001 and has since studied acting at the VCA Foundation Program and with Leonid Verzub. He was last seen in Playbox's *3D Fest*.

**Bree Pickering** is from Noosa. She has performed in *Summer of the Aliens* at the Brisbane Arts Theatre, and in the short films *Love and Tragedy* and *Fate is Red*. She moved to Melbourne to study at the VCA Foundations Program, which she completed this year.

**Tamara Searle** danced for the Australian Ballet before studying acting at the National Theatre Drama School for two years. She has appeared in *Orbit* and *Season of New Australian Works* at St Martin's, where she was assistant director on *7 Chapters from a Shattered World*, and the short films *Shy & Holly's Grail*. Tamara also created and performed in *Mildred takes a Moment* for Dancehouse at last year's Fringe and is currently directing *Wanderlust* at YWCA Victoria. She studies acting at Kenny Ransom's Actor's Lab.

**Ash Wain** trained at the VCA from 1991-93, He has appeared in stage productions at the Hole in the Wall Theatre, The Effie Crump Theatre, the Perth International Festival of the Arts and the Blue Room Theatre. Roles include Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, Hughie in *The One Day of the Year*, Adam in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* and Prospero in *The Tempest*. He has directed and devised numerous productions in youth and co-operative theatre. He teaches at the VCA Foundation Program, and has and has taught at The Broken Limb Theatre Company, Fool's Earth, The National Theatre School of Drama. He is currently a student of Leonid Verzub, and is conducting research through the University of Western Sydney.

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Carly Schrever, Kyle Wright and Ellie, SJ Chapman and Bec for their generous feedback; Rebecca Bell for her wonderful artwork and support; Darryl Colless at Northcote Uniting Church for his beautiful space, support and community spirit; Diane and Margaret at The Victorian Ballet School for providing an affordable rehearsal space; Andrea, Terry, Kate and Carly for welcoming the cast into their house and letting me off my chores; Kate Hairsine for the erudite plug on 3CR and David Wright for our discussions. Thanks also to Robert for letting us bookend *The Pelican* this weekend and to Tim and Maddie for their cosy space. Ash would also like to acknowledge the teachers and friends that stand behind us—I hope that, in some moments at least, I have done justice to the wisdom they have freely shared with me—particularly: David Latham, Leonid Verzub, John Bolton, Jean Berwick and Stanislav Grof.

## **A request**

This performance is part of a larger research project spanning three years. I would be very interested to hear your experiences of, and responses to, this performance. If you like to know more about the project or are interested in sharing your responses either in writing or conversation let me know on 0417 930 274 or at [ashwain@alphalink.com.au](mailto:ashwain@alphalink.com.au) .

## **WILD FORCES**

There are beautiful wild forces within us.

Let them turn the mills inside  
and fill  
sacks

that feed even  
heaven

*~St Francis*



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