

# **Experiencing the future**

## **Introduction**

When I talk about theatre I operate on three different levels: how theatre works in general, regardless of whose work it is how we understand human beings to inter-act and exist in the world how I develop and engage my own particular theatre practice.

These three levels all inter-relate as one complex whole. There is no priority of one level to the other. Each element informs the other at all times. The whole system exists in every moment of practice or analysis which I might isolate.

Others before me, such as the anthropologist Gregory Bateson for example , have observed that giving a linear exposition of such a dynamic process is in some ways a contradiction in terms.

## **Two Theatres**

I understand theatre as split fundamentally into two modes of engagement. The one mode searches for the authentic now, for the present reality of being, while the other is characterised by the territory of discourse and appearance, evoking the now but linked essentially to the past.

In my own current work I attempt to work at the transition point of both polarities of theatre. In doing this I have discovered a way of engaging with the third temporal element, the future. I call this practice emergent performance.

In the work of Shakespeare there are two classic demonstrations of the binary divide of theatre performance:

*'playing, whose end , both at the first and now ,  
was and is, to hold as t'were a mirror up to nature'*

*Hamlet William Shakespeare*

*'I know when one is dead and when one lives  
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone  
Why then she lives'*

King Lear William Shakespeare

In Hamlet's 'mirror up to nature' there is the basic logic of reflective illusion and appearance. In King Lear's physical interrogation of human breath, we are invited to witness the biological reality which challenges it.

In Hamlet's version nature is other, and performing reflects, re-tells, re-calls it. He is after all using it to repeat the past. In this century this model has been turned on to ourselves. The reflection in Hamlet's mirror is our own face, and what has interested us more and more is the interior that plays there. Stanislavski was among the first to investigate this in performance. He transformed the past events of 'out there' into the mystical history of a personal and individual 'inside'. The technique of emotion memory was to be the bridge between the two.

In the scene from King Lear Shakespeare offers another version of theatre logic. The young boy playing Cordelia is lying on the wooden floor. The actor playing King Lear holds a looking glass to his lips and speaks the words 'if that her breath will mist or stain the stone why then she lives'. We as audience all know the fictional past event: Cordelia is dead. In the present moment we are watching the boy holding his breath. There is no stain on the glass. We know that the boy is not dead, but it is a perfect image of death. Yet we also know that he must breathe again.

In that indication of the future, Shakespeare offers a brilliant revelation of the twin polarities of acting. It is consummate appearance, a reflection of reality. But on the other hand, this is limited. Breathing cannot be acted. It is real in a biological way which challenges the mirror. Shakespeare knew it and in characteristic fashion overcame it by admitting it.

Breathing is a constant process if life is to continue. The actor can only hold the breath for a limited period of time. Yet in the withheld breath there is the shadow of death, and its reality if the body does not breathe again. For that brief moment it is utterly authentic, utterly present. Not the mirror, but the reality of nature.

### **Performing (in) the new paradigm**

In our own contemporary period I would argue that changing perceptions of reality arising from the biological sciences and the new physics have displaced the Stanislavskian configuration of individual and the past. Today, the chemistry of the neurotransmitter has replaced the analysis of dreams. The question we must ask ourselves is how performance practice can respond to this new paradigm. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves - can we still dream? It is vital to respond, unless of course we are content for our performance to be a matter of heritage, a relic even before it is dead.

Richard Schechner in his book *The Future of Ritual* writes that 'what the book was, performance has become'. Trenchantly if optimistically, Schechner appears to be proposing that if the book became the key technology for the mechanical universe of Shakespeare's day to this century, then performance, in replacing the book, has the possibility to be the emergent technology for the new paradigm. I believe this to be the case. It is a radical vision of performance which invites us to re-discover the bio-technology of live human presence.

## **A singular practice: the work of OPTIK**

I have taken the dynamic reality of live presence as the starting point of my own current performance work. I have attempted to develop a technique that enables performers to explore, not the recollected past as the image of life or death, but the present and future reality of their own experience in the moment of performing.

This work has led me into a completely different territory, into what I might call a theatre of phenomenology.

A key characteristic of this practice is that in it performance becomes an emergent phenomenon. This means that performance events are not pre-determined in advance but arise spontaneously, from structures embedded in the total conditions of the performance at any moment.

I have developed a performer technique to engage with this system. As an approach the technique challenges the notion of intention and all that goes with communicating that intention to the audience. You could say that the technique is centrally concerned to enable the performer to act without intention.

There seem to be certain key processes that are central to the work of the individual performer. These are: proprioception, dynamogenesis (the origins of impulse) and duration in time.

### **Proprioception**

All of us use this sense but I ask performers to become critically aware of it in their own processes. This means being aware of your body in space, its alignment and potential for change at any moment, balance and other minute details of physical conservation and

change. This knowing is a total process, a matter of whole corporeal perception, not just a matter of left side brain rationality.

As performing becomes a way of knowing, a primary function, it also becomes a means of discovery and exploration, in much the same tradition as that of scientific discovery and geographical exploration. This approach connects my theatre work more to ritual practice than the communicative legacy of performance. In this work the transmission of knowledge from performer to spectator is not simply a matter of cerebral rationalisation. It also becomes involved in a process of corporeal transformation, experience and perception.

### **Dynamogenesis**

This refers to the beginning of the action cycle, the origin of movement in the performer. It is an all or nothing thing. The performer moves or does not move. The performer can have the impulse and still not move, by resisting the action in space. Dynamogenesis does not refer to the visible result of impulse, it refers to the transmission of signals to the body. The conscious experience of intention is not used as the primary generator of impulse. The performer does not move in order to achieve a particular result, or a particular destination. They find themselves in movement and are then able to respond to that.

As in the William James formula, the principle behind the technique of dynamogenesis is that physical action comes first followed by the experience in the consciousness of the subject. The performer trains to generate and engage muscular impulse without that impulse being first consciously experienced (and rationalised). That is, the experience is always in the future.

## **Duration in time**

Normally the actor knows in advance where the resolution of the action cycle is going to occur and plays everything in relation to it. It is this feature which gives this kind of performing its characteristic quality arising from the technique of recall, remembered learned actions and resolutions.

In what I call emergent performance the action cycle is put into reverse. It is the starting point which is the key known factor, the resolution is not known in advance. The performer can now be asked to use long periods of time to explore particular action sequences, with resolution a constant possibility but never a certainty.

In these long periods of performance work, minute details are allowed to emerge, details which would normally not become apparent. A key factor in emergent performance is that resolution of action is only apparent after it has occurred, not before. This use of duration removes the function of remembering from the performer, and aligns the arrow of performance time with the arrow of real time, that is not towards the past, but forwards to the future. The use of the past is often a way of avoiding the risk of the future, it is a way of being secure. Working in duration allows the exploration of risk.

## **Experiencing the future: spectating and performing**

A consequence of these techniques is that the performer is able to know what they are doing at any one moment with complete certainty, but not to know in advance what is going to happen. Movement decisions are taken independently by each performer. Each performer acts as an independent agent in the performance process. They work the axis that defines the alignment of the human species, based on the line of the field of vision that divides in front from behind. They can move forward, stand still, turn at any point, and the emerging patterns are in a constant state of flux as a result. The total system of

proprioception, dynamogenesis and duration in time develops what I call dynamic alignment.

The consequences of these decisions are experienced in the same way, as happening 'now' and not explicitly in the performers' control. In this experience there is the whole range of emotional responses. A performer may feel sad, rejected, elated, absurd or terrified. They don't know why, there is no why. The moment it is felt it is already passing, changing. Each individual is unique and different, though connected, in ways that are still not clear. I would like to say at this point that I have found that this fluidity and depth of human response need not be linked to language. It does not have to be named to be experienced. It is a transitional state.

As far as the spectator is concerned, I have discovered through my own theatre work that the performer and the spectator are engaged in the same process. Performing and spectating are essentially shifting modes of engagement rather than fixed positions of status. The spectator may not be explicitly de-coding or 'reading' an interior intention and interpreting it as discourse. This release from the inevitability of discourse changes the way in which we define watching or observing.

Individual spectators are drawn to the future potential in action sequences. There is a paradox here. Performance is a flow of movement, and in a deliberate emergent practice such as my own, this movement is constant, fluid, changing. At the same time there is always the possibility of this flow being experienced as a series of 'nows', or irreducible moments. When, in the experience of the spectator, these moments cluster together, it is possible to talk of an 'event' occurring. I compare this to the wave particle paradox of quantum physics. In emergent performance spectators and performers alike can experience duration of time and movement as a wave like constant, or this can 'collapse' into what is experienced as a singular event, remembered in individual consciousness, and linking to past events and experiences.

This 'event mechanism', this clustering, must be linked to the spectator's own history and

memory, triggered by spatial, temporal configurations in the play of movement they are witnessing. The spectator, like the performer, is caught. On the one hand there is the future potential in the movement possibilities and decisions, their feelings about what they want to happen, and their role in it. On the other hand there is the sudden and unexpected emotional resonance when an 'event' occurs as experienced by their consciousness. In essence they are experiencing their own history and their role in its future shape.

'Now' cannot be experienced, but it can be felt. I would argue that when the spectator (and the performer) is caught between the collapse into the past and the indeterminacy of the future they are in an unstable state that excites a whole range of sensation. Some spectators engage physically in the performance. They leave their seats, taking the future of the action literally 'into their own hands (and feet)'.

Only when the performance is over does this tension between past event and undetermined future stop. It is at this point that the narratives emerge as remembered experience, both of deeds (participation in the performance) and as re-called emotional states. It is also in this re-telling that language is used. At this precise moment the condition of future potential is at an end and the performance can become a historical, remembered event, connected to memory.

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