Physical Theatre: Meyerhold and Biomechanics

Documentation Review and Reflection: Week 3

Before I start to review a selection of your documentations, I just wanted to record my heartfelt thanks to you for responding so imaginatively to this task. The posted stills, writings and videos – both on the platform and in the Event pages set up on Facebook – testify to something quite profound, to my mind: a first step towards the democratization of performer training. We have already debated this idea on the course in real detail – the pluses and minuses of horizontal training and the tricky balance of depth and eclecticism.

No one is arguing that these first forays into biomechanical training are striking that balance, yet – and there are clearly limits to how far one can learn in this environment, without a hands-on teacher and a set of partners. But they do evidence a notable ‘levelling out’ of where embodied learning can begin to take place, extending the boundaries of the studio, not only in geographical terms but also functionally. You have posted videos from specialized training spaces as well as from places of domestic living, from dance studios (grabbed in the lunch hour?) to busy living rooms, complete with stereo accompaniment! Above all the question of WHY one documents has been really fruitful and I hope that reflecting on this, whilst doing the work will have wider ramifications for your own learning beyond producing (important) notes on Meyerhold’s biomechanics. The production of well-targeted documentary reflections is clearly not just needed in the theatre!

And so to the sampling of your documentation, remembering that my focus here is on the efficacy of the documentation and its underlying purpose, not on judging the quality of your embodiments. I have included a few pointers for those of you who have posted video, specifically in the comments section on the Facebook Event page. Have a look there from some online coaching!

For writing-based documentation, I very much liked Cas Sutherland’s approach who: “imagined teaching this movement to someone by simply describing what the embodied movement feels like to me”. She breaks down the biomechanical rhythm of otkaz, posli and tochka, cleanly and accurately with a focus on the spine as the ‘central axis’. And she adds in another layer of metaphor: “Remind yourself of the strings suspending you and the roots beneath your feet”. This use of metaphor reminded me of the power of words to create productive images in the actor’s psyche, images which have the facility to bypass the sometimes deadening influence of the rational mind: puppets and trees as a conduit to embodiment.
Carmen Paddock evaluates all the forms of documentation we have been using, reminding us that writing is itself a process of analysis, or thinking through:

For physical activities such as biomechanics, video and photos seem to have the advantage since they can show you what the movements look like. However, writing can also be extremely beneficial because it encourages you to analyse and critically describe the motions your body goes through.

This is a common theme in my classes with students at Leeds: write to understand. The same point is made by Marta Bou-Noet: “probably due to my Language studies, I need to write down my reflections and ideas in order to organize and make sense” and by Dani Rocha, judging by the fascinating snapshot of Dani’s copious notes uploaded to the Event page.

Of the documentations using visuals, one or two of you have avoided video and exploited the formal impact of stills imagery.

Jenny Marlowe


Jenny’s documentation does something very interesting – she is reconfiguring the etude in multiple ways: by ‘slapping’ herself she is making it a solo etude; by using multiple shutter release, she is echoing the famous photographic work of Eadweard Muybridge, a visual precursor to Taylorism; and by addressing the spectator directly in the opening of the etude she is shifting (with some power) the original perspective of the etude, perhaps making the audience the missing partner in some way. BUT as she notes in the comments this is still underpinned by the rhythm of biomechanics: “Look closely, and you will see intention, action, and end point clearly represented!” A very thought provoking extension of the work we have been doing.

Nicola Collins and Tammy Giblin:
Nicola and Tammy’s documentation takes an altogether more didactic approach, using annotation of stills images in a slide show very effectively to transmit the learning they have done on the course to another audience, presumably their students. Careful attention has been taken here to capture movement in stills images and the titles support this function. But there are also helpful experiential hints embedded in this document, showing their ‘insiders’ perspective’: “tips for ball exercises: keep body and especially hands relaxed. Keep jaw relaxed!”

Of the video material, it has been a real treat to see you grappling with the complexities of the etude in such contrasting environments. In the last run of the course I was privileged to witness two actors in Tokyo recreating the whole of the etude and followed this with a fascinating Skype call with the whole of the group to clarify some of their important questions. In this run the Event page is filling up with lots of different interpretations, some capturing all the exercises, some focusing in real detail on just one of the actions from the Slap etude.

Of the former category Jess Gal has shared her footwork – and a confident rendition of the tricky second step, which many of you have found ‘fiendish’. Jess also uses slow motion to expose the otkaz, posli and tochka structure of the Preparation to Shake action and, delightfully records her challenges as ‘rolling credits’ at the end; breathing, balance, [posil] action, footing. Olga Spiraki also shares her embodiment of all of the exercises (including a micro-warm up), in a summary filmed at home. I very much liked the fact that this was not a polished piece of documentation but showed the processes you are all going through – dropping the ball (or bean bag in this case) and struggling (productively) with controlling the stick. Interestingly, after the discussion of left and right leading habits earlier in the course, I’m intrigued to know whether Olga is left or right handed. My guess would be: Right handed - as her throwing and catching with the left hand is actually more accurate. Go back to the video of Stick Throwing and see if you can see why...

Of the latter category – focus on one or more actions - Verity Merryweather has offered us a really engaging window onto her ‘Work in progress’. With the camera positioned quite far away from Verity herself, we get an almost fly-on-the-wall view of the careful, repetitious and ongoing exploration of these three actions, (plus an improvised leap to the stance). Her use of editing transitions and accompanying music add subtly to this effect. Viewed from outside there are dual readings of this video – the large expanse of studio begs the question many of you have inevitably asked – where are the partners? But at the same time the
enduring pursuit of biomechanical aptitude evoked by this film reminds me of the ‘auto-
didact’ so central to Eugenio Barba’s notion of training. Ian Watson quotes Barba in his 
essay in Hodge’s *Actor Training*: training is... “a process of self-definition, a process of self-
discipline which manifests itself indissolubly through physical reactions. It is not the exercise 
in itself that counts... but individual’s justification for his [or her] own work (2010: 212).

Finally, let me thank you for your bravery and honesty in engaging in this tough task. 
Whether you have posted or not, all of you have been actively making connections between 
history, philosophy and practice. To share these connections and reflections so early in a 
course is extraordinarily generous. There are many illuminating reflections, and you will 
have your own favourite comments that have particularly chimed with your experiences. 
This posting from **Sarah Glendinning Svenson** is illustrative of the deep reflection and 
honest self-criticism exemplified by so many of you on this course:

> The documentation of this work made me realise just how much awareness and 
training is needed. I was able to note the many inaccuracies and flaws in the work I 
produced and felt very aware of the moment to moment movement. It felt like there 
was an overwhelming number of aspects to keep control over even in such a short 
sequence. I felt that awareness of the body in space and its relationship to my 
imaginary partner grew the more I practised. The more accurate I became the clearer 
the rhythm became. I enjoyed the physical demands of accuracy and coordination 
(even if I was not so successful) and can see how this would link to Industrialization 
and the moving away from the individual’s inner. The creation of such ‘kinesthetic, 
spacial and relation awareness’...must lead to a style of acting that rises above the 
individual.

Do keep your documentation coming, and I will review the whole week fully as usual later 
on. In the meantime thanks for sharing these fascinating documents. I hope you enjoy the 
rest of the week.