

On Somatic Acting

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Through practices like Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering®[®], actors are increasingly being trained, viewing their work, and working somatically. But what does it mean to act somatically or be a somatic actor? In this essay, Taavo Smith investigates his experience as an actor to report the ways in which somatic training has changed his perspective on warm-ups, blockage, scoring, collaboration, and the practice of acting itself.

Introduction

This essay began when I was documenting my acting process in two shows I created in 2008—a two man adaptation of *The Three Sisters*², and *I Am Not What I Am*³, a solo butoh/theatre investigation of Shakespeare's Iago by way of the Bible's Job. In my writing I came to two particular realizations. My first realization was that the somatic training I had been undertaking for the last two years with Wendell Beavers and Erika Berland—based on the Body-Mind Centering® of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen—had transformed my work as an actor. My second realization was that I had no vocabulary to describe how I was working. Awkward phrases like 'somatic action' and 'mind-body feeling-gesture' came to mind, but these were far from self-evident in their meaning. Others had defined somatic directing, somatic actor training, and even somatic character work, but no one I knew of had said what somatic acting itself might be.

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² Adaptation of Anton Chekhov et al., by One Continuous Mistake. Boulder International Fringe Festival, 2008.

³ MFA Thesis Production. Naropa University MFA Theatre: Contemporary Performance, 2008.

This essay is an attempt to articulate the ways I have found myself working as an actor with somatic training. Although my intention is to reach out to a broad audience, in discussing the subject of years of experiential practice I have found certain technical language unavoidable, and many readers may find this language off-putting. For this, I can only ask your open-mindedness, and offer my own humility in return. At the beginning of my training, I was myself extremely skeptical of the claims of somatic practitioners, for example in sensing organ activity, or in being able to initiate movement from glands.

On Quality

What is needed is that [...] every movement be accompanied by an internal state of awareness peculiar to the movement being done (Copeau 1970).

An actor is a person who moves and makes sounds with the intent that those movements and sounds be read as meaningful by an audience. But how does movement and sound transmit meaning? How does the actor do what he or she does? Meaning is not found in what you do, but how you do it. The things you do, the words you speak, and the physical and logical contexts of your actions all contribute, but 'how' has the final say. The meaning of a word is determined by the quality of your speech. The significance of a gesture, entrance, or cross is determined by the quality of your movement. What is meaningful is not *that* you crossed from here to there, but *how* you crossed; not *that* you said 'I love you', but *how* you said 'I love you'. Meaning is a flavour or texture evoked by detail. It is the nuances of 'how' that the audience reads as 'why'. This can be an inflection, rhythm, tone, timbre or resonance in the voice. It can also be in the form of balance, tempo, rhythm, weight, lightness, fluidity, suspension or tension in the body.

How is quality achieved? I believe quality is what happens when movement and mental association - the fleeting contents of mind - mutually inform one another, when a mind-state creates a body-state and a body-state

creates a mind-state⁴. In the case of quality, movement and mental association could be seen as the same thing looked at from two perspectives. Quality is when movement feels a certain way, or a feeling creates a certain movement. Quality, as in movement quality and vocal quality, is the sum total, the output of an actor's craft. Whether he works with psychology, image, intention, or otherwise, quality is the perceptible result. The actor's task is to manifest one quality, then another, and then another. If you can find quality - either by harmonizing your movements to your mind (e.g. freeing impulse), harmonizing your mind to your movements (e.g. deepening sensation), or by reaching for quality, a movement informed by mind, directly - your work is done.

On Somatic Acting

The fact that physical sensation can be on par with sense memory as a basis for creating physical behaviour in the moment in retrospect seems obvious but has been distrusted and overlooked for generations (Beavers unpublished).

Your body is not your instrument; your body is you (Schechner 1973: 145).

Somatic training is a verbal and technical vocabulary for working with the 'somatic body', the 'soma', a term coined by Thomas Hanna 'to designate the experienced body in contrast to the objectified body' (Cohen 2008: 1). The somatic body is the body you *are*, not the body you see in a photograph or on an autopsy table. The somatic vocabulary includes all of the body's anatomical systems, as well as its patterns and reflexes. We work with this vocabulary both imaginatively and literally, in Wendell Beavers' words, 'to develop further mind-body response and coordination, balanced flexion and extension and full integration of all six limbs (head, hands, feet and tail) and equal initiation and support through all the surfaces of the body' (2008: 130). Somatic technique is a means of analyzing and manifesting all the ways there

⁴ Although my experience suggests a mind state *is* a body state, I use the dualism here to better communicate with those who identify with one side or the other. When I speak of an actor's "body", I mean that which is perceived by an audience; when I speak of an actor's "mind", I mean that which is limited to his or her subjective experience.

are to move, analyzing and manifesting all body-mind states, or simply analyzing and manifesting all human expression.

On one level, somatic training can be seen as learning to experience your body, learning that there is an inevitability and richness to the sensation of the body in movement. In all the ways there are to raise your arm, there are psychophysical experiences of arm-raising. Every movement and variation of movement has its own flavour, with which a performer can work in both directions: to look for the psychological flavour to know the quality of movement is present, or to look for the sensation of movement to ensure the psychological flavour is present. Looked at another way, somatic training's task is to center the body-mind. Although this can sound esoteric, in practice it is simple. Centering the body-mind means synchronizing bodily activity to mental activity, learning to ground expression in sensation. I have observed a number of specific ways Body-Mind Centering and other somatic training has proved valuable to me as an actor: for warm-ups, working with blockage, scoring, and communication.

Warm-ups

The developmental process establishes the basic patterns of all our movement [...] Because each previous stage underlies and supports each successive stage, any incomplete development or skipping of any stage leads to perceptual/movement problems. By returning to these basic patterns, we can repattern our responses and establish more efficient nervous pathways to support our movement (Cohen 2008: 16).

With somatic work, the training, often, *is* the warm-up. This makes defining a somatic warm-up difficult without elaborating the full range of activities which could constitute somatic training. Rather, I will describe a single practice which has become the foundation of my own acting warm-ups, Developmental Technique^{TM5}. Developmental Technique consists of a progression of simple movements from an extensive vocabulary mirroring the human developmental

⁵ A trademarked movement technique that Wendell Beavers created from several influences, principally Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering, developmental movement, and experiential anatomy material.

progression from creeping to crawling to standing. Within each level of verticality, there is a sub-progression ‘from spinal movement to homologous (both arms together or both legs), to homolateral (left arm and left leg together, right arm and right leg together), to contralateral (left arm and right leg together, right arm and left leg together’ (Cohen 2008: 100). These movements are undertaken anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, with a strict attention to your own experience. This attention is a kind of check-in, review, or therapy. You are watching for delight and difficulty, to witness your momentary psychophysical state, as well as your patterns and habits. The central intention inside the practice of Developmental Technique is to explore a maximal expressive range through sensation rather than effort, and by doing so progressively increase that range.

A key point to note is that as approached within the practice these movements enforce and are reinforced by certain mental states. The mind of a contralateral walk (an everyday walk) is radically different from the mind of a spinal creep (like an inchworm). It is common to find yourself in an extra-daily mental state making these movements, and conversely to find that an apparent physical difficulty can be most readily solved by releasing habitual mental patterns.

I have found Developmental Technique a useful actor’s warm up for a number of reasons. First and most obviously, as a physical form it does a good job of conditioning the body to prepare for performance and reduce the risk of injury. Secondly, the attention it places on sensation, and a wide range of sensations, quickly centers my mental state, offering a blank slate to work with creatively. Thirdly, its form offers the opportunity to warm up not just that which comes to me improvisationally, but a baseline approaching warming up ‘everything’. Finally and most importantly, its relationship with, and attitude towards, habit and habituation provides a means to loosen habit and expand my expressive range.

Working with Blockage

In every way of standing, way of sitting, way of moving, there are certain contractions that are physical but not just physical, that are blocking the flow (Richards 2008: 47).

The core of human neurosis is man's incapacity to live in the body (Sontag 2001: 259).

Blockage, as a habituated reduction in range of experience and expression, is fundamentally a mind-body phenomenon. An inaccessible emotional range is an inaccessible quality of movement and an inaccessible quality of sound. By learning how to work with your body or voice, you are learning how to work with your emotions, and vice versa.

Many blockages are made of simple ignorance and are quickly worked through, but the most challenging and most rewarding to confront are those linked to the identity of the performer. There are ways in which I could move, sounds I could make, and thoughts I could think, which are taboo or traumatized, which would apparently erase who it is I perceive myself to be. If I really made *that* sound, I would be a pariah. If I moved *that* way, I would no longer be a man. If I thought *that* thing, I would surely descend into perversity, madness and despair. These blockages are rooted in fear, and in working with them we discover not just the possibility for transformation, but a joy in transformation.

Somatic training offers a systematic process for working with blockage. Forms and practices like Developmental Technique make your limitations apparent, and there are a range of tools to approach these challenges. A handful of these tools in overview are: breath, or breathing into or around an area 'in shadow'; sounding or vocal vibration; touching yourself or being touched; anatomical visualization; and patterning, working with an underlying movement or reflex. Each of these can be used alone or in concert to ease habitual tensions, draw attention to previously shrouded anatomy, increase sensation, and free expression.

Having briefly defined a somatic perspective on blockage, I offer a personal anecdote as an example. One of my challenges as an actor is

vulnerability, or softness. In *The Three Sisters*, my director Jeremy Williams noted that I had a wide variety of muscular, vigorous qualities, but actually a low dynamic range because I always inhabited extremes. Without softness I was merely crazed, so we dedicated a day to investigate the problem. Williams led me through a standing sagittal fold which in skeletal terms is a forward fold through the ankles, knees, hips, spine, and neck, as though I am moving towards a foetal curl, but stopping at the point of maximal head-tail compression. In this movement, experiencing the compression of my organs and the delicate balance of my skeletal support, I felt overwhelmed by a naked frailty, which manifested in weeping and timidity, which we took for success.

In performance, however, my habits reaffirmed themselves. I could be led to this place, but I could not find it on my own. Subsequently, in our next show together, *I Am Not What I Am*, Williams and I set working with that vulnerability as a challenge to us, and as I continued to fail to find either the softness or the fold, one reason gradually became clear. My habitual standing posture involves my feet inside my hips, with my right foot slightly turned out. In this posture a sagittal fold is awkward and difficult - my skeletal support is out of alignment, so my muscles have to activate to protect the delicate joints of my lower body, my ankles and knees. This unnecessary muscular tension reaches up into my core, and shrouds my organs and glands. My sensation inside the fold is muscular effort rather than the vulnerability of softness and compression. The movement becomes physical, rather than psychophysical. When I learned to correct my posture, just as Williams had led me through from the start, not only did I gain the ability to give myself a psychophysical 'thrill ride' by folding sagittally, but I actually gained access to much of that psychophysical material, the quality of softness, whether or not I folded visibly. My blockage around vulnerability had to some extent been cleared, and my range as an actor expanded.

Scoring

I should not try to feel proud. That I cannot do, but I can ask myself: in that moment when I was proud, how did I walk? (Richards 1995: 67)

Don't talk to me about feeling, you cannot set feeling. You can only recall and set physical action. (Toporkov 1998: 114)

As mentioned earlier, the somatic vocabulary includes all of the body's anatomical systems, patterns, and reflexes, from bones to organs to fluids, glands, and others. We learn not just to visualize or even experience these systems and patterns, but also to label and describe them as well. Exploring a particular system, we discover landmarks, movement initiations which are familiar and repeatable, such as for example the connection of sensation between the heart and the palm of the hand, initiation from the pelvic floor, or intention from the pituitary - to say nothing of the landmarks with which we become familiar without names. Whether or not it can be established these phenomena empirically originate in the anatomy in which they are perceived, in practice over time we develop a reliable verbal and physical vocabulary that is both idiosyncratic to the individual (based on subjective experience), and is shared between somatic practitioners (communicable and applicable to analysis). In this sense somatic training is a practice of cultivating skill at recognizing and repeating precise psychophysical action.

A somatic acting score might consist of a chain of sensation and expression guided by these landmarks. For example, I can recall a few seconds of an entrance I once made: lymph and adrenals with sensation through the soles of my feet. I pause, tip my head back, leave the pituitary, and activate my gonads as I enter the arterial flow. A moment from a monologue: the skin on my back, venous flow leaving the ligaments of my left hand, on an exhale I turn, take three steps, turn, and express from my heart and lungs. These scores read somewhere between poetry and science, I think, because as Susan Aposhyan says of Body-Mind Centering, this work 'speaks the unspoken. The principles were not developed verbally nor are they easily transmitted in words' (Cohen 2008: vii).

Very little of these brief example scores was recorded verbally prior to my writing them here. Words arose when they seemed especially obvious, or

when work with a director prompted them, but for the most part these scores existed only as body memory. The score is action, not idea. The bulk of the actor's work in rehearsal is improvising bits of behaviour, noticing what is worth repeating, repeating the bits that worked, and re-improvising the bits that did not. Somatic training is a means for building facility handling these psychophysical 'bits' - these detailed movements with quality - with delicacy and precision, through direct experience of the body.

Communication

You're not standing in the right rhythm! [...] Would you stand like that if you were seriously threatened by Tarkhanov's getting on the train? (Toporkov 1998: 31)

Notes from a somatic director, rather than being about intention, psychology or circumstance, are about specific usage of the body. Such notes suggest details such as, 'you are not actually folding', 'find your heels', or 'bring your chin down to find the support of your vocal cords'. These notes are literal and empirical. They are clearly about the performance rather than the performer, about part of the composition which has either been lost or which is not working.

With the somatic language it is possible to achieve a tight correspondence between events on stage and the description of those events. For example, among somatic practitioners there is little interpretation necessary to determine whether someone has diaphragmatic support or is holding their organs. These descriptions, furthermore, are testable. In the case of articulating a problem, a description implies a solution, through tools like breath, touch, sounding, image, and patterning. In pursuit of a solution, it should be readily apparent whether or not your original diagnosis was accurate.

This precision is invaluable for feedback and revision, but just as importantly I have found it useful in easing the burden of feedback on the actor. Working with language I experienced to be less specific, I have found

that I have to use mental discipline to keep from seeing criticism of my work as criticism of myself. If, for example, I am not making visible a given circumstance, or creating the right atmosphere with a particular active verb, I find myself guessing solutions based on my own conception, rather than implementing solutions based on my director's. Subsequently I may have difficulty telling the difference between a failure on my part ('I am failing as an actor') and a flaw in the composition ('it is not done yet'). With the somatic language, on the other hand, hearing my feet are out of alignment for instance, I have a set of tools ready to approach the problem and I experience little shame or neurosis.

Values

The self you have to control is the deluded you, not the real you.
(Suzuki 2002: 111)

As in all pedagogical situations there are certain values implicit in somatic training. Steve Wangh (2009) has called these implicit values 'meta-lessons', lessons which are not the named subject of training but which nonetheless permeate it and create a context or frame to enclose both the student's experience of the training and, perhaps, even the student's experience of his or her life.

The central value of somatic training is embedded in the 'sensory motor loop', a way of viewing human behaviour in terms of the structure of the nervous system. Sensation enters through sensory neurons, and expression (or action) is driven by motor neurons. These sensory and motor neurons are connected in a loop - inside the brain by associational neurons, and outside by the new sensations generated by expression. Behaviour is a chain of loops, as we sense, act in response, and sense the changes affected. We can say then that authenticity is achieved when behaviour flows from feeling, feeling flows from perception, and perception is based on what is real. Action is based on sensation, on literal, present experience. Start with what you know is real.

Furthermore, two key meta-lessons derive from the somatic exploration of listening. The first is that most sensations have no word to label them, and subsequently can be hard to hold in our minds. My typical experience is subtle, and if I am impatient or insensitive to that subtlety I have no experience at all. *It* has usually overwhelmed me before I have figured out what *it* might be, and in fact it seems my efforts to discover *it*, if premature, make *it* go away. I only know what I'm doing in hindsight. The second lesson is that in our listening we must be constantly vigilant that the object of our perception is in the present tense rather than the elsewhere of cognitive shortcuts, for instance seeing not 'a chair', 'a person', or 'a situation' but actually *the* chair, person, or situation with which we are presented. We must always be ready to be 'wrong', to catch ourselves exploring our own ideas of the world rather than the world itself. For example, a word does not necessarily grant me access to the thing to which it refers. Words and ideas cannot be sensed, because they have no colour, no texture, no flavour, and no weight. It is possible, or maybe even common, for me to ask myself 'am I relaxed and ready' and receive an 'all-clear' regardless of the state of my habitual tensions. When I ask that question in general I am not really sensing, which can require checking in, scanning through my experience of specific body parts, sometimes with specific watchfulness for specific problems, to see what is really going on. Working with sensation, we know both more and less than we think we do.

I have to emphasize that in suggesting that somatic training can be seen as a method for the direct pursuit of quality, I am not asserting a return to a paint-by-numbers proscriptive style such as formal pre-modern oratory. Creating a performance is not a matter of thinking up a score of qualities and then looking them up in a chart somewhere so that they can be physicalized, thinking 'now I will raise my arm with *this* quality to depict rage or sorrow.' Direct experience mandates finding rather than conceptualizing using the body, and disregarding this fact will lead the actor to the same kind of disembodied, mechanical performance that drove us in the West to ground our performance in psychology in the first place.

Finally, working through precise movement may not be as 'dry' as it might seem to an actor accustomed to rooting performance in psychology. Spontaneity is the goal of automatization. The objective of precision is a loss of control. In creating a role, you are both collecting repeatable, precise body-mind experiences/actions, and working with repetition to move these experiences/actions into the realm of reflex. The score is too vast and too complex to hold in the mind. The actor is at his best when there is more to do than he is capable of, like a juggler with two hands and three balls. To keep everything in the air you have to trust the wisdom of the body.

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