



Theatrical Bridge: The Art and Actor Training Method of Tadashi Suzuki From a Hungarian Perspective

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Abstract: *It is hard to realize after the first impression that the philosophical and pedagogical work of Mr. Suzuki has common points with the Eastern-European theatrical culture. I would like to point out the differences and similarities between our, basically psychological ways of thinking in our theatres and Tadashi Suzuki's theatre. I would like to bridge the gap between the two opposing ways of thinking and query that they are even contrary to each other. I will research the advantages of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training for the Eastern-European theatrical culture. I will examine the different theatrical way of thinking about the legs. I would like to research this topic based on the science of theatre anthropology and my personal artistic experience with Tadashi Suzuki along the following aspects: the pre-expressive level and the body, the importance of the legs, stillness and freedom.*

Key words: *Suzuki Tadashi, actor training, psychophysical methods, pre-expressivity, actor's freedom.*

Preface

I first encountered the Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT) in 2014 in Lithuania, then I continued my studies at the Toga Art Center, Japan, participating in the Summer Session on the SMAT in 2015. Learning the method from the most experienced masters, receiving the philosophical background behind it, meeting with Tadashi Suzuki personally and watching his performances had a great effect on my artistic views. In 2016, the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) invited me to work as an actor in two different productions, so I spent three months altogether in Toga that year. These experiences made me think about how I can integrate the advantages of the training and the philosophy of Mr. Suzuki into my artistic work back at home, and what kind of meeting points I can find with the Hungarian theatre culture. Suzuki writes: "While my work with the Suzuki Company of Toga has been compared to Noh and Kabuki, in fact it is a hybrid: bridging the classic and contemporary to illuminate the problems of our time in the imaginations of the audience." (Suzuki 2015, 53–54) As Suzuki makes a bridge between the classical and the contemporary, I would like to do the same with my Hungarian heritage and his work: based on my experiences I will compare psychological acting with Tadashi Suzuki's aesthetics along the following aspects: the pre-expressive level and the body, the role of the feet, stillness, and freedom on the stage. I



would like to use the phrases and terms of theatre anthropology to define some phenomena I have observed. For this bridging, I will refer to my personal artistic experience as an actor, in order to complete the scientific analysis with my practical point of view.

Roots and importance

Tadashi Suzuki references the elements of the traditional Japanese theatre – Noh and Kabuki –, and he can brilliantly integrate these into authentic contemporary theatre performances. Even if oriental theatre forms have inspired him, his art materialises in varied and modern theatre pieces which reflect sharply on the present problems of the modern society. Suzuki started his career in the 1960s, when Russian realistic theatre aesthetics had a great influence on Japanese theatre culture. Although many Japanese artists started to follow realism – called *Shinseki* – Suzuki turned away from this wave and claimed that (his) theatre should lead back to pre-modern traditions.

The effect of codified theatre is recognizable in his work. The bodies of the actors get great significance in his performances. I admire the enormously-concentrated energies, the clear presence and focus of the performers and their special awareness on the stage. These make Mr. Suzuki's art unique. In order to reach such a level with his Company, he started to develop his Training Method in the 1970s, and this method has become famous worldwide. It was born from the necessity of his theatre aesthetics. Mr. Suzuki often says *to be on the stage is not daily life*, therefore his method helps the actors to reconstruct their bodies, increase the capacity of their voices, sharpen their physical senses, and reach an "extra-daily energy" (Barba 1995, 9). The Suzuki Method of Actor Training offers an experimental space for the actors to discover their own physical and mental sensibilities. According to the Western terminology, the Suzuki Method is one of the physical methods of actor training.

The Hungarian theatrical way of thinking is basically psychological. Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski developed his acting method in the first half of the 20th century, and it became a common language for the actors in realist aesthetics. Realism and the pedagogical work of Stanislavski also had a great effect on the Hungarian theatre¹. My experience is that although the aesthetics of the Hungarian theatre performances is quite colorful and varied, the way in which the actors create their roles is mainly following psychological acting.

One basic difference between the physical and the psychological acting has roots in the philosophical background. European philosophy was dominated by the ideas of René Descartes for centuries. He claimed: "Cogito ergo sum" – "I think, therefore I am". (Descartes 1637). The Cartesian philosophy points out that the mind has an evident dominance over the body. On the other hand, Eastern cultures mainly follow the holistic approach,

¹ Especially the early thoughts in Stanislavski's work, integrated in the Hungarian theatre, which claim the importance of the affective memory.



which postulates in the body-mind-soul unity. Although some significant theatre makers and teachers – like Michael Chekhov, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, etc. – were inspired by the Eastern way of thinking and integrated this knowledge into their work, the holistic approach is still not well-known and generally accepted in the Hungarian culture. From my point of view, the physical methods of actor training are missing or do not have enough significance in the Hungarian theatre.

Although the physical and the psychophysical way of acting look oppositional at a first glance, they can fit together and also show similarities. In my experience, it is quite useful to be aware of both ways, because different professional challenges require different solutions from the actor. In this case, the psychophysical methods of actor training can offer a complementary way beside the psychological one to reach the same aim, which can be defined as the stage presence of the actor.

Decided body for maintaining pre-expressive energy

As Theatre Anthropology claims: “[...] classical Asian theatres [...] and Western theatre [...] they are analogous on the pre-expressive level.” (Barba & Savarese 2006, 218-220) Although Suzuki’s art can not be defined as classical Asian theatre, the importance of pre-expressivity is recognizable in his works. In my opinion, the improvement of pre-expressive energy is a preparation process, the focusing of the physical and mental energies.

I often encounter the opinion, in the Hungarian area, that this kind of preparation is individual and intimate for each artist. I can partially agree with it, and I also see the importance of offering different ways both for the acting students and for the actors to prepare themselves individually or together for the stage work. Based on my experience, I can assert that training a group with well-structured acting techniques – like the Suzuki Method – can support the artwork incredibly well. This can join the artists’ different ways of thinking, and create an artistic connection web underneath the surface of the performance. In Suzuki’s art, the training and the creative process of the performances are deeply connected, so the trainings happen for, and not beside the stage work. Generally, finding the tight connection between the artistic work and the training is of utmost importance, otherwise the trainings improve the skills of the actors, but do not serve the artwork. I think this can be one of the main reasons wherefore the different training methods have not spread out widely in the Hungarian culture. The connection could not be made. I hope this is just the present and it will change soon.

One of the basic aims of the Suzuki Method is to construct the stage *readiness* or, as Theatre Anthropology names it, the “sats” (Barba 1995, 54). To reach it, the exercises train the body to be highly controlled and “decided” (Barba 1995, 9). Focusing on the lower body is a core element of the method. In the exercises, the lower and the upper body are consciously separated, and have different functions in the stage work. The feet and the center of gravity support the torso with a strong muscular activity, thereby it becomes free to use as an expressive surface. This is the same technique which Eugenio



Barba calls “the principle of opposition” (Barba 1995, 23). Although the opposing forces and muscular tension require a high level of concentration from the performer, these can make the body alive and present. In the different exercises, the body is between oppositional forces all the time. One should work with the same energy on the direction of the movement as on the physical resistance to it, as if somebody was pulling his/her body back. The terms, which Stanislavski mentions as *aim* and *resistance*, are embodied in the Suzuki Method and translated to physical directions in the space.

Between the upper and lower body there is the area of the pelvis and hips. Ballet, modern dances, martial arts, and Oriental body-techniques also pay great attention to the center of gravity, and see it as the energy cell of the body. Barba writes about the Japanese term: “koshi”. Koshi means the hips and the energy itself. This word represents how strongly these two terms are connected in their culture. The Suzuki Method teaches how to control the center of gravity, makes the breathing conscious, and increases the energy of the whole stage existence. Linking the energy of the center of gravity with the gestures and moves one makes on the stage can make the whole presence of the actor sharp, clear, and expressive. The controlled tension helps the actors to find a special awareness, the readiness, the sats.

Reconstructing my body, keeping up a special body-technique and inner sensation was challenging for me at first, because it required special focus points. Therefore, I sometimes lost the sense of the inner acting process. Later, when it became a natural body sensation, I had a supporting base, which made my body solid, strong, and also gave me confidence. Moreover, I discovered that the shape of the decided body reflects the imagination too. Making a gesture, keeping a still position created thoughts and emotional reactions inside me, so the “acting” arose subconsciously. I just needed to recognize it and control it consciously. I found this very useful not only in the performances of the Suzuki Company, but also in my other works, for example in the University where I study. When I need to prepare to a rehearsal or a performance I can engage this body-technique, which helps one to get ready to move or gives confidence to stand simply in one position.

The role of the feet

„The anatomy of the human body is structured in such a way that even a single movement of one individual part results in a kind of muscular echo in all the other parts.” (Barba & Savarese 2006, 141) – written in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. One significant difference between the psychological acting and the Suzuki theatre is how the actors work with their legs.

Suzuki states: “[...] an actor’s basic sense of his physicality comes from his feet. In ordinary life, we have little consciousness of our feet. The body can stand of its own accord without any sense at all of the relationship of feet to earth; [...] the ground and the body are not two separate entities.” (Suzuki 1986, 9) In classical Japanese theatre,



the performers give great attention to the way they work with their legs. In their tradition, characters have unique and typical steps, like the onnagata (pigeon-toed), nageashi (side stomp), suriashi (shuffling), or shikkō (shuffling with bent knees) (Suzuki 2012, 134-135). The genres are not divided in the Oriental culture, so the performers should have a general skill of acting, dancing, singing and speaking at the same time.

Mr. Suzuki agrees with the traditional Japanese performing idea of the feet: “The way in which the feet are used is the basis of a stage performance. There are many cases in which the position of the feet determines even the strength and nuance of the actor’s voice.” (Suzuki 2015, 65–66)– writes Suzuki. The extra-daily way of using the feet makes alteration in the balance and the muscular tension, as well. Contrary to daily life, it requires the “wasting of energy” (Barba 1995, 24), which is significant not only for the aesthetics, but for creating an expressive presence on the stage. The importance of the feet characterizes the SMAT as well: the name of the fifth exercise is *Walkings*, in which the trainees work on twelve different walking styles, collected from various cultures and performing traditions.

In daily life, the situations automatically make alterations in our balance, in the way we walk and in the tensions of our body. Psychological acting takes it as an evidence that the body will react on the same level of muscular tension to an imaginative situation as to a real one. This is an ideal way, but because of several reasons, different blocks and disadvantageous tensions can arise in the actor’s body, and these can block this reacting process. It can be useful to take into consideration that the opposite way to reach the presence also works: finding the right tension can help to connect the emotions with the situation. The conscious work with the feet can help for the performer to find the effective level of tension in their body, which can free the flow of the emotions.

To prove it, I would like to refer to the modern psychology and neuroscience research which explores the process of how emotions are born. Richard Kemp refers in his book – *Embodied Acting* – to the research of Antonio Damasio. Based on his research in the field of neuroscience, he states that the emotions are complex reactions which come from the physical changes of the body. The brain receives information, then the body answers with physical changes, which the neuro-system senses and consequently decodes this alternation as an emotion. (Kemp 2010, 155) If we consider that the body is a significant element in this process, we can see how important it is to find the effective level of tension in the body according to the stage work. Referring to the Suzuki Method, the intense work of the legs and the center of gravity helps to release the chest, the shoulders and free the breathing. Without useless tensions in the torso, the emotions can rise and appear without any block.

When I started to consciously use my legs on the stage, it opened a new perspective for me to embody a character. People have different physical abilities, which determine the way they generally walk. Finding the steps of a character can strongly link the performer to the personality he or she is playing. Different situations and emotions modify the general connection between the ground and the characters. In daily life, people are used to forget principles like this, but reminding ourselves these simple things can make our art flourish.



Stillness and freedom

Following the pre-modern traditions, in Tadashi Suzuki's performances, the actors rarely look at each other directly. The eye-contact happens only in meaningful parts of the storyline, bringing the importance of those moments into prominence. This expressive aesthetics offers a clear and direct surface to the audience, the members of which are able to receive the intentions of the actors. To achieve it, the performers often stay in one position, and any movement and gesture have special meaning in the context of the situation.

The notion of stillness in Suzuki's theatre is very different from our understanding of it in the realistic theatre, and this makes it hard to manage as an actor on stage. The focus is directed to the inner process which should happen in the physical motionlessness. Ellen Lauren states that the

“[...] stillness, [...] is the art of seduction. By making clear decisions in the body, the actor's concentration excites the space, and the audience experiences something beyond daily life. What is moving inside you is made manifest. It is a deeply personal and intimate revelation of the self. Stillness allows the strength of your convictions to be visible.” (Lauren 2012, 8-9)

To stand still, you need to have deep inner confidence and clear aim. This stillness comes from the decided body. In psychological acting, I often see that the actors make unnecessary movements with their arms and feet onstage, out of the context of character or situation. This makes me feel that their message, which they would like to send to their partners and the audience, is not clear. Motionless moments can function in this case as a proof that something really happened inside the performer and one does not feel the necessity to underline it with any movements. In psychological acting, the aim is to be natural on the stage, but sometimes the concept of “natural” is confused with the concept of “daily life”.

When I performed in one of Suzuki's productions – *Greetings From the Edge of the Earth* –, I had to sit in a wheelchair, motionless, facing the audience from the Open-air Theatre's stage for approximately twenty minutes. I was a member of the chorus and we had only two short lines for replying to the main character in that scene. Apart from the physical difficulties of holding a body position, of maintaining the oppositional forces inside, it was hard to manage the inner acting process. At the beginning of the rehearsal period, I felt I did not have the freedom to act. It took time until I realised and experienced that the freedom of my imagination constantly had an effect on my body, on my voice, and last but not least, on my breathing, so I could keep up the communication with the audience. This was a simple mental block, and I needed to break it to reach the freedom, which I had had all the time. Then I realised that the freedom of the imagination can rise in the stillness, and this realization is connected to Ellen Lauren's thoughts.



“Most importantly, the actor must imagine a narrative scene or fiction that this focus represents.” (Steele 2012, 13) – writes Kameron Steele. The inner imaginative work in the Suzuki Method is quite similar to the term of the *magic if* in the Stanislavski system. The performers have their freedom to choose their own focus points, which can support them in the context of the narrative text. The word *fiction* does not bind the actor’s mind by using only visual impulses, it rather implicates all the body sensations, memories and creativity. Movements and gestures in the training should happen in the context of the imagined narrative scene. As a result, the training, in my experience, can be used as a process that creates fictional memories, as well. While working on the fiction, the actor can enrich the character’s inner life, fulfill it with sensorial memories. The image work makes the Suzuki method more than a physical workout. As Steele writes:

“Suzuki himself warns us that: Any time an actor thinks he is merely exercising or training his muscles, he is cheating himself. These are acting disciplines. Every instant of every discipline, the actor must be expressing the emotion of some situation, according to his own bodily interpretation. The actor composes on the basis of his sense of contact with the ground.” (Steele 2012, 13)

I was taught at the University to involve the different impulses in my acting, even if these don’t belong to the context of the situation, or come from mistakes. This is a common trend in the modern Western theatrical world. This helps to be in the present, to open one’s sensations to whatever comes from the world around. In the codified theatre, I did not have the chance for it, or I thought I didn’t. On the Open-air stage, hundreds of bugs were flying around us, mosquitoes bit one after another, poisonous toads jumped around us, etc. The first time, I made the mistake of putting great efforts in ignoring these impulses. I thought that work in a codified theatre was somehow opposite to what I had learnt at home, so I should forget what I knew. There was a moment when I had to realise my mistake. Fixing my body in a sculpture-like position doesn’t mean that I should exclude everything that is not part of my imaginative theatrical space. I can still let the impulses touch me, consider their energies as resistance, which I should overcome, or integrate it as part of my imaginary world. There is an important difference between the two concepts of presence. While in my culture my duty is to find my presence as an *actor* on the stage, in Suzuki’s theatre I need to create a fictional space, where the *character* can be manifested and get presence. Both ideas are working, but they require different acting skills. For me, experiencing both concepts was incredibly useful.

Conclusion

I presented the aspects above to show that the different artistic ways in the theatre can fit together and they can serve the acting process in any performing style. Differences offer a chance to observe the same topic from different points of view. Although the psycho-



logical and psychophysical way of acting seem oppositional at first glance, both aim to reach an intense presence of the performers on the stage. Practitioners use different tools to reach it, but regardless of the aesthetics, the results show many similarities. The meeting with the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and the artistic experience in the Suzuki Company gave me a new perspective, which I had not encountered before. Independently from the performing style, the body can be used not only as an expressive tool to form a character, but also as a tool to free imagination, and to allow the character's inner mental and emotional processes to be born. Experiencing different artistic views and methodologies can enrich the artists and inspire them for further research. Even for the education system, even for the professional practice, I would highly recommend observing more the psychophysical way of acting and the Suzuki Method of Actor Training.

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