

# The Bodymind Connection: Asian Practices and the Transformation of Western Theatre

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**KÖLLŐ Csongor PhD**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Hungarian Theatre Department  
csongor.kollo@ubbcluj.ro

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the profound influence of Asian theatrical traditions on 20th-century Western theatre. Artaud's seminal encounter with Balinese theatre inspired his concept of a 'physical language' beyond words. This notion catalyzed a broader Western turn towards Eastern practices, emphasizing the actor's body as a primary medium for performance. The discussion highlights the divergent applications of Asian techniques among practitioners.*

*Central to this analysis is the evolution of the psychophysical actor—a concept rooted in Stanislavski's late work, further developed through contemporary neuroscience and psychology. This paradigm posits a seamless integration of body and mind, enabling actors to cultivate an 'inner improvisation' that transcends textual interpretation. Drawing on practices like tai chi, kalarippayattu, and yoga, practitioners refine their somatic awareness, fostering a state of heightened presence and responsiveness, or 'bodymind'.*

*The paper argues that the integration of Asian techniques not only enriched the technical repertoire of Western actors but also redefined the ontology of acting itself. By prioritizing the actor's embodied experience and dissolving the dichotomy between text and performance, these innovations laid the groundwork for contemporary devised theatre and the actor-as-creator paradigm.*

**Key words:** *Psychophysical Acting; Asian Theatrical Traditions; Embodied Performance; Cross-Cultural Exchange; Actor Training.*

## Introduction

The present paper is one section from my PhH thesis (completed in 2018), which studies whether the actor's specific physical and vocal training can be considered a spiritual discipline or not. In the first chapter of the original study, I highlight the major changes that took shape in what the actor's work consists of and how we think about it. I position the initiation of these changes to the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup>



century, starting from Stanislavski. I argue that the changes consisted of what I call ‘the turn towards the body’, which then came into completion during the whole and especially the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the present paper I will briefly present how Asian influences informed this *turn towards the body*, and I will also bring into discussion two very important concepts, the *bodymind* and psychophysical processes, or ‘*the psycho-physical actor*’.

### A discovery

Many of Artaud’s ideas regarding acting and theatre came from a Balinese performance that he saw in 1931. Although his analysis of the performance contained cultural misunderstandings, nonetheless, his basic observations regarding the craft/technique of the actor are correct, and these observations served as a springboard to formulating his own concepts: “through the labyrinth of their gestures, attitudes, and sudden cries, through the gyrations and turns which leave no portion of the stage space un utilized, the sense of a new physical language, based upon signs and no longer upon words, is liberated” (Artaud 1958, 54).

This turning towards Eastern theatre, tradition and philosophy can be observed in many of the practitioners influenced by Artaud, although different creators emphasized different aspects of Asian techniques and genres. For instance Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil were “interested in telling a story while exploring a definite theatrical form”, where the actors “keep to the feeling of these classic forms in order to focus and unify their style of performance”, while in the work done with Peter Brook the different genres that the actors explore are not used so much directly in performance, but are there, as Yoshi Oida relates to “deepen our understanding” as well as “try to find an essence on which we can build” (Oida 1992, 172). In the case of Brook, utilizing one or more particular technique in an extremely focused way was not part of the habitual mode of creating theatre: Brook has been inspired by Africa just as much as Asia, yet his actors have been trained for various projects in Asian techniques such as Tai Chi, Kalarippayattu and other martial arts, as well as theatre forms like kathakali, while one of Brook’s biggest, most ambitious (and most renowned) projects has been the staging of the *Mahabharata*. Brook, however, did have one constant cultural and theatrical contact with Asia from the beginnings of his *Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale* (CIRT, later CICT), in the person of Yoshi Oida, who through the decades has somewhat come to be a symbol of the work carried out at CIRT/CICT, and who, for Brook, has been an important source of inspiration and training. Despite their varied interests, both Mnouchkine and Brook, like Artaud, were mesmerised by the superior techniques (as compared to the average Western actors’ technique) of the actors performing in the various codified classical genres found throughout the Far East and South Asia. On this theme, Mnouchkine herself has stated more than once that she considers Asian forms of theatre to be the cradle and origin of theatrical form.



Two other prominent figures with a strong and persistent fascination with Asian techniques/forms are Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, whose interest manifested itself mainly on two levels: ideological and technical. Additionally, in the case of Barba, one could argue for an artistic presence as well, but this is not on the same level as in Mnouchkine's case: there have been concrete Oriental forms used in his performances with Odin Teatre (like Balinese dances), but these have come from individual actors actively studying these forms, and not as a general style.

According to Barba himself (at the time he worked as an assistant to Grotowski in Opole), Grotowski did not know very well the various forms of classical Asian theatre, he was more interested in different aspects of Indian philosophy to the point that it completely permeated both his outlook on life as well as on theatre (Barba 2015, 61). However, in practical terms, the actors in their daily training still tried out various exercises inspired by Kathakali (these were brought to the group by Barba himself after a study visit to Kerala), as well as other genres, such as Peking Opera and Noh (Grotowski claims in *Towards a poor theatre* that the training techniques of all three forms mentioned above were 'particularly stimulating'), until Grotowski reached "the conclusion that Western actors were better served by looking to Asian theatre practices as a model for a rigorous work ethic than by attempting to appropriate codified exercises" (Wolford 2010, 208). As for Barba himself, he has also had a lifelong attraction to Asian philosophy, religion and practices, while at the same time being fascinated by the techniques employed by the actors of the different theatrical traditions. This fascination has led him to the formulation of the precepts of his *theatre anthropology*, which revolves around finding and examining recurrent principles in the craft of the actor across various genres (the so-called pre-expressive level) and the founding of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in 1979. Most examples of the pre-expressive level and most of the masters invited to the different editions of ISTA come from Asian classical theatre. Barba justifies this choice saying that "The traditional Asian performer [...] has a base of organic and well-tested 'absolute advice'", unlike their contemporary Western counterparts, who don't possess such advice "to provide support and orientation. They lack rules of action which, while not limiting artistic freedom, aid them in their different tasks" (Barba & Savarese 2006, 6). The recurrent principles that I mentioned revolve around the scenic presence of the actor, the so-called *extra-daily technique*.

I believe that Artaud's appraisal of the Balinese performances (and the subsequent inclusion of his analysis of them into the book *The Theatre and its Double*) is one of the reasons that Eastern techniques had such a major influence on the evolution of Western theatre, among them the four creators mentioned above (of course, their natural attraction – one would be tempted to say, in certain cases even obsession – towards Asia is also of utmost importance here). This effect on Artaud (and consequently on the ones his writings later effected) should be mentioned on the same page with other similar examples, among them the effect Mei Lanfang has had on Brecht, and the effect Kawakami and his company (especially his actress wife Sadayakko) has had



on Meyerhold's ideas about acting and the theatre. The former is of course well documented, but the latter is perhaps not so well known. As Joseph L. Anderson relates, Meyerhold happened to see the Kawakami troupe's performances around the time he had fallen out with Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre, and "was attracted by what he saw in their theatricality and the plasticity of their acting", so much so that even two decades later, he would still be talking about them, "describing what Japanese actors did onstage and how their pantomimic forms were central to his vision of that new theatre he called *uslovny* (stylized)" (Anderson 2011, 1: 510-511). The examples for such an influence of Oriental forms on important 20<sup>th</sup> century practitioners do not stop here. Kawakami himself influenced Edward Gordon Craig as well (among others), and Asian techniques (such as *kabuki*) would constitute inspiration also to names such as Jacques Copeau, Sergei Eisenstein, Charles Dullin, Jean Louis Barrault, Aleksandr Tairov and so on.<sup>1</sup>

What is the reason for this appeal? Even though, as detailed above, different characteristics attracted different practitioners, in my view, the main reason that they all looked towards the East was that the type of new theatre and new actor that they were imagining was not possible to create from the confines of Western techniques, while other techniques (such as Eastern ones) still kept alive a "different type of logic" (Borie 2004, 376), so essential for the realisation of this new vision (or rather, these new visions, different from each other and yet intrinsically related). This is punctuated by James R. Brandon, who says that learning *kabuki* (for example) "trains students to value concentration, discipline, and a sense of dedication implicit in the concept of *michi* or *dō* (way)" (Brandon 2015, 346). Two more reasons can be mentioned: one is the already quoted thought of Barba regarding the superior technical knowledge of traditional Eastern actors, and the second is perhaps the fact that all these genres still contained an element of ritual, an aspect which had already been missing from Western theatre for quite some time (Savarese 2010, 553).

In the course of my research I identified the following reasons for what I termed *the turn towards the body*: (1) disillusionment in the state of theatre making as well as towards the dominance of spoken and realistic theatre at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, coupled with (2) influences of contemporary psychology which only just started to acknowledge and explore the relationship between body, mind, spirit (for example the effect of Ribot on Stanislavski), and (3) the gradual appearance of Asian mind-body practices and classical theatrical genres as a resource for training and inspiration among European theatre practitioners. These tendencies have become accelerated in the second part of the century, when early pioneers such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Artaud, Copeau, became role models to follow for the new generation of theatre makers, and their work, visions and results transformed into a springboard for further exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see Nicola Savarese's splendid book, *Eurasian Theatre. Drama and Performance Between East and West from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, Hostebro – Malta – Wroclaw, 2010.



Practitioners such as Grotowski, Barba, Mnouchkine, Brook also benefited from further advancements in the field of psychology and neurosciences, as well as a wider access to mind-body practices and Asian theatre, which meant that they could carry out quasi-methodological research based on concrete contact with these traditions/cultures, resulting in more and more accurate renderings of their teachings and precepts.

### **The new paradigm**

The shifting of focus towards the body, coupled with the specific evolutions in both writing and staging text in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought about a lot of changes – for instance, the end of the dominance and sacredness of the text *for the actor*. Dymphna Callery formulates it this way: “the more general proliferation of devised work in the post- sixties has as much to do with the post-modern repudiation of the hierarchy of the text as the emergence of a new breed of actors or practitioners challenging the idea of the actor-as-interpreter and reclaiming the notion of the actor-as-creator” (Callery 2001, 160). Or as, Phillip Zarrilli argues, when examining this phenomenon: “many approaches to acting today emphasize a *gestalt* approach where the paradigm of the actor-as-interpreter of a theatrical text is replaced with a paradigm of the actor-as-creator” (Zarrilli 2002, 15).

While there is no universal consensus, we could say that, to many practitioners working in this new paradigm, there is a sense of liberation of the actor/performer from the constraints of ‘character’, allowing them to focus more on one’s own psychosomatic responses. This idea, ‘invention’, which started with Stanislavski and Meyerhold, is that any physical activity has an impact on the psyche, making us feel differently. In this new paradigm the challenge is to be aware of these connections, to search for them, find them, to sharpen the interior reactions to the physical impulses, in other words, to awaken what can be called the ‘*bodymind*’.

What the psychophysical actor needs to do, is to search, within the form, for the connection between the body, i.e. the somatic experience, and the psyche (the thoughts, feelings and associations that arise from within). This process needs a particular type of presence and preparedness, and hence the apparition of *training* in the second part of the century, and also the turning of several important practitioners towards the Eastern theatrical genres as well as Eastern philosophy and spirituality in general.

### **The psychophysical actor**

As Zarrilli writes, the first time the term ‘psychophysical’ appeared was with Stanislavski, who used it “to describe an approach to Western acting focused equally on the actor’s psychology and physicality applied to textually based character acting” (Zarrilli 2009, 13). In his book *Systems of rehearsal*, Shomit Mitter details that this method was known to Stanislavski from the very beginnings of his career as an actor, in fact, the stage characters that he created via this approach have been his biggest successes, but



that he was somewhat ‘ashamed’ of this process and this is the reason why for many years he focused on finding a purely psychological way to enter the acting process, rather than a physical one, until eventually giving up his resistance and accepting the validity of approaching psychology through physical details (Mitter 2006, 17-18).

In the little over 100 years since starting to use the term, advancements in science (neuroscience and psychology) have effectively proven what for Stanislavski was still only a hunch, namely that the outer and the inner are two sides of the same coin. That is, mind and body are indissolubly connected. What was once a theory of Ribot has since been proved by neurobiology (forerunner of this work is Antonio Damasio), and psychology (with the work of Paul Ekman proving of utmost importance). Paul Ekman is a psychologist specializing in deception detection. His research concluded that performing the exact expression has the effect of giving life to the particular emotion, that is, being able to feel it. Although Ekman specializes in facial expressions, it has since been proved that the same process holds true of the complete body–mind relation. One of the more recent studies realized is that of Marta Miragall and associates, which was published in 2018, entitled *Expand your body when you look at yourself: The role of the posture in a mirror exposure task*, in which they have shown that adopting a concrete expansive and upright posture for two minutes before analysing themselves in a 3-way mirror and filling out several questionnaires, women who received high scores on a questionnaire which discussed their dissatisfaction with their own body, tended to produce more positive emotions than those who adopted a contracted or stooped position for the same amount of time before doing the same task (called ME or Mirror Exposure). The authors of the study have concluded that “psychological interventions should explore the convenience of holding an expansive posture before the ME in women with body dissatisfaction” (Miragall et al. 2018), while referring also to previous researches carried out in the field of embodied cognition, some of which are summarized in the article *Wise additions bridge the gap between social psychology and clinical practice: Cognitive-behavioral therapy as an exemplar*, as follows: “Studies of embodied cognition have found that physical postures can also alter cognitions. Riskind and Gotay (1982) expanded the above research by assessing how body posture may elicit similar cognitive shifts. In two studies, they found that participants who were placed in a slumped physical posture were quicker to develop helplessness than individuals who had been placed in an upright posture. Other studies have shown that particular postures can lead to particular emotional states (Duclos, et al., 1989). When placing individuals into a body posture of fear, anger, or sadness, participants reported heightened levels of the applicable emotion. For instance, when participants were instructed to clench their fists tightly and lean forward and hold the position for 15 seconds, they reported experiencing higher levels of anger” (Folk et al. 2016).

These findings are in sync with – to give an example – exercises in exploring body language to be found in John Martin’s book *The Intercultural Performance Handbook*, in which the author states that “Any slight change in that neutral body puts us into a different state, as it will slightly (or considerably) change the flow of energy around our



body, and this will affect our feelings" (Martin 2004, 68). This change in the 'flow of the energy', as he later mentions, has to do with change of weight, balance and rhythm (core principles in Barba's theatre anthropology), while the neutral body that he refers to is a state of neutrality and openness that was central to the work of Jacques Copeau. Copeau says that starting from silence and calm are essential: "An actor must know how to be silent, to listen, respond, keep still, begin a gesture, develop it, return to stillness and silence, with all the tones and half tones that those actions imply" (Rudlin 1986, 46). This notion of neutrality later became a fundamental concept in Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy (who, having worked and studied with Jean Dasté, can be seen to be part of the 'Copeau lineage' of pedagogues), but in reality, it is possible to be identified in the approaches of most of the practitioners mentioned already. Deterrence from the neutral state, through changes in weight, balance and rhythm have the effect of bringing about marked changes in emotion and even the process of thinking. And this process is always connected to the body, but also to consciousness. A psychophysical actor, then, could be said to be an actor who has trained in achieving the neutral state, as well as explored/is in the process of exploring the different changes brought about by deterrence from the neutral state, and through a particular kind of attention can register these changes.

When actualizing the term '*psychophysical*' from the point of view of the actor, Zarrilli goes on to cite Bella Merlin (who has trained extensively in the later Stanislavski system in Russia), saying that "there is no *divide* between body and psychology, but rather a *continuum*", emphasizing "acting, doing, experiencing, playing", while also saying that "The optimal state of Merlin's psychophysical actor is helpfully described as one of 'constant inner improvisation' – a state in which the actor opens out to, acts within, and responds to the performative environment she inhabits in the moment" (Zarrilli 2019, 18). Such an opening, acting and responding are possible due to an attunement to the *bodymind*. To this end, Zarrilli utilises kalarippayattu, yoga and tai chi in his psychophysical training of actors, stating that they help the body "become all eyes" and "standing still while not standing still", notions which also are drawn from Asian practices. Let us take a closer look at what we have referred to as *bodymind*.

## **Bodymind**

For the body 'to be all eyes' is for it to be engaged totally, with all of its functions in the act that it participates in, whether it is rehearsal, training or performance. As I've said, such an engagement (that is, being completely present, attentive and open; being able to transition – act and respond – from neutral to whatever state we get in to, as well as to move between states) is possible when we make use of the *bodymind*. It is the *bodymind* that is at the base of the work of the *psychophysical actor*. This concept supposes that mind and body are actually a continuum, a whole. They are one, hence the dualistic divide between them is stopped. Our body and mind thus become what is called a *gestalt*, that is, "something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).



When we are able to experience ourselves as a *gestalt*, “Actions are experienced as having both mind-aspects and body-aspects, and not as one or the other” (Zarrilli 2009, 85). When we begin training in a *psychophysical* way, we go on a journey which takes us from experiencing our mind and body as two separate entities, to experiencing them as a *gestalt*. Along the way, we learn to “think” with our body and “act” with our mind, but we also start to become attuned to this something that is “somehow more”, and which arises from the convergence of our physical, mental and consciousness aspects. This something can be experienced as a type of inner energy, a flow, as if there was something alive in us, which begins to move and manifest itself through specific impulses, which we then can follow through with actions. In his analysis of the phenomenon, Phillip Zarrilli refers us to Shigenori Nagatomo, who mentions three types of psychophysical integration: “The first type is the normative, everyday relationship between the mind and the body which is experienced as dualistic. Inherent in our daily experience of body and mind as separate is an underlying tension. [...] An intermediate stage of integration is when an individual de-conditions this dualistic relationship via psychophysical training. Body and mind are gradually de-tensed and a flow is discovered within. In the third stage of attunement one achieves a fully ‘non-tensional state’. Mind and body are experienced not as separate but as a single system of co-synthesis” (Zarrilli 2009, 85).

The ‘underlying tension’ in stage one of psychophysical integration refers to situations in which an individual would attempt to use rational thinking in approaching certain tasks, such as learning certain steps to a dance or a choreography, or learning to execute exercises and forms in martial arts (he gives the example of kalarippayattu). In these situations “The mind is attempting to figure out how to do something with the body and attempts to command it. The result is that there is no flow. There is tension. Similarly in acting, when an actor *tries* to put an action into the body rather than *doing the action unthinkingly*” (Zarrilli 2009, 85).

In classical acting schools we often hear the axiom ‘don’t think about it, just do it’, but we are rarely taught how to actually achieve this state in which we can ‘just do’, *unthinkingly*, and as a consequence ‘just doing’ remains nothing more than a cognitive construct.

With sufficient training and an intuitive approach, one can become aware of the existence of the *bodymind*, and develop it to the point of reaching the *gestalt*, where the body is “fully alive, in dialogue with your inner life, and able to vividly express a chosen human reality” (Marshall 2001, 9). As I see it, the ‘chosen human reality’ is whatever circumstance we put ourselves in, be it (after Stanislavski) ‘the given circumstances’ of a character within a play, or any other circumstance of our choosing. When this happens, we are able to create “an additional mode of and quality of self-presencing within the relationship between oneself and what is being attended to”, in a state of “fuller attentiveness” (Zarrilli 2009, 97). This state is characterized both by the discovery of the inner flow/inner energy, the impulses that shape our chosen actions, as well as



the fact that “the origin of the impulses and their resulting actions is *not* the will or the ego”, and that they “are not characterized by *intentionality*”, but rather “are one’s own, i.e., they are generated by the bodymind as a whole” (Zarrilli 2009, 87). As Zarrilli states, “Ultimately, the goal of personal attunement would be to achieve a fully non-tensional state within oneself as a person” (Zarrilli 2009, 85).

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