The Actor’s Presence

by

Benjamin Scott Vigus
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One enters the Königstädtter Theater and gets a place in the first balcony, for relatively few sit there, and in seeing a farce, one must sit comfortably and in no way feel hampered by the exaltation of art that makes people jam into a theater to see a play as if it were a matter of salvation.

—Søren Kierkegaard

Repetition

A good actor can command an audience by moving one finger.

—Robert Wilson

The Theatre of Robert Wilson

All this is true, and yet none of it really explains anything or evokes the experience of watching this man play. Of witnessing, firsthand, the beauty and genius of his game. You more have to come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, to talk around it, or—as Aquinas did with his own ineffable subject—to try to define it in terms of what it is not.

—David Foster Wallace

“Roger Federer as Religious Experience”
Approaching Presence

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Walter Benjamin laments the loss of what he terms art’s “aura” through mass reproduction: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (117). Benjamin does not provide a working definition for aura, but instead points to the conditions that produce it. For him, aura is derived from a work of art’s “uniqueness,” which he states, “is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” (118). Benjamin argues that aura withers through mechanical reproduction because the work is divorced from its original context, losing what he calls its “cult value.”

Benjamin devotes a large portion of his essay to comparing theatre and film in order to underscore the lack of aura in the latter, an art form inherently bound to mechanical reproduction. He argues, “there is indeed no greater contrast than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction” (123). Benjamin locates theatre’s aura in the live actor: “For aura is tied to his [the actor’s] presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor” (122). By contrast, the actor in film lacks aura because she is not physically co-present with the spectators. As such, she cannot “adjust to the audience” and the audience experiences no “personal contact” with her (122). For Benjamin, theatre’s aura depends on the actor’s presence, for it enables the live interaction between the artists and spectators.
In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte explores how this interaction takes place in live performance and details the potential value of such an exchange. Fischer-Lichte begins by defining performance in terms of what she calls “the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators,” or the “liveness” of performance (67). She writes, “The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must interact in a specific place for a certain period of time” (32).

Fischer-Lichte elaborates on the sorts of interactions that can occur at this meeting: “The actors act…move through the space, gesture, change their expression, manipulate objects, speak or sing. The spectators perceive their actions and respond to them…the spectators laugh, cheer, sigh, groan, sob, cry, scuff their feet…” (38). Fischer-Lichte perceives that actors and spectators actively respond to one another during a performance event in a variety of provocative and transformative ways. She argues that there is tremendous value in this kind of interaction, as it can lead to what she calls a “reenchantment of the world” (207).

As an actor primarily interested in theatre, I am attracted to both Benjamin’s and Fischer-Lichte’s assessments of the value of live performance. Particularly as I prepare to enter a professional landscape where film is ubiquitous, Hollywood dominates Broadway, and small theatres struggle increasingly, it is encouraging to hear live theatre championed by these two writers. I also agree with Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin when they locate the unique power of performance in the live exchange between actors and spectators. Yet, while I appreciate the value of liveness and the interaction it welcomes, I recognize that not all live performances are necessarily
moving or transformative. I have sat through many theatrical events that failed to provide an engaging experience for the spectator—these were, to be honest, quite boring and at times embarrassing. On the other hand, certain performers have given me some of the most profound and exciting experiences of my life, transforming my perceptions of the limits of human physical, expressive, and creative ability. Some actors have remarkable power, and watching them is unlike anything else. I believe such performers demonstrate the unique value of live performance when it is done masterfully: they occasion a transformative experience shared by actors and spectators. This essay is my attempt to understand what these actors do to create such an experience, and why as a spectator they are so powerful to behold.

Italian director Eugenio Barba has devoted his career to understanding what makes some actors more compelling than others. He writes, “Faced with certain actors, a spectator is attracted by an elementary energy which seduces without mediation, even before he has deciphered the individual actions or questioned himself about their meaning and understood it” (*The Dilated Body* 13). Many clichés are commonly used to describe what such performers seem to possess: “genius,” “talent,” “star power,” etc. Yet, these words seem to suggest that powerful acting emerges from some innate and elusive “it-factor.” Simply to call an actor talented seems to abandon attempts at understanding with any precision or depth what she actually does. Barba proposes the term “the actor’s presence” (14) to describe an actor’s ability to forge a magnetic connection with the spectator. Barba also employs several other terms that I will address throughout this essay, but in general I have chosen to
use “the actor’s presence” and “the actor’s heightened presence” interchangeably in my analysis of the mesmerizing power that certain actors display.

The actor’s heightened presence appears similar to phenomena that emerge in other spheres of human interaction. In sports, music, circus, politics, daily life, and so forth, there are people with an uncommon ability to attract the focused gaze and unwavering attention of others. This magnetism can appear to stem from many personal characteristics, including exceptional athleticism, technical virtuosity, charisma, beauty, and celebrity. An actor’s heightened presence may indeed be influenced by these factors—however, it also transcends and may disregard them. Lesser-known actors, or those who lack conventional attractiveness, can exude unexpected and commanding presence. Barba differentiates an actor’s “extra-daily” work from what he calls “virtuosic” and “daily” abilities. He writes, “the performer is someone who uses an extra-daily body technique in a situation of organized representation” (The Paper Canoe 108, emphasis his). An actor’s work is unique because her self—her body and psyche—is the very instrument she utilizes to create and represent a character, feeling, idea, or story. To further clarify the difference between virtuosic and representational techniques, Barba writes,

Daily body techniques are used to communicate; techniques of virtuosity are used to amaze. Extra-daily techniques, on the other hand, lead to information. They literally put the body into form, rendering it artificial/artistic but believable. Herein lies the essential difference which separates extra-daily techniques from those which merely
transform the body into the “incredible” body of the acrobat and the virtuoso. (16, emphasis his)

Barba’s distinction is useful for clarifying how representation is central to the actor’s presence. Even if an actor amazes audiences with technical skill or seduces them with charisma, Barba understands an actor’s heightened presence to be fundamentally connected to the believability of the actor’s organized representation in a performance event.

Because the actor’s self is the material she must organize artistically, a tension arises between that self and what it represents. Fischer-Lichte notes, “The peculiar role of the body as aesthetic material has had a central place in theories of theatre and acting. The emphasis lies in the tension between the phenomenal body of the actor, or their bodily being-in-the-world, and their representation of the dramatic character” (76). Fischer-Lichte further describes this distinction as between “real physicality” and the “fictive world of the play” (78), or between the actor’s ”phenomenal” and “semiotic” bodies (79). Benjamin identifies a similar tension in his essay when he observes that an audience can never separate the aura of the character Macbeth from the body of the actor. I would argue that even in cases when an actor does not seek to represent a character, her engagement with abstract or expressive movements can provoke the audience to respond to the tension between her phenomenal and semiotic bodies. For both Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin, the actor always, whether intentionally or not, creates a tension between fiction and reality. How she manages this relationship impacts her stage presence.
An actor in performance also negotiates the relationship between her body and mind. Beginning with Konstantin Stanislavsky’s seminal System, the training approaches I analyze in this essay generally reject the popular nineteenth-century understanding of mind-body dualism.¹ Scholar Sharon Carnicke remarks on “Stanislavsky’s holistic belief that mind and body represent a psychophysical continuum. He rejects the Western conception that divides mind from body, taking his cue from French psychologist Théodule Ribot, who believed that emotion never exists without physical consequence” (“Stanislavsky’s System” 16). In a similar vein, Fischer-Lichte proposes a “radical concept of presence” (99) to describe performers who demonstrate a unity of body and mind in performance. Fischer-Lichte argues, “When the actor brings forth their [sic] body as energetic and thus generates presence, they appear as embodied mind. The actor exemplifies that body and mind cannot be separated from one another” (99, emphasis mine). I will discuss Fischer-Lichte’s claim later, as it is pertinent to the work of the artists I approach. For now, it suffices to recognize that the actor’s work always explores the connection between her physical action (body) and inner dimension (mind), and that this exploration affects her heightened presence.

Fischer-Lichte argues that the actor’s embodied mind allows spectators to become engaged in the performance event as embodied minds themselves. Moreover, “When spectators sense the performers’ presence and simultaneously bring themselves forth as embodied minds, they experience a moment of happiness which cannot be recreated in daily life” (99). While I cannot say if, sitting in an audience, I have felt myself as “embodied mind,” certain performers have powerfully engaged
me. Their heightened presence had an unusual ability to invite me to actively invest in the performance. An actor’s heightened presence can transform performance into a deeply personal and collaborative event between actors and spectators.

This essay is my investigation into how presence has been approached by prominent theorists and artists from the nineteenth century through the present day. In my analysis, I look at the actor’s presence from three different perspectives: “Presence and the Body,” an examination of how performance aesthetics and physical techniques that foreground the actor’s phenomenal body can impact heightened presence; “Presence and the Inner Dimension,” an analysis of the actor’s inner and personal connection to performing as it can heighten stage presence; and “Liveness and Actor/Spectator Collaboration,” a look at how presence can invite spectators to join the performance as collaborators in the unique event. My conclusion, “Encounters with Presence,” is a personal reflection on my own experiences with the actor’s heightened presence, both as a performer and as a spectator.

Presence and the Body

In “The Actor and the Über-marionette” (1908), director Edward Gordon Craig implies that the human body is a fundamentally flawed material for artistic creation. He writes, “Acting is not an art…in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials” (28). For Craig, the actor’s body cannot be finely crafted and fixed because his performance will always be upset by emotions: “emotion possesses him; it seizes upon his limbs, moving them whither it will” (28, emphasis his). Such
emotional chaos has no place in Craig’s understanding of art. He ventures, “there has never been an actor who has not spoiled his performance once, twice, ten times, sometimes a hundred times during the evening” (33). Craig ultimately calls for a life-like puppet, the über-marionette, to replace the actor on stage. The über-marionette would not be subject to the caprices and imperfections of actors, and would therefore grant the director total control over the performance. Moreover, in direct response to the prevalence of Realism in his time, Craig argues that the über-marionette would surpass imitative representation and achieve a more profound artistic expression: “The über-marionette will not compete with life—but will rather go beyond it. Its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance—it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit” (40). Because it would be completely subject to the director’s will, the über-marionette could transcend its materiality to become pure artistic expression.

Craig’s opinions belong to another time in theater history and were heavily influenced by the emerging role of the director at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet Craig’s observations regarding the limitations of the actor’s self as they impact her artistic expression remain significant. Whenever an actor creates with her body, she cannot entirely control her body or the form she creates. However precise the actor’s artistic composition may be, it is always subject to imperfection. In short, an actor will always deviate slightly from the artistic plan, causing the audience to see her phenomenal body. Acting therefore always engages with the tension between the actor’s phenomenal and semiotic bodies, and how the actor negotiates this tension is fundamental to how the audience receives her performance. Yet, rather than allowing
it to detract from her work, an actor can exploit this tension to increase her impact on spectators. As such, this is the first perspective from which I will examine presence.

The particular physical forms an actor embodies directly influence the tension between her phenomenal and semiotic bodies. Etienne Decroux, founder of Corporeal Mime and teacher of both Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau, committed his life to researching and formulating physical techniques that would enable the performer to craft purely expressive forms. Scholar and former student of Decroux, Thomas Leabhart writes, “he [Decroux] worked with a revolutionary zeal to make the human body artificial, artistic…He viewed the body in the same way as would a ‘craftsman making a string marionette, or a sculptor making an articulated model’” (Etienne Decroux 40). Decroux was deeply influenced by Craig’s theories, as exemplified in his announcement to his school in 1947, “We have done well in choosing him [Craig] as our leader” (“Words on Mime” 173). Like Craig, Decroux rejected the notion that acting was art: “But the actor, what is an actor? He’s not an artist. He’s a man who has certain qualities—often—and who makes us think that he is an artist. This is a mix-up made by ordinary mortals between beauty and art” (“The Imaginary Interview” 75). However, where Craig rejected the human body altogether in favor of his hypothetical puppet, Decroux believed it possible to apply Craig’s theories—“discern his path” (“Words on Mime” 173)—to the performer’s personal work with her body. With the techniques of Corporeal Mime, Decroux aimed to enable the performer to transform herself into something akin to Craig’s über-marionette. Decroux poses, “I personally wish for the birth of this actor made of wood…But is it really important to know whether Craig declares himself for the
marionette or for the human body?” (172). Although he eschewed the theatre and acting of his time, Decroux was unequivocally committed to exploring the human body’s expressive potential. His work is immensely helpful for understanding how the actor’s bodily forms can contribute to her heightened presence.

If Decroux was troubled by the human body’s tendency to ruin the artist’s creation, he locates the source of this problem in the body itself rather than emotional excitability—a position very different from Craig’s. Decroux finds that perfect artistry in acting is unachievable because of the body’s limited malleability. In a 1960 article entitled “Bodily Presence” (“Presencé en corps”) he writes,

To have only his body as his material is for the artist a striking condition. The body is in fact remarkable and impossible to pulverize. It’s a pity. The advantage would be clear if, without killing this body, one managed to reduce it to powder or carve it up into tiny cubes. These parts, too small to interest the eye, too uniform as well, would be arranged as one wished; then one would reveal to the world the arrangement of these specks concealed from the world’s view. (53)

Decroux’s statement suggests that if the mime could completely transform herself so that no sign of her original body remained, then spectators would not see her body but only the artist’s creation. Decroux however recognizes that such complete transformation is not actually possible: “The parts of the body are very far from being particles. They differ from each other, we identify them; each of them as they show themselves announces its function to us” (54). In Decroux’s view, the body inevitably distracts the spectator from the artist’s intent.
Decroux rejects superficial and exhibitionistic uses of the body, and his work employs physical techniques and aesthetic tactics designed to counteract such bodily display. For example, Corporeal Mime eschews excessive use of the hands and arms because Decroux finds them prone to what he calls lying: “one can lie with the arms. And if one *can* lie, there is danger that one *is* lying” (“The Imaginary Interview” 67, emphasis his). The techniques of Corporeal Mime instead focus heavily on the performer’s trunk and legs—which Decroux considers to be more “difficult” and “dangerous,” capable of deeper, more honest, expressiveness (67). Of all the body parts, Decroux seems most troubled by the face: “The face sweats reality. And there is even something immodest in using such an intimate part of the body to cry in front of everyone” (“Bodily Presence” 41). In Decroux’s training, performers learn to assume a neutral facial expression and at times use masks or cloth coverings to hide their faces altogether. Decroux’s views might best be summed up with his assertion, “To show one’s nude body is not the same thing as showing one’s inner life” (41). For him, an ideal artistic form is one that makes the performer’s phenomenal body vanish completely to represent “inner life.” Despite Decroux’s emphasis on technical forms that obscure the phenomenal body, he does not value technique for its own sake, but rather for what it can reveal.

An admirer of Decroux, Eugenio Barba provides helpful insight on this point. Barba observes that an excessive focus on technique can lead the actor to develop a “technical cuirass” that ultimately obscures her artistic expression behind the mechanical display of skill. Barba admits that technique, on the one hand, “creates interest, commands respect, dazzles,” but cautions that becoming enamored of
technical skill is also the actor’s “most insidious obstacle” (The Paper Canoe 65). In short, technique alone is not art, but must reveal what Barba calls a “scenic bios, that which enlivens, from the inside, her/his technique” (65). Barba likens scenic bios to a “shadow” contained within the technical cuirass:

The shadow can emerge only from a fracture, when the performer is able to open a vent in the cuirass of technique and seduction which s/he has built and dominating it, abandons it, exposing her/himself, undefended, like the warrior who fights with bare hands. Vulnerability becomes strength. (65)

Technique exists not to hide the actor behind a display of virtuosity, but to expose something interior, contained within and revealed through structure. Barba finds Decroux’s work remarkably successful at producing presence in this way. Barba writes, “His [Decroux’s] knowledge of the pre-expressive level, how to build up presence, and how to articulate the transformation of energy, is unequalled in Western theatre history” (“The Hidden Master” 34, emphasis his). In Barba’s view, Decroux’s techniques successfully generate and reveal a powerful inner life that leads to heightened presence.²

In my view, the techniques of Corporeal Mime lead to presence through a formalized physical vocabulary that generates scenic bios and simultaneously foregrounds the performer's phenomenal body. Photographs of Decroux in a 1948 mime piece titled Sport show him dressed only in a loincloth, with his face covered. His nearly-naked body does not disappear quietly, but asserts itself loudly as an object of great skill and beauty. In a movement class I attended at the Freehold
Theatre in Seattle, Washington in 2010, the teacher, George C. Lewis, who trained with Decroux in Paris, demonstrated several exercises. In the live demonstration, I was entranced by the expressivity of Decroux’s choreography and the virtuosity it demanded of the performer. Watching Lewis’ execution of a Corporeal Mime exercise was somewhat similar to watching a great musician play, where the beauty of the music is heightened by the visible virtuosity and energy of the performer. Leabhart writes that Decroux wanted to transform the body “into a keyboard, whose divisions were: head, hammer (a combination of head and neck), bust (head, neck, and chest), torso (head, neck, chest, and waist), trunk (head, neck, chest, waist, and pelvis), demi-Eiffel (from head to knees), and Eiffel Tower (the whole body)” (Etienne Decroux 40). The analogy with music was wholly apparent in Lewis’ demonstration: he transformed his body into an instrument of beautiful expression, technical precision, and skill.

Unlike Decroux’s approach, Polish director Jerzy Grotowski’s work with his company, The Laboratory Theatre, in the 1960s employed no formal or fixed physical vocabulary. However Grotowski’s physical approach to acting provides another example of how foregrounding the actor’s phenomenal body can lead to heightened presence. Similarly to Decroux, Grotowski rejects exhibitionism and laziness. Grotowski writes, “The actor is a man who works in public with his body, offering it publicly. If this body restricts itself to demonstrating what it is—something any average person can do—then it is not an obedient instrument capable of performing a spiritual act” (33). Paralleling Decroux’s desire for the performer to show his inner life, Grotowski’s work aims to train the actor to “[reveal] himself by casting off his
everyday mask” (33). Yet where Decroux’s approach employs a highly codified physical vocabulary, Grotowski emphasizes what he calls a “via negativa— not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks” (17, emphasis his). Grotowski clarifies this term in an interview with Barba: “The technique of the ‘holy actor’ is an inductive technique (i.e. a technique of elimination), whereas that of the ‘courtesan actor’ is a deductive technique (i.e. an accumulation of skills)” (35, emphasis his).³

Though Grotowski’s training aims to strip the actor of social and personal restrictions in order to facilitate the actor’s self-revelation, Grotowski’s approach also relies on physical precision and form. He explains, “In their [actors’] daily work they do not concentrate on the spiritual technique but on the composition of the role, on the construction of form, on the expression of signs—i.e., on artifice” (17). The via negativa serves to rid the actor of physical restrictions so that he can commit more fully to carrying out the precisely crafted physical score of a role. However—and exceptionally—the actor does not base his physical score around an attempt to represent the character or dramatic situation, but instead uses the fictional character as means for self-investigation. Grotowski explains:

[the actor] must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel, to dissect himself. It is not a question of portraying himself under certain given circumstances, or of “living” a part; nor does it entail the distant sort of acting common to epic theatre and based on cold calculation. The important thing is to use the role as a trampolin [sic], an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask—the
innermost core of our personality—in order to sacrifice it, expose it.

(37)

In this passage, Grotowski responds directly to the acting approaches of Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht, and distances himself from both. For Grotowski, the actor neither seeks to “live” the part in the sense of understanding the character’s psychology, nor to create an intellectual distance between him and the character. Instead, the actor uses the dramatic character as a point of departure towards arousing personal memories and associations. For example: to embody a character that has killed his mother, Grotowski suggests that the actor recall a time when he perhaps killed an animal. The actor can then compose a psychophysical score based on memories of how the event made him feel and what physical actions it provoked: “How did you see the animal? How were your hands behaving? Were you concentrating or not?” (233). The actor’s psychophysical score becomes the vehicle for self-revelation because it is composed of actions that minutely recreate an actual experience. Importantly, this experience should not be the same as that of the character, but inspired by it. This causes acting to be more personal and less “banal,” as the actor’s experience parallels the fictional character’s. In the example above, Grotowski explains that using the memory of killing an animal—he refers specifically to a cat—“will be a cruel analysis of the situation because the acting will not be grandiose and tragic but will only display a small personal obsession. Furthermore, returning to the memory of having killed a cat when you have to kill your mother is not banal” (233). As the actor relives a personal memory, the director’s task is to montage dramatic text and psychophysical score to give shape to the performance’s story.
Grotowski’s approach therefore allows the actor to collapse the distance between himself and his character by using the fictional role as the means for a deeply personal investigation. The process transforms acting into a real event that takes place in front of the spectator. In the real event, the actor foregrounds his phenomenal body and the physical score functions as a vehicle for self-revelation. Ryszard Cieslak, Grotowski’s greatest actor, best demonstrated this type of acting in the Polish director’s 1965 production of *The Constant Prince*. Production photographs show Cieslak’s body contorted in extreme and vulnerable positions, his body showcased much like in the images of Decroux at work. Critic Josef Kelera wrote of Cieslak’s performance, “In the culminating moments of the role, everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within, light, literally imponderable. At any moment the actor will levitate” (qtd. in Grotowski 109). The manner in which Cieslak executed the physical score made his phenomenal body—the actor’s personal experience at the moment of the performance—visible to the audience. Cieslak’s performance of the fictional character could not be separated from his real experience.

Confronting spectators with the actor’s phenomenal body as Cieslak’s performance did can cause them to lose track of the distinction between real and fictional in performance. Erika Fischer-Lichte notes a similar case in her description of the 1903 production of *Electra* directed by Max Reinhardt and starring Gertrude Eysoldt. The relationship with the audience that Cieslak created through a deeply personal and precise physical score, Eysoldt achieved through embodying the
physical and emotional violence that her character endured in the play. Fischer-Lichte explains,

In and through her acting, Eysoldt permanently transgressed the boundary between the semiotic and the phenomenal body. The movements she performed not only expressed the unspeakable violence that the character Electra suffers to her body. By performing such movements, she also did violence on her own body. It was no longer possible to draw a clear borderline between the semiotic and the phenomenal body, the bodily being-in-the world of the actress.

(Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual 5)

Particularly through acts of violence and “convulsive spasms,” Eysoldt shocked her audiences by repeatedly transgressing the limits of an actor’s phenomenal and semiotic bodies in her representation of Electra. Fischer-Lichte also notes that “no illusion was created for spectators,” but they were nevertheless “fixed to their seats by a basilisk-glance, by hypnotic magic powers” (6). Fischer-Lichte argues this hypnotic power worked “in place of illusion” (6). Deeply uncomfortable and unfamiliar with Eysoldt’s unorthodox acting, the audience was riveted. The actor heightened her presence by constantly shifting the audience’s attention “between her semiotic and her phenomenal body” (5), upsetting spectators’ expectations.

The oscillation of attention that Eysoldt’s acting provoked is central to how the actor’s body affects audiences in all instances of heightened presence. This oscillation may in fact be the very process that leads to the audience’s entranced state of attention, and what causes the “basilisk-glance” that Fischer-Lichte describes. In
such cases, the audience’s attention becomes rapt by how reality and fiction juxtapose, come forward, recede, trade places, and merge in the actor’s body.

*Presence and the Inner Dimension*

Kate Valk’s performance in the Wooster Group’s adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* was widely lauded for its technical mastery and mesmerizing presence. Produced first in New York City in 1992, the adaptation has been remounted many times in cities worldwide, most recently in 2009. As with many Wooster Group productions, *The Emperor Jones* was polarizing for its controversial aesthetic choices. In a review for the *New York Times* in March 1998, Ben Brantley wrote, “The production consistently calls attention to its artificiality and its methods of disorientation.” At the center of the production was Kate Valk’s performance in blackface as the title character Brutus Jones. Valk’s performance made no efforts at presenting Realism, as Brantley observed: “Her eyes rolling feverishly and her voice a brazen evocation of the dumb but crafty black figures in minstrel shows and melodramas, Ms. Valk initially registers as an obscene cartoon.” In 2006, Charles Isherwood called her performance “a simulacrum of a stereotype” and noted that, “she articulates every ‘dem’ and every ‘sho’ in an uncannily precise imitation of the signsongy vocal roulades of minstrelsy.” Despite Valk’s and director Elizabeth LeCompte’s controversial choices, the actor’s performance was almost universally hailed a *tour de force*. One reviewer remarked, “To say that she commands the stage is an understatement. Hers is a performance the likes of which
most will never have experienced before, and are not likely to encounter again…every motion in her body is calculated, timed, perfection” (Gutman).

Valk was praised not only for her technical mastery, but also for her ability to create a human core within a character so clearly composed of artificial elements. Brantley noted, “Ms. Valk initially registers as an obscene cartoon. Yet as the performance continues, it acquires a searing depth, a compounded feeling of entrapment. It’s a performance that sucks you in just when you’re feeling safely distanced from it.” Charles Isherwood used similar language to describe her acting: “That Ms. Valk is somehow able to infuse this artfully outlandish performance with a poignant sense of entrapped humanity is remarkable. In fact it’s nothing short of sorcery.” Other reviewers remarked on Valk’s “fearlessness,” likely in reference to the racially charged nature of the performance. Each comment indicates that her acting impacted spectators as more than a formal experiment or intellectual commentary—Valk managed to make her performance relatable and human.

When Financial Times’ Emily Stokes asked Valk about her process of creating the role, Valk answered: “Oh, we just found the right mask.” The comment however downplays what appears to be a very significant part of the actor’s creative process. Commenting in another interview on her first production with the Wooster Group, Valk explained that makeup and costume helped her transform internally into her character: “I was different. I was so powerful, and I would think differently—respond differently—and it was terribly exciting” (Salle and French). In finding “the right mask” for Brutus Jones, Valk connected to her role in such a way that it changed how she thought, moved, and spoke. While her performance may have been described
as a “simulacrum of a stereotype,” it stemmed from a deep and embodied connection to the character. ⁴

The reception of Valk’s Brutus Jones demonstrates a path to character creation also visible in Cieslak’s and Eysoldt’s performances, one in which an actor’s strong internal connection to the dramatic material leads to heightened stage presence. In each of these three examples, audiences were riveted not just by extra-daily or precise physical forms. Rather, spectators were moved because these actors presented real and deeply personal embodiments of their fictional characters. In other words, they demonstrated that an intense and focused engagement of the actor’s inner dimension in performing could heighten presence.

While Konstantin Stanislavsky was the first European theater artist to create an actor training program based on the actor’s psychological understanding of a role, it was his student Vsevelod Meyerhold who first noted that a physical score of movements could stimulate the actor’s internal connection to the character. ⁵ In the transcript from a 1922 lecture titled “The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics,” Meyerhold argues for physically skilled movement as a means to heighten performance and engage spectators. He turns first to daily-life examples: “When we admire the child’s movements we are admiring his biomechanical skill” (200). Meyerhold then compares skilled labor to dance: “a skilled worker at work invariably reminds one of a dancer; thus work borders on art,” and argues that the performances of “exceptionally great actors” such as Eleanora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, Giovanni Grasso, Feodor Chaliapin, and Francis Coquelin resulted from their “stupendous technical mastery” (198-99). These examples support Meyerhold’s larger observation
and complaint about the acting and training methods of his day: “The fundamental deficiency of the modern actor is his absolute ignorance of the laws of biomechanics” (199). For Meyerhold, great acting emerges from the actor’s deep understanding of the physical body, its properties, and how to organize it in relationship to theatrical space.

Meyerhold’s emphasis on physical organization rests on the premise that physical movement can ignite an actor’s internal connection to his performance, what Meyerhold calls “excitation:”

By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences the excitation which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor’s performance: what we used to call ‘gripping’ the spectator. It is this excitation which is the very essence of the actor’s art. (199, emphasis his)

Meyerhold does not advocate Biomechanics simply for the sake of virtuosity, but because such techniques can lead the actor to perform with combined physical and psychological engagement. While Meyerhold seems never to have developed his notion of excitation with much theoretical rigor, I find that the term evocatively describes the connection between an actor’s physical movements and his inner dimension. Moreover, the term is useful for indicating how this connection relates to heightened presence.

Influenced heavily by Meyerhold’s Biomechanics, Stanislavsky’s actor training experiments in the 1930s sought a similar connection between the actor’s
physical behavior and psyche. For Stanislavsky, an actor would achieve this connection by first cultivating a proper creative state. Near the end of *An Actor’s Work*, Stanislavsky’s fictional stand-in, Tortsov, describes the two essential components of the actor’s work: the “inner creative state” and “outer creative state” (583). In the text, the inner creative state reflects a position of precise mental focus that allows an actor to completely “believe” in the fictional world of the play. The outer creative state requires physical readiness, so that the actor’s body may be fully responsive to inner impulses. Tortsov explains,

> All that remains is to unite these two creative states to form what we term *the general creative state*…All the mental and physical elements of their [the actor’s] creative state are on the alert and answer the call immediately. The more directly, vividly, precisely the outer reflects the inner, the better, the more broadly, the more fully the audience will understand the life of the human spirit you have created. That was why the play was written, why the theatre exists. *The general creative state is the working state.* (583, emphasis his)

To cultivate this creative state, the actor must free his body from psychological and physical resistances by training his imagination, working on memory exercises, muscular release, vocal expressiveness, and so forth.

For Stanislavsky, the general creative state allows an actor to fully commit himself to psychophysical actions. The psychological analysis of a character and the translation of this analysis into a score of psychophysical actions is the crux of Stanislavsky’s approach: “*The art of the dramatic actor,*” Tortsov explains, “*is the art*
of inner and outer action” (582, emphasis his). Contrary to common misunderstandings about the System, at this stage of his work Stanislavsky no longer believed that the actor should seek to reach an emotional state in order to provoke his physical actions. Instead—drawing from Meyerhold’s research—Stanislavsky argues that a properly composed score of actions can stimulate the actor’s emotions. However, while Meyerhold emphasizes only physical composition, Stanislavsky stresses the importance of sustaining a line of psychological, inner actions. Tortsov suggests translating emotions into chains of inner actions and demonstrates how “love” can be transmuted into a series of short specific scenes: “meeting him or her…immediate or gradual attraction…the lovers relive every moment of their meeting…they find an excuse to meet again…second meeting, [etc.] (513). Tortsov then explains that by imagining these actions in his mind, the actor can come to experience “states and actions analogous to those of a man in love” (514).

Sharon Carnicke helpfully distinguishes between Stanislavsky’s views on the actor’s “inner, purposeful action” and external physical action. Working from a chain of purposeful actions, the actor then crafts a score of physical actions, which, Carnicke explains, “includes the many external moves and strategies that the actor needs to carry out the overarching purposeful action, that has been identified as necessary to the scene” (“Stanislavsky’s System” 27). These physical actions are then tested in “silent études” to ensure that they clearly convey the elements of the scene and accurately reflect the actor’s inner actions.⁷

Of all Stanislavsky’s techniques, his work on what he termed “Tempo-rhythm” bears the strongest resemblance to Meyerhold’s notion of excitation. Indeed,
Meyerhold attributed the success of Stanislavsky’s 1906 production of *The Seagull* to the acting ensemble’s mastery of rhythm in Chekhov’s play: “If the Art Theatre had not captured the rhythm in Chekhov’s plays, it would never have succeeded in re-creating it on the stage” (“The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood” 32). Tempo-rhythm capitalizes on Meyerhold’s insight into the power of rhythm to evoke life onstage. Stanislavsky explains, “where there is life there is action, and where there is action there is movement, and where there is movement there is tempo, and where there is tempo there is rhythm” (*An Actor’s Work* 473, emphasis his). Tempo is the speed with which a movement is performed, and rhythm, the repetition and variation of tempo within and between movements. By varying the Tempo-rhythm of a score of physical actions, the actor can stimulate his inner connection to the role.

Kostya, Stanislavsky’s protagonist in *An Actor’s Work*, explains how performing a simple task with varying Tempo-rhythms impacted his feelings:

> The metronome was beating at such a slow rate, one whole note to a bar, and therefore one movement, I had to stretch that single action over the entire distance between the beats. This induced a steady, solemn mood which echoed in my head…When I had to do the exercise again, in another Tempo-rhythm, with four quarter-notes to the bar, I felt like a flunkey serving champagne at a gala reception.

(476)

Kostya’s comments demonstrate how technical means can not only inspire emotion or mood, but may also affect an actor’s perception of his inner actions and character.

Stanislavsky claims Tempo-rhythm is one of the actor’s most powerful tools for
exciting his inner connection to the role: “the right Tempo-rhythm for a play or a role can capture our feelings and evoke the right experiences spontaneously, intuitively, subconsciously, almost automatically” (502).

These descriptions of Tempo-rhythm are perhaps Stanislavsky’s clearest articulation of how internal and external action should relate in a performance and how the process awakens the actor’s creative state. Stanislavsky clarifies this process when he explains that the relationship between the outer and inner creative states should “become an instant, unconscious reflex” (580). The actor’s execution of a precise score of psychophysical actions ultimately aims at enabling a spontaneous psychological and physical embodiment of the role, what Stanislavsky calls “the art of experiencing” (16).

The goal of both Stanislavsky’s and Meyerhold’s training approaches is to produce the moment when the actor’s precise physical action and the engaged inner dimension merge in performance. Eugenio Barba’s research with his company, The Odin Teatret, focuses on finding and sustaining this moment. Barba attributes the actor’s presence not to action, but to impulse. Barba sees impulse as an energized state in the moment just prior to an action, leading to and provoking the action. He uses the Norwegian word *sats* to describe this concept:

*Sats* can be translated with the words ‘impulse’ or ‘preparation’, or ‘to be ready to…’ In the language of our [the Odin Teatret’s] work it indicates, among other things, the moment in which one is ready to act, the instant which precedes the action, when all the energy is already
there, ready to intervene, but as if suspended, still held in the fist, a
tiger-butterfly about to take flight. (*The Paper Canoe* 40)

For Barba, *sats* refers to an inner energy that prepares the actor for her next physical action: “It is the spring before it is sprung. It is the attitude of the feline ready for anything: to bound forward, to withdraw, to return to a position of rest” (56).

Sometimes Barba uses the term to describe the moment before an action, at other times *sats* refers to an energy-filled state within stillness, and sometimes to the transition between actions. In each case, Barba seems to indicate that *sats* creates an energetic through-line that links the actor’s inner impulses to outer actions, one moment to the next. In other words, *sats* creates a dynamic flow that presents actions as spontaneous and consequent—what Stanislavsky calls a chain of reflexes. Barba writes, “The work on *sats* is the means by which one penetrates into the cellular world of scenic behavior. It serves to eliminate the separation between thought and physical action” (58). *Sats* allows the actor to sustain a flow of energy that connects inner impulse to physical score.

Ultimately, cultivating *sats* is important because it allows an actor to perform with a precise physical and mental focus. When the actor’s self is organized to accomplish a specific task, this organization fills the actor with energy that rivets spectators. American director Anne Bogart provides an anecdotal example that I find useful on the matter. Bogart describes an episode when she attended an outdoor theatre piece and became distracted by a man fixing his bicycle:

I stood in the courtyard, attempting to watch the actors on the rooftop, but my focus kept shifting to a man in the courtyard simply fixing his
bicycle…This man turned his bicycle upside down and intently went about fixing the gears. I could not take my eyes off him. He was far more fascinating than any of the actors in their colorful costumes moving along the rooftop. This was a lesson in attitude. The man’s attitude was precise and riveted and therefore riveting. The performers’ attitudes were, in comparison, general. Exactitude concentrates and magnifies an action…The man fixing his bicycle taught me that precision engenders presence. (And Then, You Act 104, emphasis mine)

I suggest that what Barba calls sats is similar to the precision Bogart saw in the man, whose entire organism was engaged in the precise action of fixing the bicycle. Barba adds that the dynamic flow of sats leads to an actor’s “dilated body,” one that “evokes its opposite and complementary image: the ‘dilated mind’” (The Dilated Body 15). Barba describes this kind of performer as possessing a “body-in-life” or a “hot body” (The Paper Canoe 126), both of which I interpret as akin to heightened presence. The power to cultivate a body-in-life lies in the actor’s capacity to support the flow of precise impulses that connects her inner dimension to outer action.

Barba’s understanding of inner impulse is heavily influenced by his work with Grotowksi, who trained actors to achieve what he called “freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction” (16). Unlike in Stanislavsky’s understanding of the inner and outer creative states, in Grotowski’s model, impulse and action do not “reflect” one another, but should emerge simultaneously: “Impulse and action are concurrent:
the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses” (16). To achieve this ideal, the actor must rid his body of resistances and craft a physical score based on personal associations, “to stimulate a process of self-revelation” (128). In performance, the actor must allow his inner impulses to flow spontaneously and enliven his physical score, thereby rendering impulse and action concurrent (a process that I address in the following section). Grotowski writes that an actor who performs in this way achieves “a total act, that he [the actor] does what he does with his entire being” (123).

By performing with his entire being, the actor in Grotowski’s approach becomes what Fischer-Lichte calls “embodied mind.” Fischer-Lichte writes that in Ryszard Cieslak’s performance in *The Constant Prince*, “the concurrence of impulse and reaction created the impression of a special presence…” (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 98). Fischer-Lichte then expands on her concept of embodied mind to include other instances of presence: “such erasure [of the opposition between body and mind] is true for all performers with presence” (99). I agree with Fischer-Lichte’s assertion, and believe that the erasure she identifies finds a parallel in Meyerhold’s and Stanislavsky’s terminologies. “Excitation” and “experiencing” are in theory and practice quite comparable to Grotowski’s description of the “total act”: each refers to the connection between impulse and action, and recognizes that this connection commands the audience’s attention.

As Fischer-Lichte indicates, in cases of heightened presence, the actor’s inner dimension cannot be distinguished from her physical action. The actor’s connection to her role should therefore not be considered a purely mental or internal
phenomenon. Rather, this connection stems from the actor’s entire self—body and mind, a true psychophysical experience. Kate Valk’s comments on her acting all point to psychophysical transformation as central to her process of embodiment. She remarks, “it’s transformative to me…I think different. I’m a different person. It’s a really powerful place” (Sellar). I suggest that in Valk’s performance as Brutus Jones, she acquired such exceptional power by committing—or “transforming”—her whole self to embody her technically precise and challenging score. By connecting to her role in this way, Valk entered a dynamic flow that heightened her presence.

_Liveness and Actor/Spectator Collaboration_ According to Stanislavsky, a score of psychophysical actions allows an actor to connect to her role, but not in such a way that she believes she actually is her character. “Experiencing” is not the same as everyday experience. Stanislavsky clarifies the difference in personal notebooks, which Carnicke quotes and summarizes: “‘On stage truth is whatever you believe and in life truth is what actually is.’ Moreover, ‘the actor’s experiencing on stage is not at all the same as it is in life,’ where feelings occur, not according to plan, but ‘accidentally’” (Stanislavsky in Focus 121). The kind of experience Stanislavsky calls for is fundamentally intentional and creative, rather than accidental or passive. Carnicke quotes Richard Boleslavsky to further explicate Stanislavsky’s views of onstage experience: “When you love on the stage, do you really love? Be logical: You substitute creation for the real thing. The creation must be real, but that is the only reality that should be there” (qtd. in Carnicke 121). As the actor embodies her psychophysical score in
performance, her experience should be directed at actively creating the role, or as Carnicke summarizes, “Performing becomes the sincere reality of creative process” (120).

Stanislavsky’s approach emphasizes the actor’s creative act by pointing to how the liveness of the theatrical event is essential to the actor’s presence—and vice-versa. Liveness always entails a degree of spontaneity—but the kind of spontaneity to which I refer does not mean a radical departure from a set score. Rather, spontaneity refers to an actor’s ability to execute subtle variations and adjustments to her score as a live event demands. No matter how precisely choreographed and repeatable an actor’s score may be, she recreates it at each performance in front of a new group of spectators. She is precise, but not mechanical. She repeats the score, but she is sensitive and ready to adjust it when needed. She works according to a plan, but allows for unexpected discoveries. I argue that presence is directly connected to an actor’s ability to engage with the inherent liveness of a theatrical performance, and that in turn, her presence also heightens the spectators’ experiences of liveness.

The relationship between precision and spontaneity is central to an actor’s creative state in a live event. Paradoxically, it is the precision with which she executes her score that allows the actor to perform with greater spontaneity. This paradox is one of Grotowski’s fundamental insights. He writes, “spontaneity and discipline, far from weakening each other, mutually reinforce themselves…what is elementary feeds what is constructed and vice versa, to become the real source of a kind of acting that glows” (121). As I understand it, the spontaneity that Grotowski refers to exists in the actor’s inner dimension. As an actor performs each night, there are countless external
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variables—slight changes in scene partners’ behaviors, audience responses, temperature, costumes, and so forth—that provoke personal associations and impulses that she cannot control and should not ignore. By opening herself to these stimuli, the actor can respond, adjust to, and incorporate them into her performance, enlivening her score with spontaneous impulses. Commenting on his own acting, Ryszard Cieslak acknowledged the process of opening himself to nightly variation, admitting that his “inner life varies from night to night, from moment to moment” (qtd. in Wolford 201). Cieslak went on to explain,

I begin each night without anticipations: this is the hardest thing to learn. I do not prepare myself to feel anything. I do not say, “Last night this scene was extraordinary, I will try to do that again.” I only want to be receptive to what will happen. And I am ready to take what happens if I am secure in my score, knowing that even if I feel a minimum, the glass will not break, the objective structure worked out over the months will help me through. But when a night comes that I can glow, shine, live, reveal—I am ready for it by not anticipating it. The score remains the same, but everything is different because I am different. (qtd. in Wolford 201)

Cieslak’s physical score was precisely crafted to be clear in its formal expressivity—this part of his performance was constant and he could depend on it. Having mastered his physical score, Cieslak could then heighten his awareness and respond to the new inner and outer stimuli inherently present in a live performance. The process allowed him to keep the score’s formal precision while adjusting to the subtle variations in
what he called his inner life. Cieslak acted with presence not by trying to provoke his inner impulses, but by maintaining a state of receptiveness that allowed him to adjust spontaneously to stimuli he received from the environment and personal associations. This process allowed him to render impulse and action concurrent, because his score contained “tiny elements of contact, reactions to the stimuli of the outside world: what we call ‘give and take’” (Grotowski 128). In short, Cieslak’s process was one of responsiveness to the changing conditions of live performance.

Barba argues that responsiveness plays a key role in the actor’s presence because it gives her what he calls “a decided body” (*The Paper Canoe* 33). Barba explains the idea with an amusing anecdote:

The great Danish physicist Niels Bohr, an avid Western film fan, wondered why, in all the final shoot-outs, the hero shoots faster even if his adversary is the first to reach for his gun. Bohr asked himself if some physical truth might not explain this convention. He came to the conclusion that such a truth did indeed exist: the first to draw is slowest because he decides to shoot, and dies. The second to draw lives because he is faster, and he is faster because he doesn’t have to decide, *he is decided.* (35, emphasis his)

Barba’s notion of a decided body insists on the power of eliminating the distance between thought and action. Stanislavsky’s “reflex,” Meyerhold’s “excitation,” and Grotowski’s “total act” all recognize how connecting impulse and action can produce presence as well. However, I find Barba’s anecdote particularly useful because it shows how responsiveness to external stimuli can accomplish this concurrence. The
hero in the story is much like an actor in performance: he has a precise physical score (the action of removing his gun and shooting) and a defined performance event (the shootout). He wins the shootout—like Cieslak, he lives—because he trusts his score and acts responsively based on the stimuli he receives from his environment.

Anne Bogart describes this process of active response as the balancing of “feedforward” and “feedback.” Bogart writes, “Feedforward is an outgoing energy that anticipates the necessity for action. Playing volleyball, for example, demands an intense use of feedforward as the ball whizzes around the space. Feedback is the information and sensation that one receives as the result of action” (The Viewpoints Book 34). Bogart proposes that, “The mark of a great actor is the ability to balance feedforward with feedback. An actor with a lot of feedforward and not enough feedback comes across as aggressive and invulnerable…An actor with too little feedforward and an excess of feedback merely seems narcissistic or lethargic” (And Then, You Act 95). In Bogart’s understanding of this process, a great actor—one with presence, I would say—knows when and how much to rely on her score or deviate from it slightly. The actor not only receives and responds to every external stimuli and inner impulse; she also modifies her actions according to her sense of how much feedforward is appropriate or necessary at a given moment.

An actor balances feedforward with feedback not only in her relationship with fellow actors, but also with spectators. Fischer-Lichte describes one of the fundamental elements of the liveness of performance as a “feedback loop” between actors and spectators. She writes,
In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree. (The Transformative Power of Performance 38)

The degree to which the actor makes the feedback loop perceptible to the audience varies from one theatrical aesthetic to another. Actors in fourth-wall Naturalism and sketch comedy expect very different levels and modes of audience interaction. Nevertheless, a feedback loop is present in all live performance, as actors and spectators occupy the same space and time.

The feedback loop is directly influenced by the spectators’ readings of the meaning produced on stage. A perception of meaning can include fictive elements such as character or story, as well as real ones such as spatial arrangements or the actors’ bodies. Often spectators do not process meaning consciously, but instead, as Fischer-Lichte writes, “in their phenomenal beings” (156). In other words, spectators do not always immediately decipher what they see and hear. Rather than apprehending a performance’s meaning from an intellectual standpoint, Fischer-Lichte argues that the spectators’ experiences of a performance are first of all subjective: “Perception affects the spectators physically…But they do not ‘understand’ it…All associations triggered in the perceiving subject by the object of perception must indeed be seen as responses” (156). Every perception of meaning has a physical manifestation: disgust, boredom, restlessness, etc. Emotional reactions also
lead to physical responses (154). In this way, “the generation of meaning…affects the autopoieses [self-generation] of the feedback loop. It actively partakes in the creation of the performance” (157). For example, a spectator gasps because she perceives that the character is in danger. The actor receives this gasp as an auditory stimulus that influences her performance. Even subtler audience responses influence the feedback loop, even if the influence is not easily noticeable. Though Kate Valk’s performances betray no direct engagement with the audience, when asked about her relationship to spectators, Valk replied they were, “A huge part! They make it; it’s nothing without them…Me, I’m their subject. I feel it. It just happens. If the audience is yin, you naturally go yang. It’s a really symbiotic relationship” (Salle and French). An audience’s responses fuel the feedback loop and provide the actor with added stimuli to which she can respond. The actor’s ability to balance this feedback loop heightens the performance’s liveness and therefore, her presence.

An actor with heightened presence, awareness and responsiveness to the liveness of the performance leads the spectators to a fuller engagement, fueling the feedback loop. In this way, spectators become collaborators in creatively shaping the performance’s meaning. Meyerhold wrote in a 1907 essay entitled “The Stylized Theatre,” “We intend the audience not merely to observe, but to participate in a corporate creative act” (60). In the essay, Meyerhold proposes a theatrical aesthetic designed to provoke active audience participation: “The stylized theatre produces a play in such a way that the spectator is compelled to employ his imagination creatively in order to fill in those details suggested by the stage action” (63, emphasis his). Though this early writing by Meyerhold is primarily concerned with aesthetic
design, his later work on actor training can be interpreted as an extension of the Russian director’s desire for stronger audience engagement. Meyerhold wrote in 1922 that the actor’s “excitation,” i.e. the arousal of the inner dimension through biomechanical movement, explicitly “induces him [the spectator] to share in the actor’s performance” (‘The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics’ 199).

Meyerhold’s definition of excitation can therefore be read as an elaboration on his earlier interest in cultivating a corporate creative act. Meyerhold recognized that excitation—what I believe translates as the actor’s presence—could activate audience engagement and transform the performance into a corporate creative event.

An actor who aims at stimulating the spectators’ imaginations is necessarily aware that in the process she will lose some control over the production of meaning. This is not to say that artists have no command over what spectators perceive. The actor’s physical score, as well as design elements such as scenery, lighting, costumes, and so forth, are all directed at presenting a particular vision of the plot, theme, character, relationship, and other dramatic elements. Yet within the world of the play created by the artists, spectators are invited to employ their imaginations to generate new meanings. In short, the spectator’s reading of a performance may add to the ensemble of meanings explicitly presented by the mise-en-scène. Anne Bogart calls the ability to inspire spectators’ imaginations the “alchemy” of theatre:

What you see has an equal counterbalance in the unseen, the parallel realities of material existence and then what is created simultaneously in the audience’s imagination. Ask an audience to supply their imaginations, and the results will transcend anything that you can ever
afford to put physically onto the stage. And this conjuring is a kind of magic. It is a magic performed by the audience based upon clues that you offer them. *(And Then, You Act 89)*

What Bogart calls magic is present to a degree in all theatre, however an actor who performs with heightened presence has a unique ability to invite spectators to imagine much more than is explicitly presented to them. Such an actor invites each spectator to engage her imagination to create added meaning in the work of art. Barba sees that an actor may stimulate such imaginative engagement because her performance includes what he calls “twin logics” *(The Dilated Body 27)*. Barba gives the hypothetical example of a master painter whose works demonstrate skillful composition while maintaining a childlike sensibility: “he [the painter] has woven together parallel, or rather, twin, logics, without substituting one or the other” (27, emphasis his). In this way, the painter gives the spectator the freedom to perceive unexpected connections between these logics, causing the spectator to have an active relationship with the work. Barba suggests that a performer who acts with a “body-in-life” (heightened presence) does something similar. As I understand it, the actor might draw attention to her body’s technical skill, the dynamics of her inner dimension, and the dramatic character. These “*numerous logics act contemporaneously*” (Barba 27, emphasis his), and the spectator is invited to make personal associations and to perceive meanings that the actor did not originally foresee.

As Fischer-Lichte observes, the spectators’ receptions of a performance’s meaning inherently lead to physical reactions. Therefore, by stimulating a spectator’s
imagination, the actor implicitly invites unexpected physical participation from the spectator as well. Once again, this participation is not without boundaries, and usually it will not go against the artists’ original intent—reactions are shaped by the parameters of a given performance. Parallel to the actor’s physical score, spectators also follow a behavioral decorum. In most Western theatre, for example, audience members sit in an auditorium and take a non-intrusive position during the course of the performance. Still, the spectators’ presence is acknowledged, and there is a range of behaviors that they are allowed to express and improvise within this context: vocalizations, gasps, cringes, sighs, applause, and so forth are acceptable reactions. These reactions fuel the feedback loop and provide the actor with stimuli to which she can respond. Again, this process is present to a degree in all theatre, but an actor who performs with heightened presence and responsiveness makes the exchange more active and intense. Her use of what Barba designates as twin logics leads spectators to a heightened psychophysical engagement. As the actor’s spontaneous responses balance feedforward/feedback communication, spectators are likely to feel a powerful connection to her. This relationship both depends on and enhances the actor’s presence; it also transforms spectators into active collaborators in the performance.

The process of collaborating with spectators in the production of meaning is parallel to the actor’s process of approaching heightened presence. Barba observes that when an actor experiences moments of body-mind dilation in rehearsal or training, she

loses control of the meaning of [her] own actions. It is a negation which has not yet discovered the new entity which it affirms…At this
point it is not yet the meaning of what one is doing that is essential, but rather the precision of the action which prepares the void in which an unexpected meaning can be captured. (*The Paper Canoe* 87)

By letting go of what her actions mean, the actor enables “the growth of unexpected meanings” (88). Barba explains that such a dynamic, creative moment “is made possible by a disposition of all our energies, both physical and mental: perching on the edge of a cliff just before taking off in flight—a *sats*” (88). In other words, *sats*, which prepares and describes the actor’s heightened presence, also leads to unexpected meanings via personal associations. Barba writes that if at this point in rehearsal a director attempts to fix the meaning of a certain action, if she “believes, in short, that the marriage between the action and the meaning associated to it is indissoluble” (87), she can stifle the actor’s creative life. Barba argues, “Creative thought is actually distinguished by the fact that it proceeds by leaps, by means of a sudden disorientation which obliges it to reorganize itself in new ways, abandoning its well-ordered shell” (88). In other words, creative thought does not proceed according to conventional logic, but rather as “peripeteias,” the Greek word for unexpected changes in a story: “A peripeteia is an interweaving of events which cause an action to develop in unexpected ways, or cause it to conclude in a way opposite to how it began” (*The Dilated Body* 16). The spark that gives an actor presence may not correlate to meanings found in the script or the ones the director had in mind. Barba conveys that it is the director’s responsibility to respect this seemingly discontinuous creative process if she is to preserve the actor’s presence.
Just as in rehearsal an actor experiences the “growth of unexpected meanings,” so might a spectator feel the same as she encounters an actor’s heightened presence. An actor with this quality commands the audience’s attention but also offers spectators the possibility to collaborate in the production of meaning and to physically respond to her actions—she “prepares the void in which an unexpected meaning can be captured” (*The Paper Canoe* 87). The actor prompts the spectator’s participation in the performance in much the same way as the director invited the actor’s creative engagement in rehearsal. Spectators become invested in the performance in a manner that is personal, energized, spontaneous, and creative. In such a theatrical event, the spectator is in a sense invited to produce a presence of her own. This may be the reason why watching someone view a performance with rapt attention is often as fascinating as the production itself. The precision, depth, and spontaneity that can lead to an actor’s presence can lead to similar behavior in the spectator, transforming the performance into a truly live, collaborative, and heightened event.

*Encounters with Presence*

This is the theatre: an empty and ineffective ritual which we fill with our ‘why’, with our personal necessity. Which in some countries on our planet is celebrated with general indifference. And in others can cost the lives of those who do it.

> –Eugenio Barba
> *The Paper Canoe*

In the eighth grade, I performed in a play about the American Revolution called *On the Shores of Amerikay*, written by my drama teacher Laura Ferri. I played the role of a widowed Scottish immigrant farmer with three daughters. Somewhere
near the end of the first act I had my big dramatic scene, with the emotionally-charged line (written in Scottish dialect phonetics): “I will na’ leave ma lassies ta face those vicious bastards alone!” I remember that during one performance, as I was delivering this line, I suddenly became very aware that that I was acting and that the audience was watching me. Rather than causing me to disconnect from the scene, this awareness made me feel more invested in the character’s emotional moment. It was as if my consciousness had split in two: I was simultaneously in the scene and outside of it. I felt a heightened connection to both the fictional world of the play and the real performance space. At intermission, the stage manager complimented me on my performance. In fact, I received more compliments for that performance than for any others.

In 2006, I attended a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon. Actor Marco Barricelli played the lead role. I was a junior in high school and had never before witnessed such a powerful and beautiful performance. Barricelli masterfully commanded the stage for over three-and-a-half hours, but one moment in particular stood out for me: About halfway through the production, during one of the balcony scenes, Cyrano leaned his head gently against a column and called out to Roxanne. Just then, I became keenly aware that Barricelli was not Cyrano, but an actor performing a role. I could see how remarkable his performance was: how beautiful and expressive his voice and movements were. Simultaneously, I became more invested in Cyrano’s character and the story. Though the dramatic illusion was broken, Barricelli’s representation
became heartbreaking and fascinating to me, and the theatrical event acquired a heightened intensity.

These two memories strike me because both seem to contradict a rule I was taught either directly or implicitly throughout most of my education in theater: that powerful acting requires full commitment to the character, and that this can only happen when the actor to forgets that he is performing and lives truthfully under the play’s imaginary given circumstances. My experience in eighth grade exemplified the opposite: I received special compliments for that performance when I became aware that I was part of a theatrical event. Watching Barricelli perform showed me that acting could be powerful for the spectator when it did not rest on illusion, but instead revealed the actor’s phenomenal body. Both moments taught me that exposing the tension between real and fictional could heighten the theatrical experience.

These events sparked the beginnings of what would become an ongoing fascination of mine and would eventually inspire this essay: a curiosity about the inner workings and effects of the actor’s presence. I understand my experience in eighth grade to be an encounter with the inherent liveness of a performance event: my awareness expanded and I became responsive to every stimulus. While watching Barricelli, I was mesmerized by his phenomenal and semiotic bodies, the “twin logics” of his expert representation and beautiful display of acting technique. In each instance, these elements intensified the connection between actors and spectators.

Baricelli was my first encounter with the actor’s presence. Since seeing his performance, several others have affected me similarly. These experiences have not been restricted to particular aesthetics or performance styles, or even specifically to
theatre. Estelle Parsons and Amy Morton in Steppenwolf’s *August Osage County* on Broadway commanded the stage with visible skill and palpable human warmth. Rooted in Realism, their performances acquired added power through a demonstration of virtuosic vocal and physical precision. Rinde Eckert’s acting in the original experimental piece *An Idiot Divine*, which I saw at Wesleyan University in 2010, moved me with his powerful personal connection to his multiple roles. Though I was not entirely fond of his compositional choices, the transparency with which Eckert presented his inner dimension made the acting extremely compelling to watch. Most recently, Troy Ogilvie in Gallim Dance’s joyous, inventive piece *I Can See You in My Pupil*, performed at Wesleyan University in 2011, showed technical virtuosity and vibrant energy like I had never experienced before. Though all ensemble members were exceptional in their own right, Ogilvie’s energy was so infectious that I struggled to remind myself to watch the other dancers. Each of these performances left me energized for weeks afterwards.

I have included these examples to contextualize my personal motivation to pursue research on the actor’s presence and to write this essay. My investigation of the actor’s heightened presence has largely been one of trying to better understand and explain my experiences as an actor and spectator. However, rather than exclusively analyzing my own memories, I chose to examine artists and theorists who have approached and/or sought to produce presence in their work. I decided to approach the topic in this manner because, until very recently, I did not have a vocabulary or theoretical framework to articulate my direct encounters with what I now understand as the actor’s presence.
Though I have formulated what I hope to be a clear approach to understanding presence, this essay is not a guide for how one can produce it on stage. Stanislavsky writes of his System, “[It] is not a cookery book” (612), and the same applies to my study. Furthermore, I am aware of my subjectivity, particularly given my deep and personal investment in this topic and limited theatrical experience. Interpreting performance always involves ascribing importance to things with no inherent value, of selecting specific elements as more significant than others based on one’s personal vantage point. Cultural context plays a big part in this process. For example, scholar, director, and acting teacher Philip Zarrilli suggests that Eugenio Barba’s reasons for researching presence were tinged with cultural insensitivity from the start. Zarrilli quotes Barba: “My research into this area began because of my interest in Oriental theatre. I couldn’t understand how Oriental actors, even during a cold, technical demonstration, always retain a very striking quality of presence which inevitably captures one’s attention” (qtd. in “For Whom is the Invisible Not Visible” 101). Zarrilli criticizes Barba for identifying this “quality of presence” as exceptional. Zarrilli argues,

Barba’s primary concern has been the performer’s “presence” or “energy,” what he often calls the “invisible” as opposed to the “visible” dimension of performance…[Yet] What Barba calls invisible may be “invisible” only in the sense that the “energy” it refers to is simply an assumption of practice—a commonplace, what one does.

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I began my investigation because I wished to understand what makes some actors more compelling to watch than others. This curiosity arose almost exclusively within an American theatrical context, and I have been exposed to performers from other cultures only on rare occasions. As such, I have restricted my study to influential figures in Western performance. I believe the components of acting I have identified as contributing to presence are rare and worthy of special recognition for theater audiences and practitioners in this context. I am aware that there may be schools of theatre where these components are, as Zarrilli states, merely “commonplace, what one does.”

I see my study on presence as first of all useful for actors—here I include myself—as they approach their creative works, allowing them to direct their artistic choices with a deeper understanding of how these may affect an audience’s reception of the theatrical event. For example, my increased awareness of presence and the body means that I can more intelligently sculpt the formal physical elements of a performance: I can choose more wisely when to foreground my phenomenal body and when to deemphasize it, and layer the “twin logics” of my phenomenal and semiotic bodies in a more compelling way. This essay serves as the written component of my Honors Thesis in theater, a complement to my performance in *The Tragedy of Richard III*, directed by David Jaffe in December 2010, at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Arts Theater. In the performance, I explored the layering of real and fictional logics as one of two actors who played title role of Richard. For the performance, Emma Sherr-Ziarko and I portrayed Richard simultaneously, inhabiting the same space, exchanging lines, and interacting with each other.¹⁰ Though we
presented two distinct bodies, Sherr-Ziarko and I represented a single character, and
the other characters in the play treated us as an individual. Our decision to have two
actors embody a single character caused the relationship between our phenomenal
and semiotic bodies to be highlighted in an unusual way, and we explored this
relationship in our staging choices. For example, Sherr-Ziarko and I delivered
soliloquies not as moments of solitary introspection, but as Richard’s active dialogues
with himself. In Richard’s nightmare speech in Act V, Scene V, Sherr-Ziarko and I
fractured and shared the text to present it as a confused inner monologue. While
presenting a single character, we dialogued with each other, interrupting, speaking
over, and repeating each other’s lines in order to evoke Richard’s broken mental state.
In scenes with other characters, Sherr-Ziarko and I used our two phenomenal bodies
to intellectually comment on the fictional events, evoke Richard’s psychological
subtext, and/or assist with his manipulative tactics. In Act I, Scene II, Richard
threatens to kill himself in a violent demonstration of love for Lady Anne. At this
moment, rather than having Sherr-Ziarko or me threaten to commit suicide, she held a
dagger to my neck as I struggled to escape. Such moments purposefully brought our
phenomenal co-presence to the fore to heighten the fictional situation in a manner that
seems not so different from how Decroux’s stylized physical vocabulary heightens
expressiveness. I do not mean to imply that Sherr-Ziarko and I necessarily generated
heightened presence, only that our awareness of the parallel realities—or twin
logics—of our semiotic and phenomenal beings was central to our aesthetic choices.

My investigation of heightened presence has not only transformed how I think
about particular theatrical encounters; it also has influenced my views on theatre in
general. Most notably, this study has demystified the concept of talent for me. I do not believe that some actors are “holy,” as Cieslak is called, nor that an actor who performs with heightened presence does so because she possesses some innate quality. Stanislavsky writes, “It is said that talented people don’t need a system, that they create unconsciously. That is what most, almost all people say. But strangely enough, highly talented people do not, geniuses do not” (xxvi). My study of presence has brought me to a similar conclusion: though it would be easy to assume that presence arises from unconscious genius, this understanding bears little relation to reality. Presence arises in most cases as a result of extensive and rigorous technical training and devotion. Presence is not magic: it can be grasped rationally and approached practically, yet this fact does not diminish its power. Fischer-Lichte has a comment on this point that I particularly like:

[Neither] emergent phenomena nor the invisible forces at work in humans and nature count as magical forces. In fact, they can be explained rationally and still remain elusive…Humans are ultimately incapable of controlling the “invisible forces” that shape the world. Even if they aspire to govern and define these powers, they will always also have to let themselves be governed and defined by them.

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Performances in which actors display heightened presence may be calculated, but they remain elusive. Presence does not stem from innate magical powers, but it does have a powerful and magical effect on those who encounter it.
That said, the power of an actor’s presence does not always create a pleasant theatrical experience for spectators. Gertrude Eysoldt’s performance of Electra stands as a striking example of how an actor’s ability to merge reality and fiction onstage can lead to a discomforting or even traumatic encounter between actor and spectator. While accounts of the production testify that Eysoldt commanded the stage with great presence, many spectators were appalled by her rendition of the title role. Others took aesthetic exception, as they found her acting to ruin her representation of the character. Heightened presence can transform the mundane or ugly into a beautiful and compelling experience, but it can also destabilize our worldviews as it renders beautiful ideas, characters, and emotions repulsive or shocking.

Rather than detracting from my views of presence, I find this destabilizing potential extremely valuable, and I admire the actor’s heightened presence for what it gives to spectators. Pleasant or unpleasant, presence invites unforeseen and exceptional experiences—it surprises us. If there is a common thread among the encounters I describe above, it is that I left each performance with an unexpected and expanded sense of possibility and respect. I felt both revivified and stunned, enlightened and mystified. Fittingly, my process of investigating the elements surrounding the actor’s heightened presence for this essay, as well as my work on the creative component of the thesis, has left me with a similar feeling of energizing and hopeful ambivalence. By understanding more thoroughly the inner workings of the actor’s presence, I now stand more in awe of it. I hope that those who read this might feel similarly, and that this essay can lead to more encounters like the ones that proved so transformative for me.
Appendix

Fig. 1. Ryszard Cieslak in *The Constant Prince*. (1965) in *Towards a Poor Theatre*.
Jerzy Grotowski. 114.
Figure 2. Etienne Decroux in Sport. (c. 1948) in The Decroux Sourcebook. Thomas Leabhart and Franc Chamberlain, eds. 38. Photograph by Etienne Bertrand Weill.
Figure 3. Kate Valk and Scott Shepherd in *The Emperor Jones.* (1992) in “Kate Valk.” David Salle and Sarah French. Photograph by Paula Court.
Figure 4. Emma Sherr-Ziarko and Ben Vigus as Richard of Gloucester in *The Tragedy of Richard III*, directed by David B. Jaffe. Produced by the Wesleyan University Theater Department (2010). Photograph by Andy Ribner.
Notes

1. “Stanislavksy” and “Stanislavski” are both accepted transliterations of the Russian name.

2. For more information on extra-daily techniques as they contribute to scenic bios and stage presence, see Barba and Nicola Savarese’s *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. The work is an unparalleled examination of the actor’s work across cultures and an essential reading for anyone interested in a more specific analysis of physical techniques than I am able to provide.

3. Grotowski’s idiosyncratic understanding of spirituality in his work is important to note. He writes, “I speak about ‘holiness’ as an unbeliever. I mean a ‘secular holiness’” (34). His work was often criticized for seeming cult-like, a criticism he rejected.

4. Willem Dafoe, Valk’s original co-star in the production, noted that his approach to character creation in Wooster Group pieces did not depend on “transformation,” but on enacting the precise tasks of the role. Discussing his performance as John Proctor in the Wooster Group’s *LSD (… Just the High Points…)*, Dafoe remarked, “‘John Proctor’ means nothing to me. There’s no real pretending, there’s no transformation…The way I get off in the performances is when I hit those moments of real pleasure and real clarity and an understanding about myself in relationship to the structure” (qtd. in Auslander 308).

5. For an in-depth account of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold’s professional relationship, please see Robert Leach’s *Stanislavksy and Meyerhold*. 
6. *An Actor’s Work* is written as the fictional diary of a young acting student named Konstantin (Kostya) Naznavov. Two teachers are characters in the book: Ivan Rakhmanov and Arkady Tortsov. In his introduction, Benedetti notes that, in the book, “Stanislavski becomes Tortsov, which derives from the word for creator” (xxi). In Benedetti’s translation, inner and outer creative states are sometimes also written as “internal creative state” and “external creative state.”

7. This practice bears striking resemblance to Meyerhold’s biomechanical *études*, silent movement exercises designed to provoke the actor’s “excitation.”

8. Grotowski professed that his research was a continuation of Stanislavsky’s work on physical action: “I was brought up on Stanislavski; his persistent study, his systematic renewal of the methods of observation, and his dialectical relationship to his own earlier work make him my personal ideal. Stanislavski asked the key methodological questions. Our solutions, however, differ widely from his—sometimes we reach opposite conclusions” (16).

9. Carnicke translates the Russian term *perezhivanie* as “experiencing.” The term has been the subject of much disagreement over the years. For more on the precise meaning of *perezhivanie* please see: “Stanislavsky’s Lost Term,” chapter five in Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus*; and Benedetti’s introduction to *An Actor’s Work*.

10. Sherr-Ziarko’s performance of the title character in *Richard III* fulfilled the creative component of her Honors Thesis in Theater at Wesleyan University.
Works Cited


Stanislavski, Konstantin and Jean Benedetti. *An Actor’s Work: A Student’s Diary.*


