

[Back to previous page](#)



document 1 of 1

Authentic movement: the embodied experience of the text

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Abstract

The Mover is in the company of the Witness who remains stationary and observes the Mover. The Witness is "not 'looking at' the person moving, (but) listening - bringing a specific quality of attention or presence to - the experience of the Mover" (Adler 20). The Witness also engages a conscious awareness of self which attends to the way the Witness is affected by the Mover. The Witness avoids (or, at least, tries to acknowledge consciously) all forms of interpretation and evaluation of, or any projection onto the Mover. This is followed by verbal exchange in which both Mover and Witness share their experience. The roles thus shift to become Speaker and Witness / Listener as each takes a turn at speaking.

My continued work, explorations and study led me to discern the usefulness and relevance of Authentic Movement to the actor's art. I also became convinced that the process can, without betraying its basic principles, include not only vocalization, but work with actual memorized text. I came to understand that we can be "spoken" by the text just as we can be "moved" by kinaesthetic impulses. We can be guided by the words themselves: their inherent meaning, sound, rhythm, texture, taste, fabric. The more we are open to be guided by the sense aspects of the text, the more we immerse ourselves, receptively submitting to its innate demand, the more we do it justice. [Roland Barthes] speaks of the "erotic body" of the text and cites an Arab scholarly expression for text that translates as "the certain body" (Barthes 17). Jungian psychologist James Hillman refers to his colleague, Henry Corbin, saying that "he spoke from within his speech, he was his words" (Hillman 5).

After a period of learning and practising Authentic Movement, I suggest that the actor bring text into the process. The Mover / Speaker allows the words to come into speaking form through the sensory / kinaesthetic impulse. The text, then, emerges "unearthed" from the actor's body, extending into sound and space, just as physical impulse extends into time and space through movement. If the text is not fully memorized, a second Witness / Prompter may sensitively feed lines which the Mover / Speaker takes on at his liberty and discretion. We have found that lines mechanically memorized, but not fully assimilated by the actor, tend to disappear in Authentic Movement. Sometimes in these gaps important discoveries are made about the block that prevents the actor from making the words his own.

Full Text

The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas - for my body does not have the same ideas I do. Roland Barthes

Background Reflections(f.1)

A few years ago I was watching a live theatre performance with a friend. He is, I think, an average theatre-goer: intelligent, educated, enjoys theatre, but with no professional interest or expertise. He was not impressed. He commented, however, that he found one actor exceptional. "When he was on stage, everything changed, even the other actors." I questioned him about what it was about this actor that made a difference, and he finally said: "He was so in his body. I could see everything he said." I asked him to repeat his comment. No, it was not a slip of the tongue or a sudden onset of synaesthesia. Hardly - he meant exactly what he said.

Everyday language gives us clues about how we live in embodied space. We often say such phrases as: I see what you mean; what she said made sense to me; or, this sounds sensible. We keep someone "at arm's length". We "stick our neck out". We "bend over backwards" to please someone. We "embrace" an idea.

As a movement teacher and coach to professional actors and actors in training, I have been dissatisfied for a long time with the divisions drawn between those practices we call movement, voice, speech, acting. I have observed professional actors warming up while seemingly unaware and unaffected by the world around them: stretching, turning, twisting, in silence. Then I watched in disbelief how suddenly they would stop moving, launch into vocalizations, body disengaged, eyes gazing ahead or out a window, looking at nothing in particular. I have watched acting students vibrant, posture erect and in a state of readiness, flowing in motion with dilated and energetic body, filling the space with masterful and unique creative inventions of action. Half an hour later, in a voice or a text class, I would observe the same people standing still, reciting a piece of text, posture collapsed or tightly pulled together, energy held and static, gestures idiosyncratic, stiff, deliberate, awkward.

During the last four years, working as a movement coach at the National Voice Intensive at Simon Fraser University and the Advanced Actors' Workshop at the Banff Centre for the Arts, I have had the opportunity to explore ways in which the divisions can be eliminated or, at least, reduced.(f.2) Working with the process of Authentic Movement, I have been able to witness how words can flow effortlessly, simply and directly from a kind of rootedness in the body: speaking from the recalled experience rather than about it. I saw how the speaker can literally "make sense" for the listener when what is spoken is actively engaged in the sensory / kinaesthetic memory of the experience.

Authentic Movement has developed from the explorations and discoveries of the late Mary Starks Whitehouse in the 1950s. She was a dancer and teacher of dancers. She was trained in the techniques of Mary Wigman and Martha Graham. She also studied and immersed herself in Jungian depth psychology. "Movement - in - Depth" and "being moved" (as opposed to making movement) were the terms she used. Her legacy and the subsequent work of her

followers have had a major influence on many artists, teachers and therapists during the last two decades. Today Authentic Movement is embraced by performing artists, in particular, dancers and choreographers, as an important discipline through which it becomes possible to gain access to the core of one's unique and deeply personal creative resources. Authentic Movement is also seen as having the potential to inform and nourish performance as well as aid in the discriminating view of one's work.

Of the process of the artist Whitehouse said:

An artist's stature, his originality and his uniqueness, depends on his capacity to experience his world. This world has two faces: the outer one, full of objects and events; and the inner one, potentially just as rich, but far less known to most people ... The inner world of the body comes alive in two ways - sensation and feeling. Sensation has to do with the exact feel of body condition and functioning; feeling has to do with the exact sensing of the expressive component, the emotional overtone. If these two are connected through outer imitation, learned technique, and stereotyped meaning, the imagination which provides and forms material has no depth.(f.3)

Whitehouse claimed that true depth of any art form can only be reached if the experience of organic "movement sensation" and "feeling meaning" constitute the raw material for the artist, so that the work is discovered in the body and "not preconceived in the head". (A well-known potter friend of mine used to say that he shaped the pots with his body from inside the pot, even though it looked like he was working with his hands only.)

Director Peter Brook's description of the "flowing static" and the particular quality of attention required for "true acting manifestations" directly parallels Whitehouse's insights. Brook speaks of the meeting of two subjectivities: that of the actor, and the other which is the invention of the author. The actor, Brook reminds us, is not an "empty shell". The artist's own personal subjectivity cannot simply disappear to accommodate that of the character's. If the two subjectivities simply superimpose one on the other or are aligned in merely technically or cerebrally conceived ways, you have a "constant blurring and interference" between the two, as when two different photographic negatives are superimposed. For a harmonious blending of the two, a new and more refined subjectivity is required by the actor. It is this new and transparent subjectivity immersing itself openly in what Brook calls "non - image and non - time" out of which "true acting manifestations" are born. If the body is clear of rigid idiosyncrasies and is responsive to authentic impulses, the actor's attention and imagination opens up "not clogged by imagery, not clogged by forms", and "something in his deeper nature, without forms, begins to free itself inside this new structure" (Brook 105).

Authentic Movement - How We Work

Authentic Movement works as a process of immersing oneself in this realm of "non - image and non - time" without interference from preconceived imagery, technique or interpretation. Authentic sensory impulse and kinaesthetic messages become the reality out of which "feeling meaning" arises. A clean and fresh subjective consciousness is watched over, but not shaped, by conscious awareness. There is a conscious and shared witnessing by another person. But there is also the inner witness, what Yuasa Yasuo refers to as "bright" reflective consciousness (Yasuo 62), descending into a deeper layer of the self, where a pure experience of the "lived body" opens to perception. On return to ordinary consciousness the artist is able to recall and articulate the journey.

The form itself of Authentic Movement is elegantly and deceptively simple. There are always two participant roles: that of the Mover and that of the Witness. According to the need and development of the work and the group or ensemble, there can be one Mover and one Witness, several Movers and one Witness or vice - versa, and so on.

The Mover begins with eyes closed "in order to facilitate a deeper listening to (the) kinaesthetic reality" (Adler 20). The task of the Mover is to receptively follow the pathway of sensory / kinaesthetic impulses. These sometimes lead to large expansive movements but, just as often, they may be so subtle as to be externally invisible. Conscious awareness (the inner Witness) acknowledges and tracks the experience without attempting to lead into any predetermined direction (Brook's "flowing static"). The person in the midst of this "flow experience" is "both keenly aware of his or her actions and oblivious to that awareness itself" (Dreyfuss 66).

The Mover is in the company of the Witness who remains stationary and observes the Mover. The Witness is "not 'looking at' the person moving, (but) listening - bringing a specific quality of attention or presence to - the experience of the Mover" (Adler 20). The Witness also engages a conscious awareness of self which attends to the way the Witness is affected by the Mover. The Witness avoids (or, at least, tries to acknowledge consciously) all forms of interpretation and evaluation of, or any projection onto the Mover. This is followed by verbal exchange in which both Mover and Witness share their experience. The roles thus shift to become Speaker and Witness / Listener as each takes a turn at speaking.

Working with Text

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Scene work adds another layer of complexity and variety. For example Mover / Speaker and Witness / Listener roles alternate according to script. The actors make momentary eye contact as they reverse their mode of action. As one is affected through witnessing prior to switching to Mover / Speaker mode, there is the potential of deep connectedness and continuity with what went before. Sometimes we discover that the words really come from a witnessing mode and call for a Mover / Listener - Witness / Speaker relationship. Such discoveries in themselves can provide new and relevant information. The important thing is to remain guided by the text itself.

The work we do in this way never becomes an exercise (a word I think should be forever banished from the actor's vocabulary). What we do is a practice: a conscious and receptive merging between two creative processes. On the one hand we are in the Authentic Movement mode in the receptive lived body experience, on the other we are responding to the call and life of the text.

A Word of Caution

Authentic Movement is not offered here as a panacea to be applied indiscriminately to all textual explorations. Neither is it suggested as a technique or gimmick to be used casually or sporadically without proper and respectful preparation and understanding. The creative unconscious is not a place for excavation or scavenging for useful material.

The application of Authentic Movement practice must be decided through thoughtful examination of its appropriateness for the work at hand and the availability of time and space for a complete experience of its practice. A coach or a director must be trained and experienced in the practice of Authentic Movement itself in order to provide guidance and make informed adaptations according to the demands of the work, while remaining faithful to the discipline's basic requirements. Authentic Movement applied to the artistic and performing process must not be confused with therapy, nor must it be allowed to deteriorate into mere physical or emotional release.

It must be remembered that Authentic Movement is a precise and exacting discipline by itself. It requires study, training, an understanding of both theory and practice and an uncompromising willingness to access genuine depth. It demands a delicate, gentle and profoundly rooted attitude of respect and awe towards the entire human organism, creativity and spirit.

Relevance to the Actor's Art - A Credo

Approached with care, reverence and appropriate preparation, Authentic Movement can be a rich and fertile ground for the actor's art both in training and rehearsal. Authentic Movement trains for availability to the deep, unexpected and perhaps otherwise undiscovered unique creative impulses. It requires transparency to what is given from the outside: the fellow performer, the text, and the space for example. Reception is not selective. Everything matters and offers up fresh meaning as it occurs. The other actor is not listening or reacting. He is affected and moved to action and speech through the total engagement of his organism.

Authentic Movement trains and develops the functioning of a non-interfering conscious awareness which observes, acknowledges and remembers previously unconscious material without prematurely shaping it into finalized form. Through the merging and mutually superimposing of consciously and unconsciously motivated experience, Authentic Movement informs the deliberate shaping into performance with a more precise kind of circumspection: a checking up on one's faithfulness to what has been uncovered from the depth. Not by turning back for that, as the Orpheus myth teaches, would be fatal, but through trusting that, if we remain tuned in every cell, the re-found Muse of our own unlimited creative self is following closely behind as we emerge into the daylight from the journey into the mysterious darker realms where we must go to find her.

Descent completed and the threshold reached, one's gaze must remain with the world looking for the form to reveal and make apparent to others what we have found. The journey is only completed through the telling: the playing of the music, the singing of the song, the speaking of the poem. The telling must find its way through the artist's whole being. If our presence vibrates from the depth of our total organism, we are able to call on the witnessing spirit of those who have come to listen. It is still this organic, sensory and erotic connection between the actor and audience that we long for, what live theatre was meant to be from its earliest origins: the catharsis and compassionate identification brought about by witnessing authentically lived experience spoken through lusty and embodied language.

For when the traveller returns from the mountain slopes into the valley, he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue gentian. Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit - tree window - at most: column, tower.....But to say them, you must understand, oh to say them more intensely than the things themselves ever dreamed of existing.

Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland. Speak and bear witness. More than ever the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.

Between the hammers our heart endures, just as the tongue does between the teeth and, despite that, still is able to praise.

Rilke: Ninth Elegy

It has often been argued that acting cannot be taught, and what we call "talent" eludes definition and analysis. It is, perhaps, possible to come to a consensus (a sensibility together) about certain pathways and doors through which the artist can access his deep intuitive uniqueness and gain a more unobstructed view of the vistas of his talent. The humbling yet most rewarding labour of coaches and teachers is to point towards these paths and become the guide and container through which support and safety is provided for the searching artist.

To blossom and grow, remaining truthful to the inherent form - both external and internal - authentic and unconditionally accepted experience must precede, but never replace, the application of aesthetic principles and the final shaping of performance.

Or what's a Heaven for?"

Robert Browning: Andrea del Sarto

Footnotes

(f.1) Authentic Movement has been originated and disseminated through writing and practice mostly by women. As an invitation and offer of inclusion to our male colleagues I have chosen to use the pronoun "he" when other formulations that include both genders seemed to break the flow of the text.

(f.2) I am indebted for support, feedback and assistance to David Smukler of the Graduate Theatre Programme at York University, Andrew Wade of The Royal Shakespeare Company of England, Patricia Hamilton and Jane Heyman. I have also benefited greatly from the generous feedback I have received from the actors participating in these programs as well as my colleagues and teaching assistants at the National Voice Intensive.

(f.3) Statement by Mary Whitehouse at the Developmental Conference on Dance at the University of California, Los Angeles. Reported in *Impulse*, 18, 1 (1968).

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