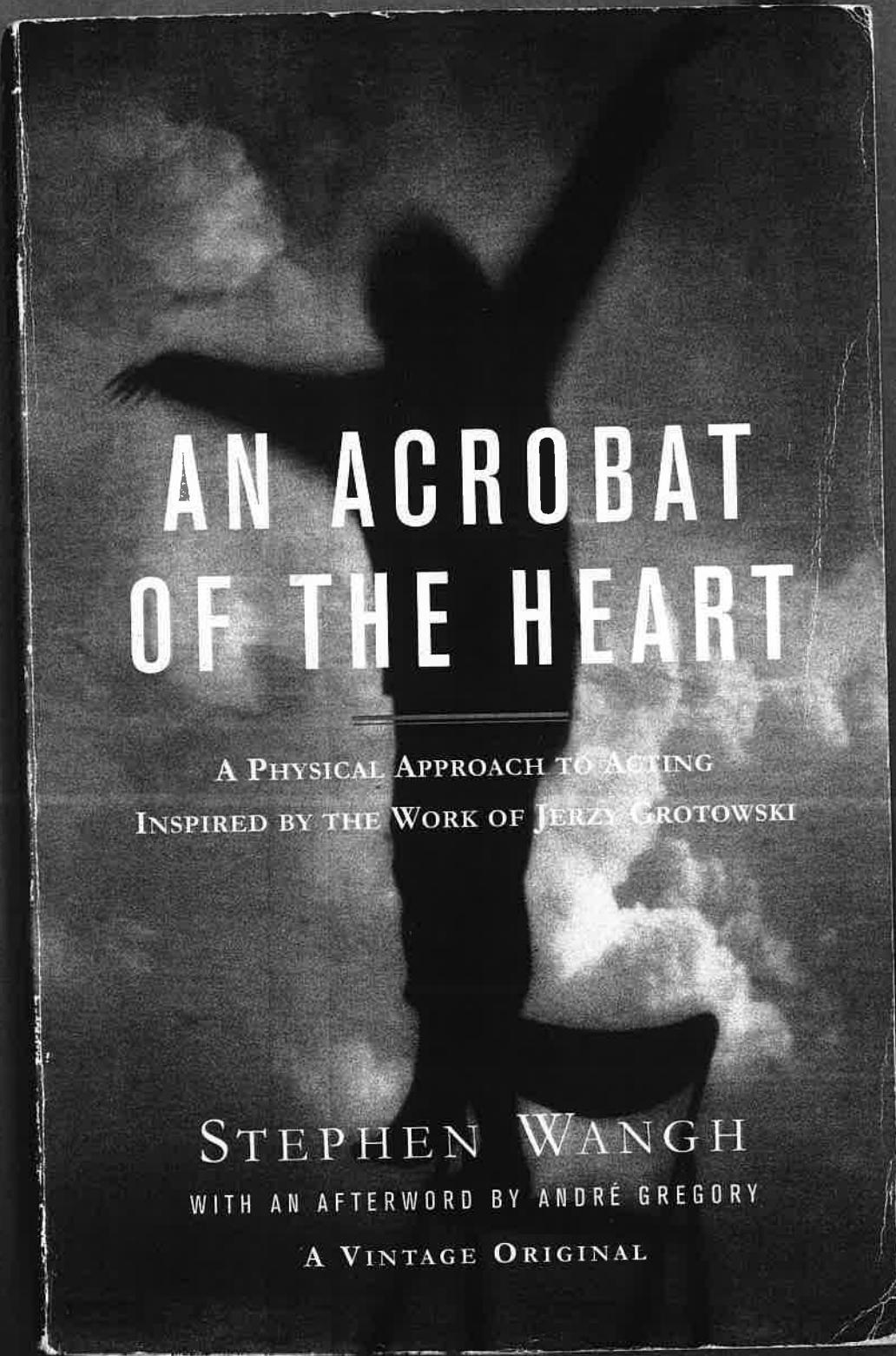




AN ACROBAT OF THE HEART

A PHYSICAL APPROACH TO ACTING
INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF JERZY GROTOWSKI

STEPHEN WANGH

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY ANDRÉ GREGORY

A VINTAGE ORIGINAL

you: yoga or a breath meditation, or even just standing still or sitting quietly with your eyes closed while you sense how you feel.”

“I don’t understand,” Sandra protests. “I thought you said I shouldn’t try to bring my thoughts back from the window.”

“No, I think concentration is important, too. But sometimes the effort of trying to concentrate can exacerbate our fear that things like a strong desire to look at the blue sky are somehow mistakes or distractions from the work. What I am suggesting is that there is also another way to achieve center: by treating those distractions themselves as sources of energy.

“Over the years, many of us have been taught that certain things are clearly *not* part of our work: things like our opinion of other students or of the teacher, and things like what we would like to eat for lunch, or how we feel about whatever happened last night. In fact, an enormous amount of our energy is locked up in the thoughts we have labeled ‘not part of the work.’ What I am proposing here is a process by which you can liberate some of that energy. It is not that you should never do yoga or concentration exercises that bring your mind to your body. It is just that there is also an opposite way to build the connection between your body and your mind—by bringing your body to your mind, noticing what is actually happening in your mind and finding a physical form that can *embody* that energy.

“Using this process you may find three things changing:

- One is what we have just been talking about: that those things that were formerly distractions from your work are no longer so distracting because the distractions are being reprocessed into work energy.
- The second change you may notice is what Brian discovered: that your general mood and energy problems like feeling depressed or tired may start to crack open and reveal the variety that exists within them, that even something like general gloom contains the seeds of sadness and anger and laughter.

- And the third thing that you may find is that after bringing the body to the mind for a while, you have a much easier time concentrating when you go back to it.”

“I don’t get that,” says Carlos, clearly hoping that this process will not deprive him of his yoga.

“Think of it this way: At first perhaps your body is doing slow, methodical stretches while your mind is running all over the place. But then if you allow your body to join your mind in its frenetic marathon, you compel the two parts of yourself to run alongside each other long enough for them to begin to link up. Then, if you return to your slow stretches, your body can more easily pull the mind along with it into its concentration. Ultimately, you will find that these two ways of working—bringing the body to the mind and bringing the mind to the body—slip back and forth quite effortlessly. And both of them serve the purpose of centering you.”

The Stream-of-Consciousness Warm-Up (1.2)

This is an exercise you can do alone or with a group.

1. To begin, make sure you are in a place in which you feel comfortable. If during the work you realize that you want to be somewhere else, move.
2. Now, begin any warm-up you would like to do for your body: Stretches, yoga, jogging, push-ups. It doesn’t matter what you start with as long as your body is doing something active.
3. When you have done that for a few minutes, the next step is to notice what is going on in your mind as you work. (To help you notice, you can try mumbling your stream of consciousness out loud.) Sometimes you will find that you are thinking about what your body is doing, but at other moments you may notice that you are thinking about other things: Perhaps you are noticing the space or the people around you, or perhaps you are daydreaming, or staring out the window, or judging your work. In any case, **don’t try to stop your mind from wandering.** Just continue doing your warm-up while allowing yourself to notice your mind’s activity.

4. After this double task is clear to you, do this: Every time your mind enters a new thought or feeling, purposefully change what you are doing with your body. Change it fully, to something very different from what you were just doing. The important thing is to notice the changes in the inner world, and to mark those changes by changing your outer activity.

5. The next step is to make your outward choices reflect your inner states. For instance, if your mind is racing around nervously, you might literally race around the room. If you feel angry and frustrated, you might kick or punch the air. If you are feeling lost, you might crawl into a corner. You don't have to find exactly the right thing to do; just let your body somehow reflect the mind's activity. But be sure that each time a new thought enters your mind, you stop what you are doing and do something entirely new, something that allows your whole body to reflect the new emotion or mental activity.

6. Continue to work this way until the process of noticing and changing is clear to you, at least six or seven minutes.

7. Now stop and take a minute with your eyes closed to let yourself reflect on what you have gone through, and on how you feel now. Remember what happened. How do the condition of your body and of your mind now compare with their condition before you started this warm-up? How do they compare with how they feel after your usual warm-up?

A BALANCING ACT

An actor is never unconcentrated. He's just concentrating on something that he doesn't think he should be concentrating on.

—Michael Kahn, in Mekler,

The New Generation of Acting Teachers

There are two ways to keep a broomstick upright and stationary as you balance it in your hand. The first is to grip the broomstick tightly and keep it from tilting with the strength of your muscles. The second is to place it on your open palm and to move your hand underneath it as the broomstick begins to fall one way or another. These two methods are physical examples of the opposite approaches to mental centeredness.

Many schools of acting teach techniques of concentration, ways of maintaining a kind of "one-pointedness" that can keep the mind calm and intent on one task even in the midst of external (or internal) chaos. Stanislavski begins *An Actor Prepares* by describing what he calls a "circle of concentration," which excludes disturbing influences (like the presence of the audience) from the actor's consciousness. Such concentration is a powerful tool, but it has two drawbacks:

1. While excluding *unwanted* stimuli (like the man coughing in the back of the audience), it can also shut out *wanted* signals (like the subtle changes in how your scene partner is smiling at you tonight).
2. Like holding the vertical broomstick stationary in your grip, this concentration requires energy.

But there is another method of centering, the one used in Zen meditation, in aikido, and by the circus juggler. In these disciplines, center is maintained not by *expending* energy to fight against distractions but by *absorbing* the energy of those distractions, and *including* that energy into the new center. In this way, each distraction is treated not as a *problem* that needs to be overcome but as a *source* of creative energy.

This is the way a circus juggler keeps a broomstick balanced on his hand: by constantly *redefining* center and moving the hand below the ever-falling stick. Of course, the expert juggler senses the tilting of the stick so quickly that he seems not to be moving at all. But his stasis is an illusion. It is a calm created out of constant motion, a seeming perpendicular created out of an endless series of falls, a concentration built out of the energies of distraction.

This is the technique the aikido practitioner uses, blending the energy of his opponent into his own. And this is the method underlying the Stream-of-Consciousness Warm-up: accepting all of our "irrelevant" thoughts and impulses as creative inspirations for our work.