

Performer Training: Researching Practice in the Theatre Laboratory

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Jonathan Pitches

Research into the processes of performer training has enjoyed an explosion of activity in recent years. This is partly due to the advent of practice as research as a methodology and the particular dimension of that activity which Robin Nelson calls 'Practitioner Knowledge' (2006: 11). This renewed interest is almost certainly caused by the growth in numbers of practitioner-researchers in higher education, a development related to the ever-shortening distance between creative industries and the academy. It may also be a manifestation of the growth of training outlets in the UK and beyond. As Murray and Keefe point out in *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (2007), in the UK venues for training and courses can now be found far beyond the nineteen accredited acting conservatoires included in the National Council of Drama Training listings. Extensive numbers of undergraduate theatre and performance programmes develop 'practitioner knowledges' in their students, experienced theatre directors not only make work but lead their own training laboratories, and there has been a connected development in what could be called the 'workshop industry': short courses led by an array of international professionals and pedagogues transmitting their training methods to a varied audience of actors, artists, academics and researchers. All these manifestations of 'training as cultural production' (Murray and Keefe 2007: 121) have added considerably to the complexity and popularity of the field. Developments in the academic journal market, particularly the introduction of the Routledge journal *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* in 2010, recent publications such as the second edition of *Actor Training* edited by Alison Hodge (2010) and

conference activity dedicated to performer training suggest the intensification in training research looks set to continue.

With this proliferation of training research comes a set of related problems, ones which haunt much of theatre and performance studies in the UK and internationally but which become particularly visible in the contemporary crucible of creativity: the theatre laboratory. Most fundamental of these are as follows. What distinguishes the everyday work of an investigative practitioner from activity that might, with some confidence and justification, be called research? What are the pitfalls and, conversely, the potentialities when researching in and around a theatre studio environment? How does one balance a state of *engagement* in 'hands on' practices with a state of *separation* from those very same practices, the second being more appropriate for reflective thinking and expression? This latter conundrum is of course central to the doubleness of the lived theatre experience, but what distinguishes research from any actor-centred training discussion is the second-level audience a practitioner-researcher is addressing: the research community or, even more generically, the disciplinary knowledge pool.

Practice as research is a widely inclusive term and performer training occupies a very specific place in this broad church, but the position of the researcher in the theatre laboratory nevertheless echoes the range of possibilities in practice-oriented enquiries. This includes the practitioner whose work is the subject of the enquiry itself and for whom knowledge can only be generated through creative practice as a research methodology, to the researcher who is looking in on the training laboratory from outside and for whom there are varying degrees of immersion combined with separation. This range of possibilities is reflected in the case studies that follow below and each raises specific methodological problems. What in effect is offered here is a series of meta-commentaries on the processes of laboratory research, written at one remove from the research itself and facilitating a set of reflections which otherwise would not have been part of the research process. The value of this approach is to compel each writer to revisit the context of their research, which by its nature is specialised, with the aim of exploring more general and transferable questions of method and methodology. These are then synthesised and rearticulated as guiding questions for performer training researchers in the conclusion. With the phenomenon of the theatre laboratory only really gaining currency after 1905 (prompted by Stanislavsky's various Theatre Studios), the case study contributors draw here on practices from the last hundred years, grounding questions of research methods in the writers' own experience of translating embodied processes and discoveries into written registers. Thus the roots of the practical work exemplified in these case studies span nearly a century of laboratory practice – from Meyerhold's biomechanics first codified in the 1920s, through Lecoq's experiments in France from the

1950s onwards, to Anna Halprin's collaborative scoring practice (RSVP) first devised in the 1960s, and concluding with a contemporary analytical window onto British studio pedagogy in the university sector: *floorplan*. This cross section allows an introductory consideration of the varying modes of transmission evident in laboratory research and spans the range of training functions: from skills-development focused on a very particular theatrical aesthetic through personal (and interpersonal) development and finally to models of interactive pedagogy.

It might be tempting to see this chronological organisation of experiences as placed along a progressive line of evolutionary development: from a practitioner-driven model of 'simple' embodied transmission, master to pupil, to a more complex, shared experience of creation in Halprin's methods and *floorplan*. In his introduction to *Performer Training* (2001) Ian Watson identifies an associated development in training terms: from early twentieth-century practitioners and their emphasis on overarching systems, to a focus, later in that century, on the 'individual actor':

Experimentalists like Grotowski and Barba [are concerned with] . . . providing means for each actor to explore his or her own creative potential . . . rather than with developing a universal training model that can be transmitted from teacher to actor. (Watson 2001: 7)

In fact, the fractures in this neat training history are evident much earlier than Eugenio Barba's Theatre Anthropology or Grotowski's search for 'secular holiness', but what is valuable here is the simple binary of *system/individual*, a lens through which we can view the following case studies in order to scrutinise questions of research methods and methodology in the training laboratory. This binary is intimately connected with another of Watson's key terms: *vertical transmission*. This term, analogous with a diachronic perspective, connotes the passage of performance skill and knowledge from one generation to another, most evident in the deep, psycho-physical training traditions of, say, Asia and the Pacific Rim, for instance Kathakali or Beijing Opera. But it begs scrutiny and extension: what might constitute *horizontal (or synchronic) transmission* in terms of performer training and would such a term, given its implication of surface learning, inevitably be a bad (or shallow) thing?

These two ideas provide a frame for the consideration of the following case studies. They resonate with a number of interconnected themes which emerge from all four case studies and form the through-line for the ensuing sections. These include: the problems of translating from one mode of communication to another, from, say, a workshop demonstration to a written document; the challenging of terms such as 'lineage' and the related issues of status, legitimacy

and authority; questions of analytical distance and how it might be best for researchers to position themselves when working in a laboratory context; and, most fundamentally, an interrogation of the ways in which knowledge is generated, owned and complicated by the researcher's own connections with the object or process under scrutiny.

If one issue is clear in the diverse interactions between practice, research, documentation, writing and reception in this chapter, it is that any claim to a singular and expert account of training methods or methodology should be treated with considerable suspicion and scepticism. What emerges from these testimonies is the strong sense that a variety of angles of critical interception – or explicitly identified research *methods* – offer a fundamentally productive approach to understanding, articulating and disseminating training practices.

(1) Researching Meyerhold and biomechanics: whose line is it anyway?

Jonathan Pitches

In 2003 Eugenio Barba published a plea to have his relations properly recognised: 'Vsevolod Meyerhold was my grandfather. It may seem bizarre . . .' (2003: 108). In so doing, he was consciously provoking questions of the theatre 'family' and of lineage which are particularly troublesome in a vertical tradition of training. To place oneself in a line of practitioners going back many years is not an unusual strategy to preserve a body of ideas, techniques and skills associated with a system of training; it is often driven by a genuine concern that they might otherwise be lost, misunderstood, diluted or misrepresented, compromising a hard-earned and long-exercised apprenticeship. But this approach to locating practices does not come without issues for the laboratory researcher. The diagrammatic equivalent of Barba's provocation is the family tree, often used in training analyses to exemplify acting traditions and to identify the key players who have contributed to keeping alive a particular tradition. In the case of Meyerhold, such a tree might more accurately include Nikolai Kustov, Alexei Levinsky and the students of ARTO in Moscow rather than Barba, for Kustov was Meyerhold's colleague who trained Levinsky in the 1970s who, in turn, is leading his own laboratory today. Examples of training inheritances like these raise several important points in relation to theatre laboratory research and specifically to the experience of *translating* the practical and pedagogical experiences into writing. These questions can be usefully addressed under the headings Transmission, Ownership and Documentation, which will form the focus of this section.

Transmission

What is at work in the passing on of bodily practices is a process of transmission, in this case the physical storyline of how biomechanics was passed on from its original context in Soviet Moscow in the 1930s to the early twenty-first century. Barba's urge to construct a simplified genealogy is indicative of a desire in many trainers, within and beyond the Russian tradition, to identify clean lines of inheritance. But what about the other players in Barba's lineage? And how are the alternative lineages constructed? A place in a training lineage is, of course, always *contingent*, dependent on historical context, and recognition of that contingency is the first imperative of research in any embodied practice. How does one navigate through this complexity, complicated further by one's own place in it? One step is to recognise that reflective and experiential modes of thinking are both part of a practitioner-researcher's critical armoury; managing this duality in methodical terms needs an element of strategic research *design*.

For historiographers, suspicion of the past (and its various tellings) is a given, but for participant-researchers in the laboratory it is often easy to forget the need for critical distancing. Indeed, it might be important actually to *suspend* one's doubts so that the work can be entered into in an open and accepting way, only later to examine the assumptions inscribed in the practice. Paul Allain has articulated this demand for dextrous negotiation of the practitioner's standpoint:

We need to be able to train with conviction and practise without inhibiting analysis, so that when we emerge the other side, when we stand back and judge we can speak with embodied insights. Reflection can rarely be done within the flow of the work, because it is always enough just to do. We need to allow ourselves to be immersed, and yet also to know when and how to reflect. This duality is still the central challenge for those documenting performance processes. (Allain 2006: 24)

To address this challenge in practice here are some suggestions, based on the assumption that you, the researcher, are also participating in the practice. Firstly, manage carefully your interaction with secondary sources: reading Michael Chekhov's statements on the Psychological Gesture, for example, or Anne Bogart's on Viewpoints, before or after their introduction in a studio space, will clearly affect the manner in which the ideas are processed. Secondly, decide how (and if) to punctuate practical work with periods of writing: does the practice merit constant small written interventions or a longer period of more sustained written response, for instance?

Thirdly, distinguish between *formative* writing (to help understand the work), *documentary* writing (to record the work), *reflective* writing (to allow space for personal evaluation) and *critical* writing (to draw on ideas from a wider context). Fourthly, decide how best to gauge when these different modes of writing may be adopted. Fifthly, build in discussion points with other participants, if appropriate, for benchmarking your own experiences against those of others. Finally, pay attention to the overarching *design* of these reflective moments and allow for flexibility and responsiveness in its execution.

Ownership

Laying aside questions of intellectual property and copyright, a more interesting question, in this particular context, is the way one might define the ownership of *embodied* creative processes and how far this overriding process of definition might be seen as a transmission of principles from the leader to the participant(s). Central to this is the problematic nature of bodily practice: where does intuition, knowledge and understanding reside? At what point are participants able to take on the principles of the work and adapt them to their own needs? And 'adaptation', here, may not necessarily mean significant changes to the specific practice. It might simply be the absorption of knowledge into a different bodily frame.

The construction of practical exercises and the explication of these in writing pushes this process of adaptation much further: beyond what is implicit in the leader-participant relationship and into the still more complicated area of mixed-mode documentation. It is one thing to 'record' the translation of knowledges from one practitioner to similar corporeal media, quite another to assume that writing alone can support this translation and sufficiently communicate it to others.

An example will illustrate my point here. In Meyerhold's biomechanics, a significant part of the training relates to the practising of 'études'. These short physical studies are intensified dramas, refined and condensed into minute-long, repeatable forms. Once the overall pattern of movements is memorised and the underlying compositional principles of the work are understood, the training is about pursuing this ideal form and finding a personal understanding or accommodation of the exercises within one's own physical limits. Yet these études were born out of a very specific and highly influential socio-political context: post-Revolutionary Russia. There is little to connect this context directly with Medvedev's/Putin's contemporary Russia, let alone to twenty-first-century Boston, Birmingham or Bangalore. Incumbent upon the practitioner-researcher, then, is a 'duty of care' both to the leader of the work and to the tradition they represent and of which they are part. This should

be reflected in the clarity and transparency of the documentation strategy adopted by the researcher.

Documentation

Central to the function of a theatre laboratory researcher is a need to open up questions of authenticity, legitimacy and power which are implied by the term 'tradition'. How one goes about answering those questions has a direct impact on the kinds of documentation methods to be adopted: what use might be made of historical surveys, participant interviews, or archival access, for example?

One direct way of addressing the complexity of historiographical questions when working in the laboratory is through the design of a documentation strategy, first to survey what documentation already exists of the practice under scrutiny, and second to decide *how* to record the work experienced directly. Paul Allain is right when he insists on the need to immerse oneself in the experience (2006: 24), but without a sufficient record of the events any later reflection is severely hampered. The need for a documentation *strategy* reflects the multiple kinds of documentation available to the practitioner-researcher; without some planning in relation to these, any project may quickly become mired in documentary overload. Logbooks, video documents, still photographs, eye witness accounts, reviews, interviews, all need arranging strategically to reflect the particular questions the research is asking. To exemplify, in my book *Vsevolod Meyerhold* there is a section called Reconstructions (2003: 148–50) which lists eleven 'versions' of a biomechanical étude called *Shooting the Bow* and identifies four different categories: prose descriptions, diagrams, photos and videos. The invitation in the book is to reconstruct these versions and then to compare the subtle differences produced by the various categories of documentation. Thus questions relating to the relationship of documentation *mode* to researcher *knowledge* may be brought to the fore. Such subtleties must be part of any nuanced documentation strategy.

In contexts such as this one, where multiple documentation sources exist, including those from one's immediate experience, the documents will not always 'speak' to each other in a logical way. But these inconsistencies are of important research value and will ultimately reveal more about the practices under observation than when subjected to a singular, homogenising perspective. The studio or laboratory is of such complexity that a binary or triadic modelling of sources will seldom be enough to capture the richness of the interaction. But paramount is that the dialectical tension between strategic thinking and experiential engagement is managed both with consciousness and care.

(2) Researching Lecoq and physical theatres

Simon Murray

Any writing project focusing on training invites its author to wrestle with a series of challenges. These exist at different orders of specificity. At one level there are unavoidable generic questions concerning any act of translation and communication of embodied live practices (from teaching studio or performance space) through the page into the body-minds of readers. At another – and perhaps more important – level there exist a series of complex issues as to how scrupulous practices give rise to a series of unfolding questions as knowledge(s) develop around the subject in question. The research questions to be posed of training practices are themselves contingent upon a range of shifting epistemological and cultural factors.

Particular challenges and issues arise when the writing in question contains a translation of *practical exercises* from the laboratory floor to the page, as many books dedicated to training aim to do, including, most notably given its popularity, the Routledge Performance Practitioners series (edited by Franc Chamberlain). Each book in the series has a simple template of biography, key ideas, a key production and a final chapter of illustrative practical exercises. The construction of these books raises many research questions over and above the more usual challenges in writing about training practices (as discussed in our first case study), not least those relating to one's target audience and the chosen methods of documentation. Imagining a Lecoq workshop on, say, his key concept of the neutral mask, the range of documentation possibilities (and hence strategies for dissemination) might include:

- unedited real-time video record;
- edited video record;
- written record of external observer and/or of participant observer;
- sound recording;
- edited transcripts of interviews/conversations with Lecoq and/or students;
- edited transcripts of interviews/conversations with other commentators (alumni, teachers, academics, practitioners);
- distillation of existing secondary sources.

Plus combinations of any of the above with other methods not included.

Within each of these methods of documentation are critical editorial choices/decisions (e.g. position and number of cameras, choice of interview questions, selection of material to be documented – why 'neutral mask', why not 'clown' or 'melodrama'?) which will significantly inflect the kinds of knowledges produced and received through transmission and translation.

To map out something of the landscape of these decisions I will concentrate

on two aspects of *Jacques Lecoq* (2003), my contribution to the Routledge series, which were conceptually and practically complex, and only partially resolved through the actual writing. These are identified as follows:

- proximity to the practitioner-subject and the role of tacit knowledge;
- the attention paid in the writing to issues of *context*.

Proximity to the subject and the role of tacit knowledge

Lecoq had been dead for only three years before I embarked on the book project and his school was still flourishing under the guidance of his widow Fay and a team of tutors. Furthermore, little had been written about his teaching and theorising of performer training. So the issue of proximity is both a matter of temporality and of available knowledge, or, rather, the type, status and authenticity of that knowledge. Closeness and distance, and the extent to which the subject matter is already well mined and disseminated, all have a significant bearing on the researcher's choice of enquiry methods.

The book illuminates a series of particular perspectives on the proximity issue. Lecoq's death in 1999, and an understandable sense of protectiveness for his reputation from those closest to him, produced sensitivities to the research and writing which would not have been the case for a figure who had died much earlier in the twentieth century. In a different, but crucial, sense I had another proximity problem: I was not a Lecoq 'graduate' and therefore an outsider to the community of teachers and students that was the Paris school both when Lecoq was alive and subsequently when undertaking my research. While I had no direct experience of his pedagogy, I had spent a year training in Paris (1986/7) with two ex-teachers from his school – Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux – who had moved on to run their own institution. I had also undertaken a number of courses and workshops run by Lecoq-trained theatre-makers such as Jos Houben and Simon McBurney. Thus I felt I had a significant amount of *indirect* experience of the principles and practices entailed in Lecoq's teaching, and for over twenty years had witnessed a considerable amount of theatre from artists and companies who explicitly acknowledged a debt to Lecoq. This tacit comprehension of Lecoq's teaching blended indiscernibly with knowledge acquired through scholarly academic research methods: reading, interviews, observation and immersion in archive film and video. The meeting point of what superficially felt like two relatively distinct streams of knowledge was in fact a complex engagement, and not simply a linear accretion of the facts, understandings and insights which ultimately were to be communicated through the book.

This tacit knowledge acquired through my own training, particularly with Gaulier and Pagneux, my own practice as performer, theatre-maker and

spectator of live performance which had been stimulated and framed explicitly by the 'Lecoq experience', provided an embodied mechanism through which I sifted, refined, selected and evaluated information I acquired from other commentators and through the writing of Lecoq himself. That such tacit knowledge is, by definition, difficult to articulate and quantify is largely to do with the fact that it is embodied as a series of corporeal dispositions – skills even – which influenced me in the construction of the Routledge series book. Whether this embodied knowledge of Lecoq's principles and practices provides additional 'authority' and authenticity to the account is for others to judge. However, I believe such tacit comprehension contributed to an embrace of complexity and nuance in assembling an account of Lecoq's fifty-year span as theatre teacher and intellectual. This articulation of complexity – in contrast, I hope, to complication and mystification – was intended to add a richness to the account which might otherwise have been lacking.

These points all have a significant bearing on understanding how one selects research methods for any particular project investigating performer training, and how one becomes aware of (and deals with) the implications of knowledges which are tacit and implicit, hidden but deeply *incorporated* into the process of articulating one's subject matter. The pragmatics of a research process inevitably have a major impact on choice of research methods and consequently the shape and content of the knowledges produced. If I had had first-hand experience of Lecoq's pedagogy as a student, or if I had been offered the opportunity to observe classes at the school during the research period of the project, the kind of knowledges generated – and their subsequent dissemination – might perhaps have looked significantly different. For the researcher this kind of issue may not be primarily about 'quality', but about the ethics of making transparent (to oneself and others) the circumstances that frame the choices one ultimately makes.

The articulation and importance of context in the writing of practice

How to deal with 'context' is equally critical and complex in the research into, and dissemination of, training practices. The issue of context necessarily imposes itself on a research project from the outset as one identifies research questions and speculates upon strategies for communication. In some respects it seems a similar issue to tacit (incorporated) knowledge. It exists – hidden or explicit – as knowledge is produced, translated and transmitted, just as reading the signs of theatre is always context bound and can never be otherwise. Experiencing as a participant the training 'event in itself' largely leaves preoccupation with context submerged and – necessarily perhaps – unaddressed. However, the moment that training practices are combined with the scrutiny of a scholarly research process, questions concerning context can no longer

be ignored. These questions become even sharper and more insistent when the researcher addresses decisions about which modes of communication best illustrate the research outcomes.

The extent to which context needs to be explicitly identified and unpicked in either a teaching or reading situation depends largely on the nature and purpose of the activity. If I attend a week-long master class with, for example, Eugenio Barba, Lev Dodin, Peter Brook or Philippe Gaulier, then it may be of little use *in the moment* to be told about the lineage of the pedagogy or its relationship with other contemporary training practices. Nonetheless, in terms of a writing and reading transaction, if I want to 'understand' the practices of Brook or Dodin then the breadth of the engagement might properly have to encompass information about, reflection on and analysis of historical lineage, comparison with relevant peers and the location of those within a range of similar or different embodied practices. Thus, as a reader, my understanding of, say, a technical exercise, game or rehearsal technique is only ever partial without engaging with this contextual information and analysis. Conceptually, therefore, any articulation of studio-based practice can never simply 'speak for itself' but must also be positioned and framed both historically and synchronically.

At times context will appear as an all-prevailing frame for the practice which is being taught or read about, a tight circumscription explaining and directing the work and its purpose. Corporeal practices are often understood, communicated and apparently experienced as 'context free' but, notwithstanding the species-specific mechanics of movement, the texture and grain of our physicality is conditioned through our 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1986) and 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1979). However, as the lens of cultural materialism insists (Wallis 2005), it is perhaps when context seems least explicit that its force is most pervasive. Nothing between reader and writer or teacher and student can be free of the mediations and framings of the circumstances which surround it. The range of possibilities for such interventions in any account of performer training might include the following:

- where an exploration of context is the explicit purpose of the engagement;
- where the practice itself is explicitly bound to a context and purpose (e.g. various forms of applied theatre work);
- where the practice seems to have a precision of focus/purpose which is tightly circumscribed (e.g. learning a particular dance technique, or the rhythms of delivering Shakespearean text);
- where the practice itself articulates its purpose as 'preparation', an opening up process that may be applied to a range of sites, forms and possibilities;
- where the practice is explicitly part of the compositional process and a means of generating material; in this sense the context of the ultimate goal

of production or performance will frame and shape the experience of the activity.

This ever-demanding issue of context became particularly evident to me when faced with the challenge of writing a chapter of practical exercises which was supposed somehow to articulate and capture the spirit of Lecoq's teaching. With the expectation that the series would be used by readers in a practical and somatic way, and not read simply for the delight of contemplation and reflection, concerns about an extreme form of decontextualisation presented themselves. There was also an anxiety concerning the almost complete lack of control a writer has over the conditions in which these exercises might be taught: the complex process and act of translation from the teaching of a particular principle (the dynamics of pushing or pulling, for example) by Lecoq himself in his Paris laboratory through the pages of a book and into the body/mind of a theatre teacher, probably in a radically different time and space.

As we have seen, this raises wider questions about research methods and methodologies: methodological questions around the status of authorship and control, about epistemology, about reading and about methods of dissemination, as well as questions of method which, particularly, might circle around the forms of representation to be selected for the investigation. These issues invite the scholar-practitioner-researcher to consider the ethics and legitimacy of the 'ownership' of established creative processes, and – depending on one's perspective on this issue – how one then handles the subsequent articulation of the practice in question through dissemination. So researching training practices necessitates quite complex engagements with a number of different constituencies: tutor and student, researcher and intended recipients of the dissemination, the concrete nature of the practices being learned, and the historical and cultural contexts which enshrine them.

(3) Collaborative writing: wrestling the slippery fish

Helen Poynor and Libby Worth

a conversation . . .

Writing or speaking about creative practice inevitably involves a process of recollection, whether this happens alone or with others, immediately or at a later date. Recollection is by its nature a fragile and partial reflection of the original experience.

Speaking about creative practice as a precursor to writing allows for the reflection to emerge from the voice and the body, with breath and energy and rhythm, with dips and pauses, voices that overtake each other, with ideas

that flip back and forth, reaching for something which has yet to find its form in language, which formulates itself in the creative exchange between two people. This is the pleasurable struggle of attempting collaboratively to 'draw' the processes of creative practice with words. Before words reach the paper a dance between two embodied voices takes place (writing as a choreographic process engaging time, space and bodies). This dance moves us beyond habitual language and assumptions, narrowing the gap between the living process of writing together and the way in which this is communicated. Before the logical sentences can be formed on the page a messier interaction is necessary. It is the energetic form of dialogue that engages, the flow of the conversation. What makes writing able to engage as dynamically with the reader?

about writing collaboratively . . .

For us there was little separation between the process of writing a book on Halprin (*Anna Halprin*, published in the Performance Practitioners series by Routledge, 2004) and the practice that we have both trained in with her in the early 1980s; we have been applying her approach to dance/movement in our practice and teaching ever since. In speaking we begin to unravel how we wrote together and how this reflects the way we might move together. For the period of writing, the book became our creative project and the tools from our training with Halprin informed the style of our working process as writers. Sometimes this was clearly articulated between us and the techniques were actively applied to our working method. For example, we applied the RSVP cycles, Halprin's approach to collective creativity, to the series format for the book, using it as 'score' (S) that could be 'recycled'. Collecting our 'resources' (R) according to the theme and intention of each section, we re-interpreted the original chapter 'scores' to reflect the ethos of Halprin's practice. At other times Halprin's approach was so fundamental to our way of working together that it did not need to be discussed. We took for granted the collaborative nature of the project, the way in which the baton in any given chapter could be, and was, passed between us. There was a tacit agreement that while not attempting to blend our voices there was no need to define our separate identities, to the extent that not only is the reader unable to distinguish our two different styles of writing, but we are now not always a hundred per cent sure which of us wrote a particular section.

This application of the creative process used by Halprin in her dance work to our writing was possible because her methodology is essentially collaborative and cross-disciplinary. The RSVP cycles are a creative research method for Halprin which allows her and her colleagues and students to research practically and reflect upon their movement and performance material and the relationship between form, content and intention. We would argue that in

order to write about studio practice, to reflect with integrity on that practice rather than becoming divorced from it, the writing and reflection benefits from being approached as an embodied and creative process. Applying Halprin's studio methodology to the writing process reflects this position and is consistent with the practice itself. By design the RSVP cycles offer a basic framework and instructions that leave much open to creative response. Using the RSVP cycles to develop 'scores' for writing we entered a contract, familiar for us, that determined certain parameters but not the exact content or style of writing. Equally, when writing the practical section of the series book, the scoring component of the RSVP cycles provided an integrative method to stimulate explorations of practice through the written word. Each score (S) included an intention, resources (R) and a series of task-based instructions to generate physical responses or 'performances' (P) that the reader/participant could choose to 'valuact' (V) and so enter the RSVP cycles methodology.

moving from talking to writing . . .

The process of creating our contribution to this chapter pushes the collaborative nature of our writing practice further. Writing about how we write about practice – what might that look like, or rather, what might that feel like? What does feeling have to do with writing in this more reflective, analytic form? Just as in a dance improvisation, I, or is it 'we', respond kinaesthetically and emotionally to your movement, feeling infuses our writing collaboration. How do our emotional responses to each other's writing indicate a point to be retained or a point to be lost? Rather than being conflictual this can be helpful, a strong feeling can indicate when a new perspective is being offered by the other. There is an ebb and flow that is easy, insistent, automatic, but that also rattles the pebbles, chinking them up against each other. Another's response can cause discomfort – this may indicate that a point needs resisting or that, for the benefit of the project, there is a need to open up to a new angle, a new thought, a contradiction. A feeling of excitement might reinforce the validity of an idea or reveal a section that needs expanding. Such are the unpredictable benefits of these research-writing methods.

Fundamental to Halprin's practice is the belief in the inextricable relationship between life and art; applying this to writing as a creative endeavour, rather than as an academic exercise, enables us to process the personal interactions that hinder or facilitate this practice. Our initial discussions about the contribution of this chapter included not only collecting 'resources' for the content in terms of ideas and themes, and how we might re-interpret the given 'score' to reflect more closely the nature of the process we are writing about, but also untangling the complex feelings provoked during the closing stages of the Halprin book project. This awareness of feelings is not separate from the

more tangible and recognisable dialogue about content. In this context it also constituted part of the ongoing 'valuation' (V) element of the RSVP cycles. 'Valuation' is a neologism that encapsulates the combination of reflection on/evaluation of performance (P) and the action that results from these responses. The emphasis on active response propels participants into any section of the cycle that requires fresh input, such as re-scoring or adding new resources.

Our discussion took the form of an 'embodied conversation' in which, without any forethought, hand gestures were used to describe the intensity of the collaborative relationship and a subsequent need for separation, and the possible form for our contribution for this chapter. These movements provided us with an understanding that we were not able to reach through language alone, enabling us to envisage a way of allowing our approach to writing together to become more fluid and layered rather than segmented. This use of movement to communicate ideas and feelings and to unravel a situation is central to Halprin's work. However, if the use of the body is crucial to communicating practice, how are we to write about it rather than talk about it? Is there a way of 'pressing' the written word to expand in response to the life of the embodied dialogue? The linearity of the logical sentence format necessarily constrains the more fluid experience of moving and talking. The notion of translating from one form to another is rife with difficulties, plagued by a lack of equivalences in the same way that a translation from poetry to painting might be. Nevertheless, the impossibility of direct translation does not mean that it is futile to attempt to communicate something about studio practice through language. There are inevitable pitfalls, or one might term them distractions, notably a use of language that promotes analysis of physical experience. This of course has its uses but is in no way a direct reflection of the experience itself. At the other end of the spectrum language may be used by participants writing experientially from inside a particular studio practice (or indeed as part of that practice) as Halprin encourages her workshop participants to do. This experiential writing differs from participants simply – or complexly – documenting the work undertaken in other ways than writing. The chasm between the analytical and experiential approaches provides unlimited potential for miscommunication as well as the possibility of exchange.

One of the crucial differences which we often sense when addressing the communication of practice via the written word is that between writing 'about' or writing 'from' the practice. Writing 'about' implies a degree of separation, describing the practice from the perspective of an observer, albeit an informed observer. Writing 'from' suggests the possibility of writing from inside the practice in such a way that the practice informs the process of writing as we have described it above. Of course these are never discrete, the interweaving of perspectives is a two-way multi-faceted process in which the understanding gained from analytical and contextual research can flow back into practice

and vice versa, creating a layered approach to writing. In the Halprin book we attempt to both write about the RSVP cycles and use them as our method for writing.

tussling with language

Practitioners attempt to articulate their practice in different contexts and for different purposes. Those working together clearly need to talk about what they are doing. This often leads to a kind of shorthand accessible only to those engaged in that particular practice. However, even practitioners trained in the same approach can understand the terminology and embody the practices in very different ways.

Likewise, in a discussion among practitioners from different backgrounds common terms in an apparently shared language can be misleading, as they are interpreted and applied differently in different practices. As a movement practitioner it is possible to have a conversation with another colleague which gives the impression of common ground, only to find in the studio that there is little communication and few points of contact between the embodied practices. In movement, as in language, it is of course also possible to dialogue across difference.

Practitioners respond to the elusive challenge of articulating their work through language by attempting to 'name' their practice, claiming or creating a particular terminology to indicate its specificity. There is a danger, when writing about a specific approach, of leaning too heavily on the terminology associated with it on the assumption that it is solid and immutable, then to find that it fails abysmally to reflect the vibrancy and fluidity of the practice which continues to evolve after the writing lies still on the page.

The dance between movement and the written word is challenging both kinaesthetically and conceptually. Two movement practitioners sit over a computer navigating the intermediary space between these apparently contradictory forms necessary to our lives and to our practice. For us 'embodied conversation' provides a bridge, allowing us to reflect on and develop our collaborative writing practice about dance. Below we offer some suggestions for wrestling with this slippery fish.

Resources and scores for collaborative writing about practice

This approach needs to be undertaken with the same degree of trust necessary for experimental studio practice.

- 'Embodied conversations': noting and unpicking the spontaneous gestures that accompany speaking about the work, using gestures when words fail.

- Creating large-scale visualisations for the shape of collaboration and the writing envisaged.
- Creating initial drafts/rants/charts individually, then giving them to one another to 'play with' freely.
- One person writing or typing as the other speaks.
- Typing instantly in response to another's spoken contribution.
- Reading the writing aloud to each other.
- Including apparent distractions as part of the process.
- Allowing visual images and metaphors alive in the conversation to permeate the writing.
- Including embodied language (physical terms and images) in the writing.
- Misbehaving, not censoring apparently inappropriate comments or behaviours.
- Going for walks on the beach.
- Recognising the resources generated during the collaborative writing process and creating your own list.

(4) floorplan: between knowing and doing

Jules Dorey Richmond and David Richmond

When we were asked to articulate something of the research methods and methodologies that we utilise in performer training in the studio, we were immediately struck by the term *training*, which we associated with other sorts of training, i.e. ballet or dog training. This conjured up images of well behaved, obedient, predictable, homogenised students/puppies performing 'correctly', which is not our experience or desire as pedagogues and researchers working with post/undergraduates in and on performance. We would assert that what we do is as much to do with de-training (after Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* 1973) and re-training as it has to do with training in and of itself.

floorplan is an active research tool into performance pedagogy and performance practice. Central to our methodology is a challenge to the distinction between pedagogy and research as separate/distinct modes of operation and practice. Our *floorplan* work with (student) bodies is both research methodology *and* pedagogy. It is worth bearing in mind that though we may be focusing on certain modes of activity, these remain in a state of flux and fluidity with each other, specifically: creativity, empowerment, reflection, action, analysis and activism.

As we are dealing with the contested terms and practices of training and pedagogy we should be mindful of the constantly shifting relationship between technique and epistemology, a perception that is clearly articulated by Wallis (2005). We take a fluid position within the studio space, moving between

lecturer, facilitator and co-researcher with the students, to pose and attempt to answer fundamental questions in what the students at York St John University aptly call a practical philosophy.

As our mantra is 'don't make the show do the process' we have corralled a series of performance strategies together to create *floorplan*, which is utilised once initial performance fragments have been created. We are not under any illusions that we have created anything new or indeed are operating differently from colleagues in performance departments around the country. However, what follows is an attempt to articulate a strategy which we and the students with whom we work find helpful. It involves looking at 'grams' of material and perhaps more importantly how the manipulation of these grams in relation to themselves and to other grams create a compositional 'landscape' or a visual (visceral) geography, playing out Michel de Certeau's axiom 'what the map cuts up the story cuts across' (1984: 129).

floorplan's seeds were planted back in 1993, in a three-week workshop with Tim Etchells (Forced Entertainment and writer), Marissa Zanotti (dance artist and film-maker) and Clanjamfrie, a Glasgow-based performance company, creating works in diverse contexts from 1989 to 1996 with co-artistic directors Jules Dorey Richmond and Emma Davie. The workshop began with four chairs at the back of the performance space and the notion of 'onstage' and 'offstage' (on/off). It has continued to develop through dialogues with students on Level 2 (Year 2) performance practice modules which we call *Performing the Self* and *Artist as Witness*, and with colleagues both within and beyond the academy.

Performing the Self and *Artist as Witness* evolved as part of the Performance Practice strand of the theatre programme at York St John University, UK. While the former module asks students to engage with autobiographic performance techniques, genres and processes, explicitly dealing with self as text, the latter asks them to engage in dealing with the notion of 'other'. Students thus progress from the personal (implicitly political) to the public (explicitly political). In order to facilitate this journey, in the inter-semester week between the two modules, we go on a field trip to the Second World War concentration camp museum at Auschwitz, in an attempt to understand somatically, kinaesthetically and philosophically what happened there. We take a position that Auschwitz as metaphor and as reality is the epicentre of the epistemic breach in the story of European culture (see Bauman 1989; Friedlander 1992; Young 2000; Lanzman 2007). If that is so, we must question: how do we deal with being beyond comprehension, beyond representation, beyond imagination, looking at loss and failure as key components of the times we live in? How do you make art, theatre, now? So the question 'how will we remember when all the witnesses are gone?' suddenly takes on a resonance, with each attempt to remember doomed.

It is here that structures like *floorplan* begin to offer a space/place for students to unpick the representational form of their content, so a pile of shoes is just a pile of shoes and yet metonymically . . .

floorplan

So what is *floorplan*? At a literal level it is a means of organising the studio floor space in order to provide a clear opportunity to look at disparate grams of material. *floorplan* organises grams of material in space and therefore time, and it provides an understanding of structure that can examine the relationship of these disparate 'grams' of material (as inspired by Gregory Ulmer's essay the 'Object of Post-Criticism', 1985) and their allogenic effect across time and space. It can also operate to break open denser kinds of performance material into constituent parts (utilising the compositional strategy of isolation), i.e. action, gesture, text, subtext, critique. It provides explicit opportunities to utilise various compositional strategies as well as providing a model by which one can translate the performance experience directly into the reflective experience of a catalogue document that is comprised of images, text, evidence, reflections, quotes, critique and so on. It clearly aligns what occurs on the floor with what occurs on the page and these two mediums become topographically equivalent offering the student the opportunity to understand the relationship between a blank page and a blank space and how one might creatively imagine the scoring of a theatre piece through time and space in modes other than the orthodoxy of a play. *floorplan* is fundamentally a research tool which enables all its participants to suggest strategies towards composition and identify reflexive questions about those strategies.

Instructions for use

floorplan is a game and the best way of understanding how a game works is to play it. For *floorplan* the studio floor is the gaming board and it is marked out thus:

- A delineated playing and audience space – all players start in the audience space.
- An on/off space at the back of the playing space created by placing a line of chairs facing in towards the audience.
- Discrete assigned performance areas, i.e. *box (a)* and *box (b)*, set up downstage, at either side of the playing space, where different kinds of text (autobiographical, evidence, critique) can be delivered (over microphones).
- A play area, mid-stage, where rules concerning compositional strategies

can apply: repetition, accretion, accumulation, palindrome, stochastic, insertion, scaling, substitution, dynamics, layering, as well as compositional tactics such as gagging, dragging, tagging, copying, leading, following.

- A projection area – visualiser, OHP, live feed camera, for instance – helping to generate evidence from the floor for the page, offering opportunities of live writing and live reflection.
- Some rules.

Rules of floorplan

1. The first rule of *floorplan* – there is no *floorplan*.
2. You may enter the space stage left and proceed to on/off.
3. You may go to box (a) or box (b) and speak to us – explicitly problematising the role of audience.
4. You may go to play area and utilise a gram of material and allow the preordained compositional strategies to act on it/them.
5. You may go to projection and write or draw comments.
6. If someone takes your hand you are obliged to follow.
7. If you wish to have one of the performers do a particular movement you can ask them but you will have to hold their hand while they do it.
8. We all reserve the right to clear the space (compassionately) and so start again (i.e. dragging, tagging, gagging; etc.).
9. If you wish to adjust any rules, please collude with as many as possible.
10. It is essential to collude in and with the audience.
11. ...
12. ... Ad infinitum.

A story of playing floorplan.

I have been set the task of creating an image of something I did not witness, I create an image, which has a falling action, a small hand gesture routine with 5 movements, a piece of found text (an obituary) and whistling Bridge over Troubled Water.

There are another 27 colleagues who have made fragments.

I enter floorplan and go to on/off, another player joins me; we talk and suggest that we should take our shoes and socks off, which we pile up stage right (accumulation).

I enter the play space and do the falling and hand gesture routine, I go to box (a) and whistle Bridge over Troubled Water, and go to box (b) and read the obituary (isolation).

I go to on/off, another player joins, takes off shoes and socks, there are now 3 of us, we all go up and we all do the falling routine with gestures, 3 times and sit down at on/off. A 4th player arrives takes off shoes and socks, we discuss accreting the routine, so we go in to play space and accrete the x3 routine i.e. we learn a move at a time (1, 1 + 2, 1 + 2 + 3, 1 + 2 + 3 + 4, etc).

We repeat, 5 colleagues collude and enter on/off take off shoes and socks, whistle Bridge over Troubled Water.

A colleague in the audience goes to another player in the audience and takes her by her hand to on/off, they remove shoes and socks, they then go to centre stage whilst holding hands. One sings the song the other looks at her.

So, from fragments the result through floorplan is an accumulation of shoes and socks (metonymic of the bodies that once inhabited them, and bringing to mind other un-peopled shoes), a falling and hand gesture routine, with choral whistling and a sung solo. And we haven't even seen the obituary again; of course the other 27 grams also come into play.

Why floorplan?

floorplan is essentially a 'collage'. It offers the opportunity for its participants to engage in the world actively, to try and understand the world through the creative practice of performance.

floorplan has been contrived to allow intervention in the performance material, deconstructing and recombining, appropriating and juxtaposing, offering it up to be witnessed and commented upon in the moment. The moments/grams/actions are the components that shift, changing the perspectives of the articulator/witness.

Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation. (Cited in Ulmer 1985: 88)

The process of engaging in *floorplan* is to propose a research methodology by asking the student to evidence an understanding of collage and its function in contemporary thinking. It is a process which refers to Derrida's notion of grammatology, as explicated by Ulmer (1985), and more specifically to the gram and its function as a contaminant from its original site to its present one: how do these different times and spaces also offer a resonance? As Derrida writes:

Each grafted text continues to radiate back towards the site of its removal, transforming that too, as it affects the new territory. (Cited in Ulmer 1985: 90)

floorplan evidences the trajectory of process: starting point – research – creation – composition and editing – repetition – performance – documentation – starting point, etc. It recognises that each of these components not only follows but also feeds into each other (the iterative). Each also sits within the whole and within each component (the stochastic) and as such is itself an example of these compositional strategies.

floorplan may appear a mechanistic process. However, it allows one to shift, to move to fluidity and complexity from a (false) sense of stasis (recognising that stasis is indeed already complex and dynamic). It has the added benefit of being controlled by the player/witness/activist, and it allows them to come to an understanding of the methodology of adjusting the process and therefore adjusting the outcome.

GENERAL CONCLUSION: SOME QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER IN PERFORMER TRAINING

'Practitioner knowledge' is multi-faceted and intimately connected to the specific activities of the practitioner-researcher as well as to the nature of the work under scrutiny. Nevertheless this chapter's case studies do highlight a fundamental aspect of laboratory research: participant *immersion*. All four of them refer to a state or states of engagement. Together they illustrate some prominent themes in terms of complexity, design, register and output:

- the non-linearity of processes of transmission and translation;
- the varied means for recognising and *organising* a combination of research methods, including issues of documentation;
- the forms and functions of different kinds of writing;
- the problematics of place, proximity and personal testimony;

- the pragmatics of collaboration, planning and design;
- the feeding back of findings from dissemination practices into the process of research gathering.

To summarise the trajectory of the case studies here – touching on over a hundred years of the training laboratory – the emphasis ostensibly shifts from the pursuit of an objective (if not universal) training in biomechanics aimed at dispensing skills appropriate for Meyerhold's particular aesthetic, through to a design of a user-centred model of laboratory research most clearly evident in *floorplan*, a system which is 'controlled by the [individual] player/witness/activist' (p. 158 above). But the intervention of writing clearly problematises this neat vertical model, as the case studies by Murray and Poynor and Worth highlight. Either as a solo writer or in collaborative mode the act of writing (*about* and *from* the practice) marks a present engagement with the training, and inevitably in some way will refer to the wider context of the here and now – the horizontal perspective.

There is important learning to be had relating to these two *axes of analysis* (the vertical and the horizontal) from these assembled stories. For each case study in its own way highlights a delicate interplay between both perspectives. Thinking outside the powerful narratives of lineage which accompany significant practitioners (Meyerhold, Lecoq and Halprin) is an essential aspect of the laboratory researcher's task. Conversely, seeing improvisation and task-based practice, which often appears to create material instantly, in a historical frame is equally important. Indeed, seeing the vertical (or diachronic) as a persistent shadow of the horizontal (synchronic) might be seen as a defining element of critical *reflection* or *reflexivity*, a constructive and complementary force to the immersive imperative.

As a stimulus for that reflection, then, we would like to conclude with the themes of this chapter expressed as a series of problems. These questions are designed to be considered at the beginning of a research project or before a proposal is fully drafted. They are pitched specifically at the practice-based researcher, to be read just before the doors of the theatre laboratory are opened:

- What assumptions do I bring to the work?
- What is my relationship to the studio work under scrutiny and how does this impact on the experience, documentation and dissemination of the research?
- How might my chosen research methods and my articulation of them best reflect the specifics of the work in the studio?
- What is the blend of materials available to me – body memories, interviews, logbooks, video documents, contextual research and reading – and how do I take account of the non-linearity of their arrangement?

- How does context operate in the theatre laboratory – explicitly or implicitly?
- How do I address the complicated terms of *translation* and *transmission* in my research and how do I manage the transition from one mode of operation to another, from movement to words, for instance?
- How do I negotiate the balance between immersion and reflection in the studio and beyond?
- How do I bridge the chasm between the analytical and experiential – the gulf between ‘writing about’ and ‘writing from’ practice?
- How do I manage any shifts from facilitator, to participant, to (co-) researcher?
- Who is my audience and how do I acknowledge this in the dissemination of my research?

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