

## DANIEL MROZ, WITH A PERFORMANCE BY LAURA ASTWOOD

### SPEAKING IN A VISCERAL LANGUAGE: FROM PERFORMER PREPARATION TO PERFORMANCE COMPOSITION

This article presents the hypothesis that sophisticated psychophysical training is vital for the development of the creative relationship between the performer and the director. Using a fragment of original performance and with reference to training practices drawn from the Chinese martial arts this presentation explains how the author and his collaborator use psychophysical training to facilitate the creation “theatrical opposition.” Originally a live lecture/demonstration, the article is supplemented by numerous illustrations of practical examples of original performance and Chinese martial arts training.

*Cet article, qui était à l'origine une conférence/démonstration en direct, montre en quoi l'entraînement psychologique et physique de haut niveau est d'une importance vitale pour le développement de la relation de création entre comédien et metteur en scène. À l'aide d'un extrait tiré de la représentation originale et d'exemples puisés des pratiques d'entraînement d'arts martiaux chinois, cette présentation explique comment l'auteur et son collaborateur se sont servis de l'entraînement physique et psychologique pour faciliter l'« opposition théâtrale » créative.*



### Introduction and Performance

Good evening everyone. Tonight's presentation is a piece of research/creation. In other words, Laura and I will be presenting a short performance and then I will be explaining the artistic research that has fueled our creative process. The hypothesis I will share is that sophisticated psychophysical training is the bedrock upon which performances should be built. This training is vital for the development of the creative relationship between the performer and the director and, more importantly, facilitates the director's creation of what I will be referring to as theatrical opposition.

We'll begin with the performance itself. I wrote the text of this piece some years ago, and Laura and I created the performance

together over the last few weeks. It's far from finished, but it is useful for our purposes here today:

*Demonstration of Laura Astwood's Performance:*

A man has washed up in the lagoon. Mud covered and tangled in weeds, he lies in a fever. The wild boars have trampled him but leave him alone now, smelling the malaria. She must drag him, raving, upland, to her home. There is a spring there and the air on the lower slopes of the mountain is clean.

She has never nursed a stranger. People from the nearby village come to her for remedies. She sets broken bones, binds cuts and scrapes. Once she had to amputate an infected forearm. She is more comfortable with wounds than diseases.

As she carries him, he raves, saying that his men have been turned into pigs by some strange sorcery. She assumes that he has been shipwrecked. She knows that no one else has washed up in the marshes along the shore.

She makes him a bed after cleaning him of the sea mud, and goes to make tea. He tries to attack her. He says he will kill her unless she restores his companions to human shape. He is too weak to stand, and collapses into fevered sleep.

As the fevers flow through him, she sees him change. One moment he is withered, the next he burns with youth. When the fever peaks it is as though he contains too much life, his skin is insufficient to contain the heat. When his temperature drops, his glow fades – he is dry and beige without its upward surge. She watches the sickness carve two beings from one body.

She soon discovers that he wanders in his sleep. She finds him at the window, in the vegetable garden, once even as far as the rocky pool of the spring. She cannot be with him all the time, and the fear is always with her that he will wander into the swamp, or chill and drown in the spring.

She is strangely indifferent to that first violence from him. It was the disease, not the man that cursed and scratched at her. She will not hold this against him.

Every month she goes down to the village to exchange her herbs for items she cannot make herself. She returns with a kettle or a knife. She must make one of these trips soon after his arrival.

He is, of course, not in bed when she returns. He is not in the garden, not by the spring. She runs along the wooded paths, calling out to him. It is already growing dark.

She has not entered the swamp since he arrived. Then, his



**Laura Astwood**  
Photos: Daniel Mroz

strangeness to the place, his fever, his presence so near death, had protected her. Carrying him, she had felt immune to his illness.

Alone, the swamp is once again dangerous. All she can think of are the hidden mud holes and the mosquitoes. There are lights in the swamp at night. Globes of flickering marsh gas are heralded by a buzzing chorus of frogs.

*End of Laura Astwood's Performance.*

When I first thought about what my motives for writing this text were vis-à-vis performance, I came up with an agenda based on sabotage: one expects a theatre text to be written in dialogue in the first person, so I consciously chose to subvert this by writing a narrative in the third person. Actors usually illustrate a single character and so here Laura tells the entire story from an outside and omniscient perspective. As I considered it, I found this sabotage agenda a bit simplistic and reactive. I wondered what tacit influences might be determining the choices I had made in writing and composing this fragment.

### ***Wushu and qigong***

In order to give you a window into how I see things, I'd like to introduce to you the theory and practice of Chinese martial arts. I spend a lot of time practicing traditional *wushu* (which is often called *gongfu* or "kung fu") and *qigong* and these combative and health maintenance disciplines have exerted a great deal of influence on my artistic choices.<sup>1</sup> Given that the practices I'm going to be discussing are separated from us both temporally and culturally—they're old and they come from China—I'm going to supplement my use of traditional Chinese martial art terms with the vocabulary developed by a contemporary martial arts teacher named Scott Sonnon.<sup>2</sup> It is important to say that Sonnon created his terminology for his own purposes. I have chosen to employ it in my presentation because I feel it can also be used to clarify the aims and the means of traditional Chinese martial arts training.

### **Forms**

The most readily identifiable training protocols in Chinese martial arts are extended sequences of set movement called Forms. In Mandarin Chinese, forms are called *taolu* which is translated literally as "training road." Some people are perhaps more familiar with the Japanese word *kata*. I'd like to show you one now, so that we have a concrete example to discuss.<sup>3</sup>



**Daniel Mroz performing the wudang taiyi wuxing quan.**

Photos: Laura Astwood.

That was the *wudang taiyi wuxing quan*. This long name indicates both the literal and metaphorical origins of the form. It comes from a school of martial arts that once existed on Mount Wudang in the province of Hubei, China. Wudang was formerly a

major center of Daoist religion. *Taiyi* is the Chinese name for the brightest star in the constellation of Draco, which is the home of numerous Daoist deities. *Wuxing* denotes the five phases of metal, wood, water, fire and earth, which were held by Daoists to be the principle states of matter and energy in the universe (An 4). The full name of the form is thus “the five phase manifestation of the deity who lives in the constellation of Draco form of Wudang mountain martial arts!” (4). Historically, Daoists were highly educated religious specialists whose every creation bore the stamp of their erudition. It is as though expert and intellectual western boxers, wrestlers and fencers were to name their practices after such cosmological principles as Einstein’s Theory of Relativity or Bohr’s Principle of Complementarity.

The movements of this form are inspired by the turtle and the snake, which are the totemic animals of Zhen Wu, a Daoist deity and patron of martial arts. The description of movement through the use of animal imagery is very common in traditional Chinese martial arts. Here the turtle stands for strength, steady advance and longevity and the snake for suppleness, mobility and circular movement. This form was created at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a man named Zhang Shouxing. Including myself it has now been re-expressed by 21 generations of students.<sup>4</sup> I chose to show it to you because it’s the oldest form I’ve ever seen or even heard of. The age of the *wudang quan* is significant to me because it means that a sophisticated approach to teaching and learning has been transmitted discreetly, but in an unbroken fashion, for the last 500 or so years.<sup>5</sup>

What is this sophisticated approach to teaching and learning and how is it furthered by the practice of forms? Forms are a series of empty energy vectors, meaning that the movements do not have a preset or absolute meaning. They can be viewed creatively, in terms of a global approach, and technically, as solutions for specific situations.

From a technical viewpoint, forms are a series of self-defense methods placed one after another for easy memorization. Each stylized move has been created in response to a hypothetical situation: against a hook punch to the torso do this; against a shoot or grab to the legs do that; against multiple assailants do these. This “martial-arts-form-as-multi-head-screwdriver” approach is ultimately limiting because it makes one differentiate in a situation which calls for integration—“hook punch, use uh ... flat head—no wait the Phillips head! Ouch!” Forms are great repositories of techniques but not in a simple way characterized by one-to-one-

correspondence. In fact I don't choose my response based on a typological analysis of the attack and a subsequent selection of the appropriate response; that's simply too slow. The technical fighting applications of this form are not central to our discussion today, but its creative role in training is.

The global approach of form training is similar to that of traditional Chinese medicine. It doesn't treat the surface symptoms but rather it addresses the underlying causes of the illness. This form habituates me to moving in a certain way. Rather than simply providing me with series of fighting tactics, it initiates me into the experience of a flow of rhythm and momentum. It uses very specific rules to ensure a general effect: when I encounter forward pressure I will gain a superior position by riding it, turning and reversing it, either directly or by outflanking my opponent. The practice of moving in this way serves to teach me to be creative in the moment and will allow me to make up an answer to my situation on the spot. What damage I do to my opponent and what blows I am able to avoid or absorb are in fact incidental to my commitment to continue moving, no matter what.

### 'Keeping on Moving'

Why would I want to keep on moving no matter what? Because of two factors that are present for anyone involved in any kind of performance situation: I will make mistakes and I will be surprised by factors beyond my control (Sonnon, *Three Dimensional* 52). If I know, in an experiential way, how to recover from these two problems and not become distracted, I'll at least know what's happening to me. I might be losing the fight I'm in but, the more conscious I remain, the more likely I am to survive.

My ability to remain conscious is a function of being able to observe myself at work. When I practice martial arts I work with divided attention—I do it, I watch myself do it and on really good days I watch myself watching myself doing it. I don't strive to produce this state of mind rather it seems to unfold naturally from my practice. Scott Sonnon proposes a very general typology of mental states:

External Focus, Broad Concentration = *attending*  
 External Focus, Narrow Concentration = *intending*  
 Broad Concentration, Internal Focus = *strategizing*  
 Narrow Concentration, Internal Focus = *fantasizing*  
 (Sonnon, *Three Dimensional* 61)

In my experience the *attending* profile is the most useful one. Broad awareness and an external focus enable me to be aware of what

is happening and to react to it with a minimum of distraction and with the greatest possible sensitivity to the needs of my situation.

When I'm *intending*, I'm already less integrated and aware of my situation because I must recover from a particular intention in order to be able to do something else. Intention thus blinds me to what is happening and binds me to an arbitrary course of action. Intending is, however, quite useful when I'm practicing a given skill in order to acquire it. I need to do things in a pre-determined manner in order to be able to repeat them.

If I'm *strategizing*, I'm likewise engaged in an activity that further removes me from the actuality of my performance. If I'm planning rather than attending, I'm sure to be distracted by the need to accomplish the end goal of that strategy. Still, strategizing is very helpful at the table when I'm creating a practice schedule and setting up training goals. If I don't have a strategy, I will not know where to begin and be hard pressed to do anything at all.

*Fantasizing* is the worst possible state for performance. I'm completely lost in my own little world, incapable of exchange with the outside world. What I'm experiencing may seem very real and potent to me, but I've resigned my ability to interact and communicate. However, the inspiration that got me practicing in the first place came from my imagination.

This ability to remain in a state of attention and "keep on moving" is refined in three broad phases.

### Phases of Training

The phases of training in Chinese martial arts are described using a formula that has its origins in Daoist religious meditative practice. The practice of forms takes the student through three phases: "*lian jing hua qi, lian qi hua shen, lian shen huan xu*" (Despeux 64-76).

Basically this means: "refining the life force by training the physical body, then refining the mind by training the life force. The refined mind then becomes one with the universe." As you can see, this is very terse language loaded with religious and cultural references. This has made it prone to some very odd interpretations that involve everything from the ability to move objects without touching them to achieving physical immortality.<sup>6</sup> Much as I love the romantic and the fanciful, I do not find that kind of interpretation very helpful as an artist or as a teacher. The best translation of this refinement process I have yet seen is the one that Scott Sonnon uses to describe the three phases of training in his RMAX system:



Biomechanical – Bringing into awareness the mechanics of the body, especially of the forces exerted by muscles and gravity on the skeletal structure.

Proprioceptive – Making conscious the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself.

Psychophysiological - The relationship between physiological processes and thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. (Sonnon, *Body-Flow* 26)

## Biomechanical

The first phase of training is concerned with recovering lost movement capabilities. We do not move as well as we could due to two factors: sensory motor amnesia and residual muscle tension (Hanna 39). Sensory motor amnesia is a kind of atrophy. Through lack of use and then fear of use, we lose or fail to develop voluntary control of various muscles. Although our spontaneous acrobatics at age three are indicative of how we can move, our physical development is cut short by a very sedentary style of schooling. There are other factors to be sure, but for me at least that was the big one. Residual muscle tension occurs when the chemicals that serve to signal our muscles to move are not fully evacuated after their task is complete. Our muscles are full of residual programs that hinder them. We are “stuck” and have insufficient space to move both inside and outside our own bodies.

Through constant practice aimed at progressively recovering, coordinating and refining our physicality, we can reduce these two major obstacles to our physical expression (Sonnon, *Body-Flow* 71).

At the level of biomechanical training<sup>7</sup> the integration of movement, breathing and alignment is central. What do I mean by integration? Let’s look at a simple weight transfer that uses alternating leg pressure to move the hips from side to side. As I increase the force of the movement in order to be able to move about, if I synchronize my exhalation with my release of force, the closing of my body squeezes the air out and the bounce of opening creates a vacuum that sucks air in all on its own. My movement has created a loaded position – I can bounce into action and I have enough air to do so, even if that action involves moving and vocalizing. And I’ve done so with a posture that is sustainable, that encourages me to bounce and will not work against the inherent structure of my body. I can stop and I still have all the potential energy I need to resume my movement.

The integration of movement, breathing and alignment makes

me more interesting to watch. It gives me what Chinese martial arts teachers call *shi*. There are many possible translations for *shi*, the most obvious is “presence.” Integration of movement, breathing and alignment cultivates *shi* by increasing the practitioner’s capacity for *jin*, a term that means force emission. The greater a person’s ability to create kinetic energy or *jin*, the greater their presence or *shi*. Here we have, in a theory that dates from at least the fourth century B.C.E., a Chinese version of the mainstay of Eugenio Barba’s Theatre Anthropology, that potential energy equals presence (Julien 27; Barba 34-35).

A contemporary Chinese martial arts teacher named Xu Guo Ming (George Xu) chooses to translate *shi* as “space power.” Xu says that martial artists should try to cultivate their *shi* so that it becomes like a radiant field around them:

Outside the body, the space is filled with the energy [of the practitioner]. Then you can practice ‘space power’, presence or *shi*, which is potential power. *Shi* is like an ocean wave before it hits you. When it hits you it is called *jin*. When a tiger is about to pounce on you from a distance of three meters, you cannot step one centimeter forward. In the wild jungle, you cannot step toward a tiger because his *shi* is much stronger than yours. He can cover you with his *shi*. (Smalheiser 16)

Our sensitivity to presence or *shi* and the increase in our ability to project it that training can facilitate is refined at the next level of training, that of proprioception.

### Proprioceptive

The second phase of training in Chinese martial arts has to do with becoming consciously aware of the life-force. The life-force is referred to as *qi* in Chinese and it is a term that is notoriously difficult to translate. When used in the context of the human body it can mean “air” or “bioelectricity” or even the energy of one’s psyche. Rather than trying to define the *qi* or life-force as a discrete substance, it might be more productive to treat it as a mode of perception. In addition to our five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, we are also endowed with a felt, or kinesthetic sense (Siff 70). This sense is in fact the combination of a whole series of senses and their underlying physical mechanisms, which are collectively referred to as interoceptors. The interoceptors give us infor-

mation about balance, temperature, internal pressure, bioelectrical fields, our own position and our reaction to all of these. The physical structures that permit interoception include the vestibular system of the inner ear, which governs balance (Madaule 49; Siff 70), the baroreceptors or sensors that line the heart and veins and provide us with information about our internal body pressure and the Golgi tendons which allow us to know the relative positions of our limbs in space without having to look at them (Siff 70).

The progress of a student's learning and implementation of traditional Chinese martial arts is gauged in several ways. Measurable increases in strength, speed and flexibility are used alongside more subjective criteria. *Qi gan* is a term used to refer to the sensations of internal heat, weight, vibration and expansiveness frequently experienced by students in training. The term means "life-force sensation" and can describe sensations within the student's own body or impressions received from the environment and other people (Cohen 270). All of the traditional signs of *qi gan* appear to be supported by the interoceptors and are thus perceived proprioceptively. Therefore the proprioceptive phase of training is principally concerned with becoming aware of one's normally unconscious bodily processes.

### Psychophysiological

The third phase of training has to do with becoming aware of the relationship between the body and consciousness. The stop, or more accurately, the pause in our movement is the gateway to this third phase. During the pause several things happen. First I exhale into my weight transfer, then I throw on the brakes and let my tissues store elastic energy. A few microseconds later I stop breathing. I finish exhaling and I don't inhale right away. My body becomes very still as does my mind. For another few microseconds I notice only awareness of consciousness. No thought content at all. Suddenly my next action appears. Regardless of whether I'm improvising or executing a known action, the utter newness of this feeling of arrival is the same. Then, stimulated by the vacuum in my lungs, my body automatically inhales and I move towards the new action that has just arrived.

Sonnon calls the pause at the end of exhalation the "control pause" and explains that we do all our most sophisticated thinking and fine motor activities during this moment of maximum quiet (Sonnon, *Three Dimensional* 48). Research on Olympic archers reveals that they released their arrows not only during the "control pause," but also between heartbeats, at the moment when the

organism is at its most silent and its most competent. Acting teachers I've met use the word impulse to refer to a variety of different things. When I'm asked about it, I now use Sonnon's formulation to supplement my own experience: it's the internal stimulus that arrives in the moment of quiet between the end of the "control pause" and the beginning of the inhalation. In the sudden quiet, the contents of consciousness seem to reorganize themselves spontaneously and reveal a creative and appropriate action.

The phrase *lian shen huan xu* that describes the third phase of training in classical Chinese can be literally translated as "returning the spirit to the void." I would like to suggest that this expression refers to the creativity experienced in the quiet of the "control pause" where one becomes aware of one's own awareness.

### Fear-Reactivity

Because of my practice of martial arts and because of the kinds of performances I've been drawn to see and to make,<sup>8</sup> I have come to believe that martial training, when handled knowledgeable, is an ideal preparation for performers. The biomechanical integration of movement, breathing and alignment is comprehensive. The understanding of potential and kinetic energy found in martial training cultivates stage presence. The sophistication of movement yields excellent composition skills. The integration of breathing is such that martially trained performers can vocalize effortlessly as they move. Martial forms are designed to do no harm to the practitioner. Furthermore, they offer excellent preventative physical therapy and they promote strength, mobility, and flexibility. They increase both the depth and breadth of concentration and offer the practitioner a regular opportunity to connect with his or her creative attention.

Martial arts benefit performers by seeking to maximize the actor's ability to remain in a state of attention. However the attention that one cultivates in solo practice must be confronted with the variable of another person. Martial arts partner work is thus based around the calm management of hostile encounters.

All living creatures, animal and human alike, have three instinctual reactions to threats that are hardwired into their physiology: fight, flight or freeze (Levine 16). In order to provide the energy for flight or fight, when we are confronted with a hostile situation, our glands flood our bodies with hormones, a phenomenon known as the neuro-endocrine response (Ledoux 212-214). If we do not have the opportunity to flee or to fight, we freeze and this powerful chemical cocktail remains in our systems. Although the

neuro-endocrine response facilitates intense activity in the short term, the long-term presence of such powerful catabolic hormones as cortisol is actually damaging to the body.<sup>9</sup> Animals in the wild who play dead after being pounced on by predators, who run or who turn and fight all exhibit interesting behaviour if they survive the encounter. They shake, spasm and contort violently for a short while and then, suddenly, trot off as though nothing has happened.

Humans have lost this trauma management reflex that both eliminates the powerful hormones released by the encounter and serves to minimize the impact of the injuries the animal may have sustained. The only creatures on earth who cannot utilize the effects of this trauma management reflex are humans and animals raised by humans. We store the hormones from the flight or fight chemical dump in our musculature and our brains are imprinted by the fear we have experienced and failed to physically evacuate. This results in an acquired behaviour called “fear-reactivity” (Sonnon, *Body-Flow* 10).

“Fear-reactivity” is a term coined by Scott Sonnon in his research to refer to those somatic ticks in breathing, movement, or alignment that have been conditioned through fear, anxiety and trauma (10). These are defensive mechanisms that make us involuntarily brace against a perceived threat. After years of sustained bracing, these mechanisms become embedded patterns of behaviour that limit us without our conscious knowledge.

For example most people cannot do the splits, not because they are inflexible, but because their muscles are fear-reactive and they haven’t spent enough time de-conditioning that program. While one might feel that one’s muscles are “short,” in fact all muscles can stretch to accommodate the maximum range of motion of the joints they cross. The feeling of shortness comes from the neurological program called the stretch reflex, that limits the muscles’ extension, and not from any actual lack of elasticity<sup>10</sup> (Tsatsouline 27).

“Fear-reactivity” is very insidious and seeps into our every activity and encounter. We are all fear-reactive in ways that are very subtle and limiting—not being able to do the splits is a minor problem compared to the unnecessary attitude of defensiveness that characterizes so many of our interpersonal relations. “Fear-reactivity” is a conditioned response and not some sort of buried bubble of pain that can be released by a single cathartic experience. It can only be de-conditioned by gently recovering strength, mobility, ease and grace through incrementally more sophisticated and challenging training.

The martial artist who braces in the face of a potential blow shuts down his or her ability to perceive and respond. Martial training is full of exercises to de-condition the student's perceived fears. These partner exercises consist of first teaching the student how to absorb impellent force from a training partner in order not to be afraid of it. Such training de-conditions our habits of fear-reactivity and allows us to actually perceive the colleague with whom we are creating or performing. All of the acquired advantages of solo training are useless if "fear-reactivity" prevents one from accessing them when one is confronted with another person. "Fear-reactivity" is what stands between us and a direct experience of our fellows and our environment.

The following is a demonstration of an improvised flowing game from the Chinese martial arts called *rou shou*, or "soft hands." Moving slowly and with little momentum, each partner tries to strike, immobilize or throw the other. The players move slowly and tease each other with combative improvisations. *Rou shou* is a collaborative training exercise and is neither competitive sparring nor actual fighting. *Rou shou* players seek to drop each other to the floor, to project them away or to flip them completely off their feet. Over time, force and speed can be increased incrementally while keeping the players safely below their fear-reactivity threshold. The purpose of *rou shou* is to condition its players to have a continuous, direct experience of their present situation. Next to the classically precise *taolu*, which seek to acquaint the practitioner with ideal and precise body alignments (see the illustrations of the *wudang taiyi wuxing quan* above), the movements of *rou shou* seem freeform and almost sloppy. This is because they are done with minimum tension and because each participant's ideal response is modified by the feedback he receives from his partner, creating an improvised sequence of idiosyncratic partner movement.

### Direct Experience

What is a direct experience? The moment of clarity that takes place in the "Control Pause" at the end of exhalation is a great place to start looking for direct experience.

What's a direct experience in performance? Well, what isn't? Sentimentality isn't the citing of some phenomenon or experience not present in the actual performance in order to trigger a desired reaction in the audience. This is the formula for advertising. It is an *intention*, arrived at by *strategizing* that results in *fantasizing*, an introverted and narrow state of mind. Direct experience is the



**Daniel Mroz and Randall Lightbown performing rou shou**

Photos: Laura Astwood

opposite of this; it is the use of *strategy* and *intention* that transforms *fantasy* into *attention*.

I suggest that those performers, whose work is physically sophisticated, experience the “control pause” and its attendant clarity with greater frequency and depth than their colleagues who are less physically trained. And this clarity projects to other performers and to audience members. This clarity is the mental correlate of a state of physical integration that influences others. As Eugenio Barba says, the audience “in spite of her/himself, dances” (Barba, “Four Spectators” 99), working its way into a state of clarity similar in nature, if not in degree, to that of the performers. I hope we’ve all had the experience at least once of sitting on the edges of our seats breathlessly waiting to see what will happen next.

While the expression “dancing in spite of itself” appears to be an apt metaphor for the audience’s engagement, it is also an accurate assessment of what goes on physiologically. It seems that in order to perceive and understand the significance of the movement of another, we must actually act it out in our own brains. This acting out is performed unconsciously by a structure referred to as the mirror-neuron system.

Each time an individual sees an action done by another individual, neurons that represent that action are activated in the observer’s premotor cortex. This automatically induced, motor representation of the observed action corresponds to that which is spontaneously generated during active action and whose outcome is known to the acting individual. Thus, the mirror system transforms visual information into knowledge. (Rizzolatti & Craighero 174)

Performers and theorists such as Barba have of course intuited the correlative physical relationship between actor and audience, but it was not until the early 1990s when the mirror-neuron system was discovered that these intuitions could be explained physiologically.

### Composing the Text

The text we used in the performance fragment Laura presented was excerpted from a writing task I set myself. I re-told the story of Odysseus and Circe and I called it “A Landfall.” I told it from her perspective, I removed all the supernatural and overtly mythological elements and I forbade myself from naming any of the charac-



ters in the story. I did this because I wanted to stress the immediate impact of the “facts” of the tale and not lead my audience off into their individual associations to the theme of *The Odyssey*. The section of text you heard contained the entire narrative of my tale and each subsequent section (with which we have yet to work) is a blow up or detail of one of the events described in it. In following these rules, I found myself moving further and further away from Homer’s tale and closer to feelings and images and events from my own life and from other stories I knew. The fantasy of fiction began to merge with the fantasy of memory. The migration of ideas between stories and memories and memories of stories meant that the elements of the story began to “float” and enter into different relationships from the ones that originally related them.

This floating meant that elements of a classic and easily recognizable story became enigmatic. While the Circe story and this new one had in common a man who arrives and who leaves and a woman who welcomes and who is left, the floating allowed the new story to diverge from the older one while continuing to quietly evoke it. When I realized that this was happening, I strove to bump up the enigma side of the meaning/enigma equation. This meant introducing the elements of a story just as one would place rocks in a brook in order to ford it. Too many rocks placed one next to one another will block the brook. Too few and I won’t be able to cross. At the distance where each rock is separate from the next one, the flowing brook touches and holds each rock completely as a single unit. And yet there are enough of them for me to step on, one at a time, in order to cross. The flow of facts, of events in the story, is the same. Each one is a separate entity in the flow of the audience’s awareness, and yet together they become a sufficient, if simple, bridge across the water.

### **From Physical Preparation to Performance Composition**

In creating our performance fragment we developed three kinds of relationships between the text and the movement. There is the causal relationship; that is, a statement is followed by an action or an action provokes a statement. There is the simultaneous relationship where the text and the action occur in tandem, and there is the overlapping relationship where the endings and beginnings of physical and vocal actions are sewn together.

I use these three compositional relationships to create two kinds of theatricality that I refer to as transposition and opposition. Theatrical transposition allows any given sign on the stage to represent something without literally illustrating it. For example,

through his or her actions, an actor can transform a wooden kitchen table into a bed or a surgical operating table; turned upside-down the table can become a boat while turned on its edge, it becomes a door. These transpositions create signs whose meaning is largely closed. Each member of the audience who witnesses the table transformed into a boat will agree that the scene in question concerns a boat. The actors' action with the table and the director's staging of those actions are theatrical, in that they do not employ an actual boat, but they are representational in the sense that everyone present interprets those actions along the same lines.

In contrast, theatrical opposition provides the audience with signs that are ambiguous and that can be interpreted by audience members in individual and idiosyncratic ways. I'm referring to this category of actions as opposition because of the disconnection between them and a readily identifiable illustration—this category of expressive acts, for me, exists in opposition to acts that are illusionist or representational. The *a posteriori* explanation of the genesis of such signs is problematic. The words that I might choose to describe them do not necessarily shed light on what is fundamentally an experiential phenomenon. A desire to create the ambiguous and the evocative and to seat its meaning principally in its interpretation by each individual audience member is hard to unpack and explain in greater detail than that. In order to shed light on the practical genesis of what I'm calling theatrical opposition, I'd like to explain the process by which they have been created.

The actions in Laura's performance that appear in the pictures above have been put together to be suggestive and evocative rather than directly illustrative. In order to accomplish this, I've worked mostly with the sewing together or overlapping procedure that I mentioned above. I've tried to replace stops, where kinetic energy is used up, with pauses, where it can be refreshed. This sewing together, as it creates ebb and flow, is a great way of creating the keeping on moving of which I spoke earlier. The causal and the simultaneous can then be used as punctuation, to provide variety and a framework for semantic meaning.

I would speculate that my decisions about what constitutes a good "director's edit" are governed by sensitivity to Laura's experience in performance. Laura and I have in common the physical performance culture that we learned from Canadian theatre director Richard Fowler. We have also spent a substantial amount of time striving to adapt the partner sensitivity exercises of Chinese martial arts to our own purposes. Thus it is feasible to imagine that my mirror-neuron response to movements created by Laura will

be extremely precise. Thus I feel I am able to use my kinesthetic interpretation of Laura's actions to choose "where I put the stones."

To elaborate on my earlier metaphor of stones placed in a flowing brook, I think that there are two primary kinds of stones. There are stones that are pauses in Laura's physical actions. These snapshots are still, but the internal tensions in Laura's body have stored elastic energy. They allow me, and eventually the audience, to read her action and to understand that it will continue shortly. There are also stones that are pauses in Laura's delivery of her text. Just as the pauses in Laura's movements must remain full of potential energy, so too must the vocal pauses retain their *élan*. How much physical energy is expressed and how much of a conclusion we hear in Laura's voice with every pause is determined not only by the complex and intuitive negotiations between her actions and interpretations of the meaning of the text, but by my response to her actions and my interpretations of the meaning of the text.

To conclude, Laura is going to show you the fragment again. In watching it a second time, perhaps you will be able to sense the embodied process I have just described. I hope that this last presentation serves to demonstrate all of the physiological things I've been discussing so far. I hope that you see those things, but I also hope that we've offered you something beautiful and mysterious that captures your attention and your imagination.

Thank you very much for your kind attendance and attention.

### *Second Demonstration of Laura Astwood's Performance.*

*This article was based on the text of a presentation given by Canadian theatre artists Daniel Mroz and Laura Astwood on 18 August 2004 at the NaCl Catskill Festival of New Theatre. The festival is produced annually in Highland Lake New York by NaCl, the North American Cultural Laboratory, a theatre ensemble led by American director Brad Krumholz and Canadian performer Tannis Kowalchuk. The text has been modified for publication.*

*Many thanks to collaborator and photographer Laura Astwood and rou shou partner Randall Lightbrown. I'd like to express my appreciation to Scott Sonnon, who generously answered my questions. Finally, I would like to thank my first martial arts instructor and mentor Wong Sui Meing.*

## NOTES

- 1 I studied traditional Chinese martial arts and physical culture under Wong Sui Meing from 1993 to 2004 and began working with Chen Zhonghua in 2005. Wong is based in Montréal, Canada and is a master practitioner and teacher of the Chinese martial arts of *cailifoquan*, *taijiqian*, *xingyiqian* and *wudangquan* as well as the health maintenance discipline of *zhi neng qigong*. Introduced to traditional *wushu* training at a very early age by his father, Wong has studied a variety of martial styles under expert teachers. He first studied *yongchunquan* under Ma Ping and moved on to learn *cailifoquan* and *wu shi taijiqian* from the late Leung Kai Weng. He studied *xingyiqian* with Xu Gong Wei. Wong learned *zhi neng qigong* while serving as the teaching assistant of the late Liu Yan Ming. Wong is currently perfecting his *cailifoquan* with Chiu Kwok Cheung of Toronto. Wong is also an expert in the martially derived folkdance, puppetry and musical traditions of *qi lin*, or lion dancing. Chen Zhonghua is one of the most respected practitioners of *chen shi taijiqian* alive today.
- 2 Sonnon began his martial arts and athletic career in the sport of S.A.M.B.O. (an acronym for *samozashchity bez oruzhiya*, which is Russian for unarmed self-defense). S.A.M.B.O. was developed in the former Soviet Union for sporting competitions similar to Olympic Judo. It is also used as close-quarters combat training for special military personnel. During his career as a Sport S.A.M.B.O. competitor and coach of the American national S.A.M.B.O. team, Sonnon became the first non-Russian to be instructed in the most recent counter-intelligence variant of the form known as R.O.S.S. or *rossijskaya otechestvennaya sistema samozashchity*, meaning Russian native system of self-defense. R.O.S.S. was developed by General Alexander Retuiskih to improve performance in both group and individual combat. R.O.S.S. has also been used to train the Russian national boxing, hockey and fencing teams.
- 3 Since his return to the United States following several extended periods of training in Russia, Sonnon has developed RMAX, a sophisticated series of principles, training methods and equipment that address a spectrum of needs from health and well-being to martial arts and elite level athletics (Sonnon, *Three Dimensional* 6).
- 4 I am far from being the first person to relate Chinese martial arts and contemporary theatre practice. Such pioneers as Herbert Blau and Philip Zarrilli have employed the martial art

of *taijiquan* in the context of actor training. Both Blau (121-24) and Zarrilli have used *taijiquan* solo forms or *taolu* as part of the general physical preparation of actors. My own use of Chinese martial arts in the teaching of actors emphasizes partner sensitivity, which is developed through modified sparring and grappling, rather than through the exclusive use of solo practice.

- 5 Wong Sui Meing learned this form from Gabrielle Boudreau, his senior classmate under Leung Kai Weng. Boudreau learned the form on Wudang Mountain, China in 1994 from Zhao Jiang Ying who in turn learned it from the late Jin Zitao (1906-1987). Jin Zitao was a student of Li Helin (n.d.), who lived on Mt. Wudang in the nineteenth century.

There are almost no martial arts being practiced today, Chinese or otherwise, that originated before 1500 CE. Most date from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Taijiquan* dates from 1851, and other well-known Chinese styles such as *cailifoquan* and *yongchunquan* date from the early 1800s. Popular Japanese martial arts such as *karate*, *judo* and *aikido* are even more recent, dating from the early part of the twentieth century.

- 6 This is reported in both popular studies (see Danaos 77) and scholarly studies (see Despeux 59-75) of Daoism.
- 7 Readers may be familiar with the “biomechanical” actor training exercises developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in Communist Russia in the early 1920s. The names “biomechanical” and “biomechanics” are a part of the fundamental vocabulary of exercise science, where they refer to “the leverage characteristics of the body, the relative strengths of the different muscle groups controlling the movement of each limb and the neuromuscular efficiency which orchestrates all movement patterns in the body” (Siff 12). Meyerhold borrowed these technical sounding names to cater to the materialist philosophy of his times (Gordon 89-92).
- 8 The bulk of my practical performance training was done from 1993 to 1997 under the guidance of Richard Fowler and his company Primus Theatre. Fowler himself had been an actor with Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret for more than a decade. If I had to characterize kinds of performances I appreciate and seek to create myself, I would describe them as being collaborative original creations with sophisticated narratives, a non-representational aesthetic, and a highly physical and musical performance style.

- 9 "Cortisol is a hormone secreted by the adrenal glands and takes control of metabolic networks in extreme stress. Cortisol becomes a problem when its temporary job becomes permanent in chronic stress. In excess, it increases insulin levels and blood sugar levels, decreases immune function, increases blood pressure and causes brain damage." (Graci 20)
- 10 This is not to say that doing the splits can be achieved by a simple act of "mind over matter." Strenuous protocols involving the sustained contraction and sudden release of the muscles in tandem with breath retention and resumption are required to override the extant neurological programs. This method is referred to as P.N.F. or Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation and is commonly used as an adjunct to strength training in elite level athletics. In fact the researchers of the former Soviet Union, who set the standards for exercise science worldwide, have no separate category for flexibility training. Flexibility is simply a function of correct strength development (Siff 401-08 and 173-99).

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