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Thick Description/Thin Lines: Writing about Process in Contemporary Performance

Paul Allain 

My academic career commenced with doctoral research in Poland from 1989 to 1993, as I performed with and then wrote about the acclaimed Gardzienice Theatre Association. Much of my subsequent research has focused on rehearsal practices to some extent and more specifically actor training. My writing on Gardzienice was followed by that on Tadashi Suzuki's Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT), though the latter project engaged with training more than rehearsal.¹ In both instances I gained many insights from and thoroughly enjoyed the deep personal engagement in theatre-making that this research afforded me. But this mode of what might be defined as 'embedded' research also came at a price.²

My first visit to Gardzienice in south-east Poland was in October 1989. The cheapest way to get there then was to fly to West Berlin and get the train to Poland from the east of the city. By the time of my return home to England for Christmas three months later, the Berlin Wall had fallen: a thick line drawn in concrete, barbed wire and

blood had disappeared. The Cold War thawed and cement blocks fragmented to become twenty-first century souvenirs. In November 2014, Germany celebrated 25 years since this upheaval. Much has changed since my doctoral days. This piece will reflect on some of these changes and how my own research and academic trajectory has evolved, while placing this in a broader context of recent developments in the fields of theatre and performance studies.

Once in Poland I was soon drawn into Gardzienice's highly collaborative practice, first performing and singing in the choir of their 1982 production *Avvakum*. I then took on a choral role and was involved in devising materials for the new emerging performance *Carmina Burana*, premiered in 1992. These were heady days, compounded by the whirl of social and political changes going on outside. But the difficulties I was soon to face in writing about these experiences of rehearsal, training, and the creative process suddenly brought me up short. The kind of research Clifford Geertz has coined as 'thick description', describing how the anthropologist's observation of behaviours are subsequently placed in a broader interpretive context, had its downside.³ The experience turned sour at that critical moment when a thin line was supposedly

1. See Paul Allain, *Gardzienice Polish Theatre in Transition* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997); and *The Art of Stillness: The Theatre Practice of Tadashi Suzuki* (London: Methuen Publishing, 2002; 2nd edn with foreword by Katie Mitchell and DVD, 2009).

2. The idea of being 'embedded' as a writer/observer was popularised when journalists joined military units on the ground during the Iraq war following the American invasion in 2003.

3. Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30.

crossed: when the director, in this case Włodzimierz Staniewski, wanted to see what I had written about their work. I have questioned my process and role with these two groups ever since.

In *Not Magic but Work*, Gay McAuley looks back at the twentieth century to observe that '[i]t is a somewhat surprising fact that, notwithstanding a century or so of scholarly concern with theatrical performance, relatively little has been written about the rehearsal practices from which these performances emerge'. She further identifies that a 'reluctance to engage seriously with rehearsal practice has continued'.⁴ In her introduction to *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, Jen Harvie notes that 'that there is relatively little published about contemporary processes of making theatre'.⁵

This is slowly changing but one might well wonder why so little attention has been paid by academics to what is, after all, a vital aspect of most modes of performance-making, beyond more spontaneous happenings? The reasons for this are various as I will show, but they raise substantial methodological issues and questions. Pragmatics also count, for it requires time and often money to follow a long creative process in a systematic way, as I did in Gardzienice. Do such material factors make such research the exclusive domain of foot-loose doctoral students rather than tenured staff? I would certainly find it hard to achieve such immersion again with all the demands I now have on me as a full-time academic. We also need to ask why theatre directors and makers would even want academics in the rehearsal space, which is usually considered a private domain for safe exploration and investigation. What role and status does the academic observer possess then in the production line of performance-making?

In this document I will reflect on my own personal difficulties when publishing academic writing about still living artists, which, by example, I hope might go some way to explain the lack both McAuley and Harvie have identified. I do so in order to analyse some of the complex issues and

negotiations involved, but also to consider where authority lies in this process. How can or might the scholar negotiate the slippery boundaries that emerge when fluid process suddenly becomes fixed in text? Georges Banu has suggested that for the academic 'it is as though he [*sic*] feels it would be indecent to open to scrutiny a practice located in the no man's land between public and private'.⁶ Equally, though, if one does have privileged access to such processes, it might be 'indecent' to say nothing. But at what point does the practice observed shift in ownership, from being something private and relatively concealed within the occluded rehearsal room to something 'owned' by the academic observer as a 'quasi-insider'? Does the scholar's authority change when a piece enters what might be called the 'free market' of theatre criticism and audience reception, when a performance becomes public property? And once such writing approaches the production line of publishing, what other issues can it then face? In such instances, to what extent, if any, does the writer represent or speak for the practice they are describing and analysing?

Before exploring these issues from a personal perspective, revealing how they have shaped my own research career, I want to build on McAuley's and Harvie's observations by questioning how the difficulties in negotiating access to and writing about performance processes might have affected the fields of theatre and performance studies. Do the ethical complications inherent in such embedded writing make academics avoid particular types of research, or at least writing about certain aspects of theatre and performance practice? Or is it largely practicalities that preclude what might be considered a more involving or complex mode of research? Watching a performance several times, conducting an interview perhaps, or even observing one or two workshops does not compare, for example, to the kind of immersion described in McAuley's book in which she charts in minute detail the process of a play rehearsal from beginning to end.

For McAuley, often the issue of what to leave out in writing up her study centres on pragmatics, such as not damaging the career trajectories of the company members. Echoing Banu's caution, she notes that '[w]riting about rehearsal, thus, requires navigation of a fine line between betraying confidences by telling too much and failing to engage with the

4. Gay McAuley, *Not Magic but Work: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 3. McAuley is solely reflecting on rehearsals but I am extending this to also focus on training, which likewise is underrepresented, though it raises some different issues. For example, the workshop studio or training room is often public to the extent that paid for workshops can be accessed by anyone with sufficient time and money.

5. Jen Harvie, 'Introduction: Contemporary Theatre in the Making', in *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*, ed. by Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 1–16 (p. 2; emphasis in original).

6. Cited in McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 8. 'Indecent' is an interesting choice of word and perhaps translation – one that is perhaps quite moral in its implications.

reality of the practice by telling too little'.⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, then, she barely explores ethical questions, although these surface later on in the book regarding sensitivities about her role as an observer. She crosses a previously invisible boundary when she writes approvingly in a card to one of the actors, wishing her luck on her first night, about something she likes in her performance. The actor retorts later that this made her self-conscious about that particular moment, thus stifling it.⁸ I am keen to investigate the much bigger question of issues that arise when one writes not so much about rehearsal room gossip or banter, or the to and fro chatter of the creative process, but rather when one takes a wider view on what a company is doing in rehearsal and training, albeit from this insider position. Here spring open many cans of worms.

Are such worms one of the reasons why our field has been dominated by what Susan Melrose in 2005 called 'closet Spectator Studies'?⁹ Melrose describes what is taught in university performance studies departments (and I take this to also encompass drama departments more generally) as predominantly being 'expert spectating'. Her personal interest lies in performer expertise, virtuosity, training, and assessing practice-as-research.¹⁰ But her writings throw up the wider topic of how our field might benefit from access to performance processes that are not the researcher's own. Where does academic writing about theatre-making processes sit in relation to this 'expert spectating'? What new insights might such an approach to researching others' practices, such as McAuley's ethnographic one bring? But equally, what might analyses of performance that have no insider understanding lack? Might such research, following Geertz and being provocative, be considered 'thin description'? Although I cannot even begin to address the second question, which could be explored fruitfully in

relation to critics, it is worth asking. The first question is, however, my main focus here.

Crossing the Fine Line: Case One

One difficulty in my writing about Gardzienice's work was that there were no clear-cut boundaries between rehearsal, performance, and training. In McAuley's case these were more distinct. I was involved in all three processes, often simultaneously, and they spilled over equally into daily life, with no set regular time for rehearsals or training. For Gardzienice, rehearsals evolve from training, to some extent *are* training (I recall many studio sessions which involved workshop participants re-enacting sequences from their performances) and there is no process of auditioning and casting as it might usually be recognised. Roles were also very fluid. Actors were at the same time administrators, drivers, cooks, and in my case a writer, initially of a more journalistic kind, within the company. This fluidity in what could be called a theatre ensemble (a title that is too hastily given and often misapplied but here seems entirely apposite), no doubt compounded the problem to come.

With hindsight, for it never seemed explicitly the case at the time, I now realise how useful I was for the company director Włodzimierz Staniewski in that difficult transitional period for Poland and its culture as it moved away from Communism. I provided access to English-language sources for possible publications about their work, but also gave voice to a non-Polish wider European perspective.

My acceptance into the group had been eased by a piece of writing. This was a brief account of a workshop in Druidstone Haven, Wales in 1988, organised by the Centre for Performance Research in which I had participated. It was published in 1989 in the short-lived journal *Music Theatre Dance* as 'Gardzienice: A Practical Account'.¹¹ I had sent this to Staniewski before I had begun my PhD or even decided that Gardzienice would be the focus of it, although I knew I wanted to write about contemporary Polish theatre. We discussed the article in a restaurant in Lublin in summer 1989 as we went over my plans, perhaps as a kind of audition. I later published other articles on Gardzienice in Polish journals and newspapers but also in *The Stage*, in this latter case about their imminent workshop at the Royal Shakespeare Company,

7. McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

9. Susan Melrose, 'Out of Words', keynote address at the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM) Symposium, 14–16 April 2005 <<http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk/outofwords/>> [accessed 11 October 2015].

10. I am differentiating the processes I am exploring in this article from practice-as-research (commonly known as PaR), where the researcher follows their own creative or practice-based process before standing back to reflect or appraise. The growth in the twenty-first century of this mode of academic research has been a very important phenomenon for our discipline. I make this distinction because it strikes me as something quite different when the borders of permission and authority are not in question, and any judgement is of a personal, creative rather than an (objective?) academic nature.

11. Paul Allain, 'Gardzienice: A Practical Account', *Music Theatre Dance Journal*, 1 (1989), 29–33.

anticipating their two collaborations in 1993 and 1995 organised by Katie Mitchell (to whom I had introduced Gardzienice).¹²

When I requested photographs to accompany an article which I had had accepted for *TDR: The Drama Review* I soon realised that a line had been crossed. Editor-in-chief Richard Schechner liked the piece, which would be the journal's third on Gardzienice (following Halina Filipowicz's two earlier contributions), and had asked me to obtain photographs.¹³ The nature of this article was inevitably much longer, more objective, analytical, and academic than the reportage I had previously published, which writings Staniewski had occasionally fed into with comments and advice. This piece had been written alone, to become part of my PhD thesis. Staniewski asked to read it and I soon found myself in an 11-hour one-to-one meeting where he advised me not to publish the article because, he believed, among other things that it would damage the company's reputation. When I refused, it was clear that he would also not provide photographs. Luckily I had a direct route to the work of English photographer Hugo Glendinning, who had taken photographs of all aspects of the company's work and Gardzienice village, commissioned by the Centre for Performance Research.¹⁴

My article is in the public domain, accompanied by some of the legible consequences of this altercation; namely two letters it provoked in the subsequent issue, both of which defended Gardzienice's work and criticised my piece, and which also included my 150-word right to reply.¹⁵ My relations with Staniewski had changed for good, not

least because of my subsequent successful attempt to publish my PhD.¹⁶

I had of course learned the hard way that 'when a person is located within a community or group, that person is subject to the power relations of the group'.¹⁷ With an ensemble like Gardzienice, we lived and breathed this maxim in the remote and, at that time, very isolated village in south-eastern Poland. But as I was also undertaking a PhD at Goldsmiths College University of London while collaborating with the company, I had assumed a certain autonomy. My supervisor had encouraged this, questioning the gender dynamics in the company, for example, nurturing my critical eye. Staniewski's understanding of what a PhD might be was very different from mine, with him instead anticipating a poetical response to their work, closer to the 'magic' of McAuley's book title. The fall of the Berlin Wall had bought together two very different worlds: one of apparent democratic openness and one founded on mistrust, deception, and State-manufactured lies, with myself as researcher caught in between.

My 'betrayal' was thrown back at me, unsurprisingly perhaps given that I had just two years before authored for a Polish theatre magazine an article titled, in translation, a 'Love Letter from Britain'. But also things had changed radically in Poland since 1989. Old master narratives of opposition had been torn up overnight as State apparatuses began to be dismantled. I had crossed a fine line but the line had itself moved, and to some extent the thickness of the line or its position had never been very firmly established. It is sometimes only when they are broken or crossed that borders become visible.

I continue to question my own judgement even today, for Bill Reichblum especially made some insightful points in response to my *TDR* article. I probably did overestimate the impact of departures of key personnel, as he suggested. But I also stand by it. There was a very small circle of mostly Polish critics and academics commenting on Gardzienice's work at that time, and the company's rural isolation meant they were outside the dominant urban circulation of theatre criticism. Zbigniew Taranienko was one of the inner circle. Curiously, his 1997 book *Gardzienice: Praktyki teatralne Włodzimierza*

12. Later articles include: Paul Allain, 'On the Border of Europe and Asia', *Zycie Warszawa* (Warsaw Life, a Polish national daily), 4 May 1990, p. 2; 'A Love Letter from Britain', *Teatr*, January 1991, p. 19; 'Modesty and Vigour', *Plays and Players*, 1991, pp. 26–27; 'Polishing up on the Classics', *The Stage*, 9 January 1992, pp. 6–7; 'Gardzienice in the Suzuki Empire', *Polityka* (Polish weekly, national newspaper), 11 December 1993, p. 248.
13. See Halina Filipowicz, 'Expedition into Culture: The Gardzienice', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 27.1 (1983), 54–71; and 'Gardzienice: A Polish Expedition to Baltimore', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 31.1 (1987), 137–63.
14. This was partly for a booklet they published: *Gardzienice Theatre Association*, Centre for Performance Research, 1989 <<http://theopr.org.uk/product/gardzienice-theatre-association/>> [accessed 11 October 2015].
15. Readers can explore the issue themselves through these writings: Paul Allain, 'Coming Home: The New Ecology of the Gardzienice Theatre Association of Poland', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 39.1 (1995), 93–121; as well as Paul Allain, 'Demythologising or Betraying?', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 39.3 (1995), 122–28. I find it interesting to note that Filipowicz had an article in issue 39.1 of *TDR* titled 'Demythologising Polish Theatre', showing that the desire for more open criticism and appraisal was not mine alone.

16. See Paul Allain, *Gardzienice Polish Theatre in Transition* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997).

17. McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 8. McAuley is loosely citing James Clifford here and his book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Staniewskiego.¹⁸ does not mention my earlier *TDR* article though it does refer to other English-language publications. It is hard to determine whether this was poor scholarship or a kind of censorship, though I believe firmly that it was the latter.

My 'thick' analysis of Gardzienice's training, performances, and way of operating attempted to find some balance. I strived to give an honest account of process and depict how theatre is actually made, rather than merely reiterating what theatre aspires to be or how it might be read by the spectator. Gardzienice have created only ten performances in the nearly 40 years of their existence, so I deemed such an insider overview invaluable, or even necessary. Facing this reality, as well as perceiving the distance created by the Polish language for English-speaking students, academics, and reviewers, an approach rooted in 'spectator studies' seemed unsatisfactory and inevitably partial in relation to such a rich multi-layered practice. The consequences of this stance and approach echoed with me for a long time.

In Thick, beyond the Thin Line: Case Two

My research into Tadashi Suzuki's theatre practice evolved slowly from my first visit to the international Toga Festival of theatre in Suzuki's village base in Japan in 1993, when I was singing in *Carmina Burana* as part of Gardzienice's chorus. Subsequently I took a two-week course in the Suzuki method in Italy in 1995, which provided the basis of my article for *TDR*, and made a second research visit to Japan in 1999.¹⁹ My 2002 book on Tadashi Suzuki's practice was based on these experiences and research.

Throughout my research period I tried to make contact with Suzuki through the late Ikuko Saito, the company's secretary as she then was, informing them of my book project. Suzuki knew me from Gardzienice's tour to Toga and Mito City, but also from a brief stay and dinner in London I had co-hosted. Communication was, however, sporadic: I usually never received replies to my letters, and the help offered was quite tightly circumscribed, though the company did receive me again in Toga

in 1999 when their hospitality was warm, even if the actual time allocated for me was, understandably perhaps, brief. The difficulties for my research were compounded by the fact that I did not speak the Japanese language, and there was very limited published material about the company in English. This is still the case today, as a quick look at their website indicates, as it has scant information in English, especially considering how internationally successful the company is.²⁰ I was also conducting my research at a time when material on the Internet was very scarce. There was no institutional archive for me to visit or look at other than the extraordinary theatre buildings and facilities Suzuki had designed with architect Arata Isozaki in Toga and Shizuoka, the latter a complex of theatre buildings one hour from central Tokyo.²¹ Suzuki had also overseen the building of a theatre in an arts centre in Mito City, also one hour from Tokyo, which I had previously visited with Gardzienice. Overall my contact was limited but amicable. Importantly, though, I had seen and been in the theatre spaces and surrounding environments, giving me a three-dimensional and contextual, material sense of Suzuki's approach to acting and staging. This was especially vital given his interest in theatre communities and families and the space of theatre practice.

My editor at Methuen Publishing contacted me in the final stage of production to tell me that Saito had written to them to try to prevent my book being published. Part of the unstated issue seemed to be that a book about Suzuki's work was simultaneously being prepared by Ian Carruthers and Yasunari Takahashi for the 'Directors in Perspectives' series at Cambridge University Press.²² I was working towards a very different kind of book, though they both had the potential to be the first significant text to be published on Suzuki in English, depending on who would be faster. Takahashi sadly died in 2002; his delayed book was published posthumously in 2004.

Carruthers and Takahashi's excellent work focuses to a large extent on Suzuki's performances within what might broadly be conceived of as a 'spectator studies' perspective. My primary interest was in the training, the Suzuki method, as I found Suzuki's performance aesthetic quite confusing and at times impenetrable. I had barely

18. Zbigniew Taranienko, *Gardzienice: Praktyki teatralne Włodzimierza Staniewskiego [Włodzimierz Staniewski's Theatre Practice]* (Lublin: Test, 1997).

19. Paul Allain, 'Suzuki Training: An Update', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 42.1 (1998), 66–89.

20. *SCOT: The Suzuki Company of Toga* <<http://www.scot-suzukicompany.com/en/>> [accessed 11 October 2015].

21. Shizuoka Performing Arts Center, *SPAC* <<http://www.spac.or.jp/e/>> [accessed 11 October 2015].

22. Ian Carruthers and Yasunari Takahashi, *The Theatre of Tadashi Suzuki* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

watched any rehearsals and also did not understand Japanese, though I do not think that was the main reason some of his performances confounded me. I rationalised this more as being due to his eclectic approach to the *mise en scène*, his sometimes very local references and citations, and a particularly Japanese sense of humour and taste. I was, however, knowledgeable about his method in an embodied way: from training with Ellen Lauren of the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), whom Suzuki has described as his ‘master teacher’, observing it on countless occasions and speaking to many practitioners about it, often in formal interviews, and conducting my own practice-as-research project exploring the creative potential of the training. Although our focuses were quite different, my book could be considered a competitor, and also was not ‘authorised’ in the way that I perceived the other book to be. Suzuki, a good acquaintance of the highly respected Takahashi, was fully aware of that text and was assisting it with interviews and materials. Suzuki obviously also knew about my book but he had paid little interest in it until the moment when the manuscript was finished and it was about to enter production. My request to Saito for photographs of the company’s work and spaces had suddenly bought it to his attention again, though now with potentially serious repercussions.

The letter from Saito indicated that they had ‘several grave reservations’ based on ‘previous material’. This could only be my *TDR* article, which, drawing on interviews with leading Suzuki practitioners and my own experience of training with Ellen Lauren had questioned how the voice is used in training and performance.²³ They were unhappy about providing photographs as they feared readers would then assume they had ‘sanctioned the book’.²⁴ Copyright laws were starting to change extensively given the impending growth of digital media, but it was still (just about) another era where hard copy prints ruled.

Given the lack of cooperation and communication I had encountered I did not have any other channels for acquiring photographs. Images did not feature in picture libraries or online stores, as might

be the case now – a simple Google search today throws up dozens of photographs of Suzuki’s work and spaces, presumably by a range of photographers. In some of these instances it might be that the photographer owns the copyright, especially if they are of Suzuki’s theatre spaces rather than productions as such. The beautiful aesthetic of Suzuki’s performances, in purpose-designed and -built spaces often in rural mountain settings made the presence of images all the more desirable. In the end I published it with very few photographs, all my own and of uneven quality, and none that documented the performances. In the second edition of the book, published by Methuen Drama, we even took these images out.

The two cases cited here of Staniewski and Suzuki are quite different to each other. In the first instance I lived and worked as a company member, very much part of the ensemble, embedded, building a thick description. In the second I was a more typical objective academic scholar, though I felt my sustained experience of the Suzuki training gave me an understanding of the performances and their rhythmic, spatial, and energetic construction that went beyond what I could have perceived as a spectator alone. This was especially important given the emphasis of Suzuki’s work on an intercultural exchange fuelled by a particular quality of energy and use of space, enabled by his training method.

Both relationships ended badly. Nevertheless, the books and articles that came out of these experiences have had wide circulation, and although personally it was bruising, professionally it was rewarding.²⁵ My research has been received, for the most part, positively and has helped to contribute to a now vibrant field of what is broadly a phenomenological approach.²⁶ I have made a contribution to the growth of interest in performer processes and actor training in particular. These positives aside, another slightly different though connected further hazard was awaiting me – one that is perhaps of relevance to all academic authors, embedded or otherwise. This arose from a small skirmish with a journal editor.

23. Allain, ‘Suzuki Training: An Update’, pp. 81–84. See especially the section titled ‘Voice’.

24. All quotations are from a letter to Elizabeth Ingrams, Methuen Publishing Ltd, 6 September 2001. I am grateful to Mark Dudgeon of Bloomsbury Methuen Drama for permission to cite this.

25. This distinction between personal and professional is a much used one, though in our field it is often quite hard to separate the two, particularly when researching a company like Gardzienice, which requires the adoption of and immersion in a way of life.

26. Observed, for example, by John Matthews in his *Training for Performance: A Meta-Disciplinary Account* (London: Methuen, 2011), pp. 24–25.

The Red Pencil Line: Case Three

Whether permission for a photograph is granted or denied is straightforward. The comparative advantages or disadvantages of a phenomenological, perhaps less objective approach are very open to debate. If the writer is embedded, how do they then emerge to see a piece and a group clearly? They can become too closely connected and involved, resulting in them being unable to be objective. Harvie touches on this when she describes the current shift towards a different type of academic research, based on what could be called 'rehearsal fieldwork': '[c]ritics might argue that this approach compromises our authors' objectivity'. She balances this by suggesting that a 'supposed critical objectivity' can also be quite 'problematic'.²⁷ In what Melrose calls 'expert spectating' the author is automatically and mistakenly assumed to be objective.²⁸ Is this really always the case?

A further issue is that writing about performance from an insider's perspective frequently necessitates a particularly personal register. How might this affect the reception of such research by potential publishers? In the following example, though a red line was drawn mainly on ideological grounds, I was perhaps too close to the material in hand. The high wire between scholarly engagement in performance processes and academic distance is thin and wobbly, frequently threatening to throw off the less tenacious scholar. I believe it was just youthful naivety and stubbornness that kept me clinging on. But as the thrust of much of my research has been in this 'thick' quasi-ethnographic vein, I would like to suggest that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. The risk of falling is high, but worth it.

The external examiner for my PhD on Gardzienice in 1993 had been Clive Barker, author of the renowned *Theatre Games* and at that time co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.²⁹ Barker had been very positive in my examination which was partly why I was all the more surprised when as co-editor of the journal he flatly rejected an article I had written on Suzuki's training method and submitted in 1998. The piece

combined large sections of interviews with members of the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI), such as Ellen Lauren, and former Suzuki performers. I now see that the piece was rough and not really worked through, but at that stage I was just soliciting initial interest from the journal editors. I still have the two-page hard copy rejection letter, dated 17 November 1998. It makes bracing reading and is usefully salutary.

Barker's reasons for rejecting the article were several, and retrospectively, most of them seem quite founded. I cringe at my innocence: 'very naïve' as Barker called it. But there were certain criticisms that I did not accept then and still do not today, or which at least raise troubling questions about editing and control. Barker concludes his rejection letter by stating:

I don't think a journal ought only to include articles which reflect the views of the editors but I wouldn't want to be associated with propagating the ideological propositions that the people you are [*sic*: 'citing' or perhaps 'interviewing'] chronically hold. It's as extreme as that. Sorry.

At another point, he suggests that 'the language they use bears an uneasy affinity to that of the Brownshirts'. Barker is concerned about terms from the interviews such as our 'terror of conflict', or that the training tests your 'will' as an actor. He lists numerous such quotations and that the training involves 'screaming abuse at someone under brainwashing or third degree conditions'. His response is carefully articulated, and stretches over a page and a half, so it is by no means unconsidered. I wish all editorial rejections and peer reviews could be as challenging and fulsome. But at heart Barker appears to be against an ideology that he sees as being present not just in how the actors articulate their approach to acting and the inspiration they take from Suzuki's method, but also in the practice itself. This conflation for me is quite problematic. Also troubling is the idea that my piece would wish to promote such ideologies uncritically, even if that was how it might have come across from the material provided.

The article proposed to *NTQ* followed my 'Suzuki Training: An Update' which I had published only just before. That *TDR* text focused on describing and analysing the Suzuki method of actor training and contained only short quotations from interviews. It was more factual in its account of the training and relied far less on interview material. This new one was quite a different kind of

27. Harvie, 'Introduction: Contemporary Theatre in the Making', p. 5.

28. Susan Melrose, 'Confessions of an Uneasy Expert Spectator', July 2007 <<http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk>> [accessed 11 October 2015].

29. See Clive Barker, *Theatre Games* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977).

article, then, building on and complementing the *TDR* one. Nevertheless, I am intrigued that *TDR* accepted a piece that describes the same ideology without (apparently) any of the ideological concerns.

When I consider the reasons for the piece's rejection, I wonder whether the fault was mine alone for not clearly enough identifying the ideologies at play. Or would the editors only ever have sanctioned a very critical analysis of such a training approach and its articulation? Or was perhaps the piece ruled out simply because of the nature of the training itself? In some ways the latter seemed the case to me which was concerning. I was left wondering to what extent the problem is one of the form, the Suzuki method itself, and any ideology that it was purported to embody. Or was it the language being used to describe it? The two of course are distinct things, the latter just an interpretation.

The language of training is full of metaphors, with Jerzy Grotowski's *via negativa* one of the most widely recognised, denoting the actor's process of stripping away blocks and resistances, both physical and psychological.³⁰ It is important to remember though that language is not the practice itself but operates as a way into it and as something which surrounds it, often formulated by the director or trainer, and sometimes the academic. Language does, however, help constitute and change practice and can play a key role in its dissemination and reception. For example, the language of SITI and Anne Bogart's work is now very familiar to theatre scholars and practitioners, not least from her own writings. This wasn't the case back in 1998. I would guess that today more people know her work through her publications than the company's live performances.³¹

Terror is a term Bogart uses frequently, and has done so for a long time, well before 9/11. In *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, she wrote '[w]e are born in terror and trembling [...]. The artist's responsibility is to bring the potential, the mystery and terror, the trembling, back.'³² In her book *A Director Prepares*, the synopsis for Chapter 4 on Terror reads: '[t]error – to undertake the artistic process involves a level of "terror", confusion, fright, danger – in art's truest manifestations it does. This

energy should feed the artistic process.'³³ For Bogart, terror is descriptive of emotions at play in performance processes but has almost become a metaphor for her, defining the broader scope within which performance should operate.

Given his passing in 2005 it is of course moot, but I am curious whether Barker would find Bogart's more recent words as troubling and feel just as 'uncomfortable' with them today, anticipating 'Blut and Boden' as he half-joked in his rejection letter. Have we since 1998 become more accustomed to such language, not only from having been made familiar with it through an active and articulate spokesperson like Bogart? If this is the case, might a contributing factor in this shift be the fact that 16 years on we have a clearer understanding of how discipline in actor training operates as a beneficial corollary to creativity and spontaneity? One need only consider the ubiquity of aspects of martial arts in actor training today; in such cases it is never even considered that the idea is to do violence to one another. The Suzuki method provides a stark and inspiring counterpoint to the vagaries of sub-Stanislawskian psychological realism for the SITI actors, as my mainly American interviewees were espousing. Such rigorous training practices provide a counterbalance to the dominant ease with which one might 'become' an actor in our televisual celebrity-obsessed digital culture.

Barker rolls together the practice, the demanding and hierarchical teacher/trainee relationship, its rigorous movements and ways of stomping and locomotive exercises or *kunren* (disciplines), as Suzuki has described them, with its precise vocabulary and a broader social and political purview. He seems concerned about the interviewees' 'us and them' language, fearing that this approach excludes others and is elitist. Training can be a means to somehow counter the individualisation which most casting enforces and which pervades our now very individualistic society, at least as it is in 2015 in the United Kingdom from where I write this. Isn't one of the main aspirations of performer training to create a strong group identity, while recognising and separating what Eugenio Barba calls 'extra-daily' behaviour from the daily, the social?³⁴

I return to the line of enquiry pursued earlier in asking where the authority to speak about a practice lies. Does it sit with the author, the theatre-maker

30. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. by Eugenio Barba (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), p. 17.

31. With the exception of *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints*, ed. by Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith (Lyme: Smith and Kraus, 1995), most of the works by which she is now known have been published since 1998.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

33. Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 79.

34. A term outlined in, for example, Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 32.

or actor who has utilised and who practises such a method, or with the academic editor? In this instance Barker was the gatekeeper and, regarding this piece at least, he silenced the practice and its verbal manifestations. Putting aside questions about the quality of the writing submitted, was his decision in the interests of the academy and the profession? I would argue that we need to air and debate a whole range of models and practices, not close them down. As more and more scholars enter the terrain of practice in myriad ways, this seems increasingly necessary.

How does one cross the boundary that notionally and of course actually exists between what is done behind closed doors and what is done outside in a public forum? And to what extent is any practice carried by and embodied in its articulation in words? Just because we demand discipline in the studio does not mean we expect the slavish following of orders outside of it. Rather we are more usually reminded to leave our social lives and 'selves' at the studio door.

Barker took issue with the coercive nature of Suzuki's method in knitting ensembles together. But in an age when ensembles are more and more scarce, even while publications about them multiply, do we not need more coercion, at least within the safe sphere of theatre play?³⁵ Besides, performance often *is* terrifying, as most actors will attest. With such a realisation and in such a context, terror is today a much more mundane term, for good or bad. Suzuki's approach prepares the performer to deal with the anxiety of performance by attempting to replicate performance conditions within the training (albeit without an audience present, though the trainer is to some extent the 'first spectator'). In this way, the performer might not be 'hijacked' (an example of the rather violent though metaphorical language which surrounds actions across all spheres of activity) in actual performance by the sudden presence of many others in the room (the audience) scrutinising their every movement and word.

Did Barker's response draw a generational line in the sand? Certainly we have now become overfamiliar with the idea of terror as it is bandied around indiscriminately by successive governments and politicians, as Adam Curtis so artfully reminded us in his BBC television documentary series *The Power*

of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear (2004).³⁶ Personally, I have always found Bogart's metaphorical language stimulating and an antidote to the creeping lethargy that has infiltrated the theatre, not least in terms of performers' basic physical health. Suzuki's interest in animal energy, supposedly fostered by his training method, is just one way of counteracting such physical lassitude. Since 1998 and the games and ideas Barker proposed much earlier in his 1977 book, understanding of actor training and its many variants around the world has moved on considerably. The Suzuki method has been taken up internationally, most influentially by SITI, and is just one of many approaches that have now been documented and discussed intensively. Barker was one of the pioneers of intercultural practice and thinking, but perhaps this has developed further than even he could have anticipated, with the result that today we do not flinch at language that draws heavily on eastern notions of discipline or ideas of terror.

One last aspect needs to be considered: Barker's own experience as an actor under the notoriously fiery and uncompromising director Joan Littlewood. Littlewood espoused democratic principles of collaboration, as Barker's chapter in *Twentieth Century Actor Training* explains, where he asserts that '[s]he has consistently declined to accept a dictatorial approach'.³⁷ Barker differentiates directors as lying between those who steer and those who order, positioning Littlewood squarely in the first category. This undoubtedly shaped Barker's view of what training and rehearsals could, or perhaps even should, be. But in his description of Theatre Workshop as an 'uncomfortable' place in that chapter, one wonders if the impact on him of her approach as director, perhaps detectable as much in what is unsaid as in what is written, also determines how he responded to my proposed article.

Conclusion

Many methodological complexities surface in these interlocked questions and three examples: who controls the usually private space of the rehearsal room and everything that happens therein; who owns the

35. For two recent examples of this academic interest, see Duška Radosavljević, *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre Makers* (London: Routledge, 2013); and *Encountering Ensemble*, ed. by John Britton (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2013).

36. Adam Curtis, *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, BBC, 20 October – 3 November 2004.

37. Clive Barker, 'Joan Littlewood', in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. by Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 130–43 (p. 131).

academic's voice; to what extent are a training or rehearsal practice's ideologies carried through in their verbal articulation; how do academics write about a creative process that is not their own? Ways of researching are as multiple as ways of making theatre and performance, especially in our now very practice-oriented discipline as it is in the United Kingdom. One has to take into account a director's tendency, be it to collaborate, to devise material with a company, or to lead as an auteur figure. Staniewski and Suzuki are very much auteur directors, both using their own surnames in their companies' titles.³⁸ But can we draw out any overarching principles that can help steer those entering the lion's den of such embedded research?

My gripe is not with Barker for, as his own chapter on Littlewood indicates, he very actively embraced insider perspectives as a scholar. Rather I am bemoaning the lack of discussion and debate that exists on the issue of ownership and access. I also want to keep a sense of perspective. I could recount many more instances of difficult working processes in my research, but happily I have also had many positive experiences. It might be that the cases here are exceptional but I hope that these reflections on my own career trajectory help others to see their role more clearly. I am keen to bring to light the fact that so little is written about rehearsal and training from an embedded position. This is changing as this century progresses, but the scholar needs to proceed with caution.

An embedded perspective can surely give us fuller understanding of how theatre is made and not just received. Inevitably such insider writing suits some kinds of practice more than others, especially if a company's emphasis is not so much on just generating performances but perhaps a way of living and working together, developing actor training processes or pioneering models of audience interaction. One risk is that insiders become mouthpieces for the artists as I became initially for Gardzienice. Self-censorship to avoid unwanted conflicts can also stifle the author's voice. Indubitably academics will be drawn to write about work they like. Perhaps we all need reminding to focus not just on what appeals to us even within that parameter. It is important that we do not just describe but also reflect and evaluate, without fear of judgement from those about whom we are writing.

With Suzuki I felt I had to analyse questions regarding vocal technique and delivery because

this had been raised by numerous critics of his performances and was reiterated in the majority of the interviews I conducted. With Gardzienice, the external circumstances had changed so much during my time of studying them that this had deeply altered the context and therefore the social dimension of the practice. This had previously been oppositional (especially evident in their 1982 performance *Avvakum*, with its anti-Russian sentiments). Part of my critique was a response therefore to seeing the company struggling to keep up with and adapt to such rapid changes, happening on many levels. I was similarly adamant in my writing, as Filipowicz also championed, about the need for the 'demythologisation' of Polish theatre.

My observations were not just about a short rehearsal period but a whole way of living and theatre-making. My criticisms of Gardzienice's fieldwork in the Ukraine in my *TDR* article that I described as 'theatrical tourism' particularly rocked the boat.³⁹ But Expeditions and Gatherings, as the two key elements of this fieldwork were known, were practices that subsequently altered quite extensively. In some ways I feel vindicated by the fact that Gardzienice's process soon after completely changed direction from fieldwork research with still extant marginal groups in Europe and beyond to a more historical project investigating ancient culture (notably Greek) for source inspiration. Putting aside whether or not it was 'indecent', as Banu described it, I also felt it was irresponsible to ignore these issues in Suzuki's and Staniewski's practices.⁴⁰

To conclude, I want to return to Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender's *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*. This book is pioneering in giving space to several academics to write about contemporary rehearsal processes from the inside and it demonstrates well the panoply of possible approaches to the topic. Harvie suggests that the former 'taboo' of people not writing about rehearsals is now dissipating, and the book does an excellent job in helping to dismantle this: it crosses a line.

It is interesting though, that none of the chapters including Harvie's introduction explicitly addresses the issue of authorship or the kinds of questions I am raising here to any great degree. The collection also does not mention the risk involved of becoming a mouthpiece or spokesperson for a particular company. At least three of the writers in the book

38. In the mid-2000s, Gardzienice was briefly referred to as the Staniewski Centre for Theatre Practices, though it appears that this name was abandoned as there are few references to it – it is not referenced as such on Gardzienice's own website. Suzuki founded the Suzuki Company of Toga.

39. Allain, 'Coming Home', p. 117.

40. Cited in McAuley, *Not Magic but Work*, p. 8. See my commentary in n. 6.

were not outsiders as such but were already key artistic collaborators in the companies observed (Catherine Alexander, Peter Eckersall, and Adam Broinowski).⁴¹ Writing in these three instances belongs more to the practice-as-research self-reflexive model mentioned earlier. Perhaps in focusing on examples of postdramatic theatre and companies that devise material, described as ‘new trends’, authority is more dispersed and the presence of the academic observer is less conspicuous in the book’s case studies. Though few address it, I can imagine that all contributors probably had to resolve the issue Barker’s response to me raises of how their writing speaks to and represents the practices documented and analysed. More discussion on this aspect of academic writing as well as the responsibilities of editors in understanding and drawing lines (red or otherwise) would be welcome.

There are a couple of exceptions in this book. In her chapter on Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Lou Cope briefly refers to the issue of being asked to share her notes with one of the actors and ultimately deciding not to.⁴² She also, in passing, touches on the question of authority and access when she is frustratingly barred from the first day of rehearsals. Lourdes Orozco’s chapter is refreshingly frank in appraising director Rodrigo García’s confrontational approach to his actors rather than just describing it.⁴³ Such a judgement is also perhaps not surprising given the very mixed public reception of his performance *One Way to Approach the Idea of*

Mistrust, which Orozco focuses on. Might there be many more issues behind and negotiations involved in such an edited collection that could have been productively drawn out?

I hope that others will take this agenda forward. If debates about authorship, ownership, and authority operate more freely, they can contribute to a broader opening up of what theatre and performance studies might be, as actor training and rehearsals take their rightful place at the table. This is particularly pertinent for rehearsal research: actor training has already been well scrutinised, given the relatively more accessible landscapes in which it operates. Then we might all be encouraged more often to cross over and cross out lines, whether they exist in our imaginations, are created by the artists with whom we collaborate, or are drawn in red by us as academics and editors.

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41. Catherine Alexander, ‘Complicite – *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003/4) – “The elephant and keeper have vanished completely...They will never be coming back”’, pp. 59–80; Peter Eckersall, ‘Not Yet It’s Difficult – *Blowback* (2004) – Unmaking *Blowback* – A Visceral Process for a Political Theatre’, pp. 202–21; and Adam Broinowski, ‘Gekidan Kataisha – *Bye Bye: The New Primitive* (2001) – Theatre of the Body and Cultural Deconstruction’, pp. 140–59; all in *Making Contemporary Theatre*, ed. by Harvie and Lavender.
42. Lou Cope, ‘Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui – *Myth* (2007) – Mapping the Multiple’, *Making Contemporary Theatre*, ed. by Harvie and Lavender, pp. 39–58 (p. 57, n. 8).
43. Lourdes Orozco, ‘Rodrigo García and La Carnicería Teatro – *Une façon d’aborder l’idée de méfiance [One Way to Approach the Idea of Mistrust]* (2006) – Approaching Mistrust’, *Making Contemporary Theatre*, ed. by Harvie and Lavender, pp. 121–39.