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Book Review

***Acting & Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance* by Elizabeth Hess, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013, pp. xiii + 239, ISBN 978-1-349-95105-5**

Taking Brook's metaphor in *The Open Door* of the actor as a "giant instrument ready to be played" as her starting point, Elizabeth Hess proposes a framework for exploring and expanding the actor's psychophysical range in her book *Acting & Being: Explorations in Embodied Performance*. The book puts forward a rationale and suggests a practical and systematic approach for exploration in the acting class and rehearsal. Hess's framework for her 'explorations' are designed to help actors activate a maximum range of emotional resonance. She deliberately avoids fixed truths, despite a methodical process, and shows how the work stimulates varied and personal responses from actors in training.

In her introduction Hess traces her own journey from her undergraduate days studying Psychology, to her current role as a teacher of actors. Along the way she snacks on a smörgåsbord of influences and practices (Freud, Plath, Stanislavski, Grotowski, Harold Guskin, Kundalini yoga, Jungian analysis, Lecoq, Commedia dell'Arte, Michael Chekhov), and acknowledges that she is no different from countless theatre-makers in being guided by the interaction of an array of perspectives, so that the framework at which she arrives is merely one process out of many possibles.

The book is divided into three sections, and in the first Hess divides 'states of being' into three interconnected categories for exploration: the behavioural, the physiological and the psychological. Each of these categories is divided again into seven states, inspired originally by the seven physical energy centres or chakras. The seven behavioural states are each represented by an 'elemental landscape', a 'consciousness' and an 'essence'. In the first state, for example, which Hess calls "Primal", these are "earth", "instinct" and "primal" respectively. The seven physiological states are represented similarly by a 'movement landscape', an 'energy center' and a 'sense' and the seven psychological states by a 'psychic landscape', a 'universal theme' and an 'archetype'.

Hess shows how each of the three areas of exploration are informed by influences from different theatre practices, though occasionally it feels as though these practices have been appropriated to align at a surface level with Hess's purposes rather than having been fully digested. ('Animal work' in particular is reduced to embodiment of anthropomorphised metaphor, but Hess is more concerned with drawing on her personal interpretations and experiences of each practice, some of which are experienced more deeply than others.) Each of the twenty-one states is also illustrated with well-chosen examples of literary and dramatic characters who embody them.

The second, and most substantial, part of the book is dedicated to putting the framework into action and this is where Hess's experience as an educator comes to the fore. She proposes a systematic and original series of 'explorations' for all twenty-one states. There are guided exercises designed for whole class explorations, partner work as well as individual tasks. Hess provides clear and

helpful examples of useful teacher interventions, which can help push the actors deeper into the work. Explorations could be approached as structured series tackled across a training year, or ensembles and individuals working on a production might select a particular area or archetype to investigate.

Despite the highly structured nature of the explorations, Hess shows clearly that the results for individual actors are distinct and wide-ranging. Actors are encouraged to respond to the guided activities in a private journal, and Hess, with her students' permission, includes extracts of these personal responses. Implicit throughout is the idea that the actors in her class are seen as creators and explorers, and the work is inclusive, while offering the chance for deep reflective learning. Actors following Hess's programme will doubtless increase the range of their instrument.

If the first two parts of the book have focused on states of 'Being', it is in the third part of the book that Hess moves explicitly from viewing the work in a training environment to its practical application in an approach to 'Acting': character work, scene study and production. This section of the book is slighter in length and less well-developed in scope, and Hess's commitment to the number 'seven' as the basis of her framework feels a little more arbitrary when applied to Stanislavskian play and character elements. Nonetheless, Hess shows how her explorations can be applied to Scene Study work, and uses case studies drawn from key playwrights to show how her approach can deepen the actors' understanding and add imaginative texture to their work. The application of the work to devised performance feels a more natural fit, and indeed Hess celebrates the expansion of theatre beyond naturalism to a more symbolic realm with a plethora of forms.

Acting & Being will be of interest to actor-trainers and theatre educators alike and offers them a rich vocabulary, a curriculum to follow if they like, as well as ideas for further investigation. Hess's achievement is to reorganise her personal array of influences as a clearly structured non-prescriptive syllabus for actor-centred exploration that can complement multiple approaches and methods. While others have better articulated the link between chakras or energy-centres and the development of character in the rehearsal room, and some will feel that Hess is at times over-reliant on neat head-centred metaphor at the expense of detailed imaginative observation, there is no doubt that Hess offers a framework in which to stretch and tune any group of actors.

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