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Questioning invitational rhetoric in theatre and training practices

Paul Allain

This article looks at the role of language in actor training and teaching and how invitational language is increasingly used within a wider context of consent-based practices. It shares much with invitational rhetoric, a concept from communication studies that prioritises the notion of invitation rather than persuasion, with the latter considered patriarchal and dominating. Its three main principles, based on feminist ideals, are equality, immanent value (meaning that every living being has an intrinsic value) and self-determination. This approach has been picked up in many fields including politics, education and body-based practices, from yoga through to actor training and teaching. The article suggests that 'inviting' is not always an accurate reflection of the dynamics at work in teaching or actor training. It argues that consent practices are not always appropriate, particularly for physical work that involves touch: here seeking consent might increase nervousness and compromise technically sophisticated practices like acrobatics or impede processes that require manual stimulation such as for vocal resonance. It examines these issues by briefly considering the author's own practice as well as that of Jerzy Grotowski. The piece suggests that inviting, broadly understood, does not always recognize participants' actual obligations and fails to acknowledge the value of the teacher's experience, expertise and necessary authority, and the difficult complexities and challenges of consent-based work.

Keywords: invitational language, rhetoric, consent, workshops

I invite you to read this article …

Today, many teachers and instructors of body-based practices invite participation.[1] Sometimes, as in these cited yoga cases, it is to offer choices to help participants dealing with trauma. However, inviting has moved well beyond such therapeutic contexts and has become increasingly common in theatre teaching and performer training contexts too. It is no longer enough to ask students or participants to do something, to tell them even; they must be invited. In the drama studio, it is familiar practice to invite a group of students to 'take to the floor', to do a

1 See https://www.denveryogaunderground.com/invitational-language-when-teaching-yoga/ or https://shareyourpractice.wordpress.com/2017/05/05/invitational-language/ (accessed 18 July 2024) as just two examples.

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particular movement, to 'hold a partner's hand'. Inviting can help manage large groups and select participants: 'Can I invite three of you to stand up and demonstrate?' Here it has a clear purpose. The majority can rightly choose not to participate, and the reason for offering choice is obvious. At other times, though, its purpose is much more ambiguous.

This article is about the role language, and specifically invitational rhetoric or invitational language, might play in teaching acting and actor training, and implications and questions that arise from its use. This will be considered under the umbrella of consent, of which inviting is one small part, as discussed later. Initially, I will focus on vocabularies used in teaching and training. We cannot normally bypass verbalization, which is vital in most pedagogical or training contexts. It has value for instruction, feedback and for specific material ends in terms of information giving and receiving. It can have a technical dimension, enabling precision of execution, adjustments, corrections. It serves a pro-social function: for welcoming participants, introducing people, setting parameters. Spoken language, alongside body language and other corporeal aspects, helps create an ethos, an atmosphere. But in a domain such as theatre, where analysis and exploration of action and language (most commonly in the form of playtexts) and how these combine is crucial, I suggest we need to reflect more stringently on how we might use language and invitational language in particular. Inviting has become a habit which we need to question.

Spoken language can often be deployed in practice-based contexts when it might actually not be needed. We have all probably encountered teachers or trainers who like the sound of their own voice. Other practices can have as much value, if not more, than language: gestures, imitation, following, silent repetition or execution. They encourage us to use the eyes and other senses rather than primarily the ears. This is especially the case in a wider cultural context beyond Euro-or Anglo-centric models. Imitation is intrinsic to the transmission of many approaches in Asian performance, for example. Some training involves a 'guru' passing on knowledge to the student through actual body-to-body contact. I have personally witnessed such an approach in the studios of the Kathakali Kalamandalam in Kerala, South India.

We also know that language can lie. For example, language might incline towards inclusivity but application might not match verbal aspiration, which is a concern here. Performance has taught us that actions *do* speak louder than words; and it is by our actions that we should be judged. Nowhere is this truer than in the theatre. In the 1960s, J.L. Austin's focus on 'speech acts' reminded us of the power spoken words have as actions (Austin 1962). Though his ideas have had a well-documented impact on theatre and performance studies, largely through the much over- and misused concept of performativity, they focused largely on quite specific non-theatre contexts (perhaps the most obvious and frequently cited is 'I do' at a wedding, where saying the phrase carries legal weight).[2] How do invitations operate where there is no such functionality or overt purpose, when the invite is far from being a speech act in Austin's terms?

2 This popular article outlines some examples of speech acts, also known as performative speech acts: https://daily.jstor.org/when-actions-are-words/(accessed 18 July 2024).

Invitational Rhetoric

In order to understand how this habit might have evolved, it seems sensible to follow Austin and look further into language and communications studies. Invitational language has much in common with invitational rhetoric, a term coined by American academics Sonia K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin in an article in communications studies (Foss and Griffin 1995). The two concepts are closely related and both have grounding in similar feminist theories. Their article set out an argument for an alternative to persuasion, the long-standing basis of rhetoric which stretches back to Aristotle, which the authors recognized as the dominant mode, though a problematic one. For them, persuasion was driven by the desire to change others to see things as you do, reinforcing a (male dominated) hierarchy and, consequently, the patriarchy. They do not deny the need for persuasion at times, but they saw it as largely coercive, reinforcing the status quo. Invitations on the other hand are open and inclusive, invoking another set of expectations, marking out a gender difference.

Invitational rhetoric was premised on what they defined as three key feminist criteria: equality, immanent value (meaning that every living being has an intrinsic value) and self-determination. Their desire to break down hierarchies is very evident in the first category, regarding which they cite bell hooks and her desire to replace 'alienation, competition and dehumanization' with equality, thereby enabling 'intimacy' and 'mutuality'. Immanent value was about reasserting women's worth and role, which they believed had been significantly downgraded. The third aspect was about living on an individual's own terms rather than from a male-dominated perspective. Interactions should start from offering something up for others, 'the giving of expression to a perspective […] without advocating its support or seeking its acceptance' (Foss and Griffin 1995, 7). The exchange contract is open-ended, not predetermined.

The idea of an 'offer' here is key. As significant is not anticipating, prejudging or doing others down: 'in presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own' (Foss and Griffin 1995, 5). Mutual respect is vital.

Their theory is evidenced by two very specific examples. The first is poet and essayist Adrienne Rich's prize acceptance speech where she credited the award to a trio rather than herself alone. The second is a more daily example, where two random people, seemingly politically and socially at complete odds, during the course of a bus ride come to recognize each other's 'immanent value'. This shows how prioritizing immanent value can help us relate to and accept others for who they are, rather than focusing too much on what they might represent. The article says little about education or training but the implications for this context are key, since this is one amongst many places where the notion is now being adopted.

In 2020, Foss and Griffin returned to their concept in *Inviting Understanding: a Portrait of Invitational Rhetoric* (Foss and Griffin 2020), a collection that republished the foundational essay and looked at how it had inspired thinking and practices across a range of areas of life and academic disciplines, including pedagogy.[3] The book shows the many ways in which this approach has been adopted, adapted and questioned. Chapter 4 counters some of the major criticisms that have been levelled at the theory, for example that it is gender-specific, essentialist, reductive. What the collection makes clear is that even if the precise notion and practices of invitational rhetoric articulated in the original article are not themselves directly referenced, the wider approach and aspiration which they proposed have had wide traction. Invitational language, I suggest, is one such, even if it is rarely connected back to invitational rhetoric, as far as I have been able to determine.

My argument here is that the articulation of invitations in theatre pedagogy and training has become commonplace, habituated, and needs greater consideration. I have heard it in many workshops, for example across different International Platform for Performer Training conferences.[4] Teacher/trainer Dana Blackstone often deploys the term in her practice. She questions the limits of consent in, "'Yes, and' and 'No, Although': Inviting Dissent and Difference towards Agency as Part of Multi-Representative Practice in Actor Training". Her 'no, although' rather than the commonly used 'yes, and' develops the concept of an offer and encourages dissent, agency and choice.[5] She does not refer specifically to invitational rhetoric but shares common sources such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks' writings, and, before them, Paolo Freire. In Christina Kapadocha's, "Tactile renegotiations in actor training: what the pandemic taught us about touch", the reader/student is 'invited' eight times to participate.[6] I am sure many examples can be found. Such work builds on and contributes to the continuing advance of non-hierarchical and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

This shift is part of a rapidly advancing desire to bring consent and choice into the studio. This move has been galvanized by #MeToo and related scandals about abuses that have affected many areas of public life, including the arts and education. Revelations have been widespread, for example in Greece's National Theatre and in Hindustani Music school Dhrupad Sansthan in India.[7] Authority has rightly been called into question. It also follows awakening racial consciousness stimulated by #BlackLivesMatter. Invitational language, Blackstone's dialogical non-hierarchical approach, and Lisa Peck and others' recent scholarship in Critical Acting Pedagogy are part of multiple responses to such abuses and inequities.[8] The growing use of such language to frame and indeed change practice is widespread, from yoga through to theatre.

This linguistic shift has both supported and been part of vital developments in how consent operates in training and teaching. Consent protocols and guidance are vital for scenes which might involve sexual intimacy, as one instance, and where boundaries and terms of engagement need to be established from the outset. Like invitational rhetoric, the consent movement has been driven forward by US scholars and

3 All the book's twenty contributors have worked in US Higher Education. It is hard to quantify how much these ideas have circulated and been picked up outside North America.

4 See https://performertrainingplatform.wordpress.com for these, including one which I organised at my own institution in 2020.

5 *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 15.2, 216–30. The article comes out of Blackstone's doctoral thesis 'Through 'the Gauntlet': creating multi-representative practices of community and 'dialogic gaze' using compassion-based exercises in a feminist actor training' https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/660070fa03578cc97d56f500dbc86a99ed3daf4b7c65fcc92279947c7f32b3f3/1680349/Dana%20Blackstone%20Final%20Thesis.pdf (accessed 18 July 2024) In the thesis, for which I was external examiner, the word 'asked' appears four times, 'invited' 19 times when describing her interactions with students.

6 Christina Kapadocha (2023) 'Tactile renegotiations in actor training: what the pandemic taught us about touch', *Theatre, Dance and Performance*

practitioners, as the establishment of the *Journal of Consent-Based Performance* indicates.[9] Consent-informed processes enable careful negotiation of challenging scenes especially, but the principles have filtered into more general practices, such as the idea of regular 'check ins' regarding touch in physical work. I will explore issues of touch and consent later.

Thirty years on from Foss and Griffin's article, the need to question and challenge abuse and hierarchies and keep pressing for equality and mutual respect has by no means gone away. Unfortunately, the emphasis in much theatre practice on collaboration and *création collective* does not mean that abuses of power and exclusion or sexualization have not happened. They still exist, even where processes are designed or intended to avoid them or where flat non-hierarchical structures are embedded.[10] Consent-based practice is making great progress to redress such issues, but it is not a solution for all problems and contexts and does not come without its own complexities. Similarly, 'inviting' on its own is not enough and is also sometimes not needed or transparent. The examples of invitational language listed on this yoga website make me nervous: 'You don't have to do any of these postures, you have free will' and, 'Give people the option to participate or not'.[11] My concern increases when such an approach is extrapolated to an educational environment.

Foss and Griffin's equality, their first value, is not straightforward in an educational context. Clearly a teacher's experience and knowledge count for something and are intrinsic to their role. The idea of expertise is referenced in their article but is immediately tied to coercion and domination. Of course, teachers can be wrong, misguided or narrow-minded. They can also be abusive. But there needs to be acceptance of the value of well- and long-considered views, of experience, of expertise, of research. In the teacher/student dynamic, how might equality operate? How much freedom to challenge should a teacher accept? Teaching possesses an inevitable and necessary asymmetry.

Foss and Griffin describe how "The value of the self for rhetors in this rhetorical system [persuasion] comes from the rhetor's ability to demonstrate superior knowledge, skills, and qualifications – in other words authority – in order to dominate." (Foss and Griffin 1995, 3). In teaching and training, domination may well be disrespectful and unacceptable, but authority such as that enshrined in skills (to pick just one of their terms) or deemed necessary to their transmission, is not in itself bad.[12] Can or should we enshrine equality in all our practices? Can pedagogues and trainers carry authority and impart knowledge and experience without it being problematic? Equality clearly means different things in different contexts, but we need to acknowledge the value of expertise and that its sharing can be non-coercive.

Invitations in practice

One answer to these tricky questions and issues with which so many academics and practitioners are now wrestling is that dehierarchisation does not necessarily happen by disavowal of authority or a position.[13] Writing 'I invite you' at the start of this article does not make us equal. It marks

Training, 14:2, 201–215. Interestingly, this Special Issue on Touch in Training was edited by 3 women with all of the other 21 contributors being women, with one exception. I do not want to speak on their behalf, but women have no doubt been most severely affected by the inequities and abuses that have dominated for so long. In addition, the majority of somatic practitioners are women. Both factors perhaps explain their significant contribution to driving this work forward.

7 This latter is an interesting case because, in Indian cultural forms, the *guru-shishya* (broadly the master-student) relationship is so entrenched and widespread. This reveals the difficulties of defining universal standards of engagement and expectations in a global educational environment. https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/20/former-director-of-greece-s-national-theatre-charged-with-rape and https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56523999 (accessed 18 July 2023).

8 See as just two examples Lisa Peck, 2021 and Lisa Peck and Evi Stamatiou 2024.

9 See https://www.journalcbp.com (accessed 18 July 2023) It might have been led by the US but is not geographically circumscribed. Adoption of consent principles and practices is uneven across cultures but English-speaking countries do appear to have led this work.

10 I witnessed and myself experienced extreme coercion when training in Gardzienice Theatre Association in the early 1990s in rural Poland.

out and reinforces our respective roles: myself the writer, you the reader. It might be construed as a reminder of this writer-reader hierarchy and therefore of my apparent authority, as it appears to give me control. But in writing those three words, do I actually have control? Does it change your choices in any material way? Whatever the invitation aspires to do, once this is published, I have almost no say over what is done with these words, how or when people read them (if they indeed do), and, copyright agreements aside, whether they are reproduced (and then of course interpreted) as I wish them to be. With such complexities, the invitation counts for little, could be considered redundant, a mere rhetorical device. A nicety it may be, presenting myself as the beneficent enabler, but largely it is a functionless one. You either read on or you do not. The same choices exist, even without my invitation.

What does it mean, then, to be invited to participate in a session in which one is already notionally active or where one is fully expected to participate, such as a training workshop or a practical class within an educational context? What does this invite imply for the rules of participation and how these are constructed? Much depends on context, on how the invite is said, although functionally an invite remains an invite, however it is spoken. With a soft, alluring tone, a welcoming warmth, the words convey something about the teacher, the task ahead and the contract that is emerging. Roland Barthes' 'grain of the voice' is a key factor in initiating responses in students/trainees: a gruff voice might discourage or a harsh tone appear overly coercive, creating resistance, distance (1977, 179–189). We might hear the invite but not feel included. It may be performative but that does not necessarily give it legitimacy or efficacy in the way that a judge announcing a prison sentence has.

If you have to do a task anyway, an invitation becomes meaningless. In educational contexts, if you do not enact something, if you reject the invite, there could well be negative consequences, in assessment for example, possibly leading to exclusion. Yet my concern is not just that the exhortation can become redundant. In many actor training approaches, specifically those linked to Konstantin Stanislavski and his constant refrain of, 'I don't believe you', we try to instill and model honesty and 'truthfulness' of action. The message sent to students through the language we adopt establishes principles which need to be mutually reinforced in and by practice. Language creates an ethos, in which we must be aware of clichés, of empty slogans, habitual or received knowledge, unnecessary formalities. We must work with openness and honesty. Acting and actor training demand that we scrutinise verbalization, the words performers speak, their subtext and efficacy.

When inviting someone, we need to understand whether or not we are really offering a choice, for only then does the verb make sense. Choice has been key for many adopters of invitational language, particularly when it relates to those who have experienced trauma, as in the yoga practices cited at the start. Choice underpins Blackstone's and many others' work. Yet if students have too many options, acting classes and workshops could soon break down into those doing something and those electing not to. Surely the teacher has to have authority over their students with clear

My abuse was not of a sexual or physically violent nature as recounted in Mariana Sadowska's revelations, though psychologically it was painful. See Sadowska's Polish language article, originally in Ukrainian, *Coming Out*, https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9125-coming-out.html October 2020. (accessed 18 July 2023) Abuse in training is something I touched upon briefly in my 1997 book *Gardzienice: Polish Theatre in Transition*, Harwood Press, Amsterdam, pp.74–77.

11 See https://www.denveryogaunderground.com/invitational-language-when-teaching-yoga/.

12 Ben Spatz discusses related issues regarding directing and acting in "This Extraordinary Power": Authority, Submission, and Freedom in the Actor-Director Relationship. *Ecumenica*, October 2010, 3.2, 43–61. Authority and power are both words that carry heavy freight, often perceived negatively and discredited today. Spatz's article is as good a place as any to start to wrestle with these complex terms and their implications for theatre practice.

13 Much current scholarship such as Peck's including with Stamatiou is exploring these issues, often within a feminist or critical pedagogical framework. See, for example, the section titled 'Difference' in Peck, 2021, np in ebook.

lines drawn? If I instruct or tell participants to do something, command them, it is not necessarily coercive, bullying, authoritarian, though of course it can be done abusively. The teacher proposes, students do, no invitation necessary. My plea is to be direct but polite. *Please stand up. Find a space in the room by yourself. Take a partner by the hand. Do something.*

Exploring boundaries and going beyond

Beyond such instructional language, consent practices often require staff to negotiate with students their limits and boundaries.[14] There will always be potential misunderstandings about what exactly has been agreed to, but any working relationship soon breaks down if agreement is negotiated on micro-moments of practice – though exceptions to this clearly need to be made for explorations of a sexual or violent nature. I have on many occasions said to a class, 'In your own time', and then had to hurry a particular student to keep pace with the dominant tempo of the class or the rhythm with which I teach. This is less about breaking previously agreed boundaries and more about trying to find a common denominator, recognizing the importance of group work without being held up by individual needs or differences. Outside of specific instances where carefully agreed consent is vital, it is hard to know where to draw lines. Must we always start from a position and fear of possible abuse, problematic hierarchies? I recognize that the reasons for this arise largely from past abuses condoned or caused by patriarchal systems. But we also need balance, to function in a way that is not going to inhibit practice, foster self-censorship amongst trainers and teachers, set false expectations about opting out, encourage excessive nervousness and fear, or set up other negative consequences or constraints.

As Moor mentions in her article, in 2018 a working group from SCUDD (the UK-based drama lobbying and support network, now DramaHE), published guidelines to help navigate this difficult terrain in specific relation to sexual harassment.[15] It is a very pragmatic and supportive document, extremely helpful, though it relates more to rehearsing and teaching than training *per se*. Inevitably, though, it begs as many questions as it answers. It foregrounds the need to make consent explicit, informed, specific, timebound and voluntary. It states how it has to involve discussion amongst all involved parties. Consent has to be 'voluntary (it must be as possible to withhold as to give consent)'. Yet how does this principle join up with another: 'specifics: it must be tied to particular processes, activities or projects'? How is each weighed? In an educational context there are rules for attendance and often continuous assessment of participation. To, 'Give people the option to participate or not', as in the yoga websites, is not valid in all settings. Whilst we might wish for teaching or training to be collaborative, equal, cocreated, in most contexts there is at the very least a financial transaction which immediately sets people apart: the teacher/trainer is paid, the student pays.

In, "Consent and Cameras in the Great Digital Pivot", Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard remind us that

14 See, for example, Australian pedagogue Andrea L. Moor's description of 'boundary setting, a full body scan, where students note where they are comfortable with being touched and where not, depending on all factors, including aches, pains and sensitivities. Even if there is just a hand hold, I will conduct the full body scan as it encourages students to claim their boundaries, for others to repeat the acknowledgment of those boundaries, and to reinforce the need for boundary setting in all work.' Andrea L. Moor (2023) 'Consent-based actor training as the only way forward', *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 14:2, 86–102, 95.

15 https://dramahe.ac.uk/downloads-and-documents/(accessed 20 February 2025).

> it is important to remember the significance of power dynamics in a classroom. The instructor is in a position of power, and because of that it is more difficult for students to say "no" to the instructor than it is for the instructor to say "no" to the students. It is the educator's responsibility to seek consent from their students and to make peace with their boundaries. In a consent-based practice, it is never the obligation of the students to yield; yielding is bending to pressure, not giving consent. (Pace and Rikard 2021, 122)

Is yielding never good? Perhaps laziness, self-interest or indifference sometimes drive behaviour. The limits to disclosure which we all face as teachers and trainers make navigating student choice tricky: it is hard to judge in the moment whether a student's expressed desire not to do something is founded or not. A lot has to be taken on trust. And as much as we celebrate difference, we need also to build resilience in our students. Discipline has negative associations, but I would argue that it is not inherently bad. Should pressure never be agreed to?[16] Can fear not lead to learning? Clearly there are limits and thresholds, but I would suggest that these are sometimes pitched too low.

Permit me some differentiation. Moor's article attempts to make a distinction: 'Students are introduced to consent protocols and learn physical language that assists in understanding the difference between the private and the professional body' (Moor 2023, 95). The Australian actor training model she uses as her example from her own personal experience is a fairly traditional one, at least as her language depicts it: 'All intimacy is of course determined by the storytelling and in the first year of training it is deemed best to create simple physical contact to best serve the story' (Moor 2023, 95). Trainees here appear to be working towards character and narrative, but there are performance forms such as circus, dance, physical theatre, improvisation and other models that demand different understandings of what theatre and performance might be, where the line between 'the private and the professional body' is not so fixed; where the work is, in another meaning of the word, very intimate, demanding great complicity and physical closeness. Of course, the sexual organs are private, the breasts and buttocks too, and, in most contexts, also the mouth. All parties involved need to work out carefully how the private becomes professionally 'owned' in intimacy scenes. Yet beyond such cases, suggesting that the shoulders, elbows or hands might be private can create technical problems when working on such practices as basic acrobatics or balances.

Touching touchiness

For my own practice in training and educational contexts, the private body always has to become a professional body.[17] Before beginning a physical class I often ask students to work within their own health limits (after all, I have no idea what it is like to be in their body), but I also emphasise that 'feeling a bit tired' is no reason to stop. For me, touch is an essential component of the majority of, if not all, body-based practices.

16 There is no space to go into this here, but Foucault has explored these ideas in great depth in other contexts, most notably in *Discipline and Punish* (Vintage, 2nd Ed, 1991). Foucault is a key reference in Spatz's article cited earlier.

17 Such a statement could easily be misconstrued. This is never to allow sexualised touch of another, abuse or exploitation of any

When I trained for a year as a Shiatsu (Japanese acupressure) practitioner, touch along the body's meridians was both the method of diagnosis and the means of transferring, rebalancing and feeling another's energy and tensions, mainly through sensing the flow of *ki* along the meridians as well as sensing whether organs were yin or yang.[18] In this training, I would often shut my eyes to privilege the hands and sensations to which they were party.

My background in physical actor training practices and Polish theatre derived from Jerzy Grotowski involved and involves extensive tactile contact by the teacher but also among participants. Today, aspects of this practice have been widely questioned, most notably but not exclusively by Polish scholars. There is a common perception that Grotowski was himself sadistic and deliberately encouraged a masochistic tendency in his actors. I am not sure how founded this is, but one does wonder how his training and performances might be considered today, if living practices. In the eponymous production from 1965, Ryszard Cieślak's role as the suffering Prince, who is nevertheless 'Constant' in spite of his torture, shows how misunderstandings can arise. Firstly, Calderón de la Barca's 1636 script is about this torture, suffering and death, so to some extent Grotowski is just staging the play. Countless playwrights have written characters who are driven by desire, often sexual or involving violence. It is the stuff of much drama. Secondly, we need to be able to differentiate between what might appear to be violent behaviour or sadism and how we as spectators or witnesses experience this – after all, the actors are acting. The violence being enacted against the actor Cieślak is hard to watch, and deliberately challenging and painful for the witness. But it is controlled, specific and voluntary. Cieślak consented. It is not the case, as Robert Leach described it, that 'his leading actor, Ryszard Cieslak, was genuinely humiliated, put in danger, made to feel the pain of the staged flagellation' (Leach 2004, 190). Antonin Artaud coined the term Theatre of Cruelty as rigor rather than literal violence or cruelty. We have to be careful not to jump to conclusions or misconstrue.

In rehearsals, Grotowski purposefully worked with his actors' sexual and erotic desires and personal histories. One of Grotowski's main collaborators, Zbigniew Cynkutis, who played the role of Faustus in *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus* (1962), noted that, 'Grot himself, and here I fully agree with him, justifies the use of [erotic] associations in artistic work by saying that this is the domain of the actor's strongest sensations […] where the composition of signs will in the end not resemble an erotic situation at all' (Allain and Ziółkowski, *Voices from Within*, 76). Cynkutis identified these feelings as being physically located in the pelvic region, not just because this is where the sexual organs are. This broadens and deepens notions of moving from or working with the actor's centre, which in this approach takes on a particular erotic importance. This was core to Grotowski's *via negativa*, a deductive process that leads to the removal of psycho-physical blocks that can hold back or limit an actor. Again, Cynkutis consented.

Where does this leave invitations? Sometimes learning has to be experienced through doing and words can become redundant – when a

kind; merely to reassert the need to be able to work in a way that enshrines professional understanding of such processes as weight transfer, mutual balance, complicité, technique, learning through participation and many other tactile and spatial approaches as core technical elements; rather than foregrounding and allowing personal whim, predilection or preference. This also does not mean that I do not take into account injuries and differently abled bodies.

18 Shiatsu is based on the principles and beliefs of Chinese medicine. See for example Paul Lundberg, (2014) *The New Book of Shiatsu: Vitality and Health Through the Art of Touch*, London: Octopus.

sensation needs to be felt and experienced, not described by the trainer or analysed by the trainee. I can understand a student's nervousness about being touched on the hips, especially if they have faced previous physical or sexual abuse. But it is important that the body is understood in biomechanical as well as in social or private terms. Holding a performer's hips allows them to experience a much-needed sensation of resistance, yielding a professional and technical insight, perhaps helping the performer feel a deeper sense of centre. It connects their awareness to their skeletal frame, a vital structure for movement practices. The voice is another case in point. It might be awoken or resonance felt by placing the hands on a specific point of the chest. While respecting different lived experiences, focusing on technical demands can allow the student/performer to reimagine and reconceive their bodies, to sense them otherwise. Moor's private body must not dominate or exclude the professional one.

The SCUDD guidance suggests teachers, 'give participants detailed information about a process (e.g. an exercise involving body contact, or biographical disclosure) through demonstration or verbal/written description in advance of the session to allow for careful consideration of what may be involved.'[19] This idea of advance warning is difficult in a module or workshop based on physical theatre, for example, where touch and contact is absolutely critical to the practice. Describing exercises in advance might also foreground issues or concerns which do not then arise in practice. It can be useful to explain why contact might be needed, in terms of sharing weight, mutual balances etc., but some exercises are better executed without advance knowledge.[20] This could lead to nervousness and undue fear, self-consciousness, and an overanalytical approach to, for example, impulse work. Reflection mostly works best after engagement, as it is then based on experience. A mental block can be surmounted by doing, dissipating anxiety without even needing to discuss it. Actor training wants to discourage anticipation. Fear can be easily displaced within moments through simple enactment. In my experience, small risks are outweighed by the advantages and the benefits that accrue from disinhibited, trusting, collaborative ensemble work.

The SCUDD document raises notions of students feeling 'uncomfortable'; it questions how 'signs of failure' might arise from non-participation and then might stigmatise behaviours. It also raises the issue of different cultural norms and expectations, something rich for investigation which needs to be examined much more. In 2009, a female university drama teacher from the USA told me how she had always to keep the door open when teaching classes, an institutional precautionary requirement. It was one that troubled her deeply for the mistrust it implied.

In the Higher Education Intimacy Coordination and Direction Guidelines drawn up by Equity, the British actor's union, touch is conflated with intimacy work as though all touch is intimate or needs constant negotiation (https://www.equity.org.uk/advice-and-support/know-your-rights/higher-education-intimacy-coordination-direction-guidelines). They recommend an intimacy coordinator if, 'There is light and/or casual physical touch'. Clearly this is not necessary for basic balance, acrobatic and partner work. We need

19 https://dramahe.ac.uk/downloads-and-documents/(accessed 20 February 2025).

20 See 'Physical Actor training an online A-Z' and especially Acrobatics. https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/physical-actor-training (accessed 15 July 2024).

sharper distinctions and greater understanding about the role of technique in acting practices, otherwise we run the risk that we lose spontaneity, become over cautious, and continue to promulgate the kind of empty rhetoric about safe or inclusive practices which inviting can sometimes instill. Guidelines are very helpful, and in many contexts vital, but they are just language, just guidance. They are also culturally- and practice-specific.

Conclusion

In 2014, I led a physical workshop for male and female students in Tehran, Iran, as part of a University Theatre Festival for which I was a jury member. The women had always to wear headscarves to cover their hair, but during the workshop, one kept coming off. After several awkward attempts to keep it on, the student laughingly though nervously abandoned it. Norms shifted as the work progressed. As I always do in my training, I touched the women and men as I facilitated rolls, basic acrobatics and partner work. Initial nervousness soon dissipated and we all felt free, exploratory, equal, and safe. Interestingly, and surprisingly for me, the bigger context reasserted itself straight after the workshop in the corridor outside the studio. On being thanked by another female student who had participated but now wanted to say goodbye, I went to shake her hand. This was abruptly rejected, inappropriate in a social setting outside the closed studio door. The professional workshop body had once again become public, in a highly charged context where there have been and are intense and often fatal battles about women's rights in relation to religious and cultural expectations. Never have I appreciated as much the drama studio as a place of possibility and resistance that can transcend cultural, social and political restrictions, freeing the individual, however temporarily.

Actor training and teaching should happen in a space where cultural rules, expectations and norms as well as private and personal problems can be suspended, perhaps overcome, or at least challenged and examined. It offers a place for exploring these in detail, through the body and voice. In this Iranian instance, the challenge to and shifting of cultural norms was achieved pragmatically in the white heat of training. Leaving the door ajar tries to mitigate such resistance, attempts somehow to 'socialise' the space, to make it less other. Inviting can sometimes do the same.

Just as there is value in spontaneity, in not overexplaining, in sometimes just doing, so is verbal and contextual framing also important, as the SCUDD paper acknowledges. Clearly setting out initial aims and leaving time to reflect afterwards are useful in terms of placing issues of consent, participation, the right to fail etc. in a context. They become depersonalized, shared concerns, theorized at least. Sometimes the value of discoveries or the gains made are only much later fully recognised. Yet talking things through prematurely can also exacerbate a situation that in the flow of a session would otherwise happen or pass by without comment or overt concern. Foregrounding risks and anticipating difficulties might in fact entrench tensions or complexes or make an issue of what might, in practice, be relatively or surprisingly easy, achieved in an uncomplicated way. Students are often surprised when they accomplish something which

initially they thought they could not do. They put their own nervousness to one side, quieten their inner doubting voice. After all, acting is very much about not anticipating, being in the moment, and responding impulsively. As a teacher, when resistance arises, I move to and through a task quickly, in order not to expose the student's hesitancy or doubt. I might also use other more willing subjects to demonstrate something and thereby instill greater confidence in others. This is why working in silence is sometimes helpful, which does not always equate to censorship, repression.

How we negotiate consent is complex, and inviting is not necessarily a solution. If I do invite, only the bravest might put themselves forward. It is sometimes better and more honest not to give choices. A balance needs to be established between inviting (broadly understood), instilling discipline and responsibility in a collaborative group ethos, willingness to try and risk things, and the creation of a safe(r) consensual environment of mutual respect and equality, along with recognition of the expertise or experience of the teacher and the asymmetry this entails. Just as a session is bound by its start and finish times and the space in which it operates, so do some practices need to be conducted according to certain shared principles and understandings which go beyond individual needs or concerns. Teaching and training are not free-for-alls with every option and choice on the table. They are processes which require full commitment, challenge, risk-taking, and the breaking of habits. They demand that we make our 'private' bodies public. Above all, they require openness and honesty.

I invite you to embed and embrace these principles.

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