

Oh brave new age: the rhetoric of holistic actor training

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Abstract

Attempts to describe the ineffable mystery that lies at the heart of the acting experience are invariably metaphoric. In addition to its figurative and cognitive functions, metaphor also operates as a form of rhetoric. Much of the rhetoric applied to acting theory and practice is an attempt to address (and rectify) the acknowledged dual consciousness that constitutes the central subjective experience of the actor. Whether these metaphoric explanations are ‘neuroscientific’ or ‘mystical’ they work to re-introduce ‘wholeness’ to the acting process. As a form of tropological argument, metaphor can serve as a form of constitutive rhetoric creating a discourse community of shared language and beliefs. This community is a ‘rhetorical audience’ constructed by language. It is a community called into being by being addressed. The phenomenon of ‘self-help’ books, particularly those based on New Age philosophies, serves as a model for this kind of rhetoric.

Key words: acting, metaphor, constitutive rhetoric, holism

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Introduction

Acting is a schizoid activity. It requires the simultaneous manifestation of deep feeling and controlled technique. As Diderot (1773) says of the actor, “at the very moment when he touches your heart he is listening to his own voice” (p. 164). This, the engendering of profound emotion through careful calculation, is the “Paradox of Acting”. For Diderot, the emotion actually lies in the auditor not the actor, because there is, he suggests, an inverse relationship between internalized emotion and effective communication. The more the actor feels, the less we do. But the idea of a fundamental divide at the heart of the acting experience stems from his observations. As Hornby (1992) notes, Diderot’s “application of Cartesian dualism to acting laid the groundwork for performance theory for the next two centuries” (p. 106). In twentieth-century acting, particularly the psychological realism associated with Strasberg-based “method acting”, an increasing emphasis was placed on the need for the actor to actually feel emotions rather than merely, as Diderot suggested, simulate them. What those emotions actually are is a matter of considerable debate: the question being the “difference between ‘real’ (everyday) and ‘imaginary’ (theatrical) emotions” (Zarrilli, 1995, p. 223). Relatively recent neuroscientific studies on “effector patterns” (Bloch, Orthous, & Santibanez, 1995)

suggest that stage emotions are not the same as everyday emotions but are produced by the trained actor through set of voluntary and learned psychophysiological ‘instrumental techniques’ and are felt, as Diderot indicated two centuries before, not in the performer but in the audience. The actor might actually feel the corresponding emotion, but such

subjective involvement and identification with the emotions may hinder the theatrical performance. In fact, it is possible that actors often confuse the unspecific excitation they feel during acting with the belief that they are truly ‘feeling’ the emotion that they portray (Bloch et al., 1995, p. 214).

In other words, what the audience perceives as real emotion from the actor is really just the heightened “emotional state or energy generated by the challenge of the act/job of performing—the anxiety, excitement, and/or tension an actor experiences in ‘going for it’” (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 675). These conjectures aside, the oft-repeated demands for emotional “truth” or “honesty” or “believability” in acting constitute a rhetorical pattern that seems at odds with the “double consciousness” of the actor: the experiential phenomenon of being “in the moment” while simultaneously gauging and controlling the effects of one’s performance. This paradox has become a commonplace of acting (Benedetti, 2009, pp. 86-7).

Neuroscience and acting

Perhaps the “dual consciousness” of acting has a scientific explanation. Not surprisingly, the attempt to describe, explain and discursively analyse the non-discursive and ineffable mystery at the heart of performance has involved pseudo-scientific discussions of cognitive processing. Clive Barker for example, divides the brain into two contradictory halves “which are at odds with each other”:

I feel that there are two distinct parts to my brain, each with its own function and mode of operating. The front part of my brain I use for visualizing, for reflective meditation for precisely defining my thoughts and ideas, for thinking in the abstract, and for the deliberate conscious control and direction of my actions. The back part seems to have a life of its own and I am only conscious of what it is doing when I ‘stop to think’ (1977, pp. 17-18).

He notes that the rehearsal process, which entails the conscious apprehension of material and actions that are later automatically re-created in performance, requires “getting the direction of the activities switched from the conscious front brain to the subconscious back brain” (Barker, 1977, p. 21) because the conscious mind inhibits the instinctive creative state of performance. Although he claims that his observations are “not scientific”, Barker does “feel obliged to enter some scientific evidence in support of what [he] has written, and this can be found in the Appendix at the back of the book” (Barker, 1977, p. 25). This consists of one page, based on Moshe Feldenkrais’ somatic psycho-physical method, entitled “The nervous system”, where the brain is now helpfully divided into “the old brain and the new brain”, which correspond respectively to the cerebellum and the cerebral cortex. He explains that

the significant facts to note are (a) that the new brain overlays the old brain which is at the base of the skull, which leads me to feel the activities as front and back, and (b) there is no direct connection between the new, front brain and the muscles of the body. For conscious thought to be turned into actions and activities, the intermediation of the old, or back, brain is necessary (Barker, 1977, p. 219).

His spatial metaphor reconfigures the highly evolved conscious cortex and primitive reflexive cerebellum, to the front and back. But he could also have gone sideways.

Barker could have made use of the newly-developed neuroscientific discoveries of hemispheric brain functioning: namely the vogue of right brain/left brain thinking. In his training manual, *Acting with Both Sides of Your Brain*, Ramon Delgado suggests that “the dual nature of the performing experience” can be explained by hemispheric differentiation:

Recent research on right and left brain hemisphere functions provides a metaphor and possibly even a physical explanation for the dual nature of the performing experience. Investigations by psychologists and neurologists suggest that the creative, non-verbal functions of the right hemisphere of the brain are equally important to our balance as whole personalities as is the dominant left hemisphere of the brain, long believed to direct logical and verbal functions. It is this balance which permits actors the simultaneous experience of emotional release and emotional control. Further study convinced me that the right brain/left brain approach was indeed a very useful way of organizing the development of the creative processes (Delgado, 1986, p. x).

While asserting that this concept is a “metaphor”, Delgado also bolsters his argument by suggesting that, “possibly”, just “possibly”, it might be “a physical explanation” for the mystery of “the creative processes.” Perhaps if we had a picture:

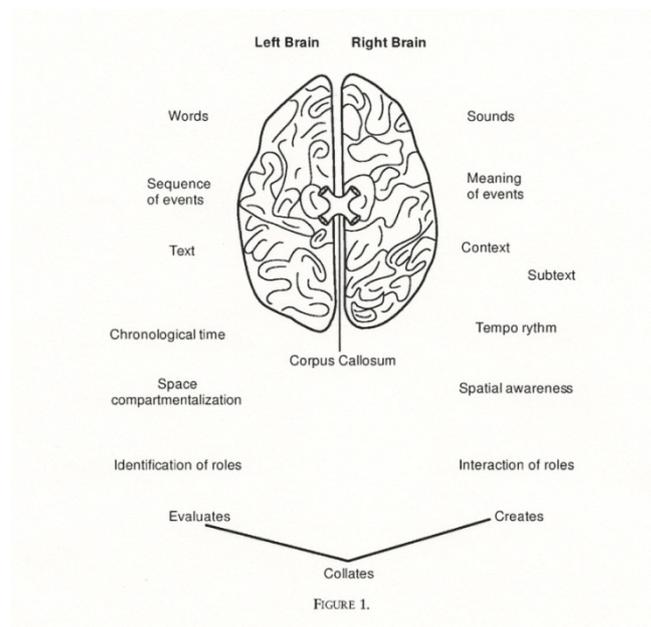


Figure 1. The brain

Source: (Delgado 1986, p. 8, reproduced in Banfield 2000, p. 239)

If rhetoric involves the suasy use of symbols, this diagram is a form of visual rhetoric whose function is not merely to explain or clarify but also to gloss the argument with the patina of science. Banfield (2000) suggests that a range of works on acting including Barker’s front brain/back brain analogy and Delgado’s right brain/left brain duality are all evidence of metaphor disguised as science.

Metaphor

Theories of acting, experiential descriptions of it and discussions about training to achieve expertise in it tend toward the metaphoric. Why? Well, there is at the heart of acting, as with all creative acts, something mysterious and inspirational that eludes discursive language. Pointing to the post-structural notion that meaning is deferred and merely signified by narratives that are socially constructed and embody hidden ideologies, Zarrilli (1995, p. 10) suggests that “if propositional language can never fully represent acting, then actors have no choice but to ‘live by’ metaphors. The question is not whether languages of acting can/should be metaphorical, but what specific ‘metaphors’ are actors to live by’?”

Metaphor also figures prominently in Daniel Pink’s *A Whole New Mind*, in fact his central proposition regarding hemispheric specialization is described as a “powerful metaphor for interpreting our present and guiding our future” (Pink, 2006, p. 3). For Pink, metaphor is essential in “forging empathic connections”, “communicating experiences” and “slaking the thirst for meaning” (p. 140). The right brain/ left brain dichotomy is a metaphor because it substitutes the concrete for the abstract, couching in pseudo-scientific physical terms fundamental cognitive and behavioural aptitudes. Or as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) would say, as metaphor, hemispheric differentiation maps from the source domain (the physical brain) to the target domain (philosophical attitudes to life). Pink elaborates on his metaphor: “This is not a book about neuroscience, of course. It’s a book that uses neuroscience to create a metaphor. But even (perhaps especially) in the realm of metaphor, it’s important to be true to the science” (p. 26n). In other words, because the science is somewhat discredited, I’ll call it a metaphor, but, rhetorically-speaking, I’d still like you to think of it as science.

According to Kenneth Burke (1969a, p. 503) “metaphor is a device for seeing something in *terms* of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this”. Burke’s suggestive comments on this, the first of his “master tropes”, are centred on the idea of “perspective”, that by bringing to bear a variety of perspectives we can “establish a character’s reality” (p. 504). Metaphor is a rhetorical device, a form of tropological argument that functions epistemologically not just to convey truth but also to create truth: “metaphors invent meaning” (Fritch, & Leeper 1993, p.187 & 193). Metaphor does this in part by condensing or truncating argument, reconfiguring it, “and then, through the associations it brings to the unit of discourse, can be used to extend the argument in new directions” (Birdsell, 1993, p. 182). If “the heart of the rhetorical function of metaphor lies in the redescription of the immanent that it seeks to elicit” (Fritch, & Leeper 1993, p. 192) we can see two contrasting, but sometimes overlapping, approaches when it is applied to acting: the scientific as outlined above and the mystical which follows below. The scientific approach focuses on the need for the actor to access the ‘hidden’ parts of the mind—the ‘back brain’ or the ‘right hemisphere’. The mystical approach leads to hypnosis, ‘shamanism’ and ‘trance’. In both there is an attempt to construct the mind as something in need of healing, in need of making whole.

Psychophysical training

It is the response to the idea of a bifurcated awareness and its ramifications that lies behind much modern acting theory and training (Wilkinson, 2009, pp. 18-19). In particular, the notion of a divided and dislocated doubleness at the centre of the actor’s performance has led to developments in an integrated approach to acting,

where the self-consciousness implicit in the regulatory control of performance at the expense of the truly ‘creative state’ is seen as detrimental to ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ acting based on an instinctive or intuitive process. Usually associated with the attempt to overcome Cartesian mind-body dualism, approaches to acting stemming from Artaud and Grotowski emphasize a psychophysical *gestalt* (Zarrilli, 1995, pp. 14-15). The integration of the divided self is achieved through physical training that will “reconnect the actor with instinctive processes” and generate a “form of awareness that goes beyond the notional duality of the actor’s consciousness (identified in Diderot’s paradox) to realise a heightened state of performance consciousness which Artaud had reached for as an ideal” (Hodge, 2000, p. 242).

This “heightened state of performance consciousness” was anticipated by Constantin Stanislavsky, who described it as the “superconscious region of creativeness” ruled by inspiration, “an area outside our comprehension and upon which we are helpless in our consciousness when we attain it” (Stilson, 2005, p. 39). Along with his later work on physical acting, Stanislavsky’s emphasis on the central mysticism at the heart of his creative practice was largely ignored in the Strasbergian psychological reworking of his system. Although “he uses the words ‘spirit’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘soul’ 136 times” in his three books, the idea of a “spiritual component in acting” did not conform to the 20th century rationalist ethos; it made western theatre academics and practitioners somewhat “squeamish” (Lloyd, 2006, p. 73). Indeed, Stanislavsky’s chart in the appendix to *An Actor Works on Himself* (1938), which depicts what takes place in the actor’s soul during the creative process (see Fig 2 below), was excluded from translations of his work, perhaps, according to Carriere (2010, p. 154), because of the “arcane nature of the illustration”.

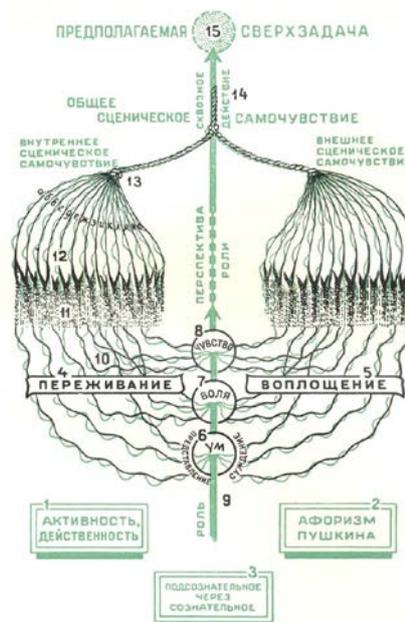


Figure 2. The Schematic of the Soul of the Actor in the Creative Process According to the Tenets of Stanislavski's System

Source: Carriere (2010, p. 150)

However, as Sharon Carnicke (2000, p.14) has noted, Stanislavsky's works were subjected to editing and censorship by the Soviet state to make them more politically correct. This diagram was an attempt, according to Jonathan Pitches (2005, p. 111), to conform to "the Stalinist political environment in 1938" by objectifying the intuitive processes of acting: it is, in fact, a scientific representation of the soul as an electrical circuit. White (2006, p. 88) suggests that

just as Soviet-era censors distorted Stanislavsky's system to conform to Marxist materialism, many modern scholars, in focusing on the alleged science of his theories, have neglected the fact that Stanislavsky granted equal importance to spirituality. The system is a holistic approach to acting, and, if taken as such, it addresses the actor's entire apparatus—mind, body, and spirit."

He links Stanislavsky's unified creative state with yogic practice, a mystical affirmation of 'wholeness' that now finds its way into current, mainstream acting handbooks. For example, Robert Benedetti (2009, p. 16) says

as you rediscover your own relaxed wholeness, you will realize that you are, by your very nature, connected to your world. Your sense of a separate "I" bounded by your physical body is a limited understanding of your place in nature. Your ideas of an "inner" and an "outer" world are only different attitudes toward experience; the world is one world, which we merely experience as "inner" and "outer". We are in it, and it is in us. Your breath reveals this

Everything is connected; the dualism of mind/body, inner/outer is an illusion.

Altered states of consciousness

Behind the scientific explanations and the mystical beliefs surrounding the actor's experience of performing is the assumption that inspired acting entails a special mode of awareness. Stanislavsky provides an example of the actor's subjective state using his alter-ego, the student actor Kostya, who, paralysed with stage fright suddenly connects with the 'creative state':

it almost seemed as though for a moment the listeners strained forward, and that through the audience there ran a murmur. The moment I felt this approval a sort of energy boiled up in me. I cannot remember how I finished the scene, because the footlights and the black hole [the proscenium arch] disappeared from my consciousness, and I was free of all fear (Hornby, 1992, p. 70).

Similarly, Leabhard (2004, pp. 324-5) discussing the work of Copeau quotes Jean Dasté's experiences of achieving this state of transcendence:

I have always remembered my first discovery of going beyond myself. ... I was a twenty-two year-old hothead; I wanted to do so well that I never did well. Always tense, never self-possessed, with a throaty voice, I articulated poorly and spoke too fast, thinking I was sincerely living the situation. ... One fine evening, on tour ... during my great love scene, without having prepared more than usual, I suddenly felt in possession of my voice, of my elocution, of my gestures, in control despite myself; I could prolong a movement, a silence, an intonation. I found myself in a different time, a different space, in another dimension. When the scene was over, filled with an immense joy, I entered the wings, glowing; Jacques Copeau was waiting for me, he took me in his arms, hugged me and said: 'Tonight, you acted.'

What is being described here is a form acting that is likened to a shamanic possession. “When I am performing” says an actor of the shamanic persuasion, “I have a heightened consciousness of what I’m doing on the stage in relation to my other actors but time ceases to exist. I forget where I am, or indeed how long I have been there, I am not under time’s control” (Karafistan, 2003, p. 158). This trance-like state involves a loss of self-consciousness and is reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of Flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter”(p. 4). According to Karafistan (2003, p. 162), Csikszentmihalyi “has described the ‘flow’ in performance as the state where action and awareness merge, destroying a dualistic perspective: a performer becomes aware of his actions, but not of the awareness itself”. Similar to “the subjective experience of athletes”, these “waking trances or flow experiences also strongly resemble actors’ subjective accounts of the creative state they naturally fall into during performance” (Klein, 1995, pp. 1-2). The inducing of this trance-like state as a desideratum of actor training is linked by Klein (1995) to the concept of hemispheric cognitive processing, where altered states of consciousness “tend to lessen the stronghold of the left brain and promote right brain participation, restoring a balance between the two hemispheres and establishing a communication link between the conscious and unconscious mind” (p. 309).

The ‘New Age’

The New Age is not really new. Although prefigured in late 19th Century occultism, as witnessed in Stanislavsky, it is at the point where the ‘spirit’ is added to the ‘bodymind’ wholeness that that we enter what is currently called the New Age: a time of harmony and understanding where the mind’s true liberation is achieved through mystic crystal revelation. This trinity of ‘mind, body, spirit’ is reflected in the marker word ‘holistic’, a word increasingly applied to actor-training:

Involving body and mind, psychophysical techniques are holistic, that is they view the actor from the vantage of somatic, mental, emotional and spiritual integration. Therefore, while employing exercises involving isolated awareness, the thrust of the work is essentially moving the actor toward synthesis with multiple entrance points. The hologram becomes a metaphor for this kind of work where the whole is contained in a part. Such strategies for the actor tend to be inclusive rather than exclusive, although ultimately artistic choice making and clarity of a defining action must grow out of this multiple path exploration (Morgan, 2006, p. 24).

Holism is a philosophical concept that “seems to be the cornerstone of the New Age movement”, a movement based on opposition to “western culture with its rational, positivist paradigm” (including dualistic fragmentation) and adherence to “a common source of inspiration, namely ‘secularized esotericism’ mixed with eastern philosophy/religion” (Askehave, 2004, p. 10). New Age holism lays emphasis on the ‘higher self’ which is the spiritual extension of the earth-bound ego. For this reason, much of the thrust of New Age spiritualism is toward self-transcendence. In actor training, the integration of the mind and body is associated with systems such as Alexander technique: “In the early 1900s, F.M. Alexander was one of the first to dispute the pervasive mind/body dichotomy of his time with the holistic term, ‘self-use’” (Chabora, 1994, p. 22). This concept is explained below:

The development of self-use training for the performer seems to me one of the most important activities in actor training going on today. It is uncompleted work, needing both extension and synthesizing. Our older acting training was too narrowly focused on acting as thinking. The new emphasis shares with the newer psychologies the breakdown of the old body-vs.-mind dichotomy. Man is seen as a whole-mind-body and body-mind being one. The actor talks totally with body, out of a greater self-awareness. Organically correct self-use is the only sure basis for any expressive-use of self, as the actor in all kinds of performance situations turns himself into a living metaphor. Whatever he does, this actor will find himself earth-anchored, unified, tension releasing, always aware of his flows of energy, centering, and joyously calling (Clay, 1972, p. 22).

At the heart of these descriptions of an organic and holistic form of acting is an affirmation of the creative state as something mystical.

If New-Age acting approaches suggest a link between 'self-use' and yoga—the ancient system of harmonizing and centering mind, body and spirit, the manuals for guiding the acting student frequently take the form of 'self-help' instruction. While self-help books are rhetorical constructs that employ a range of devices designed to authenticate the writer's message (Askehave, 2004; Lee, 2007; Cherry, 2008; Woodstock, 2006), I am interested less in their instrumental than in their constitutive function.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Aristotelian theory describes the workings of rhetoric from an instrumental perspective: namely, agent-centred discourse that by suatory means influences the hearer. Modern approaches to rhetoric tend to see it as culturally and socially situated. For Kenneth Burke (1969b, p. 43) rhetoric is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation". Burke's rhetoric is associated with "collaboration and mediation rather than with instrumental persuasion" (Heath, 2001, p. 375). Central to his view of the rhetorical process is identification, the sharing of views through symbolic interchange for either collaborative or competitive ends. Identification can lead to consubstantiation, a way of thinking and acting together, and to transcendence. Burke's theory provides a way of seeing rhetoric as community-forming, the transcendence of individualism in favour of "shared knowledge that marks collective affiliation" (Heath, 2001, p. 377).

These two approaches to rhetoric, the instrumental and constitutive, are not mutually exclusive. They are in fact simply different perspectives on the same experience, differentiated from each other primarily from the standpoint of communication theory and an underlying philosophy on the end of the rhetorical process. The means or techniques within the rhetorical artefact remain constant. However, for purposes of this paper, I suggest that while the techniques can be analysed from an instrumental perspective, the overall purpose of the discourse on actor-training is constitutive in nature. As Gaonkar (2001, p. 159) suggests, constitutive rhetoric is audience rather than agent-centred, with the audience as "the co-producers at both ends of the rhetorical transaction" in so far as the discourse is created (invented) and received (judged) according to a consensus. This is a reflection of the fact that according to the theory of constitutive rhetoric, the construction of the 'audience is logically prior to its being addressed, and the rhetorical artefact is created and shaped by the former's perceived collective identity. According to Maurice Charland (2001, p. 616), as a genre, constitutive

rhetoric simultaneously presumes and asserts a fundamental collective identity for its audience, offers a narrative that demonstrates that identity, and issues a call to affirm that identity. This genre warrants action in the name of that common identity and the principles for which it stands

An important aspect of this rhetoric is that the language used in creating a community of practice, in this case the acting community, tends toward exclusivity. Much of the discourse about acting uses a lexicon tacitly understood by teacher and student but not accessible to the lay person (Prior, 2007, p. 295). This, the creation of a specialised language, a “jargon of the group”, can, as Greer (2002, p. 118) suggests, eventually become a “barrier between those who ‘speak’ the language and those who do not”:

common words and terms are “reinvented” to have deeper meanings exclusively for group members. An actor trained in the System or Method knows the use of “creative state,” “communion,” “subtext,” “in the moment,” “third eye,” “coming down,” “transcendence,” etc. to have specialized meanings which are definable but not always observable by spectators or teachers when they occur for the actor. The actor in training is encouraged to adopt and use the new lingo to demonstrate comprehension. The implementation of the specialized language of acting adds to the group cohesiveness and can also serve as a behavioural norm expectation by members of the group.

Thus, the concept of ‘energy’, an abstraction linked to the idea of a ‘life force’, is deployed constantly “as a kind of etheric substance capable of both supporting and transmitting the will of the performer”; it can apparently be controlled, focussed, channelled and directed (McVittie, 2007, p. 162). It is of course yet another metaphor, one that can re-constitute the individual self. As Ned Manderino (1989, p. 140) points out

the energy of top young actors has both physical and psychic qualities. Perhaps the glow of their physical persona has something to do with their psychic energy. Practitioners of psychic energy create strong, healthy auras surrounding an inner organ, such as the heart, and then permit its healthy glow to be channelled into the rest of the body.

This energy can lead to transcendence.

Changing yourself

If the end of constitutive rhetoric is toward a shared identity, the approach is through the individual. As with many self-help manuals on actor-training, the emphasis in Daniel Pink’s *A Whole New Mind*, falls on the transformation of ‘the self’. The onus to achieve betterment lies with the reader. In spite of the various exercises and portfolios of practice, there is a sense that the act of reading the manual is an end in itself, deferring actual self-improvement in the world and replacing it with an imagined, vicarious one (Cherry, 2008). Reading a book on how to achieve right brain thinking becomes the actual achieving of right brain thinking. Reading a manual on acting is the magic pill for achieving talent. That, of course, is in the nature of self-help books which pretty much by definition posit the individual’s ability to achieve self-transformation (Cherry, 2008).

One of the ways these self-help manuals create a receptive reader is through metaphor. As tropological argument metaphor functions by condensing argument, pulling “logic into narrative realms and narrative into the service of logic” (Birdsell

1993, p. 182). Poetic logic tends to be enthymematic. Enthymeme usually involves an observation, a generalization and an inference. One of the terms is missing, often the inference. That is, it calls forth, in a reader-response way, an audience completion to the argument and thus serves to engage it, essentially filling in the blanks. Take, for example, the following promotional blurb for a web-site on a holistic acting method called “ENERGISE” which

invites actors to simultaneously connect with a character using the notion of ‘character’s vibration.’ Furthermore, it will enable you to invite the character in and let the character lead you throughout playing the part. (Starlight, n.d.)

Implicit in this surrendering to the reified fictional persona is the spatial metaphor “in”, playing the part as journey, the guide as a channelling metaphor, and most important the enabling metaphor of invitation. Note in particular the ‘connection’ with the reified character—the implication being that it’s like finding a friend. The same website explains that “ENERGIZE is the fusion of fundamental and realist acting techniques ... with cutting edge energy healing modalities, thus creating a new acting method” (Starlight, n.d.). Acting, here, is understood as therapy for the self.

Eric Morris, an acting teacher who espouses a holistic, shamanistic approach to acting, calls his method “BEING”, which “is not just a way of working, it is a complete philosophy and a way of life”. He enjoins his readers

to have the luxury of being able to do what you want with your life, to experience who you are and what you want, to pursue your work for your own personal fulfilment and to reap the rewards of the creative process, this is what BEING affords. If you use the exercises in this book and make them part of your life, and they become the fabric of your behaviour, you will embark on a journey that leads to the never-never-land of wonderfully full living experiences. The work not only enriches your life enormously, it allows you to act on a level that is unique and rare in the theatre. You, the artist, will develop the totality of your own individual statement (Morris, & Hotchkis, 2002, p. 174)

As Lee (2007, p. 96) observes, the discovery of ‘Being’ is a recurring motif in mind-body-spirit books, the capitalization of the first letter working rhetorically to “present Being as a proper noun, thus reifying it into existence as an actual entity. Morris capitalizes the entire word and uses it incessantly, interspersing its thematic appearances with what he calls a “Jellybean which is a statement, a thought, or a concept designed to pinpoint specifics”. Representative “Jellybeans” include “No Acting Please”, “The Unconscious Is Where Your Talent Lives” and “If You Start With An Empty Blackboard, You Can Write Anything On It”.

Changing the world

Much New Age rhetoric is constitutive in the sense that it creates shared beliefs. The isolated individual reader becomes part of a larger community. Lee (2007, p. 100) suggests that the transformational aspects of mind-body-spirit books lead from the personal to the collective: “while a personal-global linkage relates the individual to a collective or totality of consciousness, the claim is made that global change and broad-based social transformation will occur through personal change alone”. Woodstock (2006, p. 324) says that this is “the core of self-help’s positive thinking philosophy, the genre’s ‘way of life,’ that a change in the thoughts of an individual will in turn change the shape of the world”. Similarly, the holistic actor-

training manual or web-based equivalent asserts a larger mission. Thus we see in the ENERGISE acting method that

Holistic Acting incites performers to reclaim their artistic responsibilities to change the world, one performance at a time. Going back to the roots of performing artists' history, ENERGIZE infuses the work with spiritual mindfulness and a renewed sense of artistic ethics. By connecting with their Highest Creative Self, performers view themselves –and their work– as precious instruments of change (Starlight, n.d.).

The implication in becoming a “precious instrument of change” is the idea that there is something that needs to be transformed. Serving here as a representative advocate for the New Age of acting, Ned Manderino (1989, p. 52) not only “offers practical assistance for the actor who wishes to be liberated from conventional acting techniques and to celebrate his/her creativity in a joyous new way” but also, and more importantly, because the “transpersonal approach seeks to create a new type of functioning in the actor based on higher levels of consciousness” there will be an “exploration in mind and spirit expansion which may prove to be a silent weapon in global politics”. Let’s hope so.

The focus on the ‘self’ in this clearly commercial field of actor training is, in spite of disclaimers, surely an extension of the Strasbergian ideological obsession that as Carnicke (1999) suggests, “compulsively and therapeutically concerns itself with self expression” (p. 75). That same impulse, as one of the reviewers of this paper helpfully notes, “turns the rhetorical discourse away from discussions of craft towards notions of healing.” Consequently, there is a promise that when the students in the “for-profit” schools fail to find work, they can at least experience the fruits of a “transformed self, whatever that might mean”.

Conclusion

It may seem that the definition of what constitutes ‘acting’ for the purpose of this paper is left rather vague and that the artistically sublime has been somehow merged with the manifestly ridiculous. But the apparent conflation of acting as the endeavour of skilled professionals, as the serious subject of non-commercial academies, and as the excessive nonsense found in the competitive ‘for-profit’ sector is, in fact, an assertion that all discourse on acting, whatever its provenance, is rhetorical. The nature of this constitutive rhetoric changes according to “the rhetorical situation”, a term coined in 1968 by Lloyd Bitzer, which describes the emergence of rhetorical discourse as a response to “exigence, audience and constraints” (Jassinsky, 2001, pp. 694-5).¹ Across the spectrum of the acting world the supporting rhetorical discourse on actor training, including the need for it, will necessarily conform to the context of its emergence. The Method as promoting the idea of acting as an “instinctive natural art” can lead to the idea that, especially in the medium of film, training is to be abjured and that actors should simply “play themselves” (Carnicke, 1999, pp. 84-5). Similarly, and significantly, Carole Zucker (1999, p. 153) reports that from a series of interviews with British actors, “in spite of the classical training of the large majority of the interviewees, most actors believe that acting cannot be taught.” It seems clear, then, that just as the experience of acting remains a mystery that can only be spoken about in figurative ways, so, too, the various approaches to dealing with the dual consciousness at its heart are just examples of ways to “talk the talk”.

Notes

¹ An exigence is a “social ill or significant problem in the world, something to which people must attend”; a rhetorical audience is one that is “open to, and interested in, the discourse and possesses the capacity to act as a mediator of change,” and the constraints “are obstacles that influence or impede an advocate’s ability to engage an exigence successfully” (Jassinsky, 2001, pp. 694-5).

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