

EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 24

Ever-Speaking Being

Michael Dick

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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24. EVER-SPEAKING BEING

Michael Dick (Germany)

What I call the ‘ever-speaking being’ of humanness is drawn from my investigations on elementary movements and the nature of the human instrument for performing arts. This contribution is an extract from the manuscript *Finger Exercises for Actors: An Elementary Teaching and Practice for Performing Arts*.¹

Introducing the term ‘practice’ into the field of the performing arts says, first of all, that skills, knowledge and personal growth need to come from experience gained through practical activity and, secondly, that the instrument of performing arts always concerns and constitutes the whole human being. Lastly, using the term practice pays tribute to the limitlessness of our potential for humanness, both in development and attainment.

Just as fine artists use paint, canvas, and brushes for their artwork, performing artists use their own body, mind, and feeling. A pianist exercises permeability of fingering and presence of tone.² This chapter presents these two fundamental aspects of practice – ‘permeability’ and ‘presence’ – as they are applied to the performing arts. This is followed by a description of an introductory lesson in an acting class. The three essential elements of a performing arts instrument – body, mind/spirit/speech, and feeling/voice – are addressed with practical instructions and guidance, so the reader can ‘try it out at home.’ Since the explorations presented start with daily life movement, it is possible for anyone to read this chapter and relate it directly to their own experience. The chapter ends with a short

1 This teaching took shape and was validated over a period of 12 years (1999 to 2011), in which I was teaching at an acting school in Cologne, Germany.

2 For pianists, fingers are the physical part of the body that needs most practice with the instrument. So the title *Finger Exercises for Actors* highlights the main ways acting students need to apply themselves in their art-form.

description of a novel kind of blocking rehearsal that has emerged from these practices, as one example of an application for everyday professional theatrical practice.

Our Speaking Being

Human society is made up of communicative, social beings who are always inter-connected, consciously or unconsciously. Human consciousness cannot but be affected by what emanates from our bodies, feelings, and thoughts. Body, mind, and feeling are constituent elements of this 'ever-speaking-ness' of being human. In education for the performing arts, becoming more conscious of these elements is seen as most closely corresponding to becoming aware of the ever-speaking nature of humanness. Body, mind, and feeling can be seen as the agents, media, and contents of any communication happening in performing arts and in life as a whole. Students are usually quite young, coming with limited life experiences to an education for performing arts. Investigating their own character and taking on and identifying with other characters, usually expands and works on their personalities. To a certain degree, education for the performing arts can always lead to transformation for those participating. 'Practice' is an integral part of a path to enact an embodied life.

Permeable and Present

Permeability and presence are two fundamental potentials of being human. I will define what I mean by permeability and presence in the three categories of body, feeling, and mind.

Permeability

Body: For an actor, 'permeability' will express itself on the physical level as capacity for embodiment. Like changelings who can take on different forms, shapes, and physical conditions, actors need to exercise their limbs, organs, bones, joints, etc. to become permeable enough, so they can facilitate transformation.

Feeling: One could see a feeling tone being characterized and determined by its quality of vibration: amplitude and frequency. How much actors can make themselves available as a refined membrane to receive, embody, and emit these vibrations, and in this way volunteer for all possible kinds of feelings, will show the extent and limits of their permeability in this realm.

Mind: On a mind level, thinking-patterns, deeply imprinted beliefs, and unconscious orientations can become a hindrance to a more open-minded, ‘translucent’ attitude. To assimilate and to follow mental processes such as rationalization, reflection, analysis, and differentiation with a free mind affords accessibility and intellectual flexibility. In regard to depth of thought and the extent of understanding, actors need to apply themselves in a holistic, integrated, and organic way. It is important that the receptivity of the mind is not split off from that of the rest of the sensual apparatus. Otherwise over-intellectuality, lack of empathy, and more pathological consequences may arise. If the mind moves freely and permeably in alignment with body sensation and feeling tone, then one feels clear, open, and less fixated or controlling. The mind may even feel more tangibly knowable.

The practice of permeability refines and purifies the medium of ‘ever-speaking-ness’ and can lead to a sense of transparency that facilitates the embodiment of boundless possibilities. It also invokes dimensionality, in-depth feeling, and access to intelligence and freedom.

Presence

Body: In addressing ‘presence’, an actor would look at the relationship to him/herself first rather than in a more conventional approach to presence in terms of having an impact on others (usually an audience), or as personal magnetism or charisma. This is a crucial change of perspective. Facing myself as the bodily instrument of my art for the first time, I can see that ‘I am that instrument, it is this body, my feeling, my mind’. And this is the instrument that needs to be looked at, sensed and felt, explored and exercised: I see my body as ‘a forming, telling, portraying, cultivating and ever-speaking agent’. In time, this change in self-awareness will open up performers’ consciousness to the presence of what could be called the *inner stage*³: a continuous, spatial, bodily felt, and holistic awareness of what is going on inside, while also being present in their acting on the outer theatre-stage or *stages of life* as well.

All that appears in our field of experience as human beings – inner and outer – emerges within our soul⁴ or individual consciousness as an imprint, and as Martin Buber’s inner *Erregungsbild* (excitement-

³ *Inner stage* and *stage of life* are terms taken from Prapto’s vocabulary. There isn’t space to define them completely in this chapter.

⁴ My understanding of soul comes from my studies of A.H. Almaas (2004).

picture), a “dynamic, stirring image (...) streaming through” the body.⁵ These inner excitement-pictures will be noticeable to a sensitive person and can be recognized, felt, and sensed from within. It is my experience that the more an actor becomes conscious of these imprints, the more visible they will be, radiating out to an audience and by that means will become ‘present.’ This is a phenomenon that often amazes students, when they recognize what effect it has when they turn toward their immediate bodily experience on stage. They stop being concerned about the effect of their ‘playing’ and instead become increasingly able to concentrate and focus their attention on the activity, text, partner, etc.

Feeling: Presence in feeling needs involvement with heart: courage, curiosity, compassion. It feels always new and vulnerable.

Mind: Presence in mind means being awake, open, and aware of what is happening inside this mind. Simply said, what is needed is laborious exercise.

At first, practice can lead students *towards* presence. In time, they can develop a capacity to be *with* presence more often, and more continuously. Actors want to become present and be sensitive in and with their bodies all the time. They want to feel all of their emotions, and want to be able to allow the deepest, most vulnerable places within to come forth, as needed. Actors can be crisp and awake, flexible, and brilliant to grasp the depth of thoughts, to let their minds be informed and pervaded by their beauty. Further down the road, some might be ushered into a kind of embodiment that resonates with excellence and mastery. Some then might experience how to be cool and ablaze on stage at the same time, how to be fully relaxed, playful, spontaneous, and highly concentrated. *Here and now*, completely identified – and not identified – with their characters, and acting, they are then *in* presence, able to be *it*, whatever this ‘it’ might be.

To become permeable and present can be seen as a precondition for being able to work effectively as a performer. Its practice can become the one first ritual for one’s personal studies and can be introduced as a general warm-up in any theatre company. Presence and permeability are key conditions for further application in monologue, dialogue, and ensemble work.

⁵ From Martin Buber (1999). The German term *Erregungsbild* that Buber uses, which I translate as ‘excitement-picture’, has not been directly translated into English, but paraphrased as quoted above. The chapter is on the evolution of language, on how before human beings speak (spoke), all outer world is (was) experienced as “inner excitement-picture”.

A Practice Session

Arriving in a class of acting students learning elementary practices, I will let them know that I am more interested in their impressions than in attending to or evaluating their expression. We focus on how they feel during the exercise, and what they are experiencing. Developing a kind of neutral work-attitude becomes fundamental to this work of just perceiving and receiving impressions and learning to find a language to articulate them. Even though this usually will not make students stop judging themselves in the beginning, it can help them to enter exercises.

“Please don’t worry about your expression, rather start by shifting your attention a bit, noticing what you sense in your body. Whatever position you are in now, whether you are sitting or lying, standing or walking, start from where you are. Let yourself be informed by what you notice. You may want to touch or rub your limbs to feel your body more, to warm yourself up, or even to alleviate tension or pain you might be feeling. Explore freely what is arising from your daily life movement, where this exercise always starts. Maybe you want to relax in one part of your body and stretch another part. You can use the force of gravity as your partner in relaxing. Notice when you would like to feel your muscles more, to reach out, to expand in your movement. You can alter direction and levels. From lying, you can go to crawling and sitting, to standing up and walking. Recognize any physical or emotional impact these positions and levels might have on you. Notice mind-activity, images, memories related to the psycho-developmental stages of these postural changes. And find your way up and down. Pay attention to flow arising in your movement. At some point, please stop!”

Stopping is an essential part of this work’s vocabulary. Stopping is the beginning of punctuation in movement. Just as sentences have punctuation so we can understand their grammar and direction, the movement-language of our bodies has punctuation too, starting with receiving a full stop.

“In your stopping, receive your position and posture first and then receive your weight. Let go of any

additional tension not needed to keep the posture you are in now. Feel your organization from within, and in the space. And now, either follow the direction of weight, or choose a direction and start moving again. Now sense into possible movements of your joints throughout your body and softly explore them. Tensions often linger in joints and softly opening the joints through movement can release them. A single finger has got three joints, difficult to focus and to move singly. Each finger has its own character and feeling tone. Sense into those different characters of your fingers, recognize the extra sensitivity and the atmosphere they bring to your body when you let one of them lead the movement of your hand or your whole body.

Now check your state for a moment. This physical exercising can bring up emotions and thoughts that might distract you, let you drift and dream away at times. That's not bad; it's normal. When you recognize it, start to sense yourself again and let your body's movement be informed by those thoughts and feelings, allowing them to enter back into your physical reality, placing and anchoring their drifting quality in the here-and-nowness of body sensation."

Our next step will create a bridge to what already has been called the *inner stage*. It's always there waiting for us to enter. *Reading* is a tool for opening up, spreading, unfolding, and entering this inner stage.⁶ What is it we are reading here? Every gesture, posture, inner attitude, feeling, and mind pattern is part of our gesturing. Whether we are conscious of them or not, they all are saying something.

And how do we read? Inherent to a gesture is its excitement-picture. *Reading* helps us access all inner motion, stirrings, impulses, and changing tension-patterns that we become aware of in ourselves. Later reading can expand to atmosphere, the other, our physical surroundings, and subtle realms.

"Now try it out. Make a clear gesture with your hand and stop there. Or let the fingers make little changes

⁶ *Reading* is a tool Prapto uses in his terminology, which I have explored and developed further in order to apply it in my work with actors.

and each time try to contact the inner excitement-picture of each shape. Feel how those inner forms change alongside the outer forms. Can you feel it? This contact that you might feel now is reading. Again, don't worry too much about your expression. Just move and enjoy. See if you can let your focus open up to your whole arm, to the gesture of your arms and read. Let your awareness spread further to the whole of your body. Sense and feel the complete sculpture. Give attention to your moving sculpture and the flow of inner excitement-pictures will allow you to read in your unfolding story. Body-wisdom is willing to reveal its knowledge at any given moment, from instant to instant, and is offering its story to us. You might feel this challenging for your mind. Try to stay in contact with your felt sense even when your mind wants to figure out what it all means, where it all leads. Basically, your mind doesn't want to let go of control."

Reading implicitly fosters permeability and presence, which we are investigating here. Following movement along this line as a long-time practice can change our whole attitude and life orientation. We may start to find this immediacy of our general sense of being more important and dear to us than anything else, whichever stage we are on and whatever role we may be playing. Transparent, permeable spaciousness then may reveal the precise contours of role-play. Acting in this state feels simple, adequate, and authentic.

"Now, before ending, follow your own guidance for a while with all the elements and suggestions that have been introduced so far. Find your object of attention, your own thread of interest, your own intention, form, and field to immerse yourself in."

So far we have been exploring our performing instrument and this newly opened inner stage from our physical presence and body awareness. The next step for our practical exploration would then be to work with our voices in three areas:

1. **Body-sound:** this means sounds that are coming from and are directed by movements of the physical body, such as sighs, groans, and moans, and sounds from rocking, shaking, hitting, kicking, etc., or simply allowing breath to become audible. This part of the practice is of great benefit in bringing together body and voice,

finding the right placement of the voice, freeing energies, and opening the joy of playfulness. This solves lots of the issues that beginners have with expression.

2. Musical sound: in the movement from sounding to singing, we recognise vibration as a support for feeling tones. Through chakra-singing, for example, we deepen our awareness of our being as a resonating cavity, and as a body made up of sound.⁷ Working directly on emotions by what I call ‘vowel-hiking’⁸ enables us to support all possible kinds of feelings. In sounding vowels, moving slowly from one vowel to the next and pausing in between two, where the ‘impure’ vowels reside, we will come upon ‘(e)motion’.

By following profound listening practices, conducting and choosing ‘right’ pitch and note, we can learn how to sing emotions. By integrating movement and voice, this moving sculpture can shape and form a character, and become a character’s song and feeling-dance. When finally we let text come through this conduit, feeling can colour whole passages of text into one emotion (hate, love, pride, courage, joy, whatever you like) or even more flexibly, move from one tone of emotion to another. These passages can become building blocks in developing a character through a scene or a whole play. One can learn to experience this movement as a continuous flow of a constantly transforming feeling-body, the moving and sounding sculpture of ever-speaking feeling.⁹

3. Formed sound: either pre-lingual or lingual, this is an oral-linguistic expression of sound. This is a whole field of work, especially for acting students. In practical terms, we would continue to explore words and their meanings from their constituent parts. We already have found vowels as a conduit for the vibrating body of emotion. Now we turn to the physical in consonants. To sensing into the mechanics of their pronunciation and articulation in the mouth and throat we add the experience of their quality in

⁷ **Chakra singing** is only one of several different ways of achieving this. It is a practice in which specific vowels are sung to open up certain areas and chakra-points of our body energetically. There are the three lower chakras: survival, sexual and social; the central heart chakra, and the upper three connected with expression and qualities of consciousness.

⁸ **Vowel-hiking** is a term I use for one of the exercises developed by English artist Guy Dartnell in his voic(e)motion practice.

⁹ All the steps described here have been developed on the basis of Dartnell’s voic(e)motion. His exercises are highly influenced by his exposure to the Roy Hart theatre approach to voice development.

movement (squeeze, hiss and sizzle, pop, etc.), when spread onto the whole physical body. What is revealing itself then, is what we could call the words' inherent soul, a pre-lingual experience, or again Martin Buber's excitement-picture. These spirit/mind-awakening, word-birthing impressions have a palpable effect on/in us.¹⁰ We do further research on words by investigating their experiential link to sensory roots. The word 'frog,' for example, can easily be recognized as stemming from the sensory field of sound, originating in hearing. Words are often determined through sensory linkages and their specific inner motion.

This way language will become more accessible as material for our artwork, free from incorrect accentuation, subtext, and emotional predeterminations, experienced more like an animated being with its own life and presence. Finally, a word might evolve into something more vivid than just its meaning alone. Word-bodies can attract associations, word-lineages, and word-families to play around with. We soon may feel how much more words are moving us, rather than us directing them. We recognize how much more we are *in-form*-ed by our wording and our choice of words. A word as a body in its own right; this is what needs to be imparted to a student in this part of the practice. Usually this segment of work is introduced with a lecture about the evolution and nature of language.

Eventually all the layers are included and integrated in our movement session: those of feeling, word and mind, and movement of our physical body. All move together in accord.

Reflection on experience is vital after a movement session. Emphasizing interest in discrimination, students may learn to appreciate and give meaning to their findings, rather than, as so often, wishing to be on a par with their fellow students. In this way, they may pick up the scent to find the trace *of* and *to* their own unique voice. In this context, the conversation is guided by principles like: everybody will be heard, will speak only for and of themselves, and may finish without being interrupted. Through these principles, we cultivate discourse, enjoy precise description, and invoke further inquiry.

A Blocking Rehearsal

Any drama or text used for dramatization usually gives hints such as stage directions or spoken words pointing to the nature of a character, the location of a scene, or other relevant conditions for a

¹⁰ I thoroughly explored this part of the teaching in a decade of research, directing, and acting in 'Healing Theatre Cologne' between 1988 and 1998.

play. Entering a blocking rehearsal with a permeable and present instrument, one can sense, feel, analyze, and understand holistically an author's intention. Hence a blocking rehearsal can become the analysis of a text's body-mind-feeling from within the location of a character and scenery, and can become a road to identification, which means feeling the character's location, situation, and position in space and time from within one's soul and body-layers. Embodying those feelings might bring about insights into a character's motives that can be adjusted to the scene and to other characters, be seen in the context of the play's topic and so on. Including all elements will show the relevance of personal experience for final artistic decisions and composition.

Where the narration comes from can be felt deeply and authentically. How it will be delivered to an audience artistically remains open. Blocking rehearsal in this way can be seen as part of a vocabulary of an elementary teaching and practice for performing arts and, with it, an aging technique can be awakened to new life.

Concluding Remark

To realize and actualize the ever-speaking nature of being through the practice of permeability and presence cleanses the mirrors that our art and life stage can become. What is said then will be plain and audible. May excellence in theatre and in the evolution of the performing arts benefit from such development and the growth of those acting in them!

~ ~ ~

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