

THE LABOR OF ACTION FOR THE OPERATION OF TRUTH: THE  
PHENOMENOLOGY AND DRAMATIC PLATONISM OF MEISNER TECHNIQUE  
AS REFINED AND EXTENDED BY WILLIAM ESPER

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate School  
At the University of Missouri

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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By  
THEODORE DAVID MARCIA  
Dr. David A. Crespy, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,  
have examined the Dissertation entitled  
THE LABOR OF ACTION FOR THE OPERATION OF TRUTH: THE  
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Presented by Theodore David Marcia

A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. David A. Crespy

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Dr. Cheryl Black

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Dr. Joseph Bien

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Dr. Catherine Gleason

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Vaughn Dean Williamson-Marcia

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The phenomenology of a dissertation is strange; the thing itself is predominately created in solitude, yet it wouldn't exist at all without the assistance and inspiration of innumerable people. First of all I would like to thank the members of my committee. Dr. David Crespy has been a friend and mentor for the majority of my adult life and continues as such and more as the chair of my dissertation committee. He is never less than a mensch among menschen. Dr. Cheryl Black has guided me through the rigors of scholarly research with her usual grace and uncanny attention to detail from my first semester onward. Likewise Dr. Joseph Bien has imparted a small fraction of his wisdom and knowledge regarding the application of philosophy and philosophical methods to this project with his avuncular wit and casually penetrating insights. Finally, Dr. Cat Gleason has provided invaluable service from her own perspective and experience. I would also like to thank Dr. Alexandra Socarides for her incredibly helpful advice on poetic theory and writing from drafts. Thanks also to my fellow graduate students for all of their help and support over these last three and a half years, as well as to all of my undergraduate students, and especially to the cast of last year's production of *Reasons to be Pretty*, whose talent and dedication continue to amaze me. Thanks as well to my old friends and classmates from Rutgers, especially Shelley and Dennis Delaney and Rick Sordelet, folks who make the work and make it count every day. On an even more personal note, thanks to Nancy Benedict for her continuing love, support, and incredible understanding, regarding the convolutions of what I grandiosely refer to as "my process." As well as to my family and absent friends, who taught me the joys and heartbreak of this precarious life of ours.

“The normal man and the actor do not mistake imaginary situations for reality, but extricate their real bodies from the living situation to make them breath, speak and if need be, weep in the realm of imagination.”<sup>1</sup>

“Everybody has a strategy until they start getting hit.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Daphne Merkin, “Mike Tyson Moves to the Suburbs,” *New York Times*, 3/15/2011. Quotation attributed to Mike Tyson, as is the variation, “Everybody has a plan till they get punched in the mouth.”

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation deals with the application of philosophical thought and methods to school of actor training known as Meisner technique. The initial goal is to illuminate and improve the theory, practice, and pedagogy of Meisner technique through rigorous analysis and critique based in established scholarly thought. My second purpose is to use this same philosophical lens to examine the far broader question of mimesis, specifically the nature of the relationship between the created object and the world that inspired it. My interest in this is primarily political in nature. Simply put, if the mimetic object is sourced from the hegemonic world, how can it ultimately do anything other than continually justify that world's authority, and so how may the object ultimately do anything other than collude with power? It is my contention that theatre is uniquely, perhaps even singularly well suited to address the mimetic, in unique (or non-mimetic) ways. In the course of this dissertation it has become apparent to me that my first and my second areas of research are, in fact, very much related. My concluding theory is that the overall efficacy of Meisner technique is best explained by the notion that it produces non-mimetic actors. Actors who continually create both real speech acts and real physical acts that exist as unique events in a ludic game ontology.

## CHAPTER ONE---INTRODUCTION

It is the intention of this dissertation to subject the first year of the Meisner technique of actor training, as presented in William Esper's *The Actor's Art and Craft*, to a rigorous analysis founded on philosophical inquiry and theory. The purpose of this analysis is twofold: First, to illuminate both the pedagogy and the actual practice of Meisner technique, as refined and extended by Esper, especially as this pertains to the nature of its received teaching. By this I mean what about the instructor's pedagogy and the the student's reception of the technique might be clarified and strengthened by the application of philosophical methods and theories and how might this clarification take place? Secondly, I will expand my methods and conclusions to an exploration of the dilemma of mimesis itself. Specifically, what is the nature of the relationship between the ideal and the material in the actor's experience? And, what is the relationship of the created object (the play script, the play, the production, the performance) to the world that inspired it? The art object may reference a readily recognizable social reality, or may refer solely to the contents of its creator's imagination, or may combine both of these influences to varying degrees.<sup>3</sup>

In order to address the broadest, and therefore the most philosophical questions of what is done, what is its nature, and to what end, my method of analysis will take the form of a research lens based in two key principles, the phenomenology of action and the dramatic Platonism of truth. The phenomenology of action will primarily address the nature of what is done, while the dramatic Platonism of truth will primarily address issues

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.

of formal and final purpose. While this research lens is of my own devise, it is firmly based in classical, modern, and contemporary thought that combines and applies philosophy with and to the theatre. To this end, phenomenology (as per Stanton Garner) will be defined as “the study of the structure of lived human experience, prior to its objectification, abstraction, and conceptualization.”<sup>4</sup> While action will be defined as impulse/potentiality moving towards actuality (as per Aristotle), resisted/negated by the material world in a constant dialectic (as per Hegel’s definition of experience), and that discovers its motivation in the doing of the action as opposed to preceding it (as per Merleau-Ponty).<sup>5</sup> Truth will be defined initially as common, socially agreed upon reality (plausible truth), and more ultimately as an effect-oriented operation devoid of content (dramatic Platonic truth). As such, dramatic Platonic truth is neither ideal nor material, but rather is the exception to both, and so unsettles and disrupts their stability and complacency. Thus truth itself isn’t precarious in the sense of being dependent on circumstances, uncertain, insecure, hazardous, or subject to failure, rather truth is the exceptional operation that renders both the material and the ideal precarious. This concept of truth, while developed and proposed by the contemporary thinker Martin Puchner within his theory of dramatic Platonism, is itself based on the work of both philosophers (Plato, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Deleuze, Camus, and especially the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou), and theatre artists/theorists (Wilde,

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<sup>4</sup> Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Barns, *Aristotle: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 78-79. ; Jean Hyppolite, *The Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 302. ; *P of P*, 115.

Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett).<sup>6</sup> Thus, viewed in the broadest possible terms, my research lens addresses both the issue of “What is done?” and “What is its nature?” (Action), as well as the question of “To what end?” (Truth). More narrowly, the teaching, reception, and praxis of Meisner technique may be usefully framed as the actor’s labor of action for the operation of truth, as well as that of a mimetic (or representational) process whereby the ideal attains materiality. However, the actual and essential work or labor of the actor is always the bringing into being of action, and in so doing, the generation of temporality and unique events. This distinction between the more representational elements of the theatre, most significantly the text, and the actor’s labor of action, will become more and more critical as this dissertation progresses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To date my research has found only a relatively small amount of material either published or unpublished which applies critical analysis to Meisner technique. The vast majority of what is published is decidedly haphazard, unscholarly, and intended as a training manual, some sort of personal reflection, or both. Unfortunately Meisner’s own book from 1987, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, falls into this problematic category.<sup>7</sup> While historically interesting, Meisner’s book is written in a quasi-journalistic form, and unlike Esper’s, fails to clearly chart the progression of the training. Perhaps its most fascinating quality is its apparent commitment to the depicting of Meisner as a teacher, warts and all. The portrait that emerges is jarring, distracting, and not only less than flattering, but

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 190-198.

<sup>7</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987) xix.

constantly in direct opposition to the very principles of the exercises described.<sup>8</sup> Meisner seems to crave the attention of his students and to care little about whether this attention is generated by respect, admiration, or fear.<sup>9</sup> In repetition exercises he repeatedly appears to berate students for following his rules and then contradicts those same rules by pushing them toward the creation of improvised scenes with a contrived and even vaudeville-like beginning, middle, and end. In contrast, William Esper's 2008 *The Actor's Art and Craft*, while undoubtedly authoritarian in tone, largely avoids the toxic patriarchy of Meisner's book while presenting a clearer and far more organized picture of the first year's work. And I can not only attest to the accuracy of its content based on my own direct experience of studying with Mr. Esper at Rutgers University from 1982-85, but can also place the text in its appropriate context regarding the actual praxis of Meisner technique. Another very useful published source is Victoria Hart's 2006 essay "Meisner Technique: Teaching the Work of Sanford Meisner."<sup>10</sup> Professor Hart's essay is by far the best description of the entire Meisner technique, not just isolated exercises or the first year of training. I also studied with Hart at Rutgers, as well as with Kathryn Gately and Maggie Flanigan, two other highly experienced and respected teachers of Meisner technique.

In one of the few dissertations to deal with a subject similar to mine, Rosemary Malague, writing in 2001, subjects four of the major American Stanislavski-based schools of acting to a feminist analysis.<sup>11</sup> Her criticism of Meisner the teacher, based

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 112-114.

<sup>10</sup> Victoria Hart, "Teaching the Work of Sanford Meisner," in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 51-93.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemary Malague, "Getting at the Truth: A Feminist Consideration of American Actor Training" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2001), 1-4. In the course of my writing this dissertation Dr. Malague published *An Actress Prepares: Women and the Method*, (New York: Routledge, 2012) This represents an expansion of her doctoral research in this important and grossly under-studied area regarding the endemic patriarchy, misogyny, and hetero-normativity of American Stanislavski-based actor training.

mostly on his own book, is useful, perceptive, and revealing. Malague finds Meisner to be capricious, authoritarian, and most significantly, patriarchal to an extreme which actively undercuts the value of his received training.<sup>12</sup> (One might also add that the Meisner depicted in *Sanford Meisner on Acting* frequently seems to be sexist, crassly manipulative, irrationally angry, and just plain cruel to his students for little apparent reason beyond abusing them into a quasi-childlike state of unquestioning submission.) “In this way Meisner’s students are alternately told to follow their instincts, then told that their instincts are wrong. What they are not told is how to go about making choices, since any intellectual or critical choice is forbidden.”<sup>13</sup> However; Malague also makes the mistake of equating the teacher with the technique, concluding that because Meisner himself may have been or become an imperfect vessel for his life’s work, that work itself must also be irrevocably tainted. And her conclusion that unreflective impulse (the basis of Meisner technique, Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action and indeed any discipline requiring the less-than-conscious mastery of various tasks, hereafter referred to as dissociated action) is inherently instinctive and thus uniformly primitive and to some degree violent, is never substantiated sufficiently to warrant such a broad and ultimately dismissive conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Malague’s practical knowledge of the technique itself appears superficial, academic, and based primarily on description as opposed to actual practice. Furthermore, she never differentiates or even acknowledges the difference between the reflective work done in preparation for rehearsal or performance and the actual doing of rehearsal or performance.<sup>15</sup> As I hope to illuminate throughout this dissertation, Meisner

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>13</sup> Meisner, 52-56.

<sup>14</sup> Malague, 312.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 286.

technique is not necessarily hostile to the intellect of the actor (even if Meisner himself may have been) it simply separates the more intellectual aspects of the actor's craft from those where reflection is counter-productive.

Unlike Malague's work, most of the dissertations and M.F.A. theses purporting to analyze Meisner technique simply reiterate its history along with Meisner's own biography and contain little in the way of critique or critical insight. The following five dissertations, spanning from 1992 to 2010 are the only examples (other than Malague) that my research has yet revealed that resemble my own dissertation subject. Most significant is David Z. Saltz's 1992 dissertation "The Reality of the Theater Event: Logical Foundations of Dramatic Performance" and his 2000 essay based on its conclusions "The Reality of Doing."<sup>16</sup> Saltz's conclusion offers a provocative refutation of the (still) dominant semiotic dogma that any action on stage is by its very nature pretense and pretended and that given this, real action is impossible on stage. Furthermore, his thought and methodology are based almost entirely on the same semiotic and analytic philosophy whose prevailing conclusions he refutes. Saltz's conclusion that real action is indeed possible-if difficult and by no means probable-on stage provides nothing less than a foundation for Stanislavski-based methods of actor training that is neither mystical nor delusional or based on logical fallacy. Furthermore, his combination of speech act and game theories also provides a logical explanation for the actor's power to speak truthfully, or illocutionary authority, under imaginary circumstances. As such, Saltz's theories and, especially, his method, which is refreshingly free of absolutism, serve as a model for much of this dissertation. The next

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<sup>16</sup> David Z. Saltz, "The Reality of the Theater Event: Logical Foundations of Dramatic Performance" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1993) iv.

dissertation in chronological order is Diane Clayre Cecchini Holub's 1994 "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner," which deals with the degree to which various teachers of Meisner Technique conform to, or differ from, Meisner's original teachings.<sup>17</sup> There is little in the way of analysis or critique of the method itself. Louise Mallory Stinespring's 1999 dissertation "The Principles of Truthful Acting: A Theoretical Discourse on Sanford Meisner's Practice" is a slavishly uncritical recreation of Meisner's book, augmented/echoed by the author's recollections of her own training by Meisner between 1971 and 1973.<sup>18</sup> Her sporadic invocations of Heidegger and J.L. Austin are as confusing and unconvincing as her dissertation's bibliography is sparse (For example she makes no mention of Saltz's dissertation from 1993 or Holub's from 1994).<sup>19</sup> Stinespring's 2000 essay "Just be Yourself: Derrida, Difference and the Meisner Technique" is a far more interesting, but cautionary tale regarding the application of philosophic theory to the praxis of theatre.<sup>20</sup> In it the author appears to mistake deconstruction for a philosophy unto itself as opposed to a tool of or against philosophy. However; Stinespring's attempts at equating Meisner's sense of moment-to-moment reality with Derrida's play of difference/difference, are at times, tantalizing.<sup>21</sup> Still, to my mind, it is ultimately impossible to reconcile Meisner's more Platonic/Aristotelian sense of truth as the evocation of the idea of the good or the depiction of the plausible, with

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<sup>17</sup> Diane Holub, "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner" (PhD diss., New York University, 1994), ix-xi.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Mallory Stinespring, "The Principles of Truthful Acting: A Theoretical Discourse on Sanford Meisner's Practice" (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1999), 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-40.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Mallory Stinespring, "Just be Yourself: Derrida, Difference and Meisner Technique," in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.



Derrida's relativistic, postmodern depiction of truth as at best a mere facade for the exercise of power.

Aaron Lucas Adair's 2005 dissertation "Analyzing and Applying the Sanford Meisner Approach to Acting" is an interesting and comprehensive history of Meisner's work and legacy.<sup>22</sup> However; like Darvas Ruthel Honey's 2010 dissertation ("A Comparative Study of Robert Lewis, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner in Context of Current Research about the Stanislavski System"), the only real analysis is based on the degree to which Meisner's work is perceived to correspond with or differ from Stanislavski's.<sup>23</sup> Little attempt is made to explicate or justify Meisner technique in terms of any critical theory and there is even less of an attempt made to critique the technique itself. In all of these dissertations, with the exception of Saltz and Malague, both Stanislavski and Meisner are described with an almost cultish deference incompatible to the application of critical thought especially that derived from outside of the theatre itself.

## **DIALOGIC INQUIRY**

In order to fully explicate my methodology in so far as the actual application of philosophy and philosophical methods to Meisner technique is concerned, I have chosen upon occasion to employ the structure of a fictional dialogue. While the dialogic form as a hybrid of theatre and philosophy seems aesthetically appropriate given the subject of this dissertation, my reasons for choosing to employ it have more to do with issues of practicality. My first concern is to keep theory and practice as closely aligned as is

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<sup>22</sup> Aaron Lucas Adair, "Analyzing and Applying the Sanford Meisner Approach to Acting" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 2005), 5-7.

<sup>23</sup> Darvas Ruthel Honey, "A Comparative Study of Robert Lewis, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner in Context of Current Research about the Stanislavski System" (PhD diss., Wayne State University, 2010), P2-4.

possible. While each may only be describable separately, ultimately to my mind, neither can be truly understood without the other. This connection between theory and practice is especially critical in the analysis of a phenomenon as thick and complex as theatre. Secondly, this phenomenological complexity is perhaps best conveyed by a form of the sort which brings it into being in the first place. This grounding of the theatrical experience in the text facilitates an understanding that everything outside of the actor's actual performance is preparation. To my mind the primacy of the text in Western theatre is not a deficit to be overcome, but a strength to be exploited. Specifically the dialogic form allows the description and definition of the core concept of the actor's sense of onstage reality and how this experience takes place in a duration different from that of anything else involved in the playing of the play text. Dialogic form also facilitates an experience of truth as an effect-oriented operation devoid of content, a key concept of dramatic Platonism necessary for a viable definition of what we mean by truthful action.

## **CHAPTER ORGANIZATION**

Chapter Two will establish the research lens I will apply to Esper's book in chapter five. First, I will describe my theory of acting as the labor of action. Secondly, I will present the the phenomenological theories I will be using in support of my theory. Thirdly, I address the research lens itself, consisting of the two main elements of action and truth.

In the first section of chapter two I will begin with the presentation of my theory of acting as the labor of action. Later I will extend this theory by adding the purpose or final cause of it being for the operation of truth. Secondly I will define the phenomenology of action as evinced by Aristotle, Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, and Alice

Rayner. First, dealing with a description of the field of phenomenology and the various theories I will use to analyze and explore the nature of action. Thirdly, I will address the nature of impulse via Aristotle's concepts of potentiality, motion, and change and fourthly, I will address Hegel's "mystery of action" as negation. (Negation resists impulse and produces a dialectic/conflict, whereby opposites are continually unified into higher forms of knowledge and eventually of truth.) Fifthly, I address the nature of action via Merleau-Ponty's concept that places intention within the action itself. (In this sense, intention in no way precedes action, but is discovered in it.) Finally, in the second section of chapter two defining the phenomenology of action, I will attempt to unify this whole concept of action by using Alice Rayner's phenomenological concept that "Action is the medium for (not of) drama and theatre. Not a derivation or duplication, but something made in and by action."<sup>24</sup> Integral to these concepts are the temporal aspects of action, such as the nature of moment-to-moment ontology as per Bergson's theories of time and duration, Saltz's concepts of game theory and the sincerity and contingency necessary for real speech acts to occur on stage, and Badiou's theory of textual primacy.

The third section of Chapter Two will address traditional philosophic theories of truth, Puchner's dramatic Platonic concept of truth and distinction between truth and reality on stage. First, I will address the traditional theories of truth as correspondence, confirmation, or pragmatic/active and socially constructed. Secondly, I will focus on Puchner's dramatic Platonism as the ultimate outcome of what Stanislavski, Meisner, and Esper all consider to be truthful acting. Thirdly, I will address the distinction between that which is real in play or performance and that which is true, and in so doing unify action

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<sup>24</sup> Alice Rayner, *To Act, To Do, To Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 5.

and truth into a single research lens (The labor of action for the operation of truth).

Integral to these concepts is the possibility of a unique and minimal mimesis, as per Saltz, Badiou, and Puchner.

In the third chapter, I will address the history of American Stanislavski-based actor training. First, I will describe the classical placement of acting within rhetoric, as well as the overall lack of specific actor training in the West until the later 1800s. Secondly, I will explore the influence of Diderot and (the frequently underappreciated) Russian reflexologists, whose work pre-figured and greatly influenced Stanislavski's ultimate development of the Method of Physical Action. Thirdly, I will explore Stanislavski's early work based on the primacy of the actor's emotional life. Fourthly, I will address Stanislavski's later work on the Method of Physical Action and the primacy of doing truthfully within the play's given imaginary circumstances. Fifthly, I will explore the work of three of Stanislavski's major American interpreters, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. I will focus on the conflict between Strasberg's interpretation of early Stanislavski and Adler's methods based upon his later work and how this led directly to the development of Meisner's technique. Finally, I will address the lineage of influences in Meisner training from Meisner to Esper to the present day.

In Chapter Four, I will describe and explore the specific exercises of Meisner technique as interpreted by Esper, in context of their progression towards the actor's eventual development of her own technique, founded on Esper's basic precepts. This analysis will provide both an overview of the method, and focus first on the core exercises of repetition and independent activities, and then on the more advanced exercises, consisting of various combinations of repetition and independent activities

under various circumstances. These exercises eventually lead up to the dropping of repetition, the concept of the actor doing nothing until they are made to, and the crucial transition from improvised content into scripted scene work.

In Chapter Five, I will apply my research lens to the basic concepts and terms of Meisner technique as interpreted by William Esper in his book *The Actor's Art and Craft*. These concepts will include the definition of acting, the distinction between acting and lying, and the concepts of straight acting, indicating, acting in the moment, acting on impulse, justification, objectives, the use of the imagination, daydreaming, emotional preparation, the actor's point of view, relationships, and the actor's treatment of the text.

In Chapter Six I will address the conclusions and new knowledge I have deduced regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the Meisner technique in theory, praxis and pedagogy, as well as the ways in which this specific analysis of the art of acting illuminates the various dilemmas of mimesis, non-mimetic and minimally mimetic theory. Secondly, I will assess the significance of these conclusions and the new knowledge produced that may advance the study of theatre, as well as my ideas for future research in these areas.

## **CHAPTER TWO---THE LABOR OF ACTION: PHENOMENOLOGY AND DRAMATIC PLATONISM**

The purpose of Chapter Two is the construction of the research lens I will later use to analyze Esper's book in chapters four and five. The key to this lens is the definition and nature of not only action itself, but also of the labor that brings it into and also takes it out of being in a continuous dialectic. With regard to the labor of the actor, this action may be mimetic, original, or some combination of the two. It is my contention that this makes the labor of the actor unique. Indeed, the capacity to produce action in accordance with imaginary circumstances may be said to profoundly differentiate the labor of the actor. Action is a complex function of time and as such, it occurs successively with each moment of the present, also comprising both its past and future. It is obvious, but must be noted, that action (or at least the human experience of action) occurs very quickly and relentlessly and as such, much of the labor producing it is hidden. It is the purpose of this research lens to reveal the nature of this hidden labor of the actor and in so doing, ultimately illuminate the possibility of the operation of truth as a result of the actor's art and craft.

In so far as the actual construction of my research lens is concerned, first I will define and describe action as a complex function of time and the labor of the actor. Secondly, I will present the phenomenological and analytic thought that informs and supports my contentions for the broader application of the research lens. Thirdly, I will present the concepts of dramatic Platonic truth and minimal mimesis critical to my

concept of the actor's ultimate purpose. In conclusion I will describe the application of my research lens to its subject and the virtues of this method of analysis.

### **THE LABOR OF ACTION**

- Director: Take a step back before you cross down stage.<sup>25</sup>
- Actor: What?
- Director: Recoil a bit, and then make a big arc-like a question mark-downstage.
- Actor: Where am I supposed to end up?
- Director: The same as always, down center-center.
- Actor: What's wrong with the way I've been doing it?
- Director: It's too contemporary.
- Actor: I'm in a gown and heels on a raked stage. Going backwards is a bad idea.
- Director: It's just counter-intuitive.
- Actor: It's bullshit.<sup>26</sup>
- Director: It's who you are, you've been very still until now, the step back catches everyone's eye, then surprises it as the tiny linear gesture upstage generates the huge sweeping gesture downstage.
- Actor: What if I do the question mark without the step back?

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<sup>25</sup> While based on actual people and events, the incidents as well as the dialogues of the Director and the Actor(s) are a fictional conceit.

<sup>26</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 61-66. It is my contention that Frankfurt's concept of bullshit (as being not a lie, but worse than and more corrosive to truth than a lie) is a valuable distinction in the study of acting. Frankfurt's central point is that in order to lie, one must have some sense of the truth, whereas bullshit is simply a strategy to support a position and need not take any other factors into account and as it accumulates, any sense of truth that may have been is lost. Thus the worst acting, directing, and art, is not a lie, it is bullshit which begets more bullshit. It is mere rhetoric, sophistry, the desire to control and persuade, rather than the pursuit of the truth of the good.

Director: Try it.

Actor: It feels awkward.

Director: It looks awkward too.

Actor: Look, I can move the way you want me to or I can say the lines the way you want me to, I can't do both at the same time.

Director: Then just do the cross.

Actor: With the step back.

Director: Yes, with the step back, do the lines however they come out.

Actor: Will that work?

Director: Probably.

Actor: Why?

Director: The text tends to follow the action as long as the action doesn't fight the text.

Actor: OK.

Director: Try it a few times, slowly. Don't forget, you're in a gown and heels on a raked stage.

Actor: If I do I'll wave on the way down.

Directors like playwrights tend to experience the word as the smallest unit of stage action. The actor deals in a far smaller and not wholly congruent increment of human experience, the moment. In fact, Meisner technique goes so far as to say that the only thing trulyactable is the action of one moment to the next, anything else is done in preparation for this.<sup>27</sup> Thus the most essential labor of the actor is the creation of action, from moment-to-moment. Moments are qualitative as opposed to quantitative in that they

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Ashley, interview with the author, Columbia, MO, April, 2010.



deal with the sequence and forward motion of experience, rather than the chronology of time. As noted by Henri Bergson, “For the individual time speeds up or slows down, for science it is always the same.”<sup>28</sup> A few seconds of stage time may be thought of as containing a multitude of moments for every actor involved. The director’s ideas and experience of the play, whatever they may be, always come from outside of the actor’s performance, and so occur as if in another dimension from the perception of the actors being directed. Time for the director is essentially of the same duration as long as the text remains the same. Time for the actor is mobile and incomplete since the duration of the moment expands and contracts from one moment to the next according to the play’s given circumstances and the interactions of the actors.<sup>29</sup> Thus there is always some hiatus between the play as a play text, the play as play or the ludic event on stage, the play as a production or a general example of the playing of the play text, and the play as performance or a specific, singular, event of the playing of the play text.<sup>30</sup> The actor’s labor of action is at the apex of the director and the play text and represents nothing less than the materialization of the ideal. Thus any idea of the text’s embodiment must be repeatedly tested by the actor, first to see if it is capable of being transformed into behavior, and then again to see if that behavior is plausible within the given circumstances of the play text, ludic play, production, and performance. Even a tiny

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<sup>28</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), 165-168.

<sup>29</sup> It is not my contention that this is the only temporal position of the director. For example, frequently when in rehearsal, the director occupies the role and position of the audience (or the actors) and she may well experience the sort of shifting, non-scientific temporality described by Bergson. However, it is my contention that Bergson’s scientific temporality is most consistent with the director’s experience of actually directing the play as the embodiment of the play text.

<sup>30</sup> Saltz, “The Reality of the Theater Event” 172. Saltz describes these four distinctions in great detail and his distinction that “the performance of a play is a doing, and the play is what is done” is critical to my understanding of the actor’s labor of action. The parsing of the play script, from the playing of the script, and the production from the performance, serves to ontologically separate the doing from what is done, and so delineate not only the temporality, but the history of a whole theatrical entity we frequently refer to as simply a particular play by a certain author.

tweak to an actor's blocking must be bashed (as in to daunt, dismay, or discomfit) up against the actor's lived experience of the given circumstances and tested to see if it advances, impedes, or derails the action from moment-to-moment. The corporeal actor completes the mimetic ideal delineated by the play text and the director, and the text and the director in turn render the body of the actor precarious, uncertain, and dependent on given circumstances outside of her control.<sup>31</sup> Therefore actors in performance primarily concerned with the labor of action from one lived moment to the next are also capable of completing the text even as they are themselves made precarious by the text, the direction, the other actors, and the audience. The actor's precarious labor of action from moment-to-moment produces the materiality of theatre from the ideal of the imaginary.

Actor: How was that?

Director: Better, very good in fact.

Actor: Don't you wish I'd just do what you tell me to the first time you say it?

Director: It's a process; most of what I say turns out to be wrong by the time you make it your own.<sup>32</sup>

Actor: No resistance, no action?

Director: No drama. No drama.

Actor: All you have to do is think.

Director: I do?

Actor: Yes, you have the luxury of thought.

Director: And you don't.

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<sup>31</sup> As we will see, this action is consistent with and may facilitate the operation of dramatic Platonic truth.

<sup>32</sup> Elia Kazan, Interview with the author, NYC, 1987.

Actor: No. I have the burden of thought.

Director: How?

Actor: I'm responsible for it, but I can't really do it.

Director: On stage.

Actor: In performance.

Director: Nobody can, it all happens too fast.

Actor: Just about everything I think, I have to think beforehand.

Director: Yes, you prepare.

Actor: Yes, you think, I prepare.

Action is motion discovering intention and the lived experience of this discovery is the moment. The moment is the cutting edge of the present and “The ultimate consciousness is consciousness of the present.” Meaning that reason, or any other sort of reflective ideal, takes place against a background of unprocessed, unreflective experience and without it, would have no distinction from anything else. The power of the moment is difficult to overstate; it generates time as it enfolds the past and anticipates the future, and perception itself, “is based in the unfolding of time.”<sup>33</sup> Thus the “lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness,” and the actor proficient in the generation of the moment is in an ontologically privileged position in so far as the creation of real action and unique events are concerned. This authority is further enhanced by the public nature and the sense of social contract endemic to our sense of the “now.” In fact Rayner goes so far as to posit that public performance is the primary factor in the generation of the now and that this explains why it resists attempts at representation. “The fact that we can agree on the now without having to designate it suggests that the now is generated by

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<sup>33</sup> *P of P*, 493, 278.

agreement or convention.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, just as the now resists representation, it also refuses mediation, and thus living actors, on stage before a living audience may be thought of as the perfect vehicle for the generation of the now as they move from private consciousness into public motion.

Discussing the notion of the “now” raises an even more basic concept of time as experienced by the actor. The Greeks had two words for time, *chronos*, referring to chronological or sequential time, and *kairos*, meaning the right or opportune moment. *Kairos* signifies a more qualitative sense of time, an indeterminate instance in which something unique occurs. While *kairos* bears some similarity to Bergson’s duration or time of inner life, where duration is ineffable and incomplete, *kairos* is a whole and specific occurrence, a moment.<sup>35</sup> The living actor then, possesses the potential to draw the spectator out of *chronos* and into *kairos* via the precarious action of moment-to-moment reality. This phenomenology of the actor may then take on an existential quality, in the sense that existence is intertwined with action and the act. Camus was an actor as well as a playwright, and his description of the human experience of “groundlessness” or “the absurd,” like Sartre’s “nausea,” refers to the conscious experience of how ultimately pointless and without redemption life can be. “The actor knows and experiences every night just how ephemeral and precarious our lives are, that they perish all too soon, a moment of glory and then it is all over. The actor’s advantage is precisely this; knowing the absurd.”<sup>36</sup> Puchner goes so far as to posit that it is the very “hollowness and ephemerality” of experience that allows people to be actors in the first place, meaning

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<sup>34</sup> Rayner, 126.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>36</sup> Puchner, 149, 156.

that any sort of solid or secure world would not only have little use for actors, but also no real concept of them.<sup>37</sup>

It is my contention that the essential and largely hidden labor of the actor is the creation of action as a complex function of time, from moment-to-moment, within the given circumstances of the play text, the play as ludic event, the given production, and the singular performance. However, just as most of the labor of the actor bringing action into being is hidden (perhaps even from the actor herself), the nature of action itself is similarly obscured by the speed and relentless succession of impulse and experience. It is the nature of action itself that we will address next.

Aristotle uses the ancient Greek word *duamis* in two different ways. In one sense, *duamis* means the capacity for motion and change. The implementation of this power is *kinesis*. The second sense of *duamis* is broader, that of potentiality, and is more closely related to *energia* or actuality. Potentiality then, in the Aristotelian sense, involves not only motion, but the ontological process by which something comes into being. Generally speaking, it was this second aspect of *duamis* that most interested Aristotle and I will follow his lead on this subject as I begin my definition and description of action.<sup>38</sup> *Duamis* then, is not only Aristotle's explanation of motion and change, but also (as potentiality) of how things come to exist in the world. "There must always be something that underlies, from which what comes into being comes into being."<sup>39</sup> Just as form precedes matter, the actual precedes the potential. In this sense, both meanings of *duamis* are related to the English word impulse, both as a sudden force causing motion, as well as

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, S. Marc, "Aristotle's Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>.

<sup>39</sup> Barns, 78-79.

that of an ontological event. Impulse is both *kinesis* and *energia* in that it not only impels motion and change (as the actuality of potential), but also brings objects and events into being. Aristotle's point is that change is not spectacular, and if we observe carefully, it is not the case that one thing suddenly becomes another, but rather that some conditions of the latter were indeed present in the former, otherwise it would never have occurred.<sup>40</sup> In this same sense, Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between "The impulse of being in the world" and our perception of the world, wherein impulse precedes perception, which is synonymous with behavior.<sup>41</sup> The actual and the potential then establish the essential dialectic of action and being.

Hegel, in his quest for a system of philosophy that would account for and even predict all of human history and thought, extends this dialectic even further. "There is only a transition from potentiality to action, a transition that is the whole mystery of action." In so doing, Hegel directly addresses the issue of potentiality, which Aristotle thought was describable, but not definable in the Platonic sense of each and only. Hegel parsed experience so finely that he was able to put forth a theory of how potentiality becomes actuality and the actual becomes potential. Thus Hegelian potentiality/actuality is, in effect, a sort of metaphysical atomic theory of how and why things and events appear and disappear in the world, and the lynchpin of this theory, "the mystery of action," is negation.<sup>42</sup> The Scholastic philosophers who followed Aristotle and preceded

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<sup>40</sup> David Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183. "And actuality is prior to potentiality. It is logically prior, since 'being capable of being B' is a more complex notion than 'being B'. But it is also prior in another sense. A is not potentially B unless it can come to be actually B, and since it cannot do so except by the agency of something already actual, its very potentiality of being B presupposes an actuality. Potentiality indeed everywhere presupposes and is rooted in actuality... Actuality is the end to which potentiality points."

<sup>41</sup> *P of P*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *The Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 302. Hyppolite's

Hegel frequently described their idea of god as “pure act.” This concept is initially consistent with Aristotle’s concept of god as the unmoved mover, an ultimate negation that by virtue of its profound motionlessness incites motion as desire incites possession.<sup>43</sup> Much later Spinoza put forth that the boundaries of whatever exists are determined by the boundaries of other things, which it is not: “All determination is negation.”<sup>44</sup> Prefiguring Hegel, Schiller theorizes “Action creates its own opposite.” In contemporary philosophy, those who specialize in the nature of action generally agree that it is negation, opposition, or resistance, which makes action possible and brings it into being. While the more classic models tend to focus on what is present, the more modern and especially the postmodern philosophies tend to privilege absence or difference as action’s most defining aspect.<sup>45</sup>

Hegel’s ontology is a reality composed of the endless motion of constantly shifting opposing forces of negation and creation, followed by resolution (synthesis) and that resolution’s subsequent negation which begins the cycle again. This dialectic, operating at varying levels of consciousness, leads to the formation of knowledge, its subsequent failability, and the creation of new knowledge. The dialectic is relentless; synthesis is associated with consciousness, or those operations of the mind that are known to the subject. Negation/antithesis is associated with self-consciousness or as

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explanation and analysis of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, is critical to my definition and understanding of action. Most critical of all has been my study of this subject with Dr. Joseph Bien, who was himself a student of Hyppolite’s.

<sup>43</sup> Ross, 185. For Aristotle, substances are the most primary of that which exists in the world and all substances perish except change and time. Since time cannot have existed before there was time, and there can’t be time after time doesn’t exist, time is eternal. And since time is “concomitant” of change, change is eternal. Since the only continuous change is change of place, and the only continuous change of place is circular motion, there must be an eternal circular motion. Platonic forms are eternal, but cannot cause motion, therefore there must ultimately be something “eternal substantial and purely actual (as opposed to potential) that moves without being moved.”

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1945), 66, 143.

<sup>45</sup> Rayner, 137.

Hegel often defines it, “the consciousness of consciousness,” the facility of the mind to recognize itself, recognizing itself, the ability to think about thinking.

Synthesis/resolution is associated with lived experience, “the negation of the previous object and the appearance of the new object which engenders knowledge.”<sup>46</sup> Importantly, for Hegel, experience is not knowledge itself, but the potential for knowledge. Thus to this point, our definition of action is that action is brought forth from potentiality by impulse/desire, incited by negation, into a world which resists it, this “negation of negation” is time itself. Hegel’s dialectic of action is a progressive process, whereby opposites are continually unified into higher forms of knowledge and eventually of truth. As such, negation is not in conflict with any sense of content; negation is in fact, “immanent content.”<sup>47</sup>

Hegel saw ancient Greek tragedy as the precursor to philosophy. Indeed his whole sense of the progression of history is based on dramatic conflict. History for Hegel occurs as if, “in the theatre” and describes the labor of negation as essential to human agency.<sup>48</sup> While Kenneth Burke theorized about the concept of motivation as the key distinction between action and mere movement, it was Merleau-Ponty who located intention within the action itself (as opposed to preceding it) and thus captured a more accurate sense of the lived experience of motive being discovered in action as opposed precipitating action. Consistent with Hegel, for Merleau-Ponty, there is no perception (“the negation of the previous object and the appearance of the new object”) without the sensation of desire and motion. Perception is behavior, and “The world is a presentation of behavior.” Perception is not thought, it is not passive, and it is not memory: beginning in

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<sup>46</sup> Hyppolite, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>48</sup> Puchner, 129.



potentiality, the motion of desire is precipitated by the resistance of the world to the desire and moves towards actuality.<sup>49</sup> Again, most significantly, motivation does not precede, but is discovered, in action, and so as motion discovers its intention it becomes action. Via this same process, action generates its opposite action and these opposites combine, whereby they are then negated and then generated anew, eventually merging into knowledge. The discovery of intention in action/motion represents Merleau-Ponty's theory to account for the complexity or thickness of lived experience prior to thought, knowledge, and memory. And he extends this theory to the action of speech as well, "The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought."<sup>50</sup> Thus meaning is action in context and action/motion finding its motive is the moment of the present, generated from potentiality to actuality by the impulse of desire and the negation of negation.<sup>51</sup>

The final element in my definition of action is specific to theatre and involves Alice Rayner's contention that action is best defined as a medium for theatre, rather than the more Aristotelian notion that theatre is the medium of action. In this way, Rayner makes action itself the primary element and "an idea of performance as one dimension of action itself." By conceiving of theatre as "something made in and by action", Rayner is able to frame the play of the play text as a unique event, rather than an imitation or a duplication of an original source. Consistent with Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, Rayner asks "whether the articulation of action is not what gives us both our sense of temporality and of causality."<sup>52</sup> Therefore; it is my contention that the labor of the actor resides in

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<sup>49</sup> *P of P*, 274.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>52</sup> Rayner, 3-5.; Hyppolite, 309.

impulse, potentiality, negation, and motivation discovered in action, as a medium for theatre that generates the unique temporal occurrence of the moment.

## **PHENOMENOLOGY**

Phenomenology is generally described as the study of the structure of lived experience, however, Stanton Garner's definition is perhaps more to the point. "Phenomenology is the study of the givenness of the world, of the world that is lived rather than the world as it is objectified, abstracted, and conceptualized." Garner's sense of "givenness" is akin to Merleau-Ponty's notion that any consciousness of logic or knowledge takes place against a background of lived experience, a primary world of presence and absence without which the secondary world of knowledge could not be discerned or even said to exist. If consciousness is the aspect of the mind's operations that are known to the subject, and experience is the continual negation of a previous object by the occurrence of a new object, then phenomenology is in essence the study of the appearance of experience in consciousness as it waxes and wanes, prior to the formation of knowledge. And in order for the knowledge produced to be as accurate as possible, the consciousness of experience must be taken as it is, raw and without interpretation.<sup>53</sup>

While it harkens back to Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel, phenomenology as a discreet branch of philosophy was pioneered by Husserl in the late 1880's as a sort of logical operation/discipline. Central to Husserl's early work is the concept that whatever is experienced always has a back side, an aspect hidden from view, and no matter how the object is turned or what angle it may be seen from, it will always continue to have a

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<sup>53</sup> Garner, 26.

hidden aspect. Thus, it is the nature of perception that there is always an aspect of the object perceived that is hidden from the observer, and phenomenology eschews the existence of a god's eye view of the world.<sup>54</sup> Phenomenology was also key to the development of existentialism in the twentieth century where, in its more highly developed forms, it frequently posits an aesthetic perspective as being that which is most indicative of the dense complexity found in even the most mundane experience. Unlike much of Western philosophy, phenomenology has little concern for whether or not perception accurately corresponds to objects in the world, and makes no attempt to prove experience on the basis of any science. Such an attempt would be absurd to the phenomenologist since science is a secondary order of expression based on knowledge, and phenomenology is a primary order of expression based on experience.<sup>55</sup> An analogous example of this would be that chemistry is explainable by physics, however, physics cannot be explained by chemistry, since a more primary order of expression cannot be explained by a lower order of expression. This distinction in no way affects the utility of either discipline. Therefore, the difference between a phenomenological description and one of a more conventionally analytical bent might be said to be the difference between poetry and prose, or the distinction between music and binary code.

Actor:           “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
                      Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
                      To the last syllable of recorded time,  
                      And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
                      The way to dusty death...”

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<sup>54</sup> *P of P*, xv.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

I have no idea what I'm talking about.

Director: What do you say? What does it feel like?

Actor: I don't know... That it is all pointless.

Director: What?

Actor: Life, life is pointless.

Director: Why?

Actor: I don't know.

Director: What did you just say about it?

Actor: That it is slow, and creeping, and petty.

Director: To what end?

Actor: To the end. That's all. Everyone thinks it makes them smarter, better...

Director: Life.

Actor: In the end all it really does is make you dead.

Director: Does that matter?

Actor: No, not really... It just used to.

Director: You aren't like that anymore?

Actor: No, no more.

Director: You aren't like everyone else.

Actor: I'm special.

Director: Chosen.

Actor: Unstoppable.

Director: You can't be killed.

Actor:            Eventually, one way or the other, I'll always win.<sup>56</sup>

From the phenomenological point of view, Shakespeare's description of the experience of mortal futility is "thicker" and somewhat counter-intuitively, and therefore contains more of the essence of the experience. It is not that the prosaic statement "Life is pointless" is inaccurate, it is simply the product of a less essential order of expression mediated by thought as opposed to experience. This conforms to Kant's concept of the aesthetic as that which produces an affective state that mediates both reason and morality, but operates outside of and prior to any actual knowledge or understanding of the art object.<sup>57</sup> Meaning that due to the thickness and relentless temporality of negation and creation that constitutes it, conscious experience can only be captured by art.

Phenomenology's most commonly used technique is the epoche or bracketing, where the nature of an experience is described from a first person point of view, in and of itself. It is removed or bracketed off from everything else, in so far this is possible, in order that the experience/object may be described as it is and without interpretation, reflection, or history. The epoche leads to phenomenology's second core technique, phenomenological reduction, wherein the epoche is refined down to that which, if removed, would cause the experience or object to cease to be. An example of this would be Hegel's statement, "The essence of matter is gravity."<sup>58</sup> However, unlike analytic philosophy, the phenomenological search for essence is far less categorical and usually more of a process of simplification, rather than a search for final cause. In fact Merleau-Ponty, while he found the method of reduction invaluable, doubted that a final or true

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<sup>56</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5, lines 19-22.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Wartenburg, *The Nature of Art* (Belmont, CA: Thomson, Wadsworth, 2007), 49.

<sup>58</sup> Burke, 46.

essence was usually possible as its result.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, phenomenological reduction may be viewed as being akin to the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie*, where language and the experience of language is defamiliarized by poetry in order to “make strange” that which has become lifeless, remote and devoid of meaning through repetition. This is the ability to capture what Shelley called, “The being of being.”<sup>60</sup> is a concept remarkably similar to Hegel’s “consciousness of consciousness” and the “negation of negation” that generates time itself. The defamiliarizing of experience via the reduction to its most essential description is a common practice of phenomenology, poetry, and aesthetics.

The work of Merleau-Ponty is generally regarded as a synthesis and extension of the phenomenology of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. However, through this synthesis, Merleau-Ponty also developed an innovative phenomenology centered on the role of the body in spatiality, motility, desire, sexuality, speech, and perhaps most significantly, other selves. Indeed, since Descartes, to one degree or another, modern Western philosophers have found it difficult to account for even the simplest experience of human interaction. Much of this difficulty stems from what is, in fact, perhaps the most useful distinction in Cartesian philosophy, the separation of the mind and mental processes from the body and the physical world. For if mind and body are such fundamentally separate entities, how can they ever interact? And if there is no accounting for a mind’s interaction with its own body as an individual, how do individuals ever interact and what is the actual basis for our perceived social reality? By making thought the primary action of consciousness, Cartesian philosophy had little choice but to reject any correspondence of

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<sup>59</sup> *P of P*, xv, xxiii.

<sup>60</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, (New York: BiblioBazaar, 2009) 36.

appearance to the object or the objective world. And per Kant, there is simply no possibility of any appearance ever corresponding to any object in the material world. To Kant, this sort of correlation of appearance and object smacked of determinism and the obliteration of free will. Phenomenology neither embraces nor denies correspondence; it sets aside the issue as one best addressed by more secondary disciplines. Merleau-Ponty developed a method of phenomenological reduction, unique in its rigorously non-Cartesian nature. By separating being from self-consciousness and thought from experience, Merleau-Ponty keeps experience unitary and firmly located in the material world, regardless of any correspondence (or lack of correspondence) to the object perceived. That experience may fail to correspond to the objective world in no way negates the experience, since failability is critical to the ultimate formation of knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

Many phenomenologists find both behavior and imagination to be crucial to the structure of lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of any phenomena begins with, or rather against, a background of perception which is synonymous with behavior in that it is neither static nor reflective. Experience/behavior is the impulse of motion reaching out to the object of desire and discovering its motive as motion becomes action.<sup>62</sup> Husserl revolutionized the modern concept of the imagination by reclaiming the concept of the image from Cartesian dualism and defining it as an act of consciousness, rather than a thing in consciousness.<sup>63</sup> This redefinition rescued imagination from the alienation of mimetic imitation, where it had been posited as the antithesis of being, and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 343. “A *true* perception will simply be a true *perception*. Illusion will be no perception at all.” [italics original]

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., xi. “Perception is the background from which all acts stand out.”

<sup>63</sup> Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 13-14.

led to its subsequent elevation by Sartre as a fundamental, if quasi-pathological, expression of being.<sup>64</sup> By defining the imaginary as “an intentional structure” Husserl revolutionized the relationship between images and thoughts. Heidegger took the importance of the imagination even farther, theorizing that if being/reality is time, then it is an act of creative imagination and that being the case, there is no being without time and no time without imagination.<sup>65</sup> Indeed when Merleau-Ponty writes about “the imaginary texture of the real” he is positing the imaginary act as a kind of heightened perception that allows access to “inward tapestries” of vision. In doing so Merleau-Ponty is able to posit a dialectical imagination that is part of everyday life and our being with others, as well as being inexhaustible.<sup>66</sup> In a synthesis and expansion of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Bruce Wilshire succinctly defines an ontology that is an inseparable combination of the imaginary and the material. “The purely actual or purely fictional life is a delusion. The actual must involve the ideal. The reality of a human being can be compared directly to the reality of a work of art.” For Wilshire, we are fundamentally and inescapably mimetic creatures, and while it may be undeniably useful to parse our experience into subject and object or ideal and material, it also obscures the fact that this dissection is itself a secondary operation that is frequently mistaken for one that is primary.<sup>67</sup> Thus, for example, as we will see in the following section of this chapter, the attempts to justify phenomenology in terms of semiotics, while they are initially useful, ultimately fail to account for the complexity (or the givenness) of lived experience in the world.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 85-86.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 124, 135-136.

<sup>67</sup> Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1982), 258.



Actor 1: "Where hast thou been, sister?"

Actor 2: "Killing swine."

Actor 3: "Sister, where thou?"

Actor 1: "A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,  
And munched, and munched, and munched. 'Give me', quoth I.  
'Aroint thee, witch,' the rump-fed runnion cries.  
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'th' Tiger.  
But in a sieve I'll thither sail,  
And like a rat without a tail  
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do."<sup>68</sup>

Director: Why?

Actor 2: Why not?

Actor 3: We don't work that way.

Director: What way?

Actor 1: Reasonably.

Actor 2: We don't do reasons.

Actor 3: We don't reflect or consider.

Actor 1: We do.

All 3 Actors: We do, and do, and do.

Actor 2: We are doing.

Actor 3: Doing looking for a target.

Actor 1: And once we lock on.

Actor 2: It's done.

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<sup>68</sup> *Macbeth*, 1.3, lines 1-9.

Actor 3: All doing.

Actor 1: All done.

Director: Well that was spooky.

All 3 Actors: Dobie, dobie, do.<sup>69</sup>

Phenomenologically, the theatre and the stage itself is a set of brackets, presenting a simplified reality with its own rules and circumstances and removed from the complexity of the world. However, there is also the added complexity of the tension between what is on stage, or between the brackets, and that which is not, but is nevertheless evoked by that within the brackets.<sup>70</sup> For example, even in a less than realistic setting, when an actor exits the stage, most of the audience assumes that the actor is simply going to some other area of the fictional location depicted on stage, as opposed to into the wings of the theater. It is not that the audience is necessarily deceived by either the set or the actor's exit; it is simply that the reality depicted within the brackets of the stage evokes its completion off stage. The complexity of this dialectic between the bracketed and the un-bracketed allows the theatre to create unique events that are not only of the world but in the world. It evokes the possibility of the ideal made material and experienced socially as it comes into being. An analogous situation would be that of an adult playing a game of peek-a-boo with a young child. While the adult knows, based on previous experience and her position in the game, that the object is never really gone, only alternatively hidden and then revealed, the child's perception from her experience

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<sup>69</sup> Rayner, 59-61. Rayner's phenomenological exploration of *Macbeth* focuses on the numerous repetitions and contextual meanings of the word "do" in the play text. Her notion of the play is that Macbeth's penultimate journey is one that separates his being from his doing, regardless of the resistance he encounters or the obstacles he faces; he becomes what he does to the point that he is nothing else. Rayner also addresses (P 63) how this interpretation renders Macbeth a character peculiarly "without qualities" and so also without a specific personality of one sort or another. Macbeth's fate is to lose himself to his actions, this first makes him more than human, then less than human.

<sup>70</sup> Wilshire, 127.

and position in the game is that the object is continually obliterated and reborn in every appearance and disappearance. In the same way, a third party observing this action from above might see not only the reactions of the child and the adult, but also the mechanics of the peek-a-boo performance itself. This audience might then empathize with the child one moment and the adult in the next. And all of these permutations of the perception of the performance occur simultaneously and in real time, creating a rich and complex experience that is still, nevertheless, bracketed, and more easily perceived and understood than an analogous non-bracketed experience. Since that which is performed is, nevertheless, actually done, it is the singular temporal event of a specific time and place, appearing and disappearing without a material trace; it persists in memory and provokes memory, connecting and distancing the subject from themselves and from others.<sup>71</sup>

A more contemporary discourse on the phenomenology of the action for theatre is described and explored by Alice Rayner in her book, *To Act, To Do, To Perform*. Taking her title from a line in the Gravedigger's speech from *Hamlet*, Rayner develops a grammar of action as the interplay of unitary elements. To act corresponds to conscious agency, not action itself, but the potential for action. To do is the materiality of the deed; it is consciousness grasping its object and has no duration and no being. To perform involves the circumstances of action, "The discursive or rhetorical formulations that implicate an audience or the world in the act itself and give it qualities."<sup>72</sup> While Rayner's triad of action recalls Kenneth Burke's pentad, it also brings to mind the ancient Greek trio of poiesis, praxis, and theoria, with poiesis being the creative action of the

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<sup>71</sup> This is consistent with the concept of *perezhivanie* discussed in chapter five as the actor's lived experience of the synthesis of past experience, thought, emotion, and imagination, rather than some concept of the unconscious mind.

<sup>72</sup> Rayner, 12. Rayner's triad is also consistent with various aspects of *perezhivanie* especially in the sense that none of it is sourced in a concept of the unconscious mind.

artist, praxis the action of the work of art, and theoria being to grasp the truth. Rayner's triad, while it is not wholly adequate to account for the complexity of theatre, does represent an important starting point in so far as phenomenological method applied specifically to theatre is concerned.

While phenomenology may well prove to be the most useful philosophy for the study of theatre, in many ways the most dominant school of thought since at least the 1970's has been semiotics. Founded in formal logic, semiotics deals with the relationships between signs and signifiers, more specifically, between words, their meanings, and the processes by which meaning (rather than perception or experience) comes into being. Semiotics is analytic rather than descriptive and thus, phenomenologically speaking, occurs as a secondary order of knowledge, rather than a primary order of experience. This being the case, phenomenology tends not to discount semiotics and many phenomenologists of theatre have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to inform phenomenology with semiotic theory and vice versa. Be this as it may, per Saltz, it is no exaggeration to say that contemporary semiotic theory specifically and categorically rejects the possibility of any sort of real, true, or non-mimetic action on the stage.<sup>73</sup> For while J.L. Austin's speech act theory is often cited as a bench mark for how human beings do things with words, it also specifically and completely excludes any use of language on stage from any sort of legitimacy as a speech act. Austin characterizes the actor's speech in performance as "hollow" as well as being "not used seriously, but in

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<sup>73</sup> David Z. Saltz, "The Reality of Doing," in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 60-61.

ways *parasitic* upon its normal use.” [emphasis in original]<sup>74</sup> John Searle further states that speech on stage lacks illocutionary force because it is fictional and so actors can only pretend to engage in real speech acts, a practice he describes as mere “utterance.”<sup>75</sup> Keir Elam argues “What confers objects, people and action into signs on the stage... is the removal of performance from praxis.”<sup>76</sup> And even more categorically, Michael Issacharoff states that “the stage, the arena of fictional utterance, is a frame that disengages all speech acts.”<sup>77</sup> In so far as the actor is concerned, the semiotic insistence that any and all acting is synonymous with pretending is completely at odds with any theory of modern acting remotely based on the work of Stanislavski, and thus predicated on the creation of emotional truth and real action on stage. As theatre theorist David Z. Saltz writes in his essay *The Reality of Doing*, “If the semiotic view is correct and dramatic performance is by definition merely the imitation of an action, then the method is founded on a logical fallacy or a delusion.”<sup>78</sup> Saltz then uses speech act and game theory to challenge and refute the semiotic insistence that real action is impossible on stage. Since both Saltz’s methodology as well as his conclusions are so influential to my own, I will explore them in some detail.

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<sup>74</sup> J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 22. In many ways Austin’s theories of speech action seem to coincide with Merleau-Ponty’s theory that motive is discovered in action “The action is in the utterance.”

<sup>75</sup> John Searle, *Expression and Meaning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 68.

<sup>76</sup> Keir Elam, “Language in the Theatre,” *Sub-Stance* 18/19 (1977): 144. It is my assertion that semiotics in general and the work of Austin, Searle, and Elam, in particular, has exerted what can only be described as a hegemonic force on the critical analysis and understanding of the nature of theatre. This semiotic hegemony, while useful as a tool of secondary analysis, ultimately tends to undermine the agency and significance of performance when employed as the primary tool of theatre’s ontology. Even the seminal work on the phenomenology of theatre by Bert O. States, Marvin Carlson, and to some extent even that of Alice Rayner, is obscured by their apparent need to justify experience in terms of semiosis, as opposed to maintaining phenomenology’s primary position and addressing the semiotic in terms of lived experience.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Issacharoff, *Discourse as Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>78</sup> Saltz, “The Reality of Doing,” 62.

The first part of Saltz's argument deals with the necessary sense of contingency involved in any real request and its subsequent outcome. The request or illocution precedes its perlocution, or outcome, which involves not only the request being either accepted or denied, but the freedom of the responder to plausibly refuse the request. The actual speech act is in the interpersonal utterance and the nature of its reception by the receiver, in short, the request/outcome or illocutionary act must be failable.<sup>79</sup> The major semiotic arguments against the possibility of real speech acts (and by extension of real acts of any kind) occurring on stage are that the actor lacks illocutionary authority due to the fact that they are not actually who and what they say they are, and that the theatrical performance lacks both sincerity and contingency because it is scripted and rehearsed. Therefore, according to semiotics, actors are not only merely pretending to be fictional characters, but also merely pretending to speak and to perform speech acts. Saltz shows that Searle's theory of fiction suspending real speech acts mistakenly collapses what the actor actually does, with the circumstances under which it is performed. "The pretense is in the context, not in the action itself."<sup>80</sup> Meaning that it is one thing to say that an actor does something on stage, this is obviously and literally something that takes place in the real world, but it is something completely different (and completely erroneous) to say that a character does anything, anywhere, ever. To be consistent with speech act theory all that is necessary for the actor's action to have illocutionary force, or viability is her plausible sincerity to discover her motivation in the act itself and thus complete the action's desire. And whether or not the action is successful or a failure according to the contingency requirement, the cause of the outcome must be the illocutionary act, not the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 69.

play script. Saltz maintains that the semiotic issues of sincerity, contingency, and authority, exist not because a play is fictional, but because it is rehearsed, and he addresses this dilemma via game theory. For both the participants and the spectators the nature of a game is transparent, there is no attempt at deception, and players adopt the rules and intentions of the game as their own only for its duration. Saltz proposes that the given circumstances of a play script and the concept of a production function in the same way. Actors “borrow” the intentions embedded in the text and pursue them vigorously, regardless of their own beliefs and opinions, through to the end of the performance. Like a sporting event, the specific durational outcome from moment-to-moment is potentially, infinitely, contingent, even though the entire event takes place within obvious given parameters delineated by specific rules.<sup>81</sup> Saltz further asserts that semiotics cannot help but (inaccurately) posit the theatrical audience as readers of a printed text analyzing symbols and narrative structure, rather than as participants in a communal event where things actually happen rather being communicated.<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps the most significant conclusion in *The Reality of Doing* is Saltz’s separation of real action from the aesthetics of realism and mimetic imitation, reaffirming Stanislavski’s notion: “What does it really mean to be truthful on stage? Does it mean that you conduct yourself as you would in ordinary life? Not at all, truthfulness in those terms would be sheer triviality.”<sup>83</sup> Saltz’s point is that actors who are trained to pursue real illocutionary actions within the text’s given circumstances make possible the creation of a “living reality” that semiotic theory denies. Actors create a reality where “Even the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>83</sup> Constantine Stanislavski, *Stanislavski’s Legacy*, ed. And trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), 20.

most stylized movements assume a uniquely theatrical, but perfectly real illocutionary force.” The difficulty of creating even the possibility of real action on stage justifies the rigorous training and conditioning necessary for the actor to behave impulsively within the imaginary circumstances of the game mentality and to “move beyond the utterance act and find the illocutionary point of the dialogue.”<sup>84</sup> Real action on stage is thus possible, perhaps even preferable, but by no means probable. Contrary to semiotic theory, it involves an essentially non-mimetic technique, pursued by the moment-to-moment acts of speech and other real actions, performed within the confines of the text’s and the production’s given circumstances, referenced as if in a game for the duration of the play. This non-mimetic process resists reification and allows for the possibility of unique events and what Badiou would refer to as “revolutionary” transformation, as opposed to the reactionary reification of the dominant existing power structure.

## TRUTH

There is no more contentious philosophical issue than the nature of, or even the existence of, truth. This said, it is also impossible to engage in any sort of meaningful analysis of Meisner technique (or any Stanislavski-based system of actor training) without also addressing the issue of truth in a way that is both practical and profound. To proceed in any other way would be to ignore and deny not only the practice of this school of acting, but also its ultimate point. The existence and nature of truth is also critical to philosophy and indeed to the creation and accumulation of human knowledge. Common sense/common knowledge needs some semblance of something resembling Platonic forms in order to persist, without them; even the ability to communicate their alleged

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<sup>84</sup> Saltz, *The Reality of Doing*, 75.



absurdity is destroyed. Per Puchner, “Once philosophy gives up truth it reverts to sophistry, relativism, mere description of an ever-changing world.”<sup>85</sup> Truth confronts false certainties as well as false uncertainties and Platonic forms advocate truth over power, without them, virtue is simply the advantage of the stronger and the theatre’s inherent relativism and charisma tends to collude with hegemonic forces.<sup>86</sup> Truth delineates the distinction between human consciousness and the world, “Man is a historical idea and not a natural species.”<sup>87</sup> This distinction between consciousness and the world/background it takes place against and emerges from is the essential experience of perception. To this end I will draw an essential distinction between the important, but mundane, common, everyday truths, what I will call “plausible truths” and the far more profound and ultimate concept of truth as an exceptional operation empty of content, that I will refer to as “dramatic Platonic truth.” It is my contention that both of these concepts of truth are necessary in order to fully analyze and understand the nature and progression of Esper’s training in Meisner technique.

Plausible truth is akin to Rayner’s sense of the now, it is pragmatic, socially based, and resistant to representation, primarily due to the unique circumstances of its given temporality. In this sense, it too is an operation, but one more prone to be associated with specific content and mundane as opposed to exceptional. In spite of plausible truth’s temporal dependency (which is the basis or at least the beginning of most forms of relativism) it is, in general, commonly agreed on, experientially consistent, and plainly necessary for everyday life. For example, in general, we all agree on the

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<sup>85</sup> Puchner, 186. Puchner’s point of view on this is echoed and supported by Badiou, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Murdoch.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>87</sup> *Pof P*, 196.

directions of up and down (and conversely to not know up from down is to acknowledge some deficit in cognition) while acknowledging that these distinctions are only really plausible in the presence of gravity. However, since the absence of gravity is rare for most people, convention and experience continually confirm the truth of the directions of up and down, even while we may acknowledge that this is not absolutely true in all circumstances. To say that something is not absolutely true in all circumstances is not to say that it is not reliably true most of the time. In this sense, plausible truth is Aristotelian in that the senses are regarded as being a generally reliable conduit to the nature of the world and in the event of their failability; these same senses, coupled with reason, are capable of resolving the source of the failure. Thus something may be said to be plausibly true when it corresponds to existing social conventions and when lived experience corresponds to physical reality.<sup>88</sup> Plausible truth also functions in a somewhat reverse fashion in that if something fails to contradict either the existing social conventions and/or physical reality, it may be deemed to be plausibly true. This is due to the fact that plausible truth has phenomenological/experiential rather than ideal/analytic content and in fact, tends to lose its agreement and thus its plausibility, as its ideal content supersedes its experiential content. To again return to Rayner's notion of the socially performative nature of the now, the more ideal the content of truth is, the more contentious it becomes, and the less subject to common agreement. Furthermore, the ideal is less resistant to representation and so more given to rhetoric, brute force, and hegemonic authority. Thus the plausible, commonly agreed upon, experiential, operation of truth that produces the now, up and down, and tables and chairs, is essentially different from the contentious

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<sup>88</sup> Barns, 92-94.

idea based truths of good, bad, right, and wrong. And to collapse the two is to confuse experience with ideas.

Dramatic Platonic truth, as delineated by Puchner in his book *The Drama of Ideas*, is based generally in new Platonism and specifically in the mathematically inspired philosophies of Alain Badiou, and is fundamentally a response to the extreme relativism of sophistic and postmodern thought. Dramatic Platonic truth directly addresses the persistent dilemma of the argument from self-reference to which all forms of sophistic and postmodern relativism are prone to be reduced to. Namely, if there is no absolute reference point for knowledge, how can this ever be communicated by any function of knowledge, such as language?<sup>89</sup> The orientation of postmodern thought around difference, as opposed to any sense of unity, also contributes to the sense that truth is simply absent and a suspicious absence at that. Puchner's notion of truth from within the context of dramatic Platonism is effect oriented and akin to mathematic operations; like subtraction or the finding of a square root, it deals with exertion of influence toward a specific, but not pre-determined outcome. Most critically, unlike any sort of idealism, it is free of content and so universal. Dramatic Platonic truth is the exception to the material and the ideal, it does not deny them, and it disrupts the complacency of corporeality, language, and culture, and points toward an experience of unity by superseding difference. Dramatic Platonic truth then, is a content-free, exceptional, operation, which disrupts, and ultimately unifies bodies and ideas in the same way that addition unifies numbers by influencing their combination, but not by determining the specific outcome, which is dependent on the specific content of the numbers placed in the given operation. For example,  $2+2=4$ , but  $2+3=5$ , the operation is consistent however, when the content

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<sup>89</sup> Puchner, 193-198.

changes the outcome of the operation also changes in spite of the influence of the operation being the same. In any and all cases, the truth of addition is not subjective and does not vary.

It is my contention that the development of the actor's "sense of truth" that is the over-arching goal of Meisner technique, takes place in two experientially dependent steps. Beginning with the development of a sense of plausible truth on stage and then advancing toward an increasing awareness of the nature of dramatic Platonic truth. This progression from the material to the universal is in turn brought into being by the actor's increasingly subtle labor of action.

## CHAPTER THREE—THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN STANISLAVSKI-BASED ACTOR TRAINING

### THE GREEKS

While the history of Western theatre dates back over twenty-five hundred years, the history of any sort of systematic, formal training for actors is a far more recent development that we will generally date from the 1870's.<sup>90</sup> Prior to this, actors traditionally learned their trade solely by observation, or at best, via some sort of apprenticeship to either a theatrical company or an established actor. In so far as any theoretical basis for acting was concerned, the ancient Greeks tended to classify it from within the domain of rhetoric, and our modern understanding of acting remains profoundly affected by this distinction. However, this classical concept was a far richer and more complex discipline than our modern conceit of rhetoric as being simply the technology of persuasion.<sup>91</sup> The rhetoric of Plato and Aristotle, while very different in form, both contain the overarching concept of rhetoric as a necessary tool of moral order, combining effective public speaking, psychology, and ethics. A frequent analogy is that the philosopher, like the physician, possesses the knowledge of how best to treat the illness, and the rhetorician, like the politician, convinces the patient to submit to the treatment, however painful, as being what is best for all involved. Aristotle is typically prosaic and analytic, observing in fine detail that human beings generally concern

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<sup>90</sup>Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1985, 165. Roach exhaustively traces the history of the relationship between the scientific theories of the day and the corresponding theories of acting. My intention here is to simply provide a historical perspective for the development of the systems of Stanislavski-based actor training, especially their debt to the Russian reflexologists.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 28-29.

themselves, “not about the end, but about the means to the end.”<sup>92</sup> Plato, via the use of poetry and dramatic form, creates his own rhetoric as a counter force to both that of the traditional Homeric mythos of blood and honor, as well as that of the popular relativistic teachings of the Sophists. Platonic rhetoric captures the dialectic of the pursuit of the idea of the good, while for Aristotelian rhetoric, “the expedient is the good.” And the good “is whatever is desirable for its own sake.”<sup>93</sup> Herein, I contend, lies the seed of contention between acting and rhetoric, as well as Plato’s “ancient grudge” between philosophy and poetry. Rhetoric, whatever its form and content, takes place in the real world, it has consequences, and the speaker, whatever her public persona, may be held morally and ethically responsible for the outcome of her rhetoric. Acting, however, occurs under imaginary or fictitious circumstances; thus it is impossible to hold the performing actor accountable to the morality of the non-fictional world. It is not that either Plato or Aristotle necessarily conflates rhetoric with acting, but rather that they classify them under the same genus due their similar qualities and similar effects on their audience. And it is this classification of the imaginary within the actual that proves increasingly problematic as the concept of rhetoric narrows throughout history, and the dialectic is flattened into dogma.

The fundamental issue is that Plato believed in “the mimetic capacity of major artworks to impress themselves on minds that know them to be, in some sense, pretenses.”<sup>94</sup> Especially in a democratic state, these pretenses can then be employed to

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<sup>92</sup> Barns, 76.

<sup>93</sup> Burke, 292.

<sup>94</sup> Halliwell, *A of M*, 59. This is also akin to the semiotic contention that no true action is possible on stage, refuted by Saltz.

make weak arguments appear strong and override logic with manufactured emotion.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, Aristotle is unconcerned that a mimetic creation will be mistaken for something in the real world.<sup>96</sup> Whereas Plato tends to frame the products of mimesis as being either false or lies, Aristotle's view is that the fictional nature of the mimetic object, in effect, suspends the norms of the non-mimetic world, at the same time that it relies on it to provide some sense of coherence.<sup>97</sup> This duality separates the "worldlike" qualities of mimesis from the poesis or the act of the production of the object. The object is unique, but not wholly independent.<sup>98</sup>

Secondly, regardless of the medium, Aristotle's is a mimesis of action, not of individual human beings. For example, poetry is the mimesis of human action, not of human speech.<sup>99</sup> Finally, Aristotle frames emotion as a part of the mimetic object, both in so far as the emotion it contains or depicts, as well as those it evokes in its spectator(s).<sup>100</sup> While Plato's view of the emotional content of mimesis was similar, consistent with his overarching concern for moral order, he tended to view the feelings evoked (pleasure or pain) as being false or lies, whereas Aristotle conceives of them as "Close to being equivalently disposed toward "the truth" or "the real thing." Aristotle also makes a

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<sup>95</sup> Issues of moral and political order were hardly academic for either Plato or Aristotle; both lived in the declining years of Athens's Golden Age, a time during and immediately after the profound disaster of the Peloponnesian Wars which Athens ultimately lost to Sparta. The Peloponnesian were wars of choice, precipitated by greed, authorized by a manipulated, mob-like democratic process, and deeply rooted in the Homeric/tragic tradition of violent heroes and glorious conquest. Plato's great teacher Socrates was unjustly murdered by this same democratic process for his temerity of speaking truth to power.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 166-167. This is one reason for Aristotle's repeated insistence on the plausibility or the necessity of the mimetic object. The mimetic object must be something that could possibly be the case under the circumstances of the fiction created. I contend that this aspect of Aristotelian mimesis also coincides with Saltz's notion of a theatrical game theory of action.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 168. This is one reason Aristotle privileges dramatic poetry over epic poetry as a more direct representation of human action, in that poetry exhibits, rather than describes, action.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 161. "This model, which treats mimesis as not only a matter of the representational properties of an object, but also a form and vehicle of experience" and "Mimesis, on this reading is constituted partly by the experiences that it opens up for and induces in its audience."

distinction between emotions produced in the audience and those of the actors they are watching.<sup>101</sup> And his formulation of this phenomenon is quite sophisticated, positing a fusing of the audience's emotional response with the nature of the aesthetic event, rather than the emotion's liner dilution by the subsequent realization of the nature of the aesthetic event.<sup>102</sup> Thus for Aristotle, plausibly true or nearly true emotions are part of the "material constructions" and "representations of imagined human actions." And the emotions evoked in the audience need not be the same as those experienced by the actors on stage, thus accommodating the complexity of the audience's various emotional experiences of the performance and the degree to which they either enter into or resist them. This distinction allows for the possibility of the audience to enter into the aesthetic event, while still maintaining the ability to rationally judge its action and outcomes. For example, the spectator may enjoy the action of some violent outcome, such as the rage of Achilles, Ajax, or Heracles, while also judging it as ethically challenged and morally reprehensible, since this distinction is in the nature of the mimetic object itself.<sup>103</sup> In many ways, the history of theatre in the West in general, and of acting in particular, is the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 162. This is an important distinction, especially with regard to Stanislavski's later, Tolstoy-inspired, predilection toward encouraging his actors to empathically "infect" the audience with the emotions they feel within the given circumstances of the play, often disregarding the intent of the playwright. And this extends to Kazan's definition of indication (or perhaps rather the result of indicating) as being the actor's attempt to impose her feelings on the audience, in effect, telling the audience what they should be feeling at any given moment. Since the uniformity of this this one-to-one sort of experience is generally impossible across the whole of the audience, portions of the audience resist when the emotion evoked in them differs from that of the actor they observe.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 173. For example, the pity and fear evoked in tragedy are not ameliorated by the spectator's realization that they are merely watching the fictional depiction of human action in a theatre, that realization is part of and occurs simultaneously with the audience emotions that are evoked. Consistent with the Aristotelian theory of a mimesis of action, "Such feelings are, in part at least, a matter of movement, kinesis, perceived not as spatial change but *as the experience of affective sequences or impulses*, which elsewhere too Aristotle sometimes describes as "movements" of the soul." [italics added]



history of the singularly complex dialectic between rhetoric and acting, the imaginary and the world, and Plato and Aristotle.<sup>104</sup>

Actor: “Is this a dagger which I see before me  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?”<sup>105</sup>

Actor: Where’s the knife?

Director: It’s in the words, in the air.

Actor: That’s all?

Director: You want me to fly one in on some fishing line?

Actor: No.

Director: Then we could jerk it away when you reach for it.

Actor: Now you’re just being silly.

Director: You see it in the words as you speak to the audience.

Actor: But I only see it.

Director: Exactly! You reach for it, it’s right there, but you can’t feel it.

Actor: Why? I already have a knife.

Director: That’s right, you all do.

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 374. “...is the dialectic built into its history by the interplay between Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to the subject, and the full thrust of that proposition can only be grasped if we allow “Platonic” and “Aristotelian” here to embrace everything that has been said and thought, however loosely, in the name of the two philosophers, not just in their own writings.”

<sup>105</sup> *Macbeth*, 2.1, lines 33-39.

Actor: We're warriors...

Director: Ready to die.

Actor: Ready to kill.

Director: Ready for war.

Actor: It's the knife that tells me what to do with the knife.

Director: O.K.

Actor: As I reach for it, I know I'm going to kill him.

Director: Discover you are going to kill the king.

Actor: Yes. He's nothing special. He can die like everyone else.

Director: It's doable.

Actor: "I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
 As this which now I draw.  
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,  
 And such an instrument I was to use."<sup>106</sup>  
 "I was going" and "I was to use." It's already in the past to me?

Director: It's as good as done.

### EARLY ACTING TEXTS

The concept of acting being akin to rhetoric continued to Roman times in the writings of Seneca and, especially, those of Quintilian in AD 95. In fact, even though he specifically cites acting for the stage as an unsuitable and even dangerous model for public speaking, Quintilian's theories served as the theoretical basis for actor training in the West for over sixteen hundred years, whether those expounding them were conscious

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., lines 40-44.

of their original source or not.<sup>107</sup> The first early modern texts for (or about) the actor were various aesthetic treatises published under the auspices of the French Academy beginning in 1657.<sup>108</sup> However, the first book on acting to break with Quintilian was Remond de Sainte-Albine's *Le Comedien*.<sup>109</sup> Between 1747 and 1769 it was published first in French, then in English and then, incredibly, translated from English back into French without any apparent knowledge of the French original, and then again into German. While *Le Comedien* led to the increasingly wide spread discussion of acting as an art form and was filled with many illustrative examples from both the French and English theatres, it didn't translate this expanded understanding of acting into a concrete system of exercises to train the actor. Even more significant to the development of a serious aesthetic consideration of acting was Diderot's supremely influential *Le Paradoxe sur le Comedien*. Like Quintilian's *Oratory* before it, *Paradoxe* was and remains the basis of much of our modern understanding of acting, whether we realize it or not. As Roach puts it, while Diderot didn't actually create our modern understanding of the art and practice of acting, "he did anticipate it."<sup>110</sup> Since Diderot figures prominently in the later

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<sup>107</sup> Toby Cole, ed., *Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method* (New York: Lear Publishers, 1947), 17.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. Lee Strasberg's introduction to Cole's influential collection of essays gives the following concise and often quoted history of the earliest modern acting texts. *Traité de l'action de l'orateur ou de la Prononciation et du Geste*, by Michel Le Faucheur, 1657. Le Faucheur's work was published in three editions until the French Academy replaced it with a revised edition by Grimarest in 1707. The first actor's handbook in English was *The life of Mr. Thomas Betterton: The Late Eminent Tragedian*, by Charles Gildon and Saint-Evremond in 1710. This book was published shortly after Betterton's death in an apparent effort to capitalize on his name and is largely a restatement of the French Academy texts interspersed with numerous unsubstantiated theatre anecdotes attributed to Betterton.

<sup>109</sup> Roach, 78-81. Roach documents that a British actor named Aaron Hill published a series of essays in his theatrical paper "The Prompter" between 1734 and 1736 that are decidedly anti-Quintilian in their tone, as is the third "Hamburg Dramaturgy" of the great German literary critic and theorist Gotthold Lessing. In any case, it is clear that even before the first publication of *Le Comedien* in 1747, there was real and growing opposition to a theory of acting based in Quintilian.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. Much of Diderot's work wasn't published until long after his death in 1785, due to threats of censorship, and he was in fact imprisoned in 1749 for irreligion. *Paradoxe* wasn't officially published in its complete form until 1830, although it was privately disseminated in various manuscript

development of Russian Reflexology, I will address *Paradoxe* in more detail in the next section.

The first comprehensive system of pedagogy for actor training in Western theatre was developed by Francois Delsarte beginning in the mid 1850's. Delsarte was a student opera singer who believed that his voice had been ruined by his early training. Unable to sing professionally, he turned his efforts to a scientific study of acting. The Delsarte System rose to prominence in the 1870's when Delsarte's student and designated successor Steele MacKaye introduced it in New York and used it to train the young actors of his company. While both Delsarte and MacKaye died before they could write an official text of the system, MacKaye's student Genevieve Stebbins did manage to produce one in 1885.<sup>111</sup> Ironically the publication of a definitive text perhaps more than anything else led to the dilution and disregard into which the Delsarte System rapidly descended. Delsarte (like other later visionaries of actor training who would supersede him) wanted to create an organized sequence of exercises for the actor akin to those practiced by musicians, with the ultimate goal being to seamlessly merge the emotional life with physical technique. To this end he exhaustively studied and sketched what we would term the body language of people in everyday life. The essential nature of these gestures was then associated with specific emotional states via a complicated and quasi-mystic "Trinity."<sup>112</sup> The publication of Stebbins's book unintentionally led to the widespread and unsanctioned practice of teaching only the outward technique of assigned physical gestures, without the more abstract and complicated component of their

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forms beginning in 1770. Catherine the Great was an admirer and bought Diderot's library shortly before his death, thus establishing the link between 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian thinkers and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman.

<sup>111</sup> John W. Zorn, *The Essential Delsarte* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1968), 5-7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

emotional connection to the performer. This caused Delsarte's system to be associated with the superficial and melodramatic style of acting later teachers of acting would decry and seek to supplant.<sup>113</sup>

Prior to Descartes (1596-1650) the actor's emotional life on stage was generally theorized, as per Quintilian, as being essentially orphic in nature.<sup>114</sup> The orphic conception of the actor's emotions in performance usually entailed the idea of the actor being to one degree or another, penetrated, or taken over by some power outside of her, which she then channeled or projected out on to her audience. This power might be as specific as a particular muse or a god speaking to or through the body of the actor, or a more general force, such as inspiration or imagination. In any case, what we would call the emotional component of performance was conceived of as coming from outside of the actor and inhabiting them. Actors were thought to literally breathe in the gods and the connection of the appearance of various emotional states with specific patterns of breath led to a so called "rhetoric of passions." Whereby the actor not only possesses the power to control themselves via their ability to channel the external orphic forces, but also controlled the space and audience around her, as she was thought to radiate and breathed out "A vital pneuma imbibed from a universal aether."<sup>115</sup> Via the heat of her body and breath, and the *kinesis* of her gestures, the actor not only exerted an occult power over her audience, but also, as Plato states in *The Ion*, conveyed inspiration rather than real knowledge. Like a magnet surrounded by iron filings, the gods inspire the poet, who

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>114</sup> Roach, 26. As we have seen previously, Aristotle's theories of stage emotion differed from the orphic conception considerably, even if it did not break from it completely.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 27

inspires the actor (or rhapsode), who inspires the crowd.<sup>116</sup> And again we see the eternal conflict between acting and rhetoric, although in the *Ion* Plato's principal concern seems not to be that the fictitious will be taken for literal reality, but rather that it will serve as a vehicle for misinformation. The orphic actor then is a vessel of great power, but may also summon forces she cannot control and convey false knowledge that she is not accountable for. And as classical thought came to be joined with Christian theology producing scholastic philosophy, the orphic actor came to be seen as a vessel more easily occupied by demons as opposed to god. And as the medieval era became the renaissance, the actor's inspiration began to appear to have more and more in common with affliction and disease than with anything else.

Actor: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death..."<sup>117</sup>  
I have no idea what I'm talking about.

Director: What do you say? What does it feel like?

Actor: I don't know... That it is all pointless.

Director: What?

Actor: Life, life is pointless.

Director: Why?

Actor: I don't know.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 46. "It is, in the language of physical chemistry, a process of *ionization*." [italics in original]

<sup>117</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5, lines 19-22.

Director: What did you just say about it?

Actor: That it is slow, and creeping, and petty.

Director: To what end?

Actor: To the end. That's all. Everyone thinks it makes them smarter, better...

Director: Life.

Actor: In the end all it really does is make you dead.

Director: You know, there are people who think that's a good thing.

Actor: Nihilists.

Director: And humanists, if there's no point there's no authority, no oppression.

Actor: There's nothing, but what I do, it is whatever I make it.

Director: Nothing else.

Actor: "Out, out, brief candle,  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing."<sup>118</sup>  
It's my world; they are all just insects, what's the fuss all about?

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 5.5, lines 23-27.

## THE AGE OF REASON

Consistent with the radical social changes of the coming of the Age of Enlightenment, Newtonian physics, and the rise of modern scientific method, Rene Descartes began to locate all human emotions within the body. And his concept of the body was that of a machine that operated under the principles of force and matter, and under the control of the brain, not the respiratory system. Emotion as such, was simply the conscious perception of what the body did. In the following century, Diderot (1713-1784) also saw the body as a sort of machine, albeit as a far more complex one than that envisioned by Descartes. And in the labor of the actor, one of the great philosophers of the modern era saw an opportunity for science to illuminate aesthetics, and in so doing, largely created our contemporary concept of what acting is and what actors do. Diderot completed the separation of acting from any sense of the occult by not only advocating the “fourth wall,” and so instituting the concept of the actor’s sense of privacy in public, but also by framing the labor of the actor as a craft that created a role, rather than a ritual creating mystery.<sup>119</sup>

The institution of this sense of aesthetic distance between the audience and the actor removed any vestiges of the audience being affected by the heat and pneuma of the performer. Furthermore, actual emotion was increasingly seen as a physical reflex akin to sexual response, and as such, totally unreliable. Like Wordsworth, Diderot called for emotion “recalled in tranquility,” where it might be refined and shaped to the actor’s purpose.<sup>120</sup> In so doing Diderot framed acting as the art of action and the actor’s body as

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<sup>119</sup> Roach, 117.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 155.



an instrument that produces aesthetic action. Like a musical instrument, the actor was seen as a “blank slate” where “memory amplified by imagination resonates with such intensity through the body that revived sensations can duplicate actual experiences.”<sup>121</sup> However, memory for Diderot was not simply the recollection of the text, but the overall effect of all of the actor’s rehearsal of the role and the play. This relentless repetition forged a corporeal memory allowing the actor to emphasize some aspects of their consciousness while on stage, and ignore others, thus producing spontaneity, or the illusion of the first time for the audience.<sup>122</sup> Diderot referred to this as “double consciousness” and this is perhaps his most troublesome term, for Diderot is usually referring to not just any actor, but to the exceptional or the genius actor.<sup>123</sup> And these exceptional artists are perceived to possess near supernatural ability that appears to contradict the rational unity of Diderot’s previous notions of the actor being within his creation as a unified whole. Diderot also put forth the idea of the actor as an interpretive artist rather than as a creative one. This led to an increasing sense of dissatisfaction in some quarters with the whole idea of the human actor as the proper vehicle for what was increasingly a theatre initiated by playwrights, defined by complex stage technology, and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 142. Roach credits Aaron Hill for first analogizing the actor’s body to a musical instrument.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 152. This is perhaps the most profound of Diderot’s paradoxes of acting, the actor must rehearse until her words and actions can be done without conscious thought, it is only after they are properly rehearsed that these actions appear to be unrehearsed, spontaneous, and occurring as if for the first time. Conversely, action that is under-rehearsed appears to the audience as clumsy and an obvious attempt at deception. However, when properly rehearsed, the illusion of the first time is itself an illusion since, for the actor, the words and actions do indeed occur without, or mostly without, conscious reflection of any kind. And the audience, while they may have seen a performance before, has never seen this particular performance previously and furthermore, they will never see it again. Thus spontaneity is in actuality not so much based in illusion as it is in the effect of dissociated action on both actor and audience, where it may produce the operation of a unique event based in, but not limited to the cumulative mimetic action that has preceded it.

<sup>123</sup> Stanislavski will also refer to the double consciousness of the actor in performance and even his more refined concept of this is similarly troublesome with regard to the unity of the actor’s mind and body. It also takes on a decidedly literary perspective when Stanislavski instructs the actor to watch herself as she performs and edit/simplify her choices accordingly.

controlled by the authority of the relatively new position of the director. Gordon Craig was neither the first nor the last to wish for sophisticated puppet actors, actual as opposed to human machines that could do whatever their director envisioned without emotion or resistance.<sup>124</sup> (Conversely, performers also rebelled against what they saw as the mechanical tyranny of directors and text-based theatre and embraced surrealist and more improvisational models of performance.) Using Diderot's *Paradoxe* as a starting point, subsequent theorists would seek to develop schools of acting not necessarily predicated on individual genius, but on the systematic development of specific skills, and on the idea of the actor as a fully creative artist within the given circumstances of the play and the performance. Critical to this development was an even more extreme vision of the importance of rehearsal and repetitive exercises to develop in the actor the ability to respond from imaginary circumstances impulsively and without reflection, just as a competent musician need not be completely conscious of every note she plays as she plays it. Whatever the desired emotional content may be, it is seen to emerge from the text via the "blank slate" of the actor's physical instrument, which is created by rigorous and repetitious training, and "emotion recalled in tranquility." It is thus via conditioned reflex that the imagination enters into the actor's labor of action. This ability to produce what I will refer to, per Saltz, as dissociated action (see foot note 125), was rooted not so much in aesthetics as it was in the cognitive and neurosciences of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and most specifically, in the work of the Russian reflexologists and their

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<sup>124</sup> Roach, 194. Roach believes that it is unclear whether Craig ultimately wanted actual mechanical puppets or rigorously trained human actors. In either case my point is that from this point of view, the actor is viewed as being part of the material of performance (and a most problematic material at best) rather than as any sort of collaborator in the production process.

profound effect on the theory and practice of their late contemporary Konstantin Stanislavski.<sup>125</sup>

## STANISLAVSKI AND RUSSIAN REFLEXOLOGY

The roots of Russian Reflexology lay most immediately in George Henry Lewes *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859).<sup>126</sup> Lewes, himself an actor in his early years, paved the way for the subsequent James/Lange theory of emotion (1885, 1890) connecting all human emotions to physical and biological occurrences. James later states in no uncertain terms that the physical expression is itself the actual emotion. This formulation creates an event chain of “I see the bear, I run, I feel terrified.” Rather than “I see the bear, I feel terrified, I run.”<sup>127</sup> Emotion is not the cause of action; it is the action and only appears as causation in memory due to the instantaneous nature of its occurrence. Similarly, it is crying that generates sadness, striking a blow that generates anger, and enactment that incites emotion. The Russian reflexologists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took these principles even farther, in simple reflex responses they believed that they had found a sort of atomic theory of human behavior by which every action and reaction might eventually be described as a series of perceptible, cascading, reflex actions. Published in 1908, Ivan Sechenov’s *Works* stated that “frequent repetition is the means by which capacity is acquired.”<sup>128</sup> For Sechenov, “the rapidity and easiness of the

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<sup>125</sup> Saltz, “The Reality of the Theatrical Event,” 25. Dissociated action describes the nature of the mind and body when they are in action. It “is conditioned response: a pattern of actions becomes deeply entrenched through repetition, so that one action triggers the next without conscious intervention. Dissociated action then can be the mark of mastery, the product of disciplined and rigorous training.” Per Merleau-Ponty, “Habit is knowledge bred by familiarity.” *P of P*, 166.

<sup>126</sup> Lewes *The Physiology of Common Life* was published in Russian in 1861 and was a significant influence on Pavlov.

<sup>127</sup> Roach, 192. Roach further relates that Stanislavski knew of the work of Lewes, James, and Lang, via Ribot’s *La psychologie sentiments* (1896) which Stanislavski cites in his writings.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

action” indicated that actions learned so well as to become second nature are imperceptible from those that are first nature.<sup>129</sup> Later Pavlov will deny any sort of subjective psychology and define all behavior as the reflex response to stimuli.<sup>130</sup> And learned/conditioned reflex will be viewed as a vehicle to improve the functioning of the human mechanism.<sup>131</sup>

From the late 1880’s and onward, there were many groups in Europe and America committed to not only a more realistic style of theatre but also to the development of systematic schools of actor training to support them.<sup>132</sup> By the early 1920’s the most influential of these organizations was the Moscow Art Theatre, and the most influential teacher of actors was the man forever associated with it, Konstantin Stanislavski. Whether it is in interpretation, extension, or opposition, Stanislavski’s work represents the baseline of actor training in the Western theatre.<sup>133</sup> However, his work was also greatly influenced by the scientific and philosophical thought prevalent in Europe and especially in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 214. Thus extending the paradox of spontaneity, see note 111.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>132</sup> In the course of his dissertation I will draw a critical distinction between the concept of the real and the concept of the true, especially as they apply to mimetic theory. For now let us say that the real, as delineated by realism/naturalism, presents an artistic object or event that easily corresponds to the world that generated it, whereas the true, may or may not share this close correspondence to varying degrees. The rise of realistic acting reflected not only a desire to more closely replicate the world outside the theatre, but to do so by incorporating aspects of the newly popularized theories of psychology and sociology, thus conferring a sense of positivistic legitimacy to the profession and art of acting.

<sup>133</sup> Cole, 21-22. The most prominent American theatre/schools were: Samuel Silas Curry’s The Boston School of Acting-1880 (Later Curry College), Charles Wesley Emerson’s Boston College of Oratory-1880 (Later Emerson College-1890-present) and, Steele MacKaye’s American Academy of Dramatic Arts-1892-present. American theatre was also enormously influenced by the extended US tours of the great European theatre companies of the early 20th century such as: The Abbey Theatre’s tour in 1911, the Max Reinhardt theatre’s tour in 1912, Granville-Barker’s Tour in 1915, Copeau’s The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in 1917-1920 and ultimately, Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre, 1923 and 1925.

While Stanislavski was without a doubt profoundly informed and influenced by Diderot and the cognitive science of the early 1900's, he was also far less prone to absolutism than many of his students, such as Meyerhold, who like Pavlov, rejected the importance (perhaps even the very reality) of subjective experience.<sup>134</sup> Stanislavski was also a romantic; he studied yoga in the early 1900's, and had a practical as well as a somewhat orphic conception of breathing (or prana i.e. "life energy" radiating outward) and the importance of the actor's living presence on her audience.<sup>135</sup> Like Plato he believed that the actor could transfer her emotion onto the audience, like Aristotle he believed that these emotions were real or close to real. However, while Quintilian and his followers sought to develop a "rhetoric of passions," Stanislavski had to invent a grammar for acting that incorporated both the material and the ethereal, the theoretical and the practical, and had to do so in a Stalinist environment that "did not recognize the existence either of the subconscious or of the mind."<sup>136</sup> While the records of his work are frequently vague and contradictory, they also show a consistent concern with the truthful integration of the actor's physical expression with their emotional life on stage. With the ultimate goal being to fully serve the play text in performance.<sup>137</sup> In fact perhaps the most cogent general criticism of Stanislavski, from both his peers and contemporary critics, is

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<sup>134</sup> Both Diderot and Pavlov were respected by various pre-Stalinist Soviet officials as their theories supported the veracity of Marxist materialism. This coupled with his national and international reputation led them to largely support Stanislavski's work, even though they were suspicious of his tendency toward mysticism. Brecht for one, believed that the Soviet state had a positive effect on Stanislavski's work, especially with regard to the development of the Method of Physical Action.

<sup>135</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, trans. Jean Benedetti (New York: Routledge, 2008), xvii. Benedetti's translation and interpretation of Stanislavski's disparate writings is an attempt to address the deficiencies of Elizabeth Hapgood's earlier translations.

<sup>136</sup> Benedetti, xvii. In fact the 1936 American edition of *An Actor Prepares* differs substantially from the Soviet edition of 1938 in this regard. The English editions of Stanislavski's work, separated into two volumes and published thirteen years apart, only acerbated the distorted perception equating Stanislavski's "system" with Strasburg's Method and the primacy of the actor's emotional life on stage,

<sup>137</sup> Benedetti, xix. Stanislavski's collected writings take up eight volumes, his research and work stretched from the late 1800's until his death in 1937.

that while he privileged the playwright as “the only lawgiver on stage... he knew nothing of the laws of drama.”<sup>138</sup> Repeatedly Stanislavski was drawn to painfully naturalistic stage settings, not because the play required them or because the playwright demanded them, but because he believed they helped the actors to realize their fictional circumstances.<sup>139</sup> Stanislavski knew the deficits of affective memory, as did Ribot who coined the phrase in the previous century.<sup>140</sup> The practice of emotion recalled in solitude may be effective for the poet, but it is far too slow for the actor in performance. It also limits them to the content of their own personal experience and tends to wear out in the course of repeated performances. (As Stanislavski relates in *My Life in Art*) Then as now, many also found affective memory to be psychologically unhealthy for an actor, since it called on them to repeatedly relive strong or traumatic feelings outside of their actual context. Thus Stanislavski considered the Method of Physical Action to be the culmination of his research and work.<sup>141</sup> By placing the actor’s focus on what they actually do on stage, and the exacting repetition of that action in rehearsal, the actor builds a score of dissociated action within the context of a game reality delineated by the play script (per Saltz), allowing her to approach each performance as something both

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<sup>138</sup> David Magarshack, “Preface,” in *Stanislavski and the Art of the Stage*, ed David Magarshack (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 3-7. According to Hughes, Magarshack traces the influence of Tolstoy’s “What is Art?” on Stanislavski’s sense of aesthetics and attributes his conflicts with Chekov to the conflation of narrative with drama. Stanislavski relates that a positive audience reaction is indicative of a proper directorial concept, i.e. one that serves the play. Magarshack (and this writer) strongly disagree. However, this is indicative of the experimental nature of Stanislavski’s work.

<sup>139</sup> R.I.G. Hughes, “Tolstoy, Stanislavski and the Art of Acting,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51, No. 1(Winter, 1993). 41. Hughes notes that in the 1898 production of *The Seagull*, Stanislavski wrote that the realistic detail was for the audience, whereas in the 1904 production of *The Cherry Orchard* and thereafter, he related that it was for the actors. Hughes also traces the influence of Tolstoy’s “What is Art?” on Stanislavski’s sense of aesthetics. Concluding that it produced “An over-simplified model of the interaction between actors and audience... that never allowed the play to speak for itself.” The crux of this over simplification was Tolstoy’s insistence that the purpose of art is to infect the audience with the emotions of the artist. Objects that do not accomplish this, for Tolstoy, simply are not art.

<sup>140</sup> Roach, 210-211. And as did Lee Strasburg, as Benedetti points out. xxi.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

familiar and completely new. These actions also act on the subconscious mind and thus stimulate the actor's imagination creating "an inner truth of feeling" via "psychotechnical means." And this "inner truth of feeling" may also be shaped by the nature of the actor's actions, as well as by her preparation and training in the selection of these actions.<sup>142</sup> Unfortunately, due largely to the historical circumstances of the early to mid-20th century as well as the difficulty of communicating and translating such complex ideas, Stanislavski's work became known in the west in a haphazard and even distorted fashion. And these difficulties had profound effects on those who based their own techniques on interpretations of Stanislavski's work that flowed from fragmentary, incomplete, and indirectly received sources.<sup>143</sup>

## STANISLAVSKI IN AMERICA

Although it was never his intention, Stanislavski's work was received in America as falling into two distinct and contradictory periods, each of which advocates the exploration of a play from a certain point of view both in rehearsal and in performance. That which is generally seen as his earlier work is focused on the actor's sense of the emotional truth of the play and her particular role within it. The use of affective memory figures prominently. The later work is defined by a focus on the events of the play and

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<sup>142</sup> Stanislavski's concept of *perezhivanie* was his attempt to create a more comprehensive and accessible alternative to the Freudian theories of the unconscious mind "via psychotechnical means." While this may well have also been an attempt to avoid Stalinist censorship and retribution, in my opinion Stanislavski was largely successful. And the value of placing the source of the actor's imagination within *perezhivanie*, as opposed to some concept of the unconscious mind will be explored in chapter four.

<sup>143</sup> Magarshack, 1-3. In the main, while he wrote voluminously, Stanislavski resisted the codification of his work, in this sense, the entire concept of a "Stanislavski System" of acting is misleading, post-mortem, and of little present practical use. What is typically being referenced when the term is used is some particular interpretation of Stanislavski, usually based on some portion of his work or the interpretation of one or more of his many students, or both. Even the Method of Physical Action is incomplete and fragmentary. Given the vagaries of history and language, as well as the ephemerality of the subject matter, some degree of interpretation is inevitable and, I would argue (as does Benedetti) necessary and desirable if practical application is the goal.

what the actor actually does within its given circumstances, and is referred to as the Method of Physical Action. Stanislavski's early work was almost exclusively communicated and taught in the United States via his expatriate students such as Richard Boleslavsky, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and Maria Ouspenskaya, beginning in 1924 at the Lab Theatre in New York City. Their experiences and interpretations of Stanislavski's early work would provide the inspiration and moral authority for what would become Lee Strasberg's "Method" of acting, which was highly influential if increasingly criticized from the 1920's to the present day.<sup>144</sup> The later Method of Physical Action became the inspiration for Stella Adler's school of acting.<sup>145</sup> Adler has the distinction of being the only American to have ever actually spent a substantial amount of time with Stanislavski in person and to have discussed and transcribed his theories with him. Granted the circumstances of these discussions were not optimal; Stanislavski was recuperating in France from a heart attack, didn't speak English, and his theatre continued to exist only by its tacit acceptance of Stalin's rigid state aesthetic of Social Realism.<sup>146</sup> In spite of these obstacles and communicating via a series of translators, Adler managed to eventually have transcribed a workable version of Stanislavski's Method of Physical

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<sup>144</sup> David Krasner, ed., *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 44. The Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) was an organization of great foment; Stanislavski taught and directed there for over thirty years, and many of his students went on to develop their own techniques and train other students. Vakhtangov in particular was also greatly influenced by another of Stanislavski's earlier students, Vsevolod Meyerhold. The MAT also grew to prominence during one of the most chaotic and precarious periods of Western history, encompassing the early Russian uprisings, WWI, the Russian revolution, the Stalinist famine and purges, and the events leading up to WW II. To say the least, none of this was conducive to the translation and transportation of scholarship and ideas.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>146</sup> Stalin's commitment to Social Realism was not to be trifled with, in 1939, a year after Stanislavski's death, Vsevolod Meyerhold, then one of the Soviet Union's most prominent directors, was arrested for opposing it. His wife was murdered and he was tortured and executed by the NKVD in 1940.



Action, which she then took back to the Group Theatre in New York in 1934.<sup>147</sup> While Adler was a well-known actor and acting teacher until her death in 1992, the influence of her technique was somewhat limited by its lack of codification. In any case, few would argue that it was Adler's unprecedented trans-Atlantic journey to visit Stanislavski and record the principles of the Method of Physical Action that led to its dissemination in the United States. Primarily via Adler, Sanford Meisner was to develop his own technique inspired by the Method of Physical Action which he dubbed "the reality of doing." Strasberg's Method and Meisner technique remain the two most codified systems of American actor training based on Stanislavski, although they are hardly the only ones.<sup>148</sup> In the last fifteen to twenty years, largely in response to the limitations of the actor's actual lived experiences being substituted for those of the character (as advocated in the Method) versus the actor's use of her imagination to justify behavior within the given circumstances of the play (as is taught in Meisner technique), Meisner technique has emerged from the shadow of the Method as a more viable school of thought.<sup>149</sup> This

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<sup>147</sup> The various conflicts of gender and class within the Group Theatre remain the stuff of theatre legend in the US. Strasberg had little capacity for dissent, and Adler, a star actress descended from Yiddish theatre royalty made little secret of her thoughts regarding his teaching, which she felt was incomplete at best. The two quickly grew to despise each other until the day Strasberg died in 1982, when Adler opined that it would take one hundred years to undo the damage Strasberg had done to American acting. Adler and Meisner's relationship also grew contentious with age, mostly precipitated by Meisner's patriarchal personality. He tended to downplay her influence in the creation of Meisner technique, diluting her accomplishments into the organization of the Group Theatre as a whole and crediting the influence of Michael Chekov and essays by Rapaport and Sudakov. Meisner also appears to pay Adler a string of mean-spirited and back-handed complements in his book and other writings.

<sup>148</sup> William Esper and Damon DiMarco, *The Actor's Art and Craft* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 6. Uta Hagen's technique, also based on Stanislavski's earlier work, but derived from other sources and augmented by her own vast professional experience, is also a contender. In my opinion, while Hagen's technique is perhaps not so well organized as Meisner's, it appears to be no less so than that of Strasberg.

<sup>149</sup> Krasner, 25.

is especially true in the academy where the clear progression of the various exercises is well suited to an academic syllabus, especially in the first year of training.<sup>150</sup>

Meisner was a musician and the exercises of this technique reveal this. Like musical scales they are repetitive, progressive, and gradually build the capacity of the student to fulfill Meisner's definition of acting "the ability to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances." Truthfulness entails behavior that is plausible, but most importantly, impulsive, performed without reflection, and in response to the behavior of the other actors. There are two core exercises in the first year of training, repetition and independent activities. As we will see in the following chapters, these two exercises are combined and complicated in various permutations, and students are not given their first written scenes until they accomplish a certain mastery of these improvisational exercises after several weeks of class. As it has currently evolved, a full course of Meisner training typically takes from two to three years, consisting of approximately six hours of class time per week and at least another six to nine hours of practice and preparation outside of class. The first year focuses on the basics of behaving truthfully as the student imagines they themselves would behave under the imaginary circumstances of the exercise or the text. In this so-called "straight acting" there is no attempt at creating any sort of character, and apart from two assigned scenes, the work is improvisational. In the second year of training the emphasis shifts to various types of scripted work and the creation of characters other than the actors themselves. Lastly, the student attempts to apply the work

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<sup>150</sup> Malague, 264. Holub, 214. It should also be noted that many more schools and programs teach portions of Meisner technique, but not the whole course of study or even the entire first year. Many Meisner teachers feel that this "cafeteria conservatory" approach fails to provide the student actor with a firm foundation for the eventual development of her own technique.

of the first two years to classical texts.<sup>151</sup> The first year of training, as depicted in Esper's book, is codified, well organized, and generally agreed upon, if sometimes modified by individual teachers. The second is far more variable and the subject of much discontent and disagreement amongst various teachers, but it too is largely built around two core exercises and increasingly complex scene study.<sup>152</sup> The third year varies considerably, especially within MFA programs and may not be offered at all in private acting studios.

Meisner technique has been and will continue to be influenced and adapted by those who teach it. Esper's work is generally considered to be largely faithful to Meisner's original teachings; in fact he describes "the Bill Esper technique" as being a continuation, a refinement, and "in some cases" an extension of Meisner's work.<sup>153</sup> However it has also been the inspiration for vastly different approaches, such as Lloyd Williamson's Actors Movement Studio and Rick Sordelet's Improvised Choreography for stage combat and physical action. Both of these techniques are strongly influenced and inspired by their creator's training and experience of Meisner technique.<sup>154</sup> Both Williamson and Sordelet have created methods of actor training that seek to prepare and enhance the actor's ability to "physicalize the demands of Meisner technique."<sup>155</sup> Williamson's method is also informed by his study and work with dancer Anna Sokolow, while Sordelet's is also structured around the practical rigors of professional production,

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<sup>151</sup> Holub, 218.

<sup>152</sup> Victoria Hart, 72. In the second year the training moves to being primarily scripted versus primarily improvisational, and the student actor must learn to serve not only her own sense of truth, but that of the author and the director as well. As Hart aptly puts it, "The process is not graceful and the dynamic of the year is significantly different."

<sup>153</sup> Esper, 4-5. While Meisner lived to be 91, he was increasingly physically debilitated throughout the last twenty years of years of his life as a result of cancer surgery, cataracts, and being hit by a truck as he stood on the sidewalk. Esper believes that this largely prevented Meisner from the further development of his technique.

<sup>154</sup> Williamson studied with Meisner and Esper, Sordelet with Esper at Rutgers University.

<sup>155</sup> Holub, 221.

as well his experience and expertise in stage violence and physical action. Both stress the need for impulsive action motivated by the needs of the text and the production.

## CONCLUSION

It should come as no surprise that the history of acting and actor training is a history of conflict. My contention is that the classical affiliation of acting within rhetoric is largely the source of this conflict. By classifying the imaginary within the actual and juxtaposing knowledge with inspiration, the nature of the truth of mimetic creations tended to be perceived as depending on their degree of correspondence to the world that inspired them. This being the case, the mimetic object must always be, to one degree or another, a mere copy, and so an imitation, a counterfeit, or a lie. Thus, especially for Plato and in spite of his predilection for them, poetry and theatre were difficult to separate from politics and moral order, and the ironic and paradoxical nature of his dialogues captures this dialectic between the real and the true. Aristotle, as we have seen, greatly refined this, and placed the audience impact of the aesthetic object within the object itself, and separate from the act that created it (mimesis vs. poiesis) and further separated the actor's emotions from those of the audience. However, due to the similarity of their observed qualities, Aristotle still classified most performing arts and especially acting under the general heading of rhetoric. Quintilian codified this rhetoric, Descartes challenged it, and Diderot broke it apart into a sort of humanistic science. Stanislavski envisioned a system of actor training that while based in the best material science of his day, also accommodated a sense of the romantic, the mystical, and the emotional power of the orphic actor to infect her audience with the emotions she experienced. As Stanislavski's life and work progressed, these two aspects of his theories melded to a

certain extent, as represented by the Method of Physical Action and the concept *perezhivanie*. And the more metaphysical aspects of his work, for whatever reasons, came to be more and more described and explained by the theories of material science revealed in and through the actor's doing of action under imaginary circumstances. Strasberg, working mostly from the point of view of early Stanislavski, focused primarily, but not exclusively, on the actor's emotional life on stage. Adler, working primarily from the point of view of Stanislavski's later work, focused on the actor's imagination, the play's the given circumstances, and the overall action on the stage. And Meisner, working largely off of Adler, created a systematic technique of actor training founded on Stanislavski's ultimate work, the Method of Physical Action. The efficacy of Meisner's reality of doing, as we have seen and will continue to see, can be explained to a significant degree by philosophical thought and analysis, thus illuminating its clarification and extension by Esper and his students. I maintain that the three most persistent issues with regard theatre in general and acting in particular are (1) the possibility of real action occurring on stage under fictitious circumstances, (2) the nature of the relationship between the actor and the play text, and (3) the source, nature, and prominence, of the actor's emotional life on stage. While Saltz's work convincingly addresses the first issue, and his notion of game theory certainly illuminates the second and to some extent the third, it remains to be seen how these millennial issues might be addressed by a critical analysis of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the pedagogy and practice of Meisner technique.

It is my contention that action is the medium for theatre and that via impulse and desire, potentiality is drawn into motion by the presence of negation, in the course of

which it may discover its motive and become action. This action is resisted by negation, creating its opposite, obliteration, and synthesis, in a relentless dialectic that ultimately joins and supersedes these opposites and produces progressive knowledge. It is the hidden labor of the actor to create this action on stage, and as she does so, to potentially generate the operation of dramatic Platonic truth from the basis of plausible/distributive truth. This labor, beginning with the real, or even some small sense of the real, will generate a sense of progression from the merely actual to the operation of truth. This process, in a sense, operates in juxtaposition to the usual sense of a mimetic process whereby the ideal is brought to materiality. The dialectic of this juxtaposition of the actor's essentially non-mimetic process, with that of the mimetic processes of the playwright and the director, facilitates the possibility of the eventual reconciliation and synthesis of the ideal and the material. As well as that of the real and the true, through the operation of dramatic Platonic truth which, due to its lack of content and ability to disrupt the material and the corporeal, exerts influence toward the synthesis of a unique outcome without dictating a specific outcome.

Throughout the remainder of this dissertation I will apply my research lens elements of labor, action, and truth to the principles and exercises in Esper's *The Actor's Art and Craft*, in order to further the pedagogy and practice of Meisner technique, as well as to further my contention that acting and theatre are best served by a non-mimetic technique, based on the continual creation of unique events in a ludic, game ontology.

## **CHAPTER FOUR---THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE BILL ESPER TECHNIQUE**

In this chapter I will describe and explore the phenomenology of the progression of the exercises in Esper's technique. This progression is based on the two main exercises of repetition and Independent Activities. These core exercises are combined and complicated in various ways that lead first to the actor's ability to establish, sustain, and justify moment-to-moment reality (the labor of action) with her partner, and then to develop an increasingly sophisticated ability to create an emotional life truthful to the imaginary circumstances of the given exercise/circumstance. This sense of truth begins in the plausible and ideally evolves toward the dramatic Platonic sense of truth as a non-material, non-ideal operation that destabilizes both the ideal and the material towards the creation of unique events and new knowledge.

### **THE MEASURE OF AN ARTIST'S WORTH**

In his autobiography Elia Kazan wrote "The measure of an artist's worth is his depth, not his breadth."<sup>156</sup> These are chilling words that have haunted this writer for over twenty years. To be measured, evaluated, and assigned value or the lack thereof in the arena of one's chosen art is an experience so terrifying it stops many people of talent dead in their tracks. Many never move again. Especially for the young artist, depth is not a friend; she wants to do everything, and so seeks variety and breadth within the same familiar plane, rather than any single deep experience of her own creativity. Almost as frightening as Kazan's statement was the reassurance the writer received from Jack Bettenbender, as I was about to graduate from the directing program at Rutgers after

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<sup>156</sup> Elia Kazan, *A Life*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 151.

three long, hard years “Son, this is an old man’s game.”<sup>157</sup> Meaning that I had some skills, he liked me, I had potential, and it would be a long time, if ever, before I had enough depth to be worth much of anything as an artist. For a director, to be callow is to be occasionally useful, but of no real consequence. Interestingly, this was the self-described plight of the young Kazan when he attended Yale Drama School and later when he was a member of the Group Theatre, where he ingratiated himself initially by building sets and rigging scenery and managed to do this so cleverly that he acquired the nickname Gadget. After Kazan became a successful and respected actor (and then the most accomplished director of theatre and film of his generation) the nickname was shortened to Gadg. Kazan was commonly referred to as such by his family, friends, and colleagues, at least one supposes until after the publication of his autobiography in 1988, wherein he related that he had always “despised my nickname...It suggested an agreeable, ever-compliant little cuss, “a good Joe” who worked hard and always followed instructions. I didn’t feel that way, not at all.”<sup>158</sup> That Kazan allowed and even encouraged himself to be referred to by his despised nickname for over forty years reveals much about the depth of an artist he referred to. Kazan was secretive by nature and a born conspirator; he allowed and even encouraged the nickname for many reasons one suspects, but primarily because it served as a continual reminder of his otherness, his vulnerability “to the depredations of an unsympathetic world.” In spite of his accomplishments he remained, “distrustful of success...suspicious of those in favor.” Even, perhaps especially, when the person in favor was he himself.<sup>159</sup> Whatever one may

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<sup>157</sup> John Bettenbender, Founding dean of Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of the Arts, interview with the author, May, 1985.

<sup>158</sup> Kazan, 5.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 495.



think of Kazan, or any artist and the perceived disparity between their public persona and the subjective depths that may generate their work, Kazan's dictum stands as touchstone, eventually a true artist goes her own way and goes deep. And the depth she explores is the only perspective she can ever know with any certainty, her own point of view.

I indulge in this digression both to initiate a change in tone from the previous chapters and also to address the very cogent issue of "Why Esper?" While I have previously acknowledged his accomplishments as a teacher as well as his place in the contemporary theatre and the quality of his book, there are certainly others who teach not only Meisner technique, but also other acting techniques and produce similar results. What makes Esper's clarification and extension of Meisner's work unique and worthy of scholarly analysis? My contention is that it is because the ultimate goal of Esper's technique is the development of the subjective depth of the actor as a creative artist. Furthermore, this aspect of the training makes Esper's version of it even more effective and accessible than Meisner's own teachings. "The biggest misconception I hear about acting technique is that it restricts the artist's talent. Ridiculous! Ultimately technique does not constrain the artist's instincts; it frees them."<sup>160</sup> The point of Esper's technique is that it fosters the development of the actor's own technique, forged from her own point of view and sense of truth. "You'll learn *my* technique, the Bill Esper technique, And-God willing-if you leave here, you'll leave with *your own* technique."<sup>161</sup> Esper's teaching fosters the beginning of a lifelong exploration of what matters to the actor/artist and how best that may be served. Most of this exploration ultimately takes place outside of Esper's studio and after the formal training has ended. "The cultivation of that uniqueness in each

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 4.

actor is very important. I think Sandy Meisner understood that and acted on it.”<sup>162</sup> “The cultivation of uniqueness,” through a common and rigorously developed set of skills is only one of the paradoxes of Esper’s version of Meisner technique. Perhaps the most profound is that this intensely subjective depth leads not to the endless representation of the actor’s own identity, but towards the operation of unique occurrences, with their foundation based in the actor’s experience of the other.

Nietzsche believed that subjective reality was the reality of the will and that its dominant function was the urge to create powerful forms.<sup>163</sup> Later Gyorgy Lukacs expanded on this and stated, “Man grows dramatic by virtue of the intensity of his will.”<sup>164</sup> Still later and largely in response to what he saw as the existentialist’s extreme preoccupation with the will, Merleau-Ponty wrote that, “We should not seek freedom in the act of will, which is, in its very meaning, something short of an act.”<sup>165</sup> Meaning that will is in actuality much more akin to motion than it is to action, in that it has no motivation. The will is in fact non-dramatic, even if it is in motion, and thus it is senseless, and in a very real way, less than human.<sup>166</sup> This places the subjective consciousness of the actor and her subsequent labor of action in a social context, inferring that while it may be deeply subjective, it is not necessarily based in identity, but in public interaction. The primacy of moment-to-moment contact and focus on the other in the labor of action in Meisner technique moves the consciousness of both actors “away from

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<sup>162</sup> Ellen Orenstein, “Shaping the Independent Actor”, *American Theatre* 25, no 1 (January, 2008); 43.

<sup>163</sup> Burke, 333.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>165</sup> *P of P*, 506.

<sup>166</sup> Rayner’s interpretation of Macbeth as a character without qualities, a human doing as opposed to a human being, is a powerful evocation of this concept. See foot note 69, page 33.

private consciousness and into public contracts of motion, doings and deeds in time.”<sup>167</sup>

As we will see later in chapter five, the labor of action may be colored by the identity of the actor, but it need not be dominated by it. Gilles Deleuze addressed this issue after Merleau-Ponty by affirming that representation (or mimesis) is always unavoidably linked to identity, which it reifies. Deleuze however, conceived of theatre as being not mimetic, but “a technique for creating endless repetitions.”<sup>168</sup> For Deleuze, time was the foundation of truth and so his conception of rehearsal was “repetition with a difference” to account for, at minimum, the temporal change between even the most uniform of repetitions.<sup>169</sup> Deleuze’s repetition then is a real and unique action capable of being a force for change and is akin to Merleau-Ponty’s Hegelian notion of history as “neither a perpetual novelty, nor a perpetual repetition, but a unique movement which creates stable forms and breaks them up.”<sup>170</sup> Likewise for Badiou, “True events are revolutionary, non-true events are merely negative attempts to dilute the revolutionary effects of true events.”<sup>171</sup> Thus the depth of an artist’s subjective experience may provide vitality for the labor of action, without necessarily simply reifying her identity and by extension the existing structures of power. “Actors can’t be outer-directed. You have to encourage them to be inner-directed.”<sup>172</sup> Esper’s clarification and extension of Meisner’s technique exists for the purpose of establishing a craft whereby the actor may create her own technique from her own point of view, constantly renewed and intensified from the

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<sup>167</sup> Rayner, 126.

<sup>168</sup> Puchner, 167.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>170</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Pof P*, 101.

<sup>171</sup> Puchner, 188.

<sup>172</sup> Orenstein, 125. By “outer-directed” Esper is referring to unjustified, superficial or pretended behavior.

depths of her lived experience, and it is this concept of the actor's lived experience, or *perezhivanie*, that I will address next.

## PEREZHEVNIE

It is my contention that the concept of *perezhivanie* or “lived experience” is not only essentially critical to our understanding of Stanislavsky's work, but that it also provides a crucial link between the Method of Physical Action, Meisner technique (the reality of doing), and its subsequent and continuing interpretation and extension by Esper. Stanislavski first coined the term in *Building a Character* in 1949 and it was initially translated as “emotional identification.”<sup>173</sup> However, while both “lived experience” and “emotional identification” are elements of *perezhivanie*, both translations (especially the latter) are gross over-simplifications of this complex and subtle foundational element of modern acting.<sup>174</sup> Like mimesis, *perezhivanie* encompasses a range of meanings that cannot be adequately translated by a single word or phrase. However, unlike the example of mimesis, *perezhivanie* is not to be understood as a continuum of various meanings dependent on grammatical placement, but as a synthesis which “encompasses the dynamic relations of imagination and creativity, emotion and cognition.”<sup>175</sup> However,

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<sup>173</sup>Benedetti, xxi. *Perezhivanie* has also been interpreted as being akin or even synonymous with Diderot's concept of the actor's dual consciousness (i.e. that of the actor being both themselves and the character simultaneously) in performance. This undermines the sense of an actor's performance as an organic whole able to interact with other, similarly split, actors who also possess dual consciousness. Which of these entities interacts with the other at any given time? More recent investigations of *perezhivanie*, especially from the point of view of cognitive psychology, are more detailed and nuanced, especially in so far as they deal with the nature of the actor's lived experience in performance as being synergistic rather than sequential.

<sup>174</sup> Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998, 107-123. Carnicke refers to *perezhivanie* as “Stanislavsky's lost term” and characterizes it largely as being a dialectic between the romantic/subjective and the material/phenomenological as well as the distinction between realism and the overtly theatrical. (122) However, her concept of *perezhivanie*, written in 1998, does not embrace its more recent and expanded psychological and ontological aspects.

<sup>175</sup> L. Bozhovich, “The Concept of the Cultural-Historical Development of the Mind and its Prospects,” *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 16, no 1 (1977): 5-22.

this doesn't mean that these elements occur in consciousness sequentially. "They respond to one another psychologically and all exist at once in consciousness, as a Gestalt, though it is true they are expressed with varying degrees of clarity."<sup>176</sup> *Perezhivanie* combines subjective experience, especially that which is powerfully emotional and physically palpable, with the recollection and the interpretation of not only the subject's experience, but that of others, even that of fictional others. In this sense, this aspect of *perezhivanie* may be thought of as being akin to both sympathy and empathy. Via the Method of Physical Action, Stanislavski believed that through the repetition of real physical action on stage, these emotions could be contacted and, in a sense, relived (at least in the sense of being repeated) by the actor, whether or not the memory was her own, someone else's, real or imaginary.<sup>177</sup> The action of *perezhivanie* is thus "temporally double sided, growing back and towards the future and the past simultaneously." Richard Schechner proposes that it is the rhythm produced by the action of this double temporality that allows the actor to actually be not the character and not not the character simultaneously, since her present experience in performance is temporally doubled in both past and future moments of performance.<sup>178</sup> For Schechner, as it is for the semiotic theorists, the critical act of theatre is not so much performance as it is rehearsal, for without rehearsal the concept of performance as "twice behaved behavior" loses much of its cohesion. And the

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<sup>176</sup> F. Vasilyuk, *The Psychology of Experiencing*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1988. 190-191. The concept of Gestalt that is closest to this sense of *perezhivanie* is that of Ernst Mach in that perception is always relational and formed by the interaction of the experience itself and preexisting or a priori structures of cognition that are themselves formed by experience. Mach was influenced by Husserl's phenomenology and his sense of Gestalt is that experience must be appreciated as a being in relationship with all of consciousness, even though any perception in it contains a dimension that is hidden. As we will see later, Gestalt is also akin, but not identical to Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, which is similar to Stanislavski's sense of the superconscious mind.

<sup>177</sup> Beth R. Ferholt, "Playworlds and *Perezhivanie*: Emotional-Cognitive Development in Adult-Child Joint Play" PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2009. 3.

<sup>178</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, 113-114.

behavior that Schechner describes as “symbolic” and “ritual,” as opposed to actual, loses much of the rhythmic quality that he proposes brings it in to existence if it is not subject to constant repetition.<sup>179</sup>

It is my contention that the concept of *perezhivanie* is both useful and under-utilized in the study of modern acting, in that it provides a model of lived experience that incorporates the mind and the body (the ideal and the material), the real and the imaginary, and the actor’s labor of action with the emotional content it engenders.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, as it did for Stanislavski in the face Soviet materialism (socialist realism), *perezhivanie* provides a unique and more nuanced alternative to the concept of the unconscious or the sub-conscious mind as the source of the actor’s imagination and/or “true self.” The sense of lived experience as a synergy of imagination, emotion, and cognition/interpretation, mediated by the different aspects of time (as the present simultaneously reaches back to the past and also toward the future) does far more, to my mind, to accurately describe the actor’s temporally privileged position than the quasi-mystical invocation of either the unconscious or sub-conscious mind. Most problematic is the romantic notion of the unconscious mind coined by Schelling, embraced by Coleridge and later codified, such as it can be, by Freud. Perhaps the most trenchant critique is that of Searle, who finds it absurd to ascribe behavior to thoughts that can, by definition, never actually be thought by any subject.<sup>181</sup> When referring to the processes that undergird conscious life Searle prefers the term nonconscious and I will follow his example in this regard, adding Saltz’s previously described concept of dissociated action

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 111-112.

<sup>180</sup> Carnicke, 107. Carnicke cites the actor’s experience of moment-to-moment reality as a critical part of *perezhivanie*.

<sup>181</sup> John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 151-173.

to differentiate conditioned/learned behavior from autonomic functions of the body. Another recurring use of the term is that of Jung's collective unconscious, which he differentiates from the personal unconscious by positing the collective unconscious as the accumulation of both psychic structures and species memory.<sup>182</sup> In fact Hart refers to acting as being sourced in the experience of the collective unconscious.<sup>183</sup> The concept of *perezhivanie* provides another way of describing these same phenomena from the perspective of a subjective lived experience interacting with other subjective lived experiences. As such it is not only consistent with Stanislavski's intent, but also a potentially unique and more systematic way of analyzing the nature of the actor's lived experience on stage, rather than falling back upon its usual attribution to an inscrutable unconscious mind, impervious to conscious thought and thus unreceptive to analysis.

Actor 1: "My husband!"

Actor 2: "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

Actor 1: "I heard an owl scream and crickets cry.  
Did you not speak?"

Actor 2: "When?"

Actor 1: "Now."

Actor 2: "As I descended?"

Actor 1: "Ay."<sup>184</sup>

I' sorry, I just can't make any sense out of this.

Director: Stop trying to make sense out of it. What are you doing?

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<sup>182</sup> "Collective unconscious" (psychology), Britannica Online Encyclopedia. "Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia. N.p., n.d. Web. 4 Dec. 2011.

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/125572/collective-unconscious>

<sup>183</sup> Hart, 51.

<sup>184</sup> *Macbeth*, 2-2, lines 11-20.

Actor 1: I need information.

Director: But what do you do?

Actor 2: Talk.

Director: And

Actor 1: Listen.

Director: Yes, listen and talk, try it again from the top.

Actor 1: “My husband!”

Actor 2: “I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?”

Director: Stop please. Repeat the last part of the line

Actor 2: “Didst thou not hear a noise?”

Director: Not to me, to her, repeat it.

Actor 2: “Didst thou not hear a noise?”

Director: Again, repeat.

Actor 2: “Didst thou not hear a noise?”

Director: Again, repeat.

Actor 2: “Didst thou not hear a noise?”

Director: Again, repeat!

Actor 2: Didst thou not hear a noise!

Actor 1: “I heard an owl scream and crickets cry.  
Did you not speak?”

Director: Good! From now on, at least for the time being, anytime either of you doesn’t feel as though you are being really listened to or really spoken to, do not respond with your line, your partner will then



repeat her last line until they produce the necessary impulse for you to respond truthfully.

Actor 2: How many times should we repeat it?

Director: As many times as it takes to get an impulsive response.

Actor 2: But the script-

Director: No “buts,” your response has nothing to do with the text and everything to do with the unreflective impulse to speak, everything is contingent on this, if it’s not there, focus everything on your partner and repeat what you just said until it is.

Actor 1: “Did you not speak?”

Actor 2: “When?”

Actor 1: “Now.”

Actor 2: “As I descended?”

Actor 1: “Ay.”

Director: Good! Remember, when in doubt, repeat.

Actor 1: Don’t we have to listen to the castle, the noises, as well?

Director: First things first, for right now see how much you can do just by working off each other moment-to-moment. Really ask the question; really respond as if you could say whatever occurs to you, because if it’s not sincere, you could.

## **REPETITION**

The repetition exercise begins by both partners placing the entire focus of their consciousness on each other. From this focus outside of themselves and on the other, the

partner who initiates the exercise is free to experience her partner and voice some true observation predicated by that observation.<sup>185</sup> The other then responds by repeating exactly what was said and the repetition continues back and forth. These are the only rules in this first simple iteration of the exercise however; the intent is the same as it will be throughout the course of the training, respond impulsively, without reflection, and exactly. (Or as Hart previously stated, “Faster than you can think, but not faster than you can hear.”) Almost immediately Esper introduces the first criteria that can and should alter the repetition, the truthful response. The repetition may be changed in order to keep the response plausibly true. This generally involves the other in the exercise simply changing the possessive pronoun involved in the statement, thus “You have a red moustache.” would become “I have a red moustache.” assuming of course that only the other has a red moustache. This simple rule serves a number of pedagogical functions. Firstly, it introduces and demonstrates the nature of impulse and acting from impulse in two opposing ways. Initially, assuming the statement is true, the actor experiences the pure impulse to repeat what was just said according to the rules previously laid down. However, if the rules of the repetition force them to make a false statement, they experience the cognitive dissonance of making a statement that doesn’t correspond to the given circumstances of the exercise and feel how that takes them out of contact with their partner. Also, it is not unusual for the actor to automatically make the change in the repetition that makes the statement truthful. In this case the actor not only experiences the nature of acting from impulse, but also of changing the repetition due to a new superseding impulse that keeps their response accurate. “Follow your impulse... Never

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<sup>185</sup> My use of the phrase “the other” in the context of the repetition exercise is phenomenological and usually refers to the other actor or that which is not the subject, rather than to any more complex implications of the term.

sacrifice a truthful answer to the literalness of the repetition.”<sup>186</sup> Thus from the actor’s very first experience of repetition the foundational elements of acting from impulse and plausible truth are established.

The second impulse that may change the content of the repetition is when the effect of continually repeating the phrase creates a new impulse to change the repetition. This is referred to as “the pileup” and usually results from the sense of frustration or humor that develops as the actors repeat the content back and forth. The very act of repeating it engenders an impulse to change the repetition’s content.<sup>187</sup> The pileup reinforces that the exercise’s intent is to develop impulsive, rather than logical action. “A connection with his impulses is one of the most important things an actor can develop, because who you really are is revealed by your spontaneous impulses.”<sup>188</sup> This underscores the repetition’s intentional lack of intellectual content. The purpose is never to play any sort of scene, have any sort of conversation or even a logical exchange of information; the intent of these two early repetition exercises is to develop impulsive behavior based in total focus on the other. It also develops a heightened ability to listen as well, since the content can change at any moment and so the repetition is far harder for the actor to anticipate than it is for the observer watching. This is the beginning of the actor’s privileged temporality founded in the reality of doing. The actor doesn’t pretend, she must really listen and really answer. This establishes the illocutionary contingency necessary for real speech acts and creates the foundation of moment-to-moment reality. An observer sees both sides of the exercise, to a profound degree the actors experience only the other, their responses occur as dissociated action. This creates the time dilation

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 39-40

Bergson wrote of, the actor's narrow perspective on the other, in a very real sense, pulls them out of the common temporality of the class and into that of the performer who generates her own sense of duration. This also accounts for the actor's freedom from self-consciousness when focused wholly on the other, this occurs at least in part due to the sense that the actor's experience of a moment, while chronologically concurrent with that of the audience, is durationally quite different. The observer sees, or believes that they may see, where the exercise is going, the actors do not. There is no controlling intellect or desired destination. The actors simply "do" the exercise until they are stopped. Thus anticipation is largely a function of being an audience or the actor watching themselves. Absent this perspective it is difficult to experience anticipation. This also facilitates the experience of emotional content rising from the reality of doing, without an outward perspective of themselves, the actors are free from much of the socially conditioned restraint they function under outside of the theatre. This unmanaged behavior deepens the sense of relying on impulsive, unreflective impulse. Finally, the early repetition exercises condition the basic ability to rehearse an exercise to the point that it becomes second nature. "Unless you train yourselves to default to these habits instinctually, they will not serve you on stage or in life."<sup>189</sup> The ability to rehearse, to practice to the point that whatever is required becomes inculcated to the level of dissociated action is not acting, but without it, any sort of acting based in the reality of doing is impossible. Just as important is the student's experience of the importance of trial and error in the actor's rehearsal process. Failure is frequently the norm and must be embraced rather than feared. "it's okay to fall on your face-endlessly-as long as you're falling in the right

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 47.

direction, diving after the right thing.”<sup>190</sup> There is simply no other way to gain any degree of competence without it. If the actors eventually attain a sense of mastery, this knowledge of themselves and their instruments may accelerate the process, but the fact will always remain that the only way to test an acting choice is in action.

Once the above basics are established, the pedagogy of the repetition begins to move toward deepening the actor’s subjective experience of her partner and the partner’s response to this scrutiny. The repetition and the entire course of the first year’s work takes place under the condition of “straight acting,” meaning that the actors are always behaving as they themselves would under the imaginary circumstances of the exercise or the play text, there is no attempt made to portray any sort of character or anyone other than themselves. The repetition begins by one partner noticing something concrete and of interest in the other and simply voicing that interest. The goal is to share an opinion rather than to objectively report phenomena. This begins to train the actor to always gravitate towards her own unique point of view, to respond impulsively from what any given moment means to her in that moment, rather than from anything else. And in fact, an impulsive response based on the actor’s point of view is the third way it is permissible to change the content of the repetition. The point of view criteria introduces an aspect that is purely emotional; the actor is instructed to “Take everything personally,” exactly the opposite of their usual socialized behavior. The ability to take her partner’s behavior personally begins to build the actor’s overall sense of truth, her subjective, unreflective response to the other’s subjective behavior towards her. “Every time you withhold a truthful response, you actively *hurt* your development as an actor.”<sup>191</sup> And in fact an

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<sup>190</sup> Orenstein, 125.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



“We will proceed no further.” Focus on sharpening the knife, just like you’ve practiced, it’s soothing, it’s a very sharp knife.

Actor 2: “...heaven’s cherubin, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye  
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself  
And falls on th’other.  
How now? What news?”

Actor 1: “He has almost supped. Why have you left the chamber?”

Actor 2: “Hath he asked for me?”

Actor 1: “Know you not he has?”

Director: Set down the knife and stone.

Actor 2: “We will proceed no further in this business.  
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.”

Actor 1: “Was the hope drunk”

Director: Now you pick up the knife, sharpen it throughout the scene.

Actor 1: “Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?”

And wakes It now to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely? From this time  
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeared  
To be the same in thine own act and valour  
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'  
Like the poor cat I th adage?"<sup>194</sup>  
I really like that, but I need to practice.

Director: Exactly, you've got to really know what you're doing, really learn how to properly sharpen a knife, because toward the end of the scene, I want you to cross over to him and gently shave some of the hair off of his arm with it.

Actor 2: For real?

Actor 1 For real.

Director: The blade starts out sharp, and then gets even sharper, it takes a keen edge.

Actor 1: So do I.

## ACTIVITIES

Activities are literally the reality of doing on stage. They embody both speech and physical acts and condition and shape the labor of action. The actor must carefully craft

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<sup>194</sup> Macbeth, 1.7, lines 22-44.



and practice a complex physical task requiring 100% of her attention to accomplish. Activities are performed in tandem with repetition and cannot involve the other in their being accomplished (hence they are called independent activities). This separation keeps the two elements from potentially combining into an improvised scene, which is contrary to the intent of the training at this early stage. The goal, as in repetition, is consistent moment-to-moment contact. One actor performs her activity, the other initiates the repetition. The actor with the repetition, as always, focuses all of her attention on the other, who in turn must place her focus on her activity, though must also listen and repeat, moment-to-moment, with her partner. Paradoxically, when structured this way, the activity tends to intensify the concentration of both actors. This sense of interested focus tends to generate uncensored/truthful reactions from both actors.<sup>195</sup> The critical factor when the actor is first learning how to craft an activity is that the task chosen be difficult enough, not just difficult in concept, but difficult in the actual doing of the activity. Keeping concentration on the activity while simultaneously maintaining the repetition then becomes an almost impossible obstacle. However, without a high degree of difficulty in the doing of the activity, there is no obstacle and hence, no dramatic action, and no heightened sense of focus on the part of either participant. A high degree of difficulty tends to force both partners to focus on every moment of the exercise and respond in an unreflective and uncensored way.<sup>196</sup> Once the basic concept of the activity is learned, three additional rules are incorporated. The first is a standard of perfection, the actor must have some blue print for her activity, some benchmark to determine whether

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 72.

or not the activity has been done correctly or even done at all.<sup>197</sup> Secondly, the actor must craft a plausibly true, imaginary, justification for her activity, meaning some fictitious reason why she is performing the task at hand. Anything reasonable that appeals to the actor will do, but the justification must be imaginary in order begin to the process of training her ability to do truthfully under imaginary circumstances as opposed to actual circumstances. Justification is a critical foundational element of Meisner technique in that it leads the way for the more complicated concepts of objectives, and emotional preparation in the second half of the first year of training and character (as opposed to straight acting) in the second year of work.<sup>198</sup> The third element is the addition of an element of reasonable urgency and plausible consequences if the activity is not completed, frequently a time limit of some kind that raises the stakes for the actor and adds an additional aspect of conflict.<sup>199</sup>

Once they are established, the basic rules of both repetition and activities do not really change however, the circumstances they are combined under do. These new circumstances expand the actor's grasp on the imaginary world and also increasingly address the practical problems actors face when performing the play text. Gradually Meisner training moves from repetition only, to the combination of activities with repetition, to the actor's first scenes from a play text, to a point where repetition is discarded and replaced by more traditional improvisation, to the actor's final scripted scenes. As part of this progression, the circumstances of the objective, relationships, and emotional preparation are gradually added. The transition to the new circumstances centers on entering the acting space and the moment before. As mundane as it is in

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

actuality, on stage it is fraught with both practical and metaphysical significance. In previous exercises the actors are simply in the same space at the same time, they are, in a sense, revealed already in the midst of their circumstances just as when a proscenium curtain opens.<sup>200</sup> This contributes to a simplified sense of the stage where there is little tension between what is seen on stage and what is inferred in the non-stage world. Once an actor must enter the stage space, the ontology becomes much more complex and precarious and this change may take a good deal of getting used to, and yet this is typical of the enormous difference an apparently tiny alteration of circumstances can make to the actor's on stage behavior. Typically the actor "with the activity" begins her task in the space. The actor who "works from the door" knocks and then enters what is established as a common space, as in the case of roommates. The knock is the first moment of the exercise, the occupant's reaction to the knock is the second moment and then the actor at the door begins the repetition. The exercise now takes the form of a French scene and the goal of the actor who enters becomes complete vulnerability as she places her entire attention on her partner with the exercise and acts and reacts to her behavior.<sup>201</sup> Once this is established, the next change in circumstances is the addition of the actor at the door's justification for entering the room, the objective. Unlike many other Stanislavski-based schools of acting, in Meisner technique objectives are never to be pursued or played, they are for the moment before the actor enters, other than this; they are intended to subtly color or influence the scene and nothing more.<sup>202</sup> The objective is specific and concrete, but not urgent; it is creative tool for "filling out the reality of the exercise."<sup>203</sup> This ability

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 133.

to imaginatively fill out absent, necessary details will be critical when the actors are assigned their first scripted work.

The first scripted scenes typically follow the teaching of objectives and the process is narrower and more tightly controlled than most types of actor script work. The overarching goal is for the actor to establish and maintain the same moment-to-moment contact they have experienced in the repetition/activity exercises, under the imaginary circumstances of the play text, and in the words of the playwright. To this end there is no research into either the play as a whole or its history, the actors learn their parts by rote and with as little inflection as possible before rehearsing with their partners, and when they do, the first goal is to speak the text as naturally as they can. Once the actors are familiar with the text to the point of dissociated action, the moment-to-moment reality established generates and reveals the emotions and points of view of the actors involved, which may or may not serve the scene or the play as a whole. The goal at this point in the training is to transfer the skills learned in the repetition/activity exercises to the dialogue of the play text.

After the first set of scene work the repetition is dropped from the training while the Activities are retained. The first lesson the actor at the door must learn is “Don’t do anything unless the other person does something to make you do it.”<sup>204</sup> Without the necessity of repeating each moment, the exercises begin to slow down and the emotional content deepens. The conditioned responses formed through repetition allow the actor to maintain focus and respond to the other’s behavior at the level of dissociated action, even once the exercise has been superseded by more traditional improvisation.<sup>205</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>205</sup> Hart, 63-64.

repetition may even begin to impede the actor's contact and greater sense of emotional depth if practiced for too long in the course of the training. Once the repetition has served its purpose, usually after the first set of scenes is completed, the actors either tend to feel unproductively restricted by it, or conversely, too comfortable with it and unwilling to take greater risks.

The beginning of the final stage of the first year's training is centered on the actor's ability to create a deep and compelling emotional life under imaginary circumstances. The technique of emotional preparation is in effect the emotionalization of the actor's objective.<sup>206</sup> The source of the emotion is the actor's imagination, accessed via the function of daydreaming, which alters the actor's consciousness in such a way that she is able to imaginatively respond to the fictional circumstances of the exercise or the play text. While the actor retains certain specific meanings and "areas of sensitivity," the bulk of the emotional preparation must be completely imaginary, rather than sourced in the actor's own history.<sup>207</sup> As with the actor's objective, "Emotional preparation is only for the first moment of the scene. After that you must leave it alone and abandon yourself to the improvisation."<sup>208</sup> The rest of the first year's training is centered on the appropriate integration of day dreaming and emotional preparation into the actor's skill set. This culminates with the second round of scenes that are more dramatically complex and thus require greater emotional range and sensitivity.

Thus the progression of Meisner technique pedagogy in the first year of training begins and ends with the ability to create real action via a heightened ability to generate moment-to-moment reality with the other actor that rises to the level of dissociated

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<sup>206</sup> Esper., 236.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 197-200.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 209.

action. This ability allows for the emergence of the actor's unfiltered point of view and a truthful and increasingly complex emotional reaction to the given imaginary circumstances. While this is the preferred method of creating the actor's emotional life on stage, once it is firmly inculcated into the actor's instrument, the additional tool of emotional preparation is added to the actor's skill set in order to provide an additional facility to complete the actor's necessary ontology in performance. Ultimately these skills precipitate the replacement of Esper's technique by the actor's own technique, rooted in and generated by her lived experience of *perezhivanie*.

## CHAPTER 5---ESPER'S THEORIES AND TERMS

This chapter will constitute my analysis of Esper's interpretation of Meisner technique via the application of my research lens to his book, *The Actor's Art and Craft*. I will address Esper's overall concept of theatre, as well as his specific theories of acting. Working chronologically through each chapter of the book, I will define and clarify the terms Esper employs to delineate and communicate the concepts in his pedagogy. Throughout this chapter the three elements of my research lens labor, action, and truth, will be used to provide a critical understanding of Meisner technique as the actor's labor of action for the operation of truth. And the creation of moment-to-moment reality (also referred to by Esper as "improvisation") is the labor of action's most essential element. It is only after the actor is adept at the skill of improvisation that the issues of her emotional life on stage and her treatment of the text can be addressed.

### THE ACTOR'S ART AND CRAFT—CHAPTERS 1-5

The title of Esper's book is telling and owes much to Diderot's *Paradox*. The art of the actor does not reveal itself to the dilettante or the casual observer. Furthermore, it cannot be reliably and consistently addressed directly and thus is best accessed via its necessary skills and specific disciplines. The labor of action is precipitated by love and will, the love of the art and the will to learn craft necessary to fully experience it. The student actor must seek to transform herself into "the most complicated instrument of all."<sup>209</sup> The actor's art is approached and either succeeds or fails via the mastery of her instrument through specific *techne/craft*. This craft provides a foundation, and, as Esper

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<sup>209</sup> Esper, 7.

evokes in his book's prologue, "Takes an artist as raw material and builds skills necessary for him to excel at his art."<sup>210</sup> It provides conditioning of the actor's ability to respond impulsively to the behavior of other actors, much like the various exercises and drills that are run by a basketball team condition the players to respond to each other's actions without reflection. However, unlike Diderot, Esper's actor is a creative artist, not a puppet or a mere interpreter. The ultimate goal of months or years of rigorous, methodical, training is that the actor develops her own technique that, while based in the foundational elements of Meisner technique, is uniquely her own. Like Stanislavski, Esper's practical goal is to prepare his students for the rigors of the professional world, albeit one very different from that of early Twentieth century Russia. According to Esper, due among other things to the dearth of rehearsal time in theatre, film, and TV, the contemporary actor needs a technique that is fast, efficient, and effective, in multiple mediums. Esper believes that an actor properly trained in Meisner technique "can create a performance of genuine quality in any medium."<sup>211</sup> Esper attributes this versatility to the clearly delineated organization of Meisner technique and its ability to guide the actor towards the "the creating of characters with compelling inner lives."<sup>212</sup> Another factor, unmentioned by Esper, but that shouldn't be overlooked, is that Meisner technique also provides a specific vocabulary for actors who have studied it, based in the common experience of having taken the same training, even if it was from different teachers and at different times. This ability to articulate where they are in their process at any given moment, as well as where they need to eventually be for performance, is incredibly useful and allows the actor to continually orient themselves in the rehearsal and production

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 9.



process. The prologue ends with Esper's co-author Damon DiMarco explaining that the conceit of the rest of the book is that it will revolve around a fictitious group of acting students who are composites of numerous actual students. The reason given for this convention is that "no single class would be likely to cover the full range of situations that regularly arise in the classroom."<sup>213</sup> Speaking from the author's own experience of studying with Esper some thirty years ago, this conceit creates a didactic situation that is reassuringly familiar and yet not bogged down in any sort of quasi-journalistic detail that impedes the communication of the ideas and concepts of the text. As might be expected, the dialogic form also meshes well with Socratic questioning, and while Esper sometimes appears to be "preaching to the choir" in so far as the efficacy of his teaching is concerned, it is also important to note that it is crucial for the student actor to trust that the effort and sacrifice she puts forth is not just expected, but respected and leading towards a desirable ultimate goal. To teach from authority without being authoritarian is to walk a very fine line, and the Esper depicted in his book, for the most part, displays the former rather than the latter pedagogy.

In chapter one Esper establishes the Socratic technique he will use throughout the book, as well as a detailed definition of acting, and the differing natures of reality and truth. It is built on the idea of the student bringing Esper an empty cup-empty of any preconceived notions of acting, and ready to receive knowledge founded on experience and arrived at through dialogue. To engage a student in dialogue, especially in front of her peers, is a very different philosophy of teaching than to lecture or to demonstrate. The process is built as much or more on teaching the student how to ask cogent questions, as it is on leading them to appropriate conclusions. As actors, the students will need to

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 10.

continually ask each other and themselves the best questions they are capable of and the nature of these questions eventually form the basis for each actor's sense of artistic selectivity. While the metaphor of the empty cup Esper employs comes from Buddhism, it is also consistent with the method of the Platonic dialogues, which stress the need for the student to be free (or at least aware) of preconceived notions and bad education, in order that there to be room for new knowledge to take root.<sup>214</sup> It is also akin to Diderot's concept of the actor as *tabula rasa* or a neutral (as opposed to a creative) instrument for the text. The significance of the empty cup is an especially important consideration to keep in mind when the student being taught is an experienced performer, previously trained in a different artistic discipline or school of acting. And the blank slate is only the first step in the actor's training toward becoming a creative artist.

Esper begins with a Socratic exploration of Meisner's definition of acting. "Acting is the ability to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances."<sup>215</sup> The first basic concept Esper addresses is the distinction between the real and the true. Esper doesn't offer any definition of what he means by truth, except that it is the opposite of "phony" and so we would seem to be in the realm of plausible, rather than dramatic Platonic truth. Consistent with Saltz, Esper describes the imaginary nature of the theatre, which is, crucially, nevertheless, an actual event in time. And consistent with Aristotle, he separates the action of the mimetic object, from the creation of the mimetic object. However, Esper extends this even farther, in effect separating acting from rhetoric by evoking Husserl's distinction of the imaginary as an act of consciousness, rather than a thing in consciousness. "Because acting doesn't take place under life circumstances; it

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 16. "Your mind is like this cup of tea. How can I put anything in it when it is already full?"

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 18.

takes place within the confines of imaginary circumstances.”<sup>216</sup> Therefore acting is defined as taking place under imaginary circumstances and only under imaginary circumstances, while lying occurs in the real world, and only in the real world. Therefore the “lies” of the actor are not lies at all, since they are in effect real actions actually taking place in real time. “Their lies are always grounded in truth, and always-always!-their lies serve the purpose of art.”<sup>217</sup> Here Esper again grounds art/acting in plausible reality, but then swerves toward a more abstract and profound sense of truth. In the Kantian sense, the aesthetic mediates the rational and the ethical, meaning that art operates in between that which is real and that which is true, and produces its own result, at its own level of authenticity. While in the dramatic Platonic sense, truth operates in the same way regardless of whether or not the world it occurs in is real or imaginary, and in much the same way that addition operates, regardless of the numbers involved. Both of these philosophical perspectives reinforce Esper’s point that real action is possible on stage under imaginary circumstances.

Esper then addresses the definition of living, with regard to Meisner’s definition of acting and in so doing profoundly alters it by making it actable. “Would you mind coming up here and doing a little ‘truthful living for everyone?’” The student selected is depicted as being paralyzed by this request however, when Esper re-defines living as being “what you do” and modifies Meisner’s definition accordingly, the definition is activated and now playable. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s (anti-Cartesian) contention that movement is not thought about movement and “Consciousness is not a

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 20.

matter of ‘I think’ but ‘I can’.’<sup>218</sup> This re-definition of acting as the ability to do truthfully under imaginary circumstances as opposed to the more general to “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances” marks the first point of departure in the training and segues into Esper’s demonstration of the difference between actually doing and pretending to do. To pretend to do something on stage as opposed to actually doing it is the antithesis of Meisner technique.<sup>219</sup> In the writer’s own training with Esper between 1982 and 1985, the term of art for this was to “indicate.” While it is apparently Esper’s intention to move away from this jargon and toward the common language term “anticipate” (Indeed by my count the word “indicating” is only used once in the entire book.), it is nevertheless the case that his technique is built almost as much on not indicating as it is on really doing.<sup>220</sup> The first couple of exercises are mental, actually doing math or counting rather than pretending to. From here Esper physicalizes the doing with another student looking for a blood stain on a bed spread. It is not the reality of the stain--which does not exist--that is important, it is the plausible truth of the search for the stain that is crucial. As Merleau-Ponty might say, “Your act is you.”<sup>221</sup> From here Esper further segues to the nature of text and the concept that even a character as complex as Shakespeare’s Hamlet, is largely defined by what he is depicted as doing throughout the course of the play text (as well as, by inference, what he does not do). In essence, to

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<sup>218</sup> *P of P*, 159.

<sup>219</sup> As always, the acid test of such categorical statements is the necessity of violent or lethal actions on stage and in these cases I believe that Saltz’s game theory of the stage is especially useful. Regardless of whether the violence depicted is realistic or stylized, the prescribed and rehearsed actions of the actor count as violent acts within the ludic reality of the play’s imaginary circumstances for the duration of the event. As long as the actor behaves plausibly within the play of the play text’s given parameters, they are not indicating, they are behaving as they imagine they themselves would behave under the fictional circumstances of the play text, the play, and the production. This is especially the case in scenes of a meta-theatrical nature where per Puchner, “Acts of violence test what is real in meta-theater.” Puchner, 105.

<sup>220</sup> Esper, 277.

<sup>221</sup> *P of P*, 530.

commit action is to live, and to commit action under imaginary circumstances is to act.

However, after making this important distinction, Esper apparently muddies the water on the subject, while expounding on the time required to learn the level of craft necessary to make acting a creative art. Insisting that not only must the master actor's craft become invisible (a reasonable enough assertion since craft only exists to further art), but also asserting that "real acting... cannot be differentiated from life." Except, of course, that he has just established that acting only takes place under imaginary circumstances which, by definition, does in fact differentiate acting, no matter how convincing it may be, from life.<sup>222</sup> My contention would be that Esper's *intent* is to communicate that, aside from the imaginary circumstances involved, masterful acting cannot be differentiated from real life. Or perhaps, if the imaginary circumstances themselves are sufficiently realistic (the example he cites is from film), masterful acting may well not be discernible from real life, a point of view that while extreme and arguable, nevertheless makes a powerful point about the necessity for the actor to learn to do truthfully.

In the last pages of chapter one, Esper introduces two key concepts, moment-to-moment reality and anticipation. The sense that "life is nothing more than a series of moments" and that anticipation is the antithesis of this experience, are precursors to the introduction of the repetition exercise in the following chapter.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 30. To be fair, Esper's book is not a text book or however, one of the goals of this dissertation is to identify and perhaps clarify perceived inconsistencies and ambiguities in the text, in the same manner that Esper himself sought to clarify Meisner's original definition of acting. 18.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 31. Again, one of the most significant differences between the author's experience of Esper's class and the method described in his book is the almost complete absence of the term indicate. For the most part, Esper refers to anticipation instead. And this may well be a far more specific and useful term.

In chapters two and three, Esper introduces and develops the repetition exercise. Repetition takes the place of the play text for much of the first year of training. With practice, its simple, improvisatory nature allows the student to respond unreflectively from impulse, but the simplicity of repetition can be deceiving. First of all, by eliminating the play text from the student actor's early training, she must focus on the rules of repetition, which are few and easily absorbed, but not so easily mastered, since they require the actor to place her full attention outside of herself and on her partner. "Text is a very confusing element in acting. It can mask a great many problems."<sup>224</sup> Repetition trains the heightened sense of listening that an actor must have in order to continually stay in the moment from moment-to-moment, since the simple phrase or observation may change any time either of the partners have an impulse to change it. This corresponds closely with Saltz's interpretation of Austin's illocutionary and contingency requirement for real speech actions on stage. While the repetition is not, and should not, be a conversation or a scene, the impulse to listen and respond it develops is designed to create real illocutionary acts with a sense of contingency. This is especially true as the exercise becomes second nature, and the partners begin to respond to each other's behavior with their own uncensored point of view, rather than simply repeating and responding to the words said. As Esper notes repeatedly, the goal of repetition is not to develop the intellect, but the ability to respond impulsively. In so far as the actual labor of the actor in rehearsal and in performance is concerned, Esper is as adamant as Nietzsche when he wrote, "Knowledge kills action."<sup>225</sup> The actor's work is to come together with his acting partners and work moment-to-moment within the various given circumstances.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 40.

As we will see later, any other sort of preparation (and it may be considerable) comes under the general heading of actor's homework and is done outside the theatre and prior to rehearsal and performance. "Your intellect shouldn't be brought to work with you. Leave it at home where it belongs."<sup>226</sup> This is not to say that Esper is especially hostile to the actor's intellect, he simply believes that it is not the proper ultimate tool for the actor to employ in the actual practice of her craft, if for no other reason than, like our previous discussion of affective memory, it is simply too slow to respond to the relentless speed and temporality of the stage. Hart describes the ideal tempo of the repetition exercise as being, "faster than you can think but no faster than you can hear."<sup>227</sup> Only conditioned response practiced to the level of dissociated action is fast enough to fulfill this, for in a very real way, the ideal speed of the repetition exercise is just below the speed of sound. This circumvents, to one degree or another, the way the actor has been socialized and reveals her "true self," in the sense that her responses are unprocessed and unfiltered by social convention. The way the actor has been previously socialized can pose an impossible and counter-productive task for her. The actor may have been socialized to behave in socially appealing ways; this causes her to monitor her own behavior in order to see if it complies with these norms. However, this is an impossible and exhausting task, since it is ontologically impossible to determine what another person's experience of a subject actually is. It is this self-defeating self-consciousness that focus on the other frees the actor from, allowing impulsive action.

In many ways, Esper is no fan of modernity; throughout the book he makes clear that he not only believes that our current culture not only represses the individual, but

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>227</sup> Hart, 54.

also devalues the unique. “You bring a lifetime’s accumulation of defenses in order to prevent yourself from displaying your true self... you may have lost all awareness of who your true self is.”<sup>228</sup> However, a more behaviorist interpretation more consistent with *perezhivanie* might be that we are all, for better or worse, conditioned by our environments and experiences, and the advent of modernity has only intensified this basic human circumstance. This conditioning may, and frequently does, operate in contradiction to our impulsive needs and so alienates us from ability to act impulsively. “If we’re being honest with ourselves, we’d have to admit that, in real life, we often behave in a manner that is less than honest.”<sup>229</sup> Thus the need to conform to our community necessarily trumps our desire to act without reflection. While this conditioning is necessary and even beneficial to operating in the real world, it is akin to a debilitating illness for the actor creating real action in the imaginary world. In the imaginary world of the stage, time is compressed and actions take on a significance they often lack in the off-stage world. As we have seen before, stage action simply occurs too quickly for conscious thought to control it, impulsive action, rooted in reflex, is the only way to do truthfully under the conditions of the stage. Thus the conditioned reflexes of the real world are the exact opposite of those required in the imaginary world, and the only way to develop the actor’s capacity to operate here, is through newly conditioned behavior designed to facilitate spontaneous, impulsive, action, within whatever the given circumstances may be. In this sense, after sufficient practice, behaviorally speaking, the actor’s primary nature is superseded by second nature within the confines and for the

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<sup>228</sup> Esper, 56.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 54.



duration of the imaginary situation.<sup>230</sup> Conversely, our ability to function in the real world is often predicated on the ability to hide and control our emotional responses to people and situations, and leads to a conditioned alienation between the responses we present socially, and those that we may display privately. Again, this is exactly the opposite of the facilities requires by the actor in performance where any sort of inhibition or confusion can bring even the most impulsive performance to a screeching halt.<sup>231</sup> Esper is very aware of repetition's lack of intellectual content; it's primary purpose is to condition impulsive behavior predicated on constant contact with the other and in so doing allow for the expression of spontaneous emotion under the imaginary circumstances of the exercise.

As Esper's third chapter begins to come to a close, three additional concepts become apparent in the theory and practices engendered by the repetition exercise, the actor's privileged temporality, freedom, and the critical value of trial and error. First, even though repetition may, by design, have low intellectual content, it does have emotional content, especially after the actors have sufficient mastery of the exercise to respond to their partner's behavior, from their own subjective point of view. As Kazan wrote, "The measure of an artist's worth is his depth, not his breadth."<sup>232</sup> This reveals that the sense of moment-to-moment reality repetition begins to develop, like time, "is not a succession of instances of the now."<sup>233</sup> It is, in fact, something more far more complicated. As it generates time, the actor experiences each moment of the present as it simultaneously reaches back to past and forward to the future and specific emotional

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<sup>230</sup> I will further explore the relationship between behaviorism, *perezhivanie*, and the borrowed intentionality of game theory later in the chapter.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. "The imaginary world and the real world have very different values."

<sup>232</sup> Kazan, 151.

<sup>233</sup> *P of P*, 479.

content is generated in and by this moment. It is consistent with Aristotle's placement of emotion within the art object, and it is the beginning of *perezhivanie*, and it justifies Esper's insistence that the ability to listen and respond with plausible truth and within the confines of the repetition/given circumstances/game reality, is the essential/foundational element of an actor's training in Meisner technique. Illocutionary contingency, the ability to listen and respond truthfully is to generate time and allow past and future to mingle with the present, and these temporal incursions have an emotional, and as we will see later, a reflective valence, that operates at the level of impulse. Secondly, by learning to place her entire focus outside of herself and on her partner, the actor is freed from her own self-consciousness. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's dictum that, "Perception of the other is the basis of freedom." and as Esper states of repetition, "It reconnects you with the thrill of your own spontaneous responses."<sup>234</sup> The third concept that becomes apparent in this chapter is the value of trial and error, since the actor's process is so subjective, it is also fairly impervious to intellectual assessment or simulation, especially while the actor is still early in her training and experience. Therefore, the only viable way to find her way to those choices that are effective, and away from those that are not, is via trial and error. This reinforces Esper's dictum to the actor to leave her intellect at home. Success may well favor the prepared, but the labor of the actor is always determined in action and by a significant level of trial and error. The relationships of temporality to emotion, subjective freedom to perception of the other, and action to error, are all important lessons that may be experienced and retained by the practice of repetition which, paradoxically, grows more spontaneous and less subject to anticipation the more

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<sup>234</sup> Esper, 56.

faithfully its rules are followed.<sup>235</sup> “But repetition alone can’t lead an actor into the deeper levels of his work.” And as we will later see in this chapter, after a certain point in their development, the student actors will (again paradoxically) be so well versed in repetition that it actually inhibits their impulses and serves as a crutch.<sup>236</sup> However the next step in the training is the addition of the second major aspect of the first year of Meisner technique, the activity.

Director: Pick it up from the middle of the scene, “Prithee, peace.”

Actor 2: “Prithee, peace.

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.”

Director: Watch her sharpen the knife, it’s fascinating, even sexy, it’s the way she does it, it pulls you in.

Actor 1: “What beast was’t then

That made you break this enterprise to me?

When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place

Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.

They have made themselves, and that their fitness now

Does unmake you.”

Director: Stop sharpening the knife

Actor 1: “I have given suck, and know

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 179-180.

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.  
I would, while it was smiling in my face  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this.”

Director: There, shave the hair on his arm. Carefully.

Actor 2: “If we should fail?”

Actor 1: “We fail!”

Director: That’s right, now it’s not just a plot; it’s a conspiracy and a cover-up, go back to where you shave his arm again.

Actor 2: “If we should fail?”

Actor 1: “We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place  
And we’ll not fail. When Duncan is asleep-  
Whereto the rather shall his day’s hard journey  
Soundly invite him-his two chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassail so convince  
That memory, the warder of the brain,  
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason  
A limbeck only. When in swinish sleep  
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,  
What cannot you and I perform upon  
Th’ unguarded Duncan? What not put upon

His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt  
Of our great quell.”

Actor 2: “Bring forth men-children only,  
For thy daunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males. Will it not be received,  
When we have marked with blood those sleepy two  
Of his own chamber and used their very daggers,  
That they have done ‘t?”

Actor 1: “Who dares receive it other,  
As we shall make our griefs and clamour roar  
Upon his death?”

Actor 2: “I am settled, and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away and mock the time with fairest show.  
False face must hide what false heart doth know.”<sup>237</sup>

In chapters four and five, the members of Esper’s fictitious class begin to directly address the nature of real action on stage. Instead of simply doing repetition, at any given time, one member “has the activity” meaning that they must craft some complicated series of physical actions that require their full attention to complete. There are a number of rules for this exercise and they increase as the training progresses. Let us simply say for now that whatever task is chosen, it must actually be done and the actor with the activity must focus all her attention on their task, while the other actor focuses all of her attention on her partner and begins the repetition. The actor with the activity must

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<sup>237</sup> Macbeth, 1.7, lines 45-82.

respond impulsively to her partner via the repetition and still accomplish their activity. The addition of the activity to the repetition deepens the actor's experience in a number of ways. Firstly, it greatly enhances concentration, not just for the person with the activity, but somewhat paradoxically, for her partner as well. David Mamet explains this dynamic in the following way, "The ability to concentrate flows naturally from the ability to choose something interesting. Choose something interesting to do and concentration is not a problem." According to Mamet concentration cannot be forced, "It is a survival mechanism."<sup>238</sup> Paradoxically, this ability to control the otherwise uncontrollable force of concentration comes not from the will, but from the imagination through the selection of an activity that necessarily generates concentration. And the emphasis of selecting and crafting something she finds interesting takes the actor's focus off of any perceived onus to be interesting for her audience. Furthermore, seeing that her partner is interested in her activity also tends to pique the other actor's interest/concentration and quite naturally, allows her to focus even more intently than usual on her partner. Conversely, if the activity is less than interesting to the person who has it, the concentration of both will usually suffer. While the partner with the activity answers the repetition from within the doing of the activity, they are still responsible for being in contact and responding to her partner's behavior. This leads us to a second way in which the activity deepens the repetition, namely that real action tends to precipitate real emotion. Certainly simple repetition also generates emotion, but the feelings evoked with addition of the activity

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<sup>238</sup> David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1997), 94-95. Mamet was a student of Esper's when the playwright studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse in the 1960s and while he flatly disagrees with some of Esper's theories, his dissent is clearly based on a vast practical, knowledge of the conclusions with which he disagrees, especially with regard to the issue of belief in acting, as we will see later in this section. Mamet also wrote the foreword to Esper's book.

tend to be more complex and subtle, in the same way that the Russian behaviorists saw action as generating emotion, rather than emotion generating action. Thirdly, the activity throws into sharp relief the necessity for the actor to respond to every moment of her partner's behavior. Just as a musician cannot skip notes without affecting her whole performance, so too must the actors craft the repetition/activity exercise so that their interest/concentration is so highly developed that neither one ignores or misses a single moment of behavior. "You must take every moment in the exercise as an absolute reality. If, in the exercise, someone says something to you that would hurt your feelings in real life, you must allow them to be hurt in the exercise."<sup>239</sup> As the combined exercises continue, we see an increasing synergy of impulsive speech act and physical action precipitating emotion responses that build on one another. As the exercise progresses, so does the actor's lived experience of her own and her partner's behavior and emotions, as they make contact with each other and their own actions.

The addition of activities to repetition also introduces the dramatic element of conflict to the exercises.<sup>240</sup> This conflict develops externally, from the difficulty of the activity itself for the actor responsible for performing the activity, and also for the actor with the repetition, since her focus must be continually on her partner, who must keep her focus on the activity. However the conflict also manifests itself internally, as both actors respond to the various emotions engendered, for example, by being continually interrupted, in the case of the actor with the activity, and continually ignored or slighted, in the case of the actor with the repetition. This sense of conflict takes the student actor to

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<sup>239</sup> Esper, 76-77.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 72.

the next major transition in her training and her first significant step into the imaginary world, justification.

As the students' confidence and expertise in the exercises grows, they begin to react more and more to each other's behavior, rather than their words and their emotions become more complex and readily apparent. However, this combination of a degree of mastery over their technique and the confrontation with their own less-than-flattering impulses has a tendency to lead the actor towards the conscious manipulation of her instrument to be attractive and acceptable to those around her. Furthermore, the better the student's technique, the harder this non-spontaneous behavior is to recognize. "Every time you conform to someone else's opinion of what's nice and what's not, you corrupt your acting instrument."<sup>241</sup> Typically provocative, Meisner's own dictum to the same effect is "You try to be logical, as in life. You try to be polite, as in life. May I say as the world's oldest living teacher, 'Fuck polite!' You have one thing to do and that is to pick up the repetition from your partner."<sup>242</sup> The actor's sensitivity to these unflattering emotions is in many ways the key to their utility. They are what Husserl might call the back side of our emotional life, always present, but hidden from direct perception. As temporality changes our perspective of them, various facets come into view, but the picture is never complete, as with the theatre itself, there is always a tension between what can be seen and what is hidden, but still nevertheless present. "How many of us portray ourselves as vulnerable? Malicious? Petty? Vain? Arrogant?"<sup>243</sup> Without a sense of the countervailing emotions, the actors lived experience of the role will tend to be shallow, it will lack counter point and focus since the actor will fail to find it interesting

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>242</sup> Meisner, 33.

<sup>243</sup> Esper, 87.



enough to engage their full concentration. This is consistent with Esper's following dictum that activities are truthful, that is to say plausible, but not simply realistic in the sense of being naturalistic, they must above all else, stimulate the actor's imagination and facilitate the exploration of their more hidden emotional sensitivities. "We've got no place for slices of life... It's never a question of 'what is' that is exciting to the actor; it's always a question of 'what might be' that activates him."<sup>244</sup> This differentiates the Activities of Meisner technique from Uta Hagen's somewhat similar and widely used "Basic Object Exercise" where a student, working alone, tries to naturalistically re-create two minutes of her life.<sup>245</sup> Naturalistic detail is frequently the key to performing a successful Basic Object Exercise, and the actor is re-assured by the presence of familiar objects in much the same way as Stanislavski felt that his actors in *The Cherry Orchard* were inspired by the naturalistic setting Chekhov despised. The sense of the activity and its attendant repetition taking place under imaginary circumstances is now introduced by the addition of a fictitious reason for the activity to be done, the justification.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the concept and skill of justification; it not only initiates the student actor into the whole world of imaginary circumstances, but also provides the technique for consciously crafting simple and specific reasons that incite and support the impulsive, moment-to-moment, concentration/interest, necessary to complete the activity and the repetition. However basic justification consists of two apparently paradoxical components that are, at least initially, difficult to reconcile, simplicity and specificity. This is the dilemma of Esper's fictional acting student Donna who states "If I answer those kinds of questions, my justification isn't simple any more.

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<sup>244</sup> Esper, 88.

<sup>245</sup> Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 91.

But if I don't, you say I'm being too general."<sup>246</sup> This is a basic skill of Meisner technique and necessary for the development of the ability to be truthfully under imaginary circumstances, in order to beactable, that is, in order to support the actor's moment-to-moment reality on stage, her justification cannot be too complex, otherwise it will impede the action with thought, and it cannot be too general, otherwise it will be, at best, ineffectual and overwhelmed by the action. Justification is, at its best, an operation of artistic selectivity, but it is also a process whereby the actor must first ask herself "What is the simplest reason that would plausibly cause me to do this activity?" and then, within that plausible reason "What specifically would inspire me to do this activity?" Ultimately it is not the most complex reason that will motivate the actor, but the simplest and most specific. I maintain that the process of justification begins with a grounding in plausible truth and then ideally proceeds toward dramatic Platonic truth as the justification becomes more specific and subjective. This would indicate that the paradox experienced by Esper's fictitious student is not as problematic as it might first appear. The operation of justification may be akin or at least parallel to the operation of truth, since it begins in plausible truth and then must move toward a more singular truth in order to be fullyactable in practice. The subjective nature of this essential specificity further suggests a relationship to *perezhivanie* and the privileged temporality of the actor, since these distinctions can only be made in the action and repetition of rehearsal and performance. Justification, even in this, its most basic form, must connect the actor to her activity and to her partner. This can only be discovered, tested, and refined, in the actor's labor of action, which may ultimately lead her to the synergy of *perezhivanie*, and the operation of dramatic Platonic truth. Obstacles (i.e. the degree of difficulty), while they

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<sup>246</sup> Esper, 91.

initially impede the activity, ultimately intensify its pursuit, whether it is actually attained or not and serve the function of dramatic conflict within the exercise.

The most problematic issue in Esper's book, at least for this writer, is his insistence on the concept of "actor's faith." Actor's faith is what makes actors such special people... An actor's faith allows the suggestions made to his imagination to seem as real to him-sometimes more real-than life."<sup>247</sup> While Esper begins to equate actor's faith with ludic play on the following page, he is adamant that, as Meisner writes, "She believes the imaginary circumstances are truer than true."<sup>248</sup> This point of view contains at least two major fallacies that are in contradiction to much of the theory and practice that has come before in Esper's book. First, like Diderot's dual consciousness of the actor, the concept of actor's faith completely undercuts the whole notion of acting as a craft that can be learned. It becomes the talent or the natural predisposition "to do truthfully under imaginary circumstances" rather than "the ability to do truthfully under imaginary circumstances." As with Diderot, the best actors may be trained as well, but primarily, they are simply born with certain un-described and intangible faculties that allow them to believe and behave as though what they, or even others, imagine, is actual reality. To believe what they must ultimately know is impossible. This point of view doesn't simply smack of delusion, it is the definition of delusional pathology.<sup>249</sup> It also harkens back to the idea that actors are "afflicted" by talent, rather than agents of it, and deemphasizes the need for committed and rigorous preparation. Thus all actors, certainly

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<sup>247</sup> Esper, 94.

<sup>248</sup> Meisner, 61.

<sup>249</sup> G, Winokur, "Delusional Disorder (Paranoia)" *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 18(6), 2006, 513. The belief is "unlikely," embraced without question, contrary to the patient's typical behavior, out of keeping with the patient's personal and/or cultural values. The delusion induces cognitive dissonance, especially when confronted, resulting in anger and confusion, since the patient frequently realizes on some level that their behavior is illogical and counterproductive, but they are unable to resist it, frequently because they fear some terrible consequence if they do.

all great actors, are so because they were born with, or somehow otherwise acquired talent, and that talent consists largely of being a highly functioning person with a severe delusional disorder. How one or more such an actors would ever be able to relate and respond to each other, especially under violent circumstances, is never addressed. Nor is the logical fallacy that if an actor believes and behaves as if fictional circumstances are actual, all distinctions of the fiction are lost to her. She would not be doing truthfully under imaginary circumstances, but doing under subjectively actual ones, and so, by Esper's own definition, would not be acting, but lying.

Secondly, the concept of actor's faith assumes that human beings can consciously control what they believe. As Mamet notes, "But we cannot control what we believe. Religions and political creeds which degenerate in that direction demand belief. They receive from their adherents not belief (which cannot be controlled), but a certain more-or-less-well-meaning avowal of hypocrisy."<sup>250</sup> Mamet's point is well taken, and represents in many ways an evolution of American Stanislavski-based acting technique. Even though, in his typically confrontational way, Mamet describes the co-founder and director of the Moscow Art Theatre as, "essentially an amateur."<sup>251</sup> The overall thrust of Mamet's argument, ironically, corresponds in many ways to the conclusions reached by many post-soviet Stanislavski scholars, such as Benedetti and Carnicke. This is especially true with regard to his focus on a more behavioral orientation towards acting, as opposed to a psychological one. Belief is not something that can be consciously controlled, and to posit it as requirement for good acting very probably introduces a potentially fatal note of falsehood to the student actor's nascent process, and furthermore, in Esper's book, does

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<sup>250</sup> Mamet, 58.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 8.

so immediately before he elaborates on importance of developing a pervasive and intensely subjective sense of truth. My overarching point is that the whole concept of actor's faith is at best confusing, counterproductive, and unnecessary, and at its worst, might actually harm the actor's ability do truthfully under imaginary circumstances, since it infers that they should be able to control what is uncontrollable. Again per Mamet, "It is not necessary to believe anything in order to act."<sup>252</sup> Furthermore, there is nothing, practically speaking, that the concept of actor's faith provides that cannot be much more readily accomplished by the already established concepts of justification and the actor's sense of (plausible) truth. For example, Hart also uses the term actor's faith and describes it as being similar to religious faith (Esper describes it as being "very similar") however, Hart stresses that in her interpretation, actor's faith is "The ability to accept something that is imaginary and to respond to it as if it were real...the actor's ability to accept his imagined circumstances is part of the personal research of the first year's work that allows the actor to discover what he really cares about."<sup>253</sup> Hart's point is that actors "respond easily" to what they find interesting and have an emotional attachment to. The distinction between belief and acceptance is not simply semantic, but powerful and significant. Unlike belief, acceptance can be controlled, especially once the actor is facile enough to choose justifications that they can accept as plausibly true and avoid those they cannot. One of the many virtues of the imaginary world is that there is an infinite variety of justifications possible for any given circumstance. Mamet agrees, "Beliefs are unreasoning...Let us learn acceptance...The capacity to accept: to wish things to happen

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>253</sup> Hart, 57. Underlining added by the author. Esper, 94.

as they do...Because the capacity to accept derives from the will.”<sup>254</sup> The actor is trained to select only those imaginary justifications they can accept as legitimate reasons for carrying out the activity in question (And ultimately, by extension, any other sort of stage action). These justifications are then tested in rehearsal and adjusted as necessary based on the actor’s evolving sense of truth and the needs of the imaginary circumstance. Justification founded in acceptance, “induces truthful consideration” while justification based in belief, “induces self-deception” and distorts the actor as an instrument of truth even as her nascent sense of truth is being developed.<sup>255</sup> Ultimately, it is the actor’s ability to ask good questions of herself and her imagination against the background of given circumstances that determines the value of her justification, as to whether it forwards or impedes her labor of action from moment-to-moment. Certainly, the power of belief for the actor is that it generates unreflective impulse, however, so do many other aspects of Meisner technique that are largely free of the pedagogical baggage induced by the concept that a good actor must believe to be actual, imaginary circumstances, that they know to be fictional. The “as if” proviso of acceptance avoids this pit fall and supports the actor’s sense of truth and overall agency in the creative process.

Esper ends the fifth chapter by emphasizing that while certain specific aspects of real life are necessary to fully justify action in the imaginary world, “You can’t craft from the literal facts of your real life.”<sup>256</sup> By this Esper means that certain core relationships and predilections from the actor’s real world (similarly later, he will also describe certain traumatic or formative experiences as “areas of sensitivity”) persist in her imaginary

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<sup>254</sup> Mamet, 70. Here Mamet’s conception of the will seems to invoke cognition and free will, rather than a more universal concept of it, such as that conceived of by Nietzsche.

<sup>255</sup> Mamet, 70.

<sup>256</sup> Esper, 101.

world.<sup>257</sup> Esper refers to these as “meanings” referring to the fact that certain people and events have subjective meaning to the actor, even when they are placed in an imaginary circumstance. For example, to imagine one’s mother or child in jeopardy tends to strike a more powerful emotional valance than imagining one’s mail man or a sadistic past teacher in the same situation. This is consistent with Aristotle’s notion that there must be some correspondence, however slight, between the mimetic object and the actual world. However, Esper’s somewhat convoluted explanation is that justification is a craft, based in the imaginary (which has already been framed as containing certain “meanings from the actor’s actual life) that somehow accesses the unconscious mind that is the source of imagination. Thus the imaginary somehow precedes in consciousness the unconscious mind from which it originates.<sup>258</sup> Another explanation per behaviorism and Aristotle would be that the combination of the actor’s temporal placement, imagination, and emotional identification conditions a complex, learned, impulsive, response that, for all intents and purposes, functions as “close to... the real thing.”<sup>259</sup> And we can also see how the Aristotelian aspects of *perezhivanie* locate emotional responses within the mimetic object. In any case, the actor’s use of her imagination in the crafting of her justification is critical, while certain subjective meanings persist, the sense of the actor’s privileged temporal placement is lost if her justification is founded on actual, rather than imaginary circumstances.

Thus in chapters one through five, we see fundamental strengths of Esper’s pedagogy of Meisner technique, as well as the sometimes subtle, but persistent, issues related to the lack of a definition of truth and the use of nebulous, romantic, and, one is

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>259</sup> See page 44, this document

tempted to say, even archaic terms such as actor's faith and the unconscious mind. This being the case, the application and use of the concepts of dramatic Platonic truth and Stanislavski's own term from the later period of his work on the Method of Physical Action, *perezhivanie*, may provide a more detailed and facile analysis and explanation of the nature of the actor's lived experience.

In any case, as Esper's book progresses to chapter six, the student actor is increasingly confronted by the more concrete and practical considerations necessary in order to function truthfully on the stage. In many cases, although these issues may seem trivial and mundane in comparison to those that have preceded them, they are not. In order to perform the labor of action, the actor must consider every moment before hand in the same way a musician, in some way, must consider every note prior to performance, and then only respond impulsively in performance. One of the most challenging of these seemingly mundane considerations is the actor's entrance onto the stage.

Director: Take it from your entrance.

Actor 1: "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.

What hath quenched them hath given me fire. "

Question, am I high here?

Director: "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold."?

You think you may have sampled a bit of the drugged wine you gave Duncan's guards?

Actor 1: I think so and it was also exhilarating to see the plan come together and to see them, the guards so vulnerable because of something I did.



Director: Good, but work on the intoxication and the sense of exhilaration as part of your homework. For right now, why do you enter? What are you doing?

Actor 1: To find my husband.

Director: Good. Why.

Actor 1 To make sure he knows the guards are out cold.

Director: Good, keep it simple for now, keep going

Actor 1: “Hark, peace!-

It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman

Which gives the stern’s good night!”

Is there going to be an actual owl shriek?

Director: I don’t know, maybe not, but you hear it either way.

Actor 1: “He is about it.

The doors are open, and the surfeited grooms

Do mock their charge with snores. I have drugged their

Posssets

That death and nature do contend about them

Whether they live or die.”

Actor 2: “Who’s there? What ho?”

So I’m on my way back to our bedroom and I hear someone, but I

don’t know it’s her? I exit, to hide, see who it is.

Director: Yes, I don’t think her wandering around in the dark looking suspicious is part of the plan. The noise rattles you.

Actor 2: Then I see it's her and come back in.

Actor 1: And now we're both hearing things.

Director: Yes.

Actor 1: "Alack, I am afraid they have awaked.

And tis not done. Th'attempt and not the deed

Confounds us. Hark!-I laid their daggers ready;

He could not miss em. Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't.

My husband!"

Actor 2: "I have done the deed. Didst thou hear a noise?"<sup>260</sup>

Director: So this sequence of entrances and exits is built around series of specific doings that involves, sneaking, hiding, surveillance, searching and maybe above all, listening for every little clue of what might or might not be going on. Let's focus on that for right now.

### **THE ACTOR'S ART AND CRAFT—CHAPTERS 6-10**

In chapter six, Esper adds making an entrance to the actor with the repetition while her partner with the activity is already in the room. This is done to develop a "creative state" in the actor making the entrance. With her attention completely on her partner, whose attention is completely on her activity, the goal is for the actor at the door to do nothing until something occurs in the moment-to-moment reality that makes her do it. The actor at the door must therefore be completely available to her partner at all times.

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<sup>260</sup> Macbeth, 2.2, lines 1-14.

This simple addition to the exercise can be nothing short of terrifying for the actor charged with the repetition; in fact the sensation of complete vulnerability produced is akin to walking on stage without clothing. There is something primal and even predatory about being so completely focused on another, who is in turn, completely focused on something else, the conflict is innate, the situation is intimate, unstable, and unpredictable. This inherent instability echoes Merleau-Ponty's notions on the complexities of the corporeal and its attendant emotions. "The contradictions of love are related more to a general drama which arises from the metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself."<sup>261</sup> The making of an entrance frames and focuses the attention of the person who makes it, this same action tends to either force the person with the activity to break contact, however briefly, with their task or redouble their efforts in the face of the interruption. However the creative state is not just one of vulnerability, but one of relaxed vulnerability. "You're very alert and utterly open, ready to invite any experience into yourself."<sup>262</sup> Since a natural response to feelings of vulnerability is some sort of impulsive, defensive behavior that shuts down or ameliorates the threatening sensation, the first skill that must be made second nature is to always stay in contact with the other, no matter what they do, or how they react, or fail to react. Mamet's view is that this requires a particular type of courage and "learning to deal with uncertainty and being comfortable with being uncomfortable."<sup>263</sup> The capacity to place her full attention on her partner, once fully developed, is also incredibly economical, in the sense that the actor in question simply has no remaining or extra capacity for her own self-consciousness. "They have nothing

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<sup>261</sup> *P of P*, 193

<sup>262</sup> Esper, 109.

<sup>263</sup> Mamet, 20.

left with which to watch themselves or consciously control their responses.”<sup>264</sup> This enhanced perception of the other frees the actor from the repressive defense mechanisms that distort her impulsive responses to her partner’s behavior. And again we see how Meisner training seeks to replace first nature conditioning, with learned second nature conditioning. Through the countless repetitions of “working at the door” the student actor acquires an increasing ability to both stay completely focused on her partner and yet not do anything that isn’t motivated by the partner’s behavior. “Don’t do anything until something happens that makes you do it.” This produces behavior that is caused authentically, rather than being “self-generated,” indicated or pretended.<sup>265</sup> To be truthfully in a precarious situation, rather than to merely seem to do so (indicate) is in many ways the essence of Meisner technique. This combined with the interaction of the activity and the repetition creates the moment-to-moment reality between the two partners. It is second nature that is indistinguishable from first nature, in that it is an actual event of real action and not an imitation or a mimesis. It is the operation of truth on the circumstances of the given situation.

As Meisner says repeatedly, “There is no such thing as nothing.”<sup>266</sup> Whenever an actor enters the stage or a scene, there is always a moment before, they must come from some place, for some reason. Sometimes these circumstances are accounted for in the play text; mostly they are not to a degree of specificity and immediacy that is of use to the actor making her entrance into the heat of the labor of action. Thus in chapter seven, Esper addresses the first part of the technique that allows the actor to address this basic ontological task of doing truthfully under imaginary circumstances, the objective. In

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<sup>264</sup> Esper, 117.

<sup>265</sup> Hart, 51.

<sup>266</sup> Meisner, 29.

Meisner technique an objective is in essence a justification for entering the scene and nothing more.<sup>267</sup> Unlike other schools of acting, objectives are neither played nor pursued, they simply account for the ontological fact that everyone enters another's consciousness from somewhere else and the phenomenological fact that the moment immediately prior their entering into consciousness is hidden. As Merleau-Ponty describes it, "I always feel that there is a portion of being beyond what I see at this moment."<sup>268</sup> This "portion of being" corresponds to the sense of *perezhivanie*, in that it reaches both back to the past and forward to the future. In the theatre it evokes the extension of what is seen on stage, to what is not seen, but perceived to be, off stage. In the activity/repetition exercise, the objective justifies the knock at the door and the entrance into the room, nothing more. Critical to this is that the objective be crafted so as to be concrete and specific, but not immediate, since immediacy leads to the playing of the objective, the pursuit of an agenda, and a preconceived result rather than spontaneous behavior.<sup>269</sup> Upon entrance the actor, as always, focuses on the other and works moment-to-moment impulsively and without reflection or agenda, ideally the objective is never addressed in the exercise. Similarly when expectation is added to the exercise, the actor who has the activity must plausibly craft from her imagination that she is expecting someone other than her acting partner to knock at the door. Thus by creating expectation, she avoids it and reacts spontaneously to both the knock at the door and the arrival of their partner and is prepared to enter into the exercise and work moment-to-moment with both their activity and her partner.<sup>270</sup> The objective will be activated by emotional

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<sup>267</sup> Esper, 131-132.

<sup>268</sup> *P of P*, 251.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 137

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

preparation later in the training (chapter 11). At that time it becomes even more critical that the actor neither play nor pursue either the objective or their emotional preparation.<sup>271</sup>

In chapter eight Esper presents the “Criminal Action Problem” as a method of further establishing the nature of the objective as preparation for entrance rather than a plan for doing the scene. The objective must be to enter the room, usually while their partner is involved in a mental activity similar to sleep, and commit a crime. There is no repetition and no words in the exercise; the idea is that the given circumstance induces a sense of danger that focuses the actor at the door on their immediate surroundings and their given criminal task.<sup>272</sup> The objective will tend to remain in the background as the actor deals with the precarious reality of her moment-to-moment behavior and responses to her partner’s behavior.

Chapter nine deals with perhaps the most challenging transition in the whole course of the study of Meisner technique, the transition from the simple, improvised content of repetition to that of the far more complicated play text. To this end, the student actor’s experience of the text is tightly controlled, with the goal toward the actors maintaining the same moment-to-moment contact and sense of truth they have developed using repetition, with the words of the playwright. The scope of the usual rehearsal process is narrowed to that which is most essential to the labor of action, as opposed to serving the play text, which will come gradually, later in the process. The process employed in the actor’s first scenes consists of five basic techniques/concepts. First, there is no textual analysis or dramaturgic research used, in fact students do not even read the

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

entire play and know only their particular scene and its “precipitating circumstance” of what brought them together in the scene. Anything else must be gleaned or intuited from the scene itself.<sup>273</sup> This is consistent with the sense of acting being based in impulsive doing, rather than an intellectual process. Later in the training dramaturgic research will be increasingly necessary, but even then it is referred to as being part of “actor’s homework” and rigorously segregated from the actual rehearsal process. Actor’s homework, like objectives and many other aspects of Meisner technique, are painstakingly done only in preparation for rehearsal and performance. They are never intended to be pursued for their own sake. To do so is to forsake the labor of action and succumb to anticipation and indication. Secondly, the plays assigned are “From very old plays you’ve probably never heard of. So much the better. Fewer preconceptions”<sup>274</sup> The use of such apparently dated and unfamiliar material, such as Sidney Howard’s *Silver Cord* (1926) and Philip Barry’s (1951) *Second Threshold*, while somewhat counter-intuitive, serves a number of practical purposes. The strangeness and unfamiliarity of the play text tends to prevent the students from reverting to their previously learned behavior regarding the relationship of the actor to the text, and it should be remembered that while the fictitious students in Esper’s book have varying levels of experience on stage, they all have some experience and presumably, previous training in acting as well. “You’ve all worked on scripts before. Right now the last thing I need is to have you distracted, trying to figure out who your character is or what’s the dramatic arc.”<sup>275</sup> The sometimes stilted and anachronistic language also again confronts the student with the hard reality that theatre is not a slice of life and the play text is usually not written in the easy

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 160.

contemporary vernacular that they have become used to in their repetition exercises. That the student's initial excitement over finally being given an actual scene to work on is ameliorated by the unfamiliarity of the material they are assigned is an important part of the process. It dampens the impulse to fall back on previous experience and training and demonstrate to the class just how well they can "really act," thus ignoring and potentially undoing the preceding weeks of work. The text is thus de-mystified for the sake of the exercise; it is treated as more or less a found object with minimal context, no history, and is to be approached in a dispassionate and workman-like way. Ideally, its sole purpose is to provide the words for the exercise and nothing else.

Thirdly, as with all of the first year work, the first scenes involve no sense of any sort of character being played what so ever. "Straight acting" involves the actor behaving as they themselves would in the basic circumstances of the scene, and with the playwright's words, in moment-to-moment contact with their partner. "For now, only the actor's immediate personal response is wanted, whether or not it serves the scene."<sup>276</sup> "In these scenes you will be you under the imaginary circumstances, just as it's been in the exercises we've been doing." The concept of straight acting is a powerful one, so much so in fact that, coupled together with moment-to-moment reality, Mamet comes close to all but declaring it the only (or at least the most expedient) truthful kind of acting.<sup>277</sup> As reactionary and deliberately inflammatory as Mamet's views can be on this subject (He consistently advocates a performance style that is remarkably close to the desired effect of Esper's first scene exercises) the utility and theoretical basis of his thoughts are

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<sup>276</sup> Hart, 71. "In this way they are learning to really improvise, to work off of their partners, moment by moment. The work of transforming responses to serve a character and a playwright's intent is the focus of the second year of training,"

<sup>277</sup> Mamet, 62-63.



difficult to dismiss. The simplicity of straight acting is well suited to both the endemic speed of theatrical performance, as well as the absence of rehearsal time in other media. Unadorned straight acting allows the actor to simply learn her lines and show up. The text and the director are responsible for everything else and the director, for her part, simply casts the actor whose personal proclivities correspond most closely to the character as written. “It is the writer’s job to make the play interesting. It is the actor’s job to make the performance truthful.”<sup>278</sup> While this may appear to be (and in the whole context of Meisner technique undoubtedly is) an incomplete technique, I would argue that it is not necessarily a superficial one. Many successful actors either stopped their study of Meisner technique after the first year (or as in Mamet’s case, were not invited to proceed on to the second year’s training) or are never really able to make the transition to more advanced character work. The foundational training of the first year can be so effective that, if the actor is able to simply gravitate towards those roles with which she has an affinity; the whole concept of character acting may well be a moot point, at least for the early part of her career. Furthermore, Mamet’s point that “There is no character. There are only lines on a page” appears to be based in, or at least buttressed by Russian Formalism and Prague school theory wherein, the experience of character is solely the creation of the audience, precipitated by the interaction of the actor and the play text.<sup>279</sup> In any case, the goal of the first year of training is for the students to experience themselves “fully and truthfully” under imaginary circumstances by removing her

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 9. While the Prague school theorists such as Jan Mukarski present a useful and intriguing theory of where the audience’s experience of character might come from, it should be noted that their overarching perspective is semiotic, and thus the experience formed in the mind of the audience is regarded as an illusion, not a real experience. This strikes the writer as being a specious conclusion that might be disproved in much the same way that Saltz’s analysis challenged the semiotic notion of real action being impossible on stage. Per Merleau-Ponty, “A true perception will simply be a true perception. Illusion will be no perception at all. P of P, 343.

reliance on previous training and isolating the most fundamental elements of good acting, plausibly truthful, moment-to-moment reality.

The fourth primary rule for scene work is the rote memorization of lines by both partners prior to any rehearsal, the goal being to learn the words of the text in as neutral a fashion as possible, without inflection or any preconceived notions or choices. The actors are also told to ignore punctuation however, it must be noted that Esper's technique appears far less hostile to the play text than Meisner's. Meisner states in no uncertain terms, referring to the actor, "The text is your greatest enemy." Furthermore, he appears to make little distinction between the isolation and simplification of the actor's relationship to the script for the purposes of their early training and that of their ultimate goal of serving the text in performance.<sup>280</sup> Meisner instructs his students to ignore not only punctuation, but also almost all stage directions, except for entrances and exits. This is understandable in many cases, especially where the acting editions of plays are compiled base on the stage manager's prompt script of the original Broadway production, rather than by the playwright's editorial control. However, this could be a needless complication (as well as a violation of intellectual property) in the case of such playwrights as Beckett and Albee, where the texts have an overtly musical structure delineated to a significant degree by the writer's choice of punctuation, and where these writers are known to exert considerable editorial influence over the publication of their work and its subsequent production. Meisner's most significant point is well taken, there will always be a certain distance between the play as written and the play as performed, just as there is always a hiatus between language and speech. Actors must know this as well or better than any artist. However, to place the actor in continual opposition to text is

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<sup>280</sup> Meisner, 136.

simply counter-productive, and this marks a significant difference between Meisner's technique as described in his book and Esper's. For Esper, the play text is not an enemy to be overcome, its analysis by the actor simply takes place outside of and in preparation for rehearsal and performance, whereas for Meisner, the text is apparently best served by the actor ignoring as much of it as is possible. At first glance this might seem reminiscent of Harold Clurman's dictum that the director's concept of production should be based not on what the playwright meant, but on what they wrote.<sup>281</sup> However Clurman's conceit is not that the play text is an adversary to be defeated, but quite the contrary that the play text, rather than the playwright, is what is to be served in production.<sup>282</sup> Meisner's apparent petulant absolutism obliterates this distinction, thus potentially putting the actor in conflict with not only the play text, but with the director as well. Esper's approach is far more conducive to the collaborative process necessary in production, while also recognizing the distinction between language and speech endemic to the progression from play text, to the playing of the text, and from production to performance.

Rote memorization serves the purpose of the first scene exercise in that it provides the words that are to be used as the actors work off each other moment-to-moment and nothing else. The text must be inculcated in the actor so deeply that it is a dissociated action, only then can she begin to work with the playwright's words as quickly and easily as her own improvised speech; this cannot be over-emphasized. Rote memorization is in and of itself a demanding discipline, in order to be effective as conversational reality, it must be as neutral as possible, but not overly mechanical, and absolutely precise, but also relaxed, so that it takes on the actor's constantly shifting

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<sup>281</sup> Harold Clurman, *On Directing*, (New York: Collier Books, 1972), 35.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

emotional valence. Ideally it is rehearsed in solitude to the point where it becomes dissociated action prior to actually running the scene with a partner.

The fifth element employed in the first scene exercise is that of conversational reality. Once the text has been memorized by rote by both partners, the goal is for them to be able to turn the dialogue into “genuine unanticipated conversation.”<sup>283</sup> They practice this by doing the scene in various public places, if those around them appear to notice anything amiss; they have failed the test of conversational reality. Conversational reality offers a bridge between the improvised world of repetition and the scripted world of the scene. It allows the actor to practice plausibly truthful moment-to-movement speech acts, using someone else’s words. The practice of running the scene in public is a simple and surprisingly effective way of discovering the minimal amount of effort necessary to communicate the scene to their partner and still remain completely engaged with them. It also helps to dispel any sense of uneasiness or artificiality that may be created by performing the scene in front of an audience. Once properly rehearsed (and it must be again noted that in general, this degree of mastery takes an incredible amount of practice, both alone and with her partner), the actors should be able to fall into their scene quite naturally at any given moment and the sense evoked is not of actors doing a scene, but of a scene doing the actors.<sup>284</sup> The impulse to speak is continually created by the other and the scene occurs “Out of the accident of them being in the same place at the same time.”<sup>285</sup> This sense of the labor of the actor occurring in, and being created out of a temporal accident has a distinctly existential quality to it and corresponds closely to Camus’s sense of the absurd, as well as Diderot’s paradox. It is only constant rehearsal

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<sup>283</sup> Esper, 160.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 163.

that allows the actor to overcome the anticipation engendered by repeated rehearsal and only through the most diligent discipline that she creates the conditional precariousness necessary to transform language into actual speech acts. The text has nothing to do with the actor's response, which is based in the impulse to speak, not the play script. It is really only after the actor reaches this level of competence that she may truly and increasingly reliably tap into the potential complexities engendered by a sense of *perezhivanie*. The more the actor doesn't try to act, in other words, the more she does not indicate, the more she may discover what her truest feelings and point of view may be. This sense simultaneously reaches from the present to the past as well as to the future, synthesizing the subjective and the imaginary and in so doing, provides depth and subtlety to the labor of action. The exercise builds an increasingly palpable sense of the actor as an infinitely sensitive and unpredictable instrument responding to every nuance of behavior in every moment of her experience until she literally runs out of words.

For the purposes of the exercise, that these emotions may or may not be appropriate to the service of the play is irrelevant. Although it is also my experience that the combination of straight acting and rote memorization often provides not only behavior appropriate to the text, but also behavior that serves the text in counterpoint.<sup>286</sup> Meaning that the actor's behavior may be contrary to the overt meaning of the text, yet more fully expresses its deeper action than a more conventional and predictable interpretation might. Esper's approach to the text in this exercise, as noted before, is far more nuanced than Meisner's. On one hand he states that the actors should "adjust the text to the inner emotional line created by their sensitized response to the other actor."<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 169.

His point is that words in and of themselves are un-actable symbols, and that only behavior through the actor's labor of action may be truly acted. However, Esper's statement that "any line can mean anything and come out of you any way." is a specific comment related to the necessary fluidity of moment-to-moment reality and not a demand for a wholly relativistic interpretation of the text.<sup>288</sup> In fact it is far closer to the desire that, similar to Mamet's purview, there be no interpretation of the text at all on the part of the actor. Later on in the chapter, this manner of actor neutrality with regard to interpretation is seen as a way of respecting and serving the various styles of various playwrights whether or not the actor feels familiar with their language or not. In fact Esper is adamant that the "emotional context" or knowing what the words mean to the actor in the given situation of the text is what is key to the acting of the particular scene, regardless of the style it's written in and whether or not the actor feels comfortable with that style. "This isn't the nightly news; it's theatre. Every writer in the theatre has his own distinct voice, and none of them are naturalistic."<sup>289</sup> And later in the chapter Esper makes a distinction between the actors blocking themselves (meaning to shape the text from a directorial point of view) and "justifying the text" by simply fulfilling what it physically requires, such as sitting, standing, or doing a simple activity that justifies the other actor's scripted comment about her behavior. This again drives home the point that neither the actor nor the play is well served by the two being in conflict with one another, and that there should be a certain harmony between word and action, even if that harmony is discovered in counter-point.

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 167. Although Esper, like Meisner tells his students that they should "Completely ignore how your scripts are punctuated." This warning is based in the difference between language and speech, rather than antipathy to the text itself.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 172.

The first scene process of (1) unfamiliar/archaic play texts, (2) no dramaturgical research, (3) straight acting, (4) rote memorization, and (5) conversational reality lead the actor to a synergy of the real and the imaginary worlds. And Esper's practical perspective that "the line that separates reality from the imaginary world is very thin" is very much akin to Wilshire's phenomenological conclusion that "Purely actual or purely fictional life is a delusion. The actual must involve the ideal."<sup>290</sup> This synergy of the ideal and the material, the subjective and the imaginary, the actor and the play text, occurs through subjective interaction. Again per Wilshire, "The "I" is not an object but a limit of the world." And per Hegel, "I am a function of my recognition of myself, but this is a function of my recognition of others recognition of me."<sup>291</sup> Human beings in general and actors in particular respond mimetically to things, "We sing them... With a quiet thing we grow quiet in order to hear it, and with a noisy thing we shout over it to make ourselves heard. With a small thing we kneel down..."<sup>292</sup> These synergistic interactions of the personal, the inter-personal, and the communal, with the actual and the imaginary, mediated by temporality, begin to create a sense of what we mean by *perezhivanie*, and delineate how it may function as a vehicle for dramatic Platonic truth.

In chapter ten Esper ends the use of repetition and replaces it with more traditional improvisation, the point being that eventually repetition outlives its usefulness. "It was freeing in the beginning, now it's becoming restrictive."<sup>293</sup> The goal of this new exercise that combines the activity and improvisation is, as was the variation in chapter six, for the actor working the door to be profoundly focused on and vulnerable to her

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 178. Wilshire, 258.

<sup>291</sup> Wilshire, 166-167. Wilshire both invokes Hegel and forwards his own theories in this section, which also invokes a sense of *perezhivanie*, even though Wilshire doesn't use the term.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>293</sup> Esper, 179.

partner. Without the repetition to fall back on, they must be even more attuned to their partner's behavior and respond accordingly. "Instead of having the luxury of repeating to create their response to something, I'll teach the actors to shut up and not say anything unless they absolutely *must* say it."<sup>294</sup> This drastically changes the dynamic of the exercises; the actor with the activity is instructed to explore various aspects of her emotional temperament that she finds interesting and discover the emotional connections created by what she is doing, rather than why she is doing it. The actor at the door should do and say nothing unless her partner makes her, she must take in the other's behavior and react to it impulsively. This exercise begins to put a fine edge on the actor's labor of action, the actor at the door has literally nothing to work with except her partner, whose focus is on her activity. There can be nothing extraneous, "If nothing happens to you, do nothing. The actor's job is to create behavior, not dialogue."<sup>295</sup> Eventually most actors come to a point in this exercise where they accept that it is the other actor who generates the nature of their actions, and this revelation has a complicated emotional effect on them. They become even more tuned into the moment and responsive to their partner's every action and they become almost completely unpredictable, frequently wildly so, as they discover their own point of view in action. The extended silences also tend to generally quiet the actor's instrument a bit and generate a somewhat more judicious and centered, if outwardly focused, sense of being. This will facilitate an even more profound lack of anticipation in their work, since they have experienced that there is no real way to predict or control what happens in the exercise if it is done properly. And this growing

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 193.



confidence sets the stage for the various techniques of preparation that may influence and color the actor's labor of action and constitute the final weeks of the first year of training.

Director: Take it from his second entrance.

Actor 1: "My husband!"

Actor 2: "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

Actor 1: "I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.

Did you not speak?"

Actor 2: "When?"

Actor 1: "Now."

Actor 2: "As I descended?"

Actor 1: "Ay."

Actor 2: "Hark! Who lies in the second chamber?"

Actor 1: "Donalbain."

Actor 2: "This is a sorry sight."

Director: What is?

Actor 2: Me, I'm a mess.

Director: Way too general, what does the script say the "sorry sight" is?

Actor 2: My hands.

Director: Why?

Actor 2: Because they're bloody.

Director: Why? What did you do?

Actor 2: I stabbed an old man to death.

Director: Given that, what else might your hands be doing?

Actor 2: Shaking

Director: When in doubt, don't ignore the script, keep going.

Actor 1: "A foolish thought to say a sorry sight."

Actor 2: "There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried 'Murderer!' That they did wake each other. I stood and heard them. But they did say their prayers and addressed them Again to sleep."

Actor 1: "There are two lodged together."

Actor 2: "One cried 'God bless us' and 'Amen' the other. As they had seen me with these hangman's hands. List'ning their fear I could not say 'Amen' When they did say 'God bless us.'"

Actor 1: "Consider it not so deeply."

Actor 2: "But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?" I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' Stuck in my throat."

Actor 1: "These deeds must not be thought After these ways. So, it will make us mad."

Actor 2: "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep'-the innocent sleep, Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care, The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,

Chief nourisher in life's feast"

Actor 1: "What do you mean?"

Actor 2: "Still it cried 'Sleep no more' to all the house,  
'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more.'"

Actor 1: "Who was it that thus cried?"

Director: That's right, where do all these noises come from and why doesn't  
anyone but the two of you seem to hear them?

Actor 1: "Why, worthy thane,  
You do unbend your noble strength to think  
So brain-sickly of things. Go get some water  
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.  
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?"<sup>296</sup>

Actor 2: So I've been standing there with the daggers the whole time.

Actor 1: And you've been walking around the castle with them as well

Director: That's what it says, can you justify it?

Actor 2: I think so...

Director: I'd just day dream on the situation, keep it simple, you are in a  
familiar place surrounded by unfamiliar sounds you can't find the  
source of, see what that does.

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<sup>296</sup> *Macbeth*, 2.2, lines 13-46.

## THE ACTOR'S ART AND CRAFT—CHAPTERS 11--15

In the final chapters of his book, Esper begins to directly address the emotional component of acting. As always, the actor's labor of action, the creation in real time of moment-to-moment reality via fully focusing on her partner, is paramount and never to be violated. However, the phenomenological reality is that everyone always enters a given situation from someplace else, and the same is true of the stage. A play text may indicate where the actor has been before a given scene, then again it may not. In any case, no play script contains the amount of phenomenological detail necessary for an actor to play a given role well; it is simply not physically possible or even desirable. Dramatic literature is an essential art. The playwright exercises her own imagination, artistic sensitivity, and selectivity, and chooses those things she deems necessary to create the circumstances of the text. "The writer invents things that are meaningful to him."<sup>297</sup> The actor must be able to fill in the gaps with what is meaningful to her, and make specific what the text may only hint at, and a critical element of doing this in a manner that is plausibly true involves the actor entering a given scene in an appropriately plausible emotional state. This process is referred to as emotional preparation.<sup>298</sup>

As we have discussed previously, Esper sources an individual's creativity, inspiration, and imagination, in his own concept of the Freudian sub-conscious.<sup>299</sup> However, somewhat like Searle, he also acknowledges that this is a practically useless distinction for the actor, since this alleged well of less-than-conscious experience cannot

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>299</sup> Esper is hardly alone in doing this; most Stanislavski-based American schools of acting, whether they realize it or not, tend to source the actor's imagination in an increasingly archaic Freudian unconsciousness, as opposed to more contemporary explanations. Also, any invocation of Freud also invokes unavoidable associations with patriarchy, misogyny, and colonialism, as well as the general pathologizing of non-conformity. A telling exception would be Stella Adler, who tends to source the imagination more in history and social involvement.

be consciously accessed or controlled by the actor or anyone else. Since Meisner technique advocates the use of the actor's imagination to not only justify their actions, but also to create appropriately plausible emotion on stage, there must be some bridge between the actor's conscious experience and the, so called, unconscious well spring of their creativity. This is referred to as daydreaming, and it is a primary creative tool of Meisner technique. However, Esper's view of day dreaming is somewhat limited by his preoccupation with Freudian psycho-analytic theory.<sup>300</sup> And I will endeavor to show that while daydreaming may indeed reflect primitive "vindication fantasies" it may also, per more recent behavioral psychological research, be closely associated with much higher and more creative functions such as empathy, problem solving, and the consolidation of experience and knowledge.<sup>301</sup> In this sense, a more expanded concept of daydreaming may be thought of as a method of accessing and exploring *perezhivanie*, as opposed to the insular unconscious mind.

One thing common to most understandings of daydreaming (also referred to as disambiguation) is that it involves a willful, subtle, but potentially profound, alteration of the daydreamer's consciousness whereby the distinction between the ideal and the material becomes blurred or dissociated. This blurring creates a liminal space where present, past, and future are simultaneously available to the daydreamer and the imagination is generated by the synergistic interaction of her experiences, whether they

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<sup>300</sup> J. Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume V (1900-1901): The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part) and On Dreams*, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953, 492.

<sup>301</sup> D. Vaitl, J. Gruzelier, D. Lehmann et al., "Psychobiology of Altered States of Consciousness," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 131, no. 1, 2005, pp. 98–127. (2) "Brain's Problem-solving Function At Work When We Daydream". Science Daily. 2009-05-12. Retrieved 10/31/2012. (3) Kalina Christoff; Alan M. Gordon, Jonathan Smallwood, Rachelle Smith, and Jonathan W. Schooler, "Experience Sampling During fMRI Reveals Default Network and Executive System Contributions to Mind Wandering," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106 (21): 8719–24. (2009-05-11).

be first hand or vicarious, actual or fictional. More importantly for the actor, daydreams precipitate both physical sensations and emotional responses in the daydreamer that correspond closely with Aristotle's theory of "The real thing." Meaning that for all intents and purposes, the sensations and emotions experienced in the midst of a daydream are substantially the same as those felt in the actual experience itself. In the midst of a daydream, the actor may spontaneously respond as they would if immersed in the actual situation or circumstance. Furthermore, they may also process the experience and learn from it, as Esper puts it, "What does this situation mean to me? In other words: What is the one feeling I get from this set of circumstances?"<sup>302</sup> Esper's questions are well chosen, daydreaming is a powerful tool that may be used in any number of creative ways however, in order to be useful to the actor in the relentless temporality of the labor of action, the products of daydreaming must be crafted, evaluated, and adapted, to the specific needs of the individual in her given circumstances. The goal is to find the emotional essence of the daydream, to, in a sense, weaponize it, so that it may be reliably employed in the moment prior to coming on stage. It can be anything, as long as it is tied back to the textual situation prior to making the entrance. "Your emotional preparation provides the power that sends the car off. Then the tracks-meaning the text-supply the direction."<sup>303</sup> The difference between an actor coming on stage with a good emotional preparation and one who comes "cold" or without one can be tremendous. Without emotional preparation the actor must either force herself into the dynamic already established in the scene and risk anticipation and indication, or try to work her way up to the appropriate tempo within the given time between her entrance and either her exit or

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<sup>302</sup> Esper, 203.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 208.

the end of the scene. In either case, she is more likely to run out of time prior to reaching her goal and the effect can be as though the actor in question appears to be in a different play from the other actors who preceded her on stage. In any case, the most important aspect of emotional preparation in Meisner technique is this: “*emotional preparation is only for the first moment of a scene. After that, you must leave it alone and abandon yourself to the improvisation.*”<sup>304</sup> And herein lays the great paradox of emotional preparation. In order to properly enter the stage the actor must perform exactly the sort of reflective introspection they have been painstakingly taught to avoid. She must take on exactly the type of emotionalized self-absorption that she knows impedes her contact with her partner and destroys the creation of moment-to-moment reality. And even more to the point, exactly the kind of behavior that tends to lead to the anticipation of the action of the scene, rather than its spontaneous generation. None of this was lost on Meisner himself, “Preparation is the worst problem in acting. I hate it.”<sup>305</sup> Or on Esper, “Sometimes emotional preparation can cause a lot of problems. It can make the actor physically tense, for instance, or it can preoccupy you to the extent where the emotional preparation impedes your ability to work off of your partner.”<sup>306</sup> Or Hart, “The actor must learn how to shift his attention from himself to his partner... That seems easy enough, but it is not our natural response in an agitated emotional state. ...we become one, so to speak, with our happiness or distress.”<sup>307</sup> Thus many teachers of Meisner technique have a conflicted relationship with the whole notion of emotional preparation (The writer is another). This is one of the many reasons why the overtly emotional component of acting

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 209. Italics in original, underline by author.

<sup>305</sup> Meisner, 118.

<sup>306</sup> Esper, 211.

<sup>307</sup> Hart, 67-68.

isn't studied until the last part of the first year of training, the actor must first be so firmly grounded in the labor of action that even the paradox of emotional preparation cannot contradict it for long. However, this is not always the case, and even under the most propitious of conditions the paradox of emotional preparation induces a sort of cognitive dissonance in the students as they are taught to do what appears to be two contradictory things (focus inwardly and focus outwardly) as well as overcome the basic cognitive/survival reflex to respond to strong emotion by placing attention on another rather than themselves. The intention of emotional preparation, like that of the objective, is to energize and exert influence over the labor of action without interfering with it; it also may facilitate a sense of plausible truth to the actor's entrance. However, in the end, "Acting is about doing, not feeling... It's nice to have emotion. But you can get by with something else."<sup>308</sup> By this Esper is referring to the emotions that arise from the moment-to-moment reality of the labor of action. Hart echoes this sentiment, "Emotional preparation is the least desirable way for the actor to come to life... Ultimately, acting is about what the characters do, not what they feel."<sup>309</sup> Hart feels that emotional preparation can be a useful tool for the actor's homework in "isolating moments he needs to address," as well as in performance when used selectively, and assuming that the actor in question has a sufficient degree of competence to establish it and then "leave it alone" once they have entered. In this sense the emotional preparation exercises are in some ways more difficult than an actual performance, where the actor is not only literally surrounded by the specific circumstances of the stage, but also involved in a more elaborate game-like mentality. Meaning that as long as the actor is sufficiently well

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<sup>308</sup> Esper, 211.

<sup>309</sup> Hart, 68-69.



trained and experienced in the primacy of the labor of action, they will tend to associate it with the circumstances of performance and in general behave accordingly. This is similar to the way that basketball players rarely walk with the ball when they are on the court, regardless of whether or not there is an actual game going on. The space is deeply associated with a certain set of rules and when a player enters it, the ball is to be either passed or dribbled, without exception. In the same way, once an actor reaches a point in her training and experience where she associates the theatrical space with putting her focus on her partner and establishing consistent moment-to-moment reality, it becomes easier for her to establish her emotional preparation and then leave it alone once she makes her entrance. She can then be more confident that her emotional preparation will not overwhelm the labor of action. However, in the end, while emotional preparation is a useful skill for the professional actor, it is not the most essential one, and is perhaps best used judiciously as a tool of solitary exploration, and when emotion rising from the labor of action is unavailable.

In chapter twelve, as Esper's fictitious students continue to struggle with the vagaries of emotional preparation, he introduces the concept that an actor's "formal relationship" in a play may be quite different from her "acting relationship." The example he gives is that of Nora and Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Where formally the two are husband and wife, from the text's point of view, initially, their relationship is much more akin to that of an indulgent father and a spoiled child.<sup>310</sup> The actor's ability to reframe textual relationships is a somewhat elaborate example of Stanislavski's use of "as if" to justify an actor's actions. It is not that the actor denies the relationship in the text; it is more akin to the sense that we all have private as well as public aspects to our

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<sup>310</sup> Esper, 222-223.

relationships and frequently these two worlds are in conflict. Like any other sort of phenomena, relationships also have a hidden aspect that is nevertheless present even if it is not directly experienced. The technique of the acting relationship differing from the formal textual relationship is a method of illuminating this ontological dynamic.

In chapter thirteen the actor's objectives are emotionalized by emotional preparation, and both actors are given Activities. These "Domestic Exercises" are the final step for the actors prior to the second set of scene exercises. In them the actors are given the basic scenario that they live together, one enters with an emotionalized objective, the other has a standard activity designed to explore her emotional sensitivities, the other performs more mundane activities they associate with coming home. The improvisation takes off from there; neither the emotion nor the objective should be in any way played, and neither partner should do anything that is not caused by the other partner. It is in many ways a more rigorous final examination of the student actor's abilities that the second set of scenes in that it is otherwise unstructured and indefinite and so tests the actor's ability to persistently maintain the labor of action for as long as is necessary.

In the second round of scenes the text is approached in much the same way as in the first round with the addition of objectives and emotional preparation. "The whole question is: Can you create a full emotional preparation and then improvise with a text."<sup>311</sup> The scenes are from more contemporary plays and are chosen to have more complicated sources of conflict and so to lend them to the need for both actors to craft strong objectives and appropriate emotional preparations. In many ways the addition of the text simplifies the emotional preparation and points up the sense of emotion fueling

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 253.

the actor rather than being the acting, “You don’t have to achieve some precise gradation of emotion. Just get a big lump of something and the scene will channel it.”<sup>312</sup> Practice will point the actor to her own particular areas of emotional sensitivity from which she may adapt “an infinite number of emotional states.” depending on her subjective imagination, her partner, and the needs of the text.<sup>313</sup> Again, as always, the labor of action is primary, emotion fuels it, and the text sets out the rules of the imaginary situation and provides the words the actors employ. The actor fulfills this ludic reality when she operates in accordance with the circumstances set down by the text; to violate these precepts is to cheat the text.

Director: Take it from last “sleep no more”.

Actor 2: “Macbeth shall sleep no more.”

Actor 1: “Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,  
Do you unbend your noble strength to think  
So brain-sickly of things. Go get some water  
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.  
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?  
They must lie there. Go carry them, and smear  
The sleepy grooms with blood.”

Actor 2: “I’ll go no more  
I am afraid to think what I have done,  
Look on’t again I dare not.”

Actor 1: “Infirm of purpose!

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 256

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 257.

Give me the daggers. “

Director: Take them away from him, look at them.

Actor 1: The sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures. Tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed  
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,  
For it must seem their guilt.”

Director: Press a bloody finger against his lips before you exit.

Actor 2: “Whence is that knocking?  
How is't with me when every noise appals me?  
What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes. ‘

Director: I think you might need to pull out some sort of handkerchief to  
wipe your hands on.

Actor 2: I'll have scarf on, I can use that?

Director: Let's say yes for now and I'll clear it with costumes. The blood  
should be dried, it won't come off too much, and that's kind of the  
point.

Actor 2: “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine  
Making the green one red.”

Actor 1: “My hands are of your colour, but I shame  
To wear a heart so white.”

Director: Take the scarf away from him and clean your hands, it doesn't work very well.

"I hear knocking

At the south entry. Retire we to our chamber.

A little water clears us of this deed.

How easy is it then! Your constancy

Hath left you unattended.

Hark, more knocking.

Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us

And show us to be watchers. Be not lost

So poorly in your thoughts."

Actor 2: "To know my deed' twere best not to know myself."<sup>314</sup>

### **FURTHER CONCLUSIONS**

The immediate goal of the first year study of Meisner technique is to condition the operation of the actor's labor of action until her ability to create unique occurrences of moment-to-moment ontology, through focus on the other and impulsive responses to behavior, occur at the level of dissociated action. This in turn creates a subtle, but profound change in the nature of the actor's consciousness, similar to day dreaming, but outwardly directed towards the other and simultaneously, penetrating her own perception of temporality and lived experience. This heightened consciousness brought about by the labor of action produces singular, impulsive, subjective, emotional, responses sourced in the synergy of the actor's imagination, intellect, lived, and empathic experiences

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<sup>314</sup> *Macbeth*, 2.2, lines 41-71.

(*perezhivanie*). While it is generally preferable for this emotional life to be precipitated by the labor of action itself, the necessity of the actor to be able to complete the text with plausibly motivated behavior, requires a facility with the technique of emotional preparation as well. emotional preparation allows the actor to reach beyond the exercise and the text to prepare for those moments where the mimetic process of the playwright and the director fail to provide sufficient justification for the operation of truth in the actor's non-mimetic process (owing to the necessarily selective nature of the mimetic process). While the mimetic object contains the emotional content intended by the artist who created it, in the case of the play script, that object is intended to be embodied by other artists, who must justify their behavior in a wholly different medium and temporality that requires a far greater specificity to certain elements that may be largely taken for granted by the playwright. For example, taking into account the totality of the play script's given circumstances, where an actor enters a scene from and why they enter it at all, may be incidental to action the playwright is interested in. However, for the actor in rehearsal and performance these details must always be accounted for to complete, not the mimetic reality of the playwright, but the ontological reality of the actor. To this end, the actor must be able to look not just to the play text, but also to her own subjective point of view and imagination to fill the ontological gaps in the mimetic object as it transitions from play text to play, from play to production, and from production to performance. Through each of these temporal iterations, the actor must prepare the mimetic text such that it occurs at the level of dissociated action and thus allow for the singularity of each moment and the overall operation of truth. In Meisner technique, anything sourced in mimesis is done only in preparation for the labor of action and never

as an end in itself. Just as the operation of truth influences, but does not determine outcome, so too may the actor's preparation for her labor of action influence its outcome without necessarily anticipating it, through innumerable iterations, each unique and unpredictable, but nevertheless, prone to a certain outcome. In the same manner that addition influences, but does not specifically determine that  $2 + 2 = 4$  and subtraction influences  $2 - 2 = 0$ , the operation of truth (or the actor as a "truthful instrument" as Diderot might say) influences outcome based on the content it is applied to. Thus even what I have previously described as plausible truth occurs with the aspect of a unique operation that influences the outcome of the actor's input, but does not really in any way determine the specific outcome. This is one reason why both the play text and the choices made by the actor in preparation for the labor of action are so critical to the outcome of the playing of the play text. They provide the content acted upon by the operation of truth and thus also influence its result. Thus the dialectic of the mimetic and the non-mimetic (ontological), come together in a synthesis of temporally simultaneous action. More prosaically, this is akin to the ludic nature of a game mentality, where mimetic rules influence, but do not necessarily, determine singular outcomes.

## CHAPTER SIX—FINAL CONCLUSIONS

At the outset of this dissertation I proposed what I then thought of as two unrelated purposes for the application of philosophical thought and methods to Meisner technique. The initial goal was to illuminate and improve its theory, practice, and pedagogy, through rigorous analysis and critique based in established scholarly thought. With regard to this I have come to three significant conclusions. First, Esper's presentation of his interpretation and extension of Meisner technique is hamstrung by the lack of a viable definition of truth. This is both pedagogically and practically problematic because of the tremendous emphasis both Esper and Meisner place on the development of the actor's "sense of truth." As we have seen, the nature of, and even the very existence of truth is incredibly contentious. To leave such an important and provocative term undefined invites, at the very least, an unproductive confusion in the case of Esper's pedagogy, and the patriarchal abuse of power in the case of Meisner himself. (or in any case at least the Meisner depicted in *Sanford Meisner on Acting*) As Plato knew well where there is no definition of truth it tends to become, by default, "the advantage of the stronger." In my opinion and experience the theory and pedagogy of an overt theory of truth, beginning with the plausible and extending in a continuum to the dramatic Platonic, only facilitates the student actor's understanding and absorption of the concept of a "sense of truth." It also affords a sense of transparency that may guide the instructor herself away from the siren's song of overly authoritarian and even patriarchal teaching. As teachers we must recognize that some of our own training may well have been cruel (in the sense of capricious or overly rigorous) but, necessary in order to achieve the level



of exactitude we desired. However we must also acknowledge that much of this same training was also more cruel than necessary, and apply ourselves to the task of separating these counter-productive and ethically challenged traditions from our current practice, while continuing to maintain the rigor necessary to improve and extend it. The overt definition of an actor's "sense of truth" as being a continuum grounded in plausible truth and extending towards dramatic Platonic truth would be a significant step in the right direction towards the accomplishment of this goal.

Secondly, Esper, like almost all of the American interpreters of Stanislavski, relies on the archaic sourcing of the actor's imagination in the Freudian unconscious mind. While this criticism isn't necessarily detrimental to the technique's overall efficacy, it does needlessly mystify its pedagogy, as does the whole concept of "actor's faith" and the dubious supposition that the actor must actually believe her imaginary circumstances. The sourcing of the actor's imagination and lived experience in Stanislavski's concept of *perezhivanie* allows these experiences to be parsed and studied in a more modern and transparent fashion than their attribution to a system of thoughts that can never be thought allows for. My third conclusion is that Esper's concept of the actor's relationship to the play text differs significantly from that of Meisner, and is far less reactionary than his sense of the text being the actor's "greatest enemy." Esper is able to make the distinction between language and speech, while still enabling the actor to gain every advantage from the text, without her being wholly dependent on it, especially with regard to the specific needs of the actor's necessary ontology. Taken together I believe that these insights honor the achievements of those who have brought

Meisner technique to this point in its history, and also provide useful advances in our understanding of its pedagogy and practice.

My second purpose was to use this same philosophical lens to examine the far broader question of the dilemma of mimesis itself specifically, the nature of the relationship between the ideal and the material in the actor's experience and the relationship of the created object to the world that it came out of. While this always an interesting metaphysical question, my own interest in it is far more political in nature. The political aspect of mimesis centers on its reification of existing hegemonic authority. Simply put, if the mimetic object is sourced in the hegemonic world, how can it ultimately do anything other than continually justify that world's authority, and so how may the object ultimately do anything other than collude with power? There are many reasonable theories that draw important distinctions between a technique of mimesis and the specific use to which the technique is put to, for example, the same style of social realism was employed for both propaganda posters in the Soviet Union, as well as for various productions of the Public Theatre in New York City.<sup>315</sup> However, to my mind these theories, as reasonable as they are, generally fail to adequately appreciate the endemic pervasiveness of the influence and control of organized religion, the modern state, and global Capitalism. For better or worse, it is the nature of these institutions to control both their adherents and their apostates toward the alleged greater good via the status quo. To this end that which cannot be suppressed, muted, or discredited, is simply re-purposed in support of the dominate power. The intent of the artist is superseded by

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<sup>315</sup> Jon Erickson, "On Mimesis (and Truth) in Performance, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring, 2009, Vol. 23, 245.

that of the world they create in and from.<sup>316</sup> It would be no great surprise to Plato that the messages of these re-purposed mimetic works echo the Homeric virtues he opposed.

Then as now greed, consumption, and bloody glory in the death of the other, reify and grow religion and the Capitalist state. It is my contention that theatre is uniquely, perhaps even singularly well suited to address the mimetic, in a non-mimetic way.

In the course of this dissertation it has become apparent to me that my first and my second areas of research are, in fact, very much related. My concluding theory is that the overall efficacy of Meisner technique is best explained by the notion that it produces non-mimetic actors. Actors who continually create both real speech acts and real physical acts that exist as unique events in a ludic game ontology, through the operation of plausible truth, and for the ultimate operation of dramatic Platonic truth as an exceptional occurrence that disrupts the status quo with the possibility of revolutionary action. Through the privileged temporality of the actor's labor of action, moment-to-moment ontology is created through the freedom engendered by recognition of the other and illocutionary contingency. This ability, practiced to the level of dissociated action, precipitates a heightened consciousness in the actor represented by Stanislavski's concept of *perezhivanie*, which influences her impulsive responses to the other's behavior. This is by far the preferred method by which true emotion is created to fulfill the actor's ludic ontology. However, once the condition of the wholly mimetic play text is added, its service and embodiment by the actor becomes the entire reason for the existence of both actor and text. In so far as the play of the play text is concerned, the text greatly enhances this game ontology, providing in effect, the basic rules to be followed, rules then further

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<sup>316</sup> An ideal example of this phenomena would be the adoption of popular songs like Woody Guthrie's *This Land is your Land* or Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* by the right wing, in spite of their obviously left wing lyrics and the politics of their creators.

delineated by the director of the given production. Simply taken this far, as it is in the first set of scenes in the first year's training, the rote memorization of the dialogue, straight acting, and the labor of action, produce a serviceable, but ultimately unsustainable example of doing truthfully under imaginary circumstances. The reason for this unsustainability is that there must be a synthesis of the play text's mimetic structure and the actor's non-mimetic craft. Day dreaming and emotional preparation provide the method by which the actor may reach beyond the text via imagination, sourced in *perezhivanie*, and complete the ontology she requires to do truthfully under imaginary circumstances. Once created, this prepares her to enter the stage and perform her labor of action with the other in complete freedom, even as the text and the direction render her outcome precarious. This precariousness is a heightened sense of contingency akin to the illocutionary action of speech acts, but with a profoundly existential quality whereby she occupies the privileged temporality of the moment or *kairos*. *Kairos* is the socially constructed now, inaccessible to mimesis, but available to the actor via the labor of action. Thus, if "Theatre is non-mimetic to the degree that it is a unique event." then the non-mimetic actor, focused not on her own identity, but on the presence of other actor, creates theatre that is similarly, not a representation, but a unique event, and it need not reify the structures of power, but confront them.<sup>317</sup> As such, non-mimetic acting, such as that precipitated by Meisner technique, is an operation of the true, rather than the realistic exercise of power. Theatre is not a naturally occurrence, but one created by people, it is "not given but made and therefore changeable."<sup>318</sup> To this end, we cannot change the

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<sup>317</sup> Puchner, 190. Citing Deleuze and Badiou, Puchner, in essence confronts Marx's dictum "The effort to make dialectical concepts concrete is the basis of dramatic realism." As well as Merleau-Ponty's statement that "Praxis is always contaminated by representation." *P of P*, 159.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

rules if we do not know what they are and we cannot confront authority without not only knowledge of what it is, but also an understanding of how it operates.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Saltz, *The Reality of Being*, 77.

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## VITA

David holds a BFA in acting from Otterbein College, a MFA in directing from Rutgers University, and a MBA in Marketing from Kennesaw State University. He has directed professionally Off-Off Broadway and regionally. Most recently he directed the MU production of Neil LaBute's *Reasons to be Pretty* in the 2011/2012 theatre season.

David's Play *Lust of the Flesh and the Wiles of Sin* was a finalist in the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's 2011 National Playwrights Conference. (one of 42 out of over 1000 plays submitted) His play *Coward Land* was a semi-finalist at the O'Neill in 2012, and is slated for production in Beloit College's 2013/2014 theatre season. His scholarly writing has appeared in *Theatre Journal* and *Contemporary Theatre Review* and his ten-minute play *Whiskey-Tango* was published in the journal *Poems and Plays*.

In January of 2013, David will begin a position as a visiting assistant professor of theatre at Beloit College, where he will teach advanced acting and marketing the arts, and direct Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* on the main stage.