

## A Somatic Approach to Contemporary Actor Training

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**Abstract:** Actor training involves rethinking the habits in the actor's body and mind that limit their ability to fully embody a role. In today's theatrical context, actors are increasingly confronted with situations in which the structure of the performance in which they must perform departs from the unwritten laws of the art that have orbited over the performing arts since the earliest theatrical forms. I am referring here to principles such as attention to space and partner, character relationships, etc. The new forms of theater put the actor in the position of having to act organically without the human exchange to which we have been accustomed. I thus propose a new vision of actor training through which the actor can activate the inner engine of his being, and enable him to modify it externally as well, strictly through his individual perception of the external factors surrounding him.

**Keywords:** training, somatics, sensoriality, actor, experience

Somatics is a field within body training and movement studies that emphasizes internal physical perception and experience. The term somatic is derived from the Greek *somatikòs* (meaning "of the body") and is a term used both in movement therapy, where approaches are based on focusing attention on the "body perceived from within", and in different types of dance where the emphasis is not only on the external aesthetics of the movements but on the inner sensations of the dancers. Philosophers and practitioners such as Thomas Hanna and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen have explored and expanded this field through various works such as *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking*, or by developing associations such as *Hanna Somatic Education*. "I derived this word 'somatization' from Thomas Hanna's use of the word 'soma' to mean the experienced body in contrast to the objectified body."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, *Sensing, Feeling, and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*, North Hampton, Contact Editions, p. 1

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Somatic practices have been widely adopted in the world of training and performance in various fields such as dance, psychology, medicine, and much of the history is told by teachers, practitioners and performers in these fields. Martha Eddy, director of the Center for Kinesthetic Education, says that although the most relevant research and writing in the field of somatics has occurred in the last century, the tradition of the field has been passed down in history through oral history. In an article called *A Brief History of Somatic Practices and Dance: Historical Development of the Field of Somatic Education and its Relationship to Dance*, she makes a global schema where she categorizes different traditional dances from different cultures into what she calls somatic dance. She also refers in her research to numerous contributors of somatic movement to the dance world such as F. M. Alexander, Rudolf Laban, Moshe Feldenkrais, Irmgard Bartenieff and categorizes them into what she calls somatic pioneers, stating that all these disparate methodologies have in common that they all start from a deep listening to the body.

These pioneers are the founders of what is now called somatic education, aimed at developing *mindful movement*<sup>2</sup>. People seeking to relax, focus, relieve stress or pain, or gain spiritual insight or practical wisdom often seek to develop mindfulness, and many people do this by learning and practicing meditation. Somatic awareness is also a point of accessing that state of constant presence by directing open, nonjudgmental attention to one's own body and listening to its messages. "*Mindful movement* offers insight into the evolution of a field of study and practice called somatic education. It describes how the somatic arts inform mindfulness and mindful action. It recognizes the scholars, teachers, creative artists, and especially dancers, martial artists, and actors who have played a central role in the development of somatic movement practices and emphasizes that the therapeutic and educational benefits of movement are best achieved through the development of an unbiased self-awareness, that is, through mindfulness."<sup>3</sup>

Somatic work is often referred to as bodywork or movement therapy. Currently, most of the somatic disciplines that involve movement as a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Martha Eddy, *Mindful movement. The evolution of Somatic Arts and Concious Action*, The University of Chicago, 2016

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

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cornerstone of the learning process are now identified as part of the field of somatic movement education and therapy (*International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association 2002*)<sup>4</sup>. In somatic education, through the connections of the nervous system, the mind is perceived as existing throughout the body, so it can be concluded that paying attention to the body, one pays attention to the mind. This notion is further extended by studies in the neurosciences where the brain is seen as just one part of a huge neuronal, neuroendocrine (nervous system and hormonal information exchange), neuro-enteric (gut-cerebellum) and neuro-cellular network that extends throughout the body.<sup>5</sup> The body in all its complexity is therefore the main focus of attention when it comes to education or self-education through somatic processes. Through tools such as, touch, movement (including breath movement), voice, the individual engages in an investigation that eventually leads to a new awareness of inner and outer balance, thus self-regulation. The main factor fueling the somatic journey is curiosity and the desire to discover. All of this, together with disciplined involvement, can lead to relief from physical pain, permanent change of degrading mental states, improved physical performance, new perspectives on social engagement and the discovery of the creative side. Most of these outcomes resonate with the arts, with somatic explorations being fundamental especially for the art of dance, and at the same time, the art of dance being formative for somatic development.

### **Sensory awareness in acting**

According to the *Sensory Awareness Foundation*, sensory awareness is an experiential study that helps to rediscover the natural birthright, sense of authenticity and vitality. Awareness Awareness focuses on cultivating a deepening awareness of our sensory experience as a gateway to ourselves and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Martha Eddy, *Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences*, Dance Research Journal 34/2, Winter 2002, p. 47

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Deane Juhan, *Job's Body: A Handbook for Bodywork*, Station Hill Press, New York, 1987

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a deeper connection to the world around us.<sup>6</sup> The practice is not based on any specific technique or exercises. Human beings are already endowed by nature with the capacity to feel and experience sensations constantly. The only thing that needs to be learned is to focus attention on experiencing life with the whole body, not just the upper body (head/mind).

Charlotte Selver was a pioneer in the field of somatic education. She learned the theory and practices underpinning her work in Germany with Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby. As a result of her education, she developed with her husband the *Sensory Awareness* method which she first brought to the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Sensory Awareness aims to teach the individual to slow down and pay attention to experiences using all perceptual channels. It does not explicitly focus on movement as an outcome, but rather teaches how to attend to experience during any activity. Theoretical foundations tell us that the way we perceive external stimuli is not limited to the individuality of the senses (auditory, tactile, gustatory, visual, olfactory, perceptual) but encourages the exploration of each activity through the complexity formed by this group of senses. The smell of a flower is not as profound without the involvement of the visual and gustatory senses, just as the touch of a loved one does not have the same impact without the involvement of the auditory and olfactory senses.

Charlotte Selver stated that "sensory awareness offers profound learning in stress reduction and natural ways of being. Sensory awareness works as a therapeutic method alongside *mindfulness* practice, and is the target of many forms of somatic education training that train individuals to focus on raw sensations."<sup>7</sup> *Mindfulness* training, a result of *mindful movement*, has been shown to improve mental health and help gain a clearer perspective on the perception of internal and external stimuli. Practicing mindfulness helps to develop mindfulness and is one of the recommended treatments for reducing anxiety.

Chiyon Yang in his work *Self-awareness Through Sensory Awareness*, talks about how self-awareness is in direct contact with sensory awareness. He

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sensory Awareness Foundation, <https://sensoryawareness.org/about/>, 5 June 2024, time 10:25

<sup>7</sup> Chiyon Yang, *Self-awareness through Sensory Awareness*, S.U.N.Y. Fashion Institute of Technology, 2020, p. 13

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asserts that the individual, in the complexity of his being, cannot do without the exploration of the senses in his process of self-development. Technologization, industrialization are some of the factors that have put mankind on the path of desocialization and isolation and the pandemic situation that hit the world in the year 2020 was a factor that aggravated the situation by raising the stress level and cases of depression internationally.

Dr. T. Jones and L. Glover, therapists in the Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychology at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, have proposed that touch (physical contact) can be a psychotherapeutic approach using the Alexander Technique (AT). The authors noted that touch causes positive hormonal changes, decreases stress levels and increases feelings of calm and tranquility. The study interviewed six people, students of the Alexander method. They reported that touch could be an experience with positive, even healing results in TA, when the intention is clear and aims for the care and safety of the touched person. The authors noted that one of the students felt that , "touch is important for human beings as a form of comfort." The students also stated that touching changed the relationship they had with themselves by increasing their self-awareness, which suggests that touching enhances communication with the self by communicating with another individual.

At the end of the study the students took part in an interview on the basis of which the coordinators created a survey questionnaire. From analyzing these questionnaires, it was found that touching helped the participants feel more connected to their bodies. Given that touching is a non-verbal communication that includes much lower risks of feeling judged, participants stated that the experience made them feel more connected to their bodies and helped them to see themselves in a more positive way.<sup>8</sup>

The actor is a creative being whose aim is to train the audience's mind, change their emotional structure and educate them. Using his powers of expression, he brings to life moments or stories from the lives of fictional or even real characters through different acting styles and visions. His aim is not to re-enact moments from everyday, civilian life but to capture and integrate into his being critical moments in his own existence and that of those around

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Chiyon Yang, *Self-awareness through Sensory Awareness*, S.U.N.Y. Fashion Institute of Technology, 2020, p. 14-15

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him. That is why a fundamental part of the actor's training is to constantly observe his inner and outer life, to analyze his stimuli, the way they change him and to become master of this process of change. Training and development in the actor's art is not an exact science, which like the religious laws of different cultures has a sure recipe. It is a dynamic art full of variables which, like science, is evolving. In studying life, an actor has to follow all the branches of humanity's evolution and adapt to the life of the century in which he lives.

Even though technology today has made great strides in reinterpreting life through various forms that are basically meant to make man's life simpler, this progress seems to be at the same time distancing man from his deep and irrevocable connections with human nature. In such a situation, theatrical art proposes various forms of adaptability to the situation of the present century through theatrical manifestations that include both technology and life. I believe, however, that in this case, the actor must indeed adapt to the new forms of theater but at the same time he must constantly improve his craft which makes him a living component in a performance. Thus, rather than letting himself be overwhelmed by technological artifices and new theatrical forms of expression, he should continue his journey of research and self-discovery so as to find the organic component even in those situations that may seem devoid of human content.

The ability to listen and to perceive the atmosphere proposed by a director's vision is a skill that needs to be constantly trained by the contemporary actor. Understanding the universe in which they have to perform seems to be an increasingly difficult matter in today's theater. In today's social context, the passing of information and dialogues are increasingly taking place at a digital level, which is why contact between individuals tends to develop in an increasingly less sensory form. Such perception needs to be analyzed and trained by today's actor to develop multiple ways of listening.

In this vein, Steph Ceraso <sup>9</sup>, in an article entitled *(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic*

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<sup>9</sup> Steph Ceraso is assistant professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She received her doctorate in 2013 from the University of Pittsburgh, specializing in rhetoric and composition, pedagogy, sound and listening, and digital media.

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*Experiences* talks about the fact that each experience should prepare a person for subsequent experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. This is the very meaning of growth, the continual reconstruction of experience. He approaches this theme from the principle, mentioned earlier, that an action which at first sight would seem to involve only one sense (e.g. smelling a flower) is actually experienced through the other senses, and the awareness of the sensation born in all these senses increases the depth of experience. "The deaf Beethoven is said to have held a stick between his teeth to transmit the sound of the piano to himself. Similarly, Thomas Edison would bite the wood of a gramophone to hear the faint overtones which, as he said in a 1913 interview, were normally lost before reaching the inner ear."<sup>10</sup>

His essay is an attempt to reimagine ways of teaching listening to account for the multiple sensory ways in which sound is experienced in and with the body. He comes up with the concept of *multimodal listening* to expand the view that the perception and practice of listening is a simple act situated at the bodily level, recorded solely thanks to the ear. Approaching sound as an embodied event, as opposed to something heard exclusively through the ears, can help to more deeply understand how sound manipulates feelings and behavior in different situations. Steph developed this theorizing about multiple ways of perceiving sound out of her desire to train her students to become creators of sound experiences, both digital and non-digital.

To situate her research on listening through multiple modalities in a concrete embodied experience, she focuses on the listening practices of soloist and composer Dame Evelyn Glennie. It exemplifies how touch, sight and sound work together during sonic interactions. "In Thomas Riedelsheimer's documentary *Touch the Sound* (2005), for example, there is a poignant moment in which Glennie describes sound in visceral terms. She explains: 'You feel it through your body and sometimes it almost hits you in the face' (*Touch*). The next scene is a close-up of Glennie hitting a gong with a mallet. After it reaches a crescendo, she stops making contact with the instrument but continues to stand directly in front of it. By lingering there, she indicates to the viewer that she can still feel the power - the material force - of

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<sup>10</sup> Steph Ceraso, *Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences*, *College English*, Vol. 77 No. 2, November 2014, p. 102

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the sonic vibration after she has finished playing."<sup>11</sup> From the details of these scenes, one can understand the synaesthetic value of sound, because interaction with it can also be a form of touch.

In addition to the vibratory and tactile experience, the visual sense is also a prominent feature when it comes to experiencing sound. The environment and the stimuli that the individual perceives through sight play a very large role in the auditory experience. This element has a bidirectional value, because the movements of people, objects and nature around us can create the sensation of a sound or melody in the mind, even if there is no concrete sound. In the other direction, any external movement can alter the effect a sound has on a person's feelings and behavior. The image of a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman singing will enhance the auditory experience, just as a silent movie clip of a group of boys dancing will create a perspective on the sound background against which they are moving.

All these data related to the multitude of vectors that make up our sensory experiences constitute an absolutely necessary direction of study for the contemporary actor. Their training must include the self-discovery of the depth and diversity of the tools necessary for the actor's art. I am referring here to the body, voice and emotion, to their individual training, but above all to the study of how they interconnect and complement each other in what is called expressivity. „For the actor, the correct use of the self is the only sure basis for the expressive use of the self."<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of the training is therefore to make the actor as self-aware as possible. Self-utilization will always sensitize him to the energy flows in and around his body. The body is therefore "a means of communication between us and the world - and towards the world, perceived not as a sum of determined objects, but as the latent horizon of our experience, also present, ceaselessly, before any determined thought".<sup>13</sup>

Although the work of sensory awareness research and development is not specifically aimed at actors, two constants are particularly relevant to the actor's needs. The first is to release limiting tensions and open the body to

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107

<sup>12</sup> Jack Clay, *Self-Use in Actor Training*, The Drama Review, Vol. 16 No. 1, 1972, p. 16

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau Ponty, *fenomenologia percepției*, Editura AION, Oradea, 1999, p. 126



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receive and respond freely to new messages without creating new tensions. The second is the ability to relinquish control over physical data and allow reflexive actions to be able to organize the body at a much deeper level than we can rationally perceive. In other words, to re-establish the instinctive connections between emotional impulses and the muscles that react reflexively to them. „In order to gain immediate access to emotional sources and to allow emotional energy to flow freely through an unblocked body, a certain reordering of psychic priorities is needed."<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusions

The surface of the individual's body is responsible for sensory-motor capabilities. It is responsible for taking in stimuli from the external environment and transmitting them to the nerve centers, and it also provides information about the balance of movements. Moreover, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of the body's fundamental relation to the world through the physical surface, an individual's subjectivity arises precisely from the unpredictability of external stimuli that occur in everyday life. Thus, the relationship between body and mind is in a continuous improvisation, a constant shift between ways of engaging actions in different contexts. In the same way, the actor during the artistic act has to follow a structure full of tasks to be accomplished, but there is no certainty that in each performance the external stimuli will interact in the same way with the inner perception. The actor must be engaged with his or her mind and body so that this improvisation of stimuli takes place each time, both in rehearsal and in performance.

The actor is therefore a collection of experiences and changes experienced throughout his or her existence. The life around us is also constantly evolving and changing, so the ability to understand the differences in perception according to the historical changes that have taken place around us is rare. But it is the actor's duty to acquire this ability through a thorough analysis of his ego, of the people around him who fall into different generations, and of the generations that have lived in human history before his birth. Only in this way can he understand the impact that the outside has on

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<sup>14</sup> Kristin Linklater, *The Body Training of Moshe Feldenkrais*, *The Drama Review*, Vol. 16 No. 1, 1972, p. 27

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his actions, and only by a constant imaginative play with the many kinds of relationships he observes or analyzes in everyday life or from books can the actor broaden the range of functions he can perform in the stage act.

"Therefore, the fact that artists operate in different contexts is not incontrovertible proof that they are totalities in themselves, that the present moment is what exists, but that their adaptability and multifunctionality is itself suggestive of relations of exteriority."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, an actor can perform the same play in different places, so is not bound by certain inner processes that can only exist in specific locations or specific conditions of time. Once this is understood, the actor will make an immediate leap towards understanding that his performance is a play that constantly varies according to the surrounding materiality, a play which, although it retains the structure of its actions and ideas, must adapt itself to these external factors in order not to create a nonconformity between his performance and the context in which the theater performance takes place.

In today's theater, the artist's performance is judged precisely on the basis of his or her ability to adapt to the different compositional proposals of the theatrical performance, the relationship between technological and material elements and the truth of the performance being an increasingly delicate subject for the contemporary actor. This difficulty stems from the increasing number of moments in which the performer has to interact with lifeless objects, so that the changes they undergo are subject to a lack of organicity. Today's performances, however, are no longer exclusively concerned with the phenomenology of human interactions, but rely more on an ensemble construction whereby stories that once stood out for their simplicity now follow a multitude of artifices that can make it difficult for the actor to find their organic content. However, today's theatrical experiments are not intended to take anything away from the authenticity of lived experience, but to create new forms of experiencing life based on directions of evolution that an artist can anticipate by observing the universal social context.

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Camilleri, *Performer Training Reconfigured*, METHUEN DRAMA, London, 2019, p. 10

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