

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

7:2 2021

“Well-Staged Syllables”:
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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Published in December 2021
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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EDOARDO GIOVANNI CARLOTTI*

Dick McCaw. *Rethinking the Actor's Body. Dialogues with Neuroscience.* London, New York: Methuen Drama, 2020, ISBN 978-1-3500-4645-0, pp. 274

Abstract

Dick McCaw's book is aimed at establishing a dialogue, or rather many opportunities for dialogue, between body practices related (or apt to be related) to the performing arts and neuroscience, in order to open new perspectives for reconsidering current and historical systems for actor training against the background of present neurophysiological knowledge. By resorting to plain but not oversimplified language, the common topics of both the disciplines (mind-body problem, memory, attention, consciousness, learning, emotion) are identified and tackled by constantly highlighting their mutual interconnection in a network of complex interactions. Both theatre practice and neuroscience, each following its own methods, are found to aim at dealing with such issues in ways that often challenge our deep-rooted dualist habit of contrasting mind and body. The essay suggests that, in spite of their divergences (or maybe because of them), every chance for a dialogue between the two disciplines deserves to be exploited as an opportunity of rethinking not only the actor's body, but also ourselves.

KEYWORDS: actor training; performing arts; neuroscience; motor expertise; mind-body problem; cross-disciplinarity

Given the subject matter of his previous book (*Training the Actor's Body*), the title and subtitle of this essay by Dick McCaw could be seen to suggest a sort of attempt at re-visioning and possibly validating actor training systems in accordance with state-of-the-art neuroscientific findings; actually, its intent at establishing the basis for a dialogue involving theatre practitioners on the one hand and neurobiologists/neurophysiologists (as well as phenomenologists) on the other, goes beyond a mere effort at providing a scientific foundation for methods implemented through constant exercise and long experience, and rather extends the scope to a broader domain of possible investigation, leading to a deep reflection on its object.

Such reflection can progress only if both sides in the dialogue, aside from

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their respective approaches, share a focus of common interest; in this case, the common ground can be found to be the human body, especially, how mind and body interact in the execution of actions, and what is the role of the brain in all related processes such as conscious control, attention, learning, imagination, and emotion.

However, the author cannot help but remark that communication issues can easily rise on this ground: firstly, because of the mind-body dualism permeating our approach to the subject and emerging – automatically, as it were – at a linguistic level; secondly, because it is not a simple task to identify a common denominator for views often employing similar terms to express different notions or, vice versa, different terms for analogous concepts.

In other words, neuroscientists agree in refuting any dualistic conception and converge in maintaining that what we call “mind” does not correspond to any material or immaterial object but is rather a function of the brain – which in its turn is part of an interconnected organism operating through continuous information loops. However, an equally unanimous stance cannot be found after analysing the assumptions underlying actor/performer training practices or, more generally, other practices aiming at the enhancement of action execution, as for example the martial arts.

In this connection, it must be remembered that McCaw approaches his subject matter not only as a researcher, but also as a theatre practitioner and an expert in both *tai chi* and the Feldenkreis method, which allows him to integrate the scholarly perspective with an insider’s view of the various and often diverging pedagogies. Accordingly, if on the one hand the student’s stance promotes the recognition of a defective physiological knowledge behind many widespread practices, on the other the practitioner’s interest dictates an investigation on the reasons why most of them, in spite of their apparent shortcomings, are able to correctly frame and effectively solve problems concerning the acquisition of physical skills and the control of action execution in complex performance contexts.

On a strictly semantic level, as we will see, many notions (such as *prana* in Stanislavsky, for example, or *centre* in Michael Chekhov and others) can be understood as metaphors to suggest a driving force or an originating plexus for physical actions which do not result only from conscious control, but – as neuroscience tells us – are the outcome of continuous feedback loops. Motor modules stored as expertise (the performer’s technical stock-in-trade) are in fact involved in a network whose information content cannot be consciously accessed in its entirety, as it includes signals from and to the autonomous nervous system. The notion of ‘centre’ is, at least, a tentative suggestion for a locus where several different messages converge and are processed; that of ‘prana’ focuses on the pervasivity of the process. In both cases, the actor is requested, as it were, to subconsciously detect what is going on.

Considering their respective specificities, the divergences between

neuroscientific findings and pedagogical methodologies in the performing arts can be easily traced back to the difference in their primary goals: on the one hand, the understanding of how human neurophysiology is related to behaviour, on the other, how neurophysiological routines can be modified and controlled to implement what could be defined as “performative behaviour”.

Accordingly, a substantial distinction must firstly be drawn before endeavouring to find possible convergences and divergences, that is – after Eugenio Barba – performative behaviour is not everyday behaviour, insofar as it is the result of training the everyday body, whose dynamic expression through movements and gestures in performance is supposed to be believable as human behaviour, even if realism is not the aesthetic target of the representation. The performer's body – which is not *one* body, but many bodies, each of them reshaped through different individual traits and training methodologies – is concurrently the subject and the tool of such a particular behaviour mode, implemented through simulative and imaginative processes which are of significant interest for several research projects in neuroscience. Although state-of-the-art research protocols, mostly owing to instrumental limitations, cannot be applied to the empirical study of the performative body, yet it is often used to exemplify a special condition of the organism, rare but not impossible, where the autonomous nervous system appears to respond to voluntary control. For Antonio Damasio, the actor's body shows how what he defines as the “as if circuit” (a system for embodied simulation conceptually kindred to the mirror mechanism theorized by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team) can be exploited to react to fictitious situations by displaying genuine (i.e. credible) emotional symptoms. Unfortunately, neuroscience is still far from assessing whether the related emotions are actually felt or not, which has been a matter of debate since the eighteenth-century.

On these bases, establishing a dialogue involving experts who devised and are still devising methodologies to train the body to carry out these and similar tasks, and scientists who are investigating behaviour as an expression of the relationship between the body and the brain, cannot but enable us to widen the horizon of our views on these topics, whose interest goes far beyond their respective domains.

McCaw's pathway leads him to confront an ample range of questions in as much detail as possible in the given circumstances, often retracing his own steps in order to better specify certain points with the caution required by the case, as being simple and straightforward does not necessarily mean to simplify. Each one of the nine chapters of the book deals with a specific topic, tackled in accordance with the different approaches of the various dialogists, promoting a conversation where their voices could easily interfere with each other. Indeed, a moderator is needed so that the reader does not get lost by following the suggestions that each one of the voices provides. Actually, the author seems to take on that role and allows each voice to speak in its turn, not allowing one to

prevail but granting all the possibility to express their views freely.

In this conversation, the views of either theatre practitioners, or experts in physical training, are usually selected as an introduction to a specific topic, which is subsequently developed by passing them through the sieve of recent neuroscientific literature, and finally by rediscussing the whole matter adopting a wider approach. Rather than explaining the practices concerning the body in the light of scientific knowledge, this option results in opening new perspectives, since there is often nothing to explain, but additional questions arise as the salient issues are gradually framed and approached. To this purpose, the first part of the book acts as a presentation of the relevant themes, starting from methodology, as any attempt at understanding the body involves a radical rethinking of functions that are commonly taken for granted.

Firstly (chap. 1), the neat separation between active and passive modes of our interaction with the surrounding environment has to be abandoned, as we react to its continual challenges through a dynamic process of parallel operations and feedback loops involving and connecting action and perception, according to a general model that – though still not entirely clarified – definitely disputes any form of dualism. Body and mind are equally and inextricably involved in both action and perception, so much so that we cannot draw a line to separate one from the other.

The actor's body, therefore, can be seen as the result of a learning process (chap. 2) progressing through a constant increase in attention to the connections between action and perception, as the simplest movement routines must be performed in an environment – the stage – which is a sort of second-order environment, posing additional challenges for adaptation. Learning and adaptation, in every animal species, are possible because of the existence of an organ like the brain that, as part of the body, is modified by its environment while simultaneously modifying it: the brain could in fact be considered an extension of the body, in opposition to a (more common) dualistic conception.

Accordingly, the focus has now (chap. 3) to be shifted on the operating mode of the brain, and especially on the simultaneous conscious and non-conscious processes taking place during the execution of any activity, and the need for theatre practitioners to figure their combined action and interaction through notions as, for example, 'front-brain' and 'back-brain' (by Clive Barker, the frequently quoted author of *Theatre Games*). Albeit scientifically inaccurate, and phrenological in its concept, as it draws a distinction between functional macro-areas, this image effectively suggests that our behaviour is also the expression of synaptic activities escaping conscious access even if occurring within the organ which is usually thought to be the seat of consciousness itself. Considering actors and performers, the primary goal of their training is obviously the reduction of conscious awareness in carrying out certain tasks, in accordance with the natural principle of economy, but that is not the outcome of the re-allocation of certain cerebral routines exclusively into an alleged 'back-brain': it is actually a synaptic

re-organization concerning the whole brain. Accordingly, we must reconsider how attention is related to execution, and conscious control to behaviour, as many settled clichés prevent us from envisioning the issue according to its real complexity; and the same could be said as regards terms like “unconscious”, “subconscious”, or “non-conscious”, whose use in language might need to be refined in accordance with the history of the individual development of an organism, with its process of learning and adaptation to the environment.

The next step is, therefore, to better understand how an organism can cope with the mass of information, connections, and processes escaping the control of consciousness in responding to environmental challenges (chap. 4); this understanding is obviously of primary interest for scientific investigation, and as important for those who have to devise a training system whose practical implementation needs to be consistent with definite basic principles. Theatre practitioners constantly highlight the value of developing a sort of “sensitive intelligence” – guiding the performers in their action through subsequent steps – which is not based on discursive concepts and does not need to be constantly monitored by consciousness, except in the shape of a subtle mode of awareness, an oxymoronic ‘inattentive awareness’. In the neuroscientific domain, the notions of proprioceptive and kinaesthetic sense supplement the hypothesis of an “embodied knowledge” that can dispense with discursive cognition and rely only on sensorial information. This implicit knowledge is also related to the simulation properties of the mirror mechanism, which have been studied by the researchers in experiments on cortical activity during action observation.

The skills that this knowledge can express come through practice, gradually refining the motor modules an action requires, on the one hand by excluding any unnecessary muscular contribution, on the other, by removing from conscious awareness what turns out to be a tacit ability for automatically superintending the execution.

The unanimous accent on automatism as a means to improve the performance of actions ought not to suggest an easy parallel between a living organism and a machine, especially a computer: learning movement routines does not in fact involve only the ‘what’ of an action, but finds its distinctiveness in “how” an action needs to be performed, on which – somewhat paradoxically – the actor retains a “residual if non-conscious awareness” (112).

In the second part of the book, the actor's behaviour on stage is the focus of an analysis touching the relevant issues it raises: the notions of presence and energy (chap. 5) are firstly reviewed in their uses in theatrical and martial arts practices, then related to the implicit image of the body such uses evoke. Here it is almost mandatory to refer to *The Player's Passion* by Joseph Roach, as the Cartesian paradigm of a mechanic hydraulic body activated by a fluid (the vital spirits) is a useful frame to approach theatre practitioners' attempts at explaining how mind and body supplement each other. McCaw discerns exactly this paradigm behind Stanislavsky's *prana*, despite its reference to yoga

philosophy and the cautions expressed by the Russian pedagogue himself, and his descendant Grotowski, against the pitfalls of dualism, whose expression in terms of performance is inexorably mechanical acting.

Cultural – hence linguistic – conditioning is so deep-rooted that also terms like “psychophysical” or “psychophysiological” often underlie conceptions of the actor’s work where the distinction is apparent between an internal energy (or a vitality manifesting itself from the inside out) and an external body, which insofar as it is ‘animated’ is also owned by such energy (or should it be named soul?) – the ghost in the machine allowing it to function to good purpose.

In this regard, what the psychoanalyst Daniel Stern has devised to investigate “forms of vitality” can be considered – if not a means to a different approach to the general question – a useful tool, at least for analysing the variations in dynamics of non-verbal communication expressions through a method of decomposition by factors (somewhat reminding the *Labanotation* system) aiming at describing the complex interactions (both top-down and bottom-up) underlying different energy levels in movement execution (incidentally, forms of vitality have been the object of an experimental study by Rizzolatti’s team at Parma). Although it has been conceived from the point of view of the observer, it could prove itself to be a valuable contribution to the performer’s self-analysis.

The topic of energy in stage presence directly relates to that of centre (or centres) whence energy should emanate along with the movement itself (chap. 6); starting from the definition in the *OED*, the author reviews the use of the term “centre” among practitioners, where scientific accuracy is not the primary interest, while the metaphorical power of the associated body parts prevails for didactic reasons. Actually, identifying the centre of movement in areas like the solar plexus or the chest, for example, has shown its effectiveness in generating images and ideas that, during the training process, allow the performer to confront the complexity of executional issues, while even the most state-of-the-art anatomical theories do not succeed in supplying sufficient food for thought. Here, a significant gap between performing arts practices and scientific procedures must be noticed as regards what is considered to be tried and tested in the respective domains: while, on the one hand, experiments lead to the construction of models and theories requiring further validation, on the other a successful practice can crystallize its processes in a stable method.

The construction of a body image around or according to a centre (or more than one centre) is closely linked to the visual imagery of the body as an implement to performance enhancement, a subject of interest for both artistic and neuroscientific research (chap. 7). Visualization as a sort of perspective shift from the performer’s subjectivity to the spectator’s ‘objectivity’ is obviously a necessary step to undertake in order to exercise imagination, that may act as a powerful stimulus toward the invention and experimentation of new solutions. In any case, the performer’s imagination does not exhaust its possibilities by simulating visual inputs, and the mention of Artaud – which could appear to

be out of context — is actually instrumental in highlighting that imagination is activated by stimuli “in the flesh”, that the actor — as an athlete — has to become a “fine nerve-meter” to detect bodily stimuli, whose contribution to cognitive processes commonly believed to be disembodied is widely acknowledged in neuroscientific literature.

The concepts of body image and body schema are then introduced through their definitions by Shaun Gallagher, and accordingly that of self-image as it was approached and developed in Feldenkrais method; all these concepts contribute in drawing up a scenario where perception, proprioception, cognition, and imagination are the nodes of an interconnected network underlying the performer's specific learning process, which is a constant refinement of the image externally manifested and internally felt. Once again, the point is how to manage what is accessible to consciousness, and which intervention can be effective on what is not accessible. Self-knowledge, underlying and allowing the transformation into the other, can be attained only through a training whose course crosses each node of this complex network of covert and overt elements.

Moreover, as hinted above, imagination can be strictly related to action simulation, if we remind that many experiments detected the activation of the same cerebral areas during both imagining of performing and actually performing certain movements; if we were to go a little further, we could say that the embodied mode of simulation allegedly related to mirror neurons activity provides us with a new perspective under which the actor's work can be viewed: the “as if” simulation triggered by the spectators' visual and aural perception of the performance actually mirrors an imaginative “as if”, carefully refined and structured for expression during the training stage, where the performers' past experiences (their senses of self and other, in an inextricable network, if not a tangle, of action and perception) contribute to the creation of a role not without resorting to elements of prediction, drawn from their memory and previous mirroring of conspecifics' behaviours. Stanislavsky's “magic if” in the palace of mirrors...

At this stage, emotion is the topic that remains to be dealt with, starting from how the issues it raises are tackled by three prevailing approaches in the theatrical domain, summarized by Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and post-modern physical theatre respectively. In the first case, the option for realism is seen as a possible reason to suggest a direction from the inside outward, as the actor is required to process what is stored in the emotional memory to construct the character's emotion on stage

(see the discussion about the Russian terms, especially *perezhivanie*, and their translation vicissitudes), while Meyerhold appears to operate in exactly the opposite way, asking the performer to begin by reproducing the physical symptoms of an emotion in order to represent it effectively. In the case of physical theatre, its unconcern for a realistic representation gives way to a reflection about the relationships between emotion and physical expression, a

sort of experimentation on how movement and gesture can have an effect on both the spectator's perception and the performer's feeling.

Neuroscience is here of much help in delving into the subject, as "emotion" is among the several terms that common everyday language has made vague, almost a synonymous of "feeling" and "affect", though they show different semantic hues. It is not at all easy to arrive at a shared definition, but a survey of theories and views on the nature and function of emotions, from William James to Antonio Damasio, allows us at least to see the topic in its complexity (in direct proportion to the complex physiological phenomenology of an emotional reaction) and to notice that merely attempting an approach involves a return to other previously touched issues, such as the various dualisms underlying our mode of thinking. In this case, the two poles are emotion and cognition, which have been proved to be indissolubly tied.

In close connection to that, the phenomenon of stage-fright, a privileged topic in Stanislavsky's work, brings us back to consider the role of the autonomous nervous system in behaviour, and the need for devising techniques to intervene in its two branches (sympathetic and parasympathetic) in order to avoid that this peculiar emotion may increase and jeopardize the performance, whereas the tenseness it elicits can be exploited to enhance the energy of the interpretation.

In the final chapter, "Bringing it All Back Home", all the previously presented significant topics are synthetically summarized as possible subjects of the desired dialogue between performance practice and neuroscience. As we have seen, neurophysiology provides us, in unprecedented detail, with verified information about the complex functioning of organisms in their environment and points out the exigency to go beyond, or at least greatly revise, all conceptions based on the mind-body split, so deeply rooted in our thought and language.

Paraphrasing Peter Brook's reaction at being informed of the proprieties of mirror neurons, it could be said not that theatre practitioners always knew the insubstantiality of the mind-body split, but that they always acted as if they knew. If we analyse the theoretical foundations of those practices, it is in fact apparent how often they are inaccurate, if not untenable, according to current physiological knowledge. However, while scientific research aims at ascertaining facts that concern any domain of reality, theories and experimentations by theatre practitioners have been directed exclusively to improve performance efficacy (with rare but significant exceptions, as for example the last period of Grotowski's research and its development by Richard Thomas).

As long as this distinction remains, success in performance (intended as the achievement of the intended results) is the sole validation of a training method, and scientifically incorrect assumptions may be overlooked, or judged for what they really are, not indisputable statements but metaphorical expressions aimed at raising concrete issues about the performer's work by their appeal to the imagination. But if we stopped here, there would be no use in attempting to establish a dialogue, and everything would end in an exercise of comparative

analysis between different ways of framing important questions for both disciplines.

Dick McCaw chooses instead to suggest that the common ground for the dialogue can be found exactly where the respective findings most challenge our settled views (or should I say postures?) about the mind and the body, and that both theatre practice and neuroscience can help us in formulating the right questions by which a rethinking of the whole matter could start. Methodologically, the undertaking may appear much too eclectic, but this is the only possible approach to an issue so many-sided that its facets cannot be gathered under the domain of a single discipline, or even under a single method. *Rethinking the Actor's Body* confronts us with the perspective to undertake the first steps towards something that in the long run could affect our understanding not only the actor's, but also the 'ordinary', everyday body.

