The theatrical text as a misrecognised technological practice: Shape-shifting interventions between words and bodies

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Just let it be said … or written: embodied words shape embodied experience, and, at the same time, bodies shape words. One reads the words in this sentence – and already is bound to a set of habits, expectations and embodied uncertainties. You know to read this article from left to right. You have been taught to recognise the shapes and sounds of the characters of text that coalesce to re/create these words on a page or computer screen. And perhaps you’re thinking: ‘Where is this going? What’s this all about? What do I think and/or feel about this?’ Though, possibly, some of these interior voices may not occur in the initial moments of your reading activity. You may also be so caught up in hearing the author’s voice that your own self-reflection hasn’t yet drawn attention to itself. I hope, then, that in this very opening paragraph, you are persuaded that there is quite a complexity about interrogating the written word as a hard technology – a technology that is constantly intervening and interweaving itself through our embodied meaning-making together.

As a performance practitioner and “body intellectual” (a term coined by Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, co-founders of InterPlay® 2004), I am interested in how theatre (or play) texts intervene in the embodied experiences of human agents such as playwrights, actors, acting teachers, directors, and audiences. And, I believe, in the same moment, these human agents, each with their varying “interests”, intervene in the crafting and functioning of the written word. Each agent invests and is invested in this particular field of cultural production known as the Theatre. And, in spite of appearances, this field of the performing arts, using Bourdieu’s analysis, is a site of struggles over who determines the dominant understanding of necessary activities, abilities and aptitudes (1993: 42). What I want to explore in this paper is not intended as exhaustive or deterministic but rather as a provocation towards further conversations and interventions.

The written theatre text, associated with various embodiments of a play or theatrical performance, is a hard technology that co-exists alongside its ephemeral other – each unique, embodied performance. One might also say that this same hard technology intervenes in the embodied experiences and actions of the actors, the director, the designer and various production personnel, culminating in the shaping of audiences, critics and the wider community. Yet there is no universal agreement as to the definition of what constitutes a theatrical text. Gerald Rabkin (1985) reviews whose interests are affected by various understandings and expectations of the intrinsic nature of the theatre text. But what he fails to acknowledge is that, however it may be defined, the written text nevertheless intervenes into embodied experience and meaning-making among those who have some vested interest in their experience of the Theatre.

A theatre text has often been understood as, variously, a tool or blueprint for the creation of performance. But within the field of performance-making, a predominant discourse circulates that all bodies, in a production, should serve the text, and by inference, the intentions of the playwright. This process emerges with the actors and director, and carries through to the set, lighting and sound designers. This is not to naively suggest they feel bound by some notion of copyright or authorial privilege, in and of itself. But rather, the written text constrains or enables (depending on one’s personal experience) how most performances come into being. Actual, embodied performances of Theatre, as it is commonly understood, would not exist without the apparent initiating presence of words on a page.

In fact, in one predominant discourse of the profession, actors often regard and allow themselves to be treated as tools by which to manifest and embody the text – both in its narrative shape (plot and action) and its expressive modes (movement and stillness; dialogue and silence). The one acting practice that has dominated Occidental Theatre over the last century is that of Constantin Stanislavski. In An Actor Prepares (1937), his fictional account of how his “system” becomes embodied in the working practice of actors, Stanislavski constantly pointed to the written text as the guide to emotional truth. He, the guise of the fictional director Tortsov, advocated the breakdown of the text into units (a still contentious translation of the
beings: remains a key concern in contemporary performance, namely, the longing for living contact or connection with other human beings: an anxieties of the ancient Greek scholars with regard to written texts. He argues that "explicitly articulates what Socrates travels and who is exposed to it. John Durham Peters (1999), in his analysis of the idea of communication, revisits the Thus, the ever-expanding usage of writing as a technology of record and dispersion has caused anxiety about where it travels and who is exposed to it. John Durham Peters (1999), in his analysis of the idea of communication, revisits the anxieties of the ancient Greek scholars with regard to written texts. He argues that “Socrates” explicitly articulates what remains a key concern in contemporary performance, namely, the longing for living contact or connection with other human beings:

Whereas oral speech almost invariably occurs as a singular event shared by the parties privy to the discussion, writing allows all manner of strange couplings: the distant influence of the near, the dead speak to the living, and the many read what was intended for the few. Socrates’ interpretation of the cultural and human significance of the new medium of writing is governed by worries of erotic perversion; writing disembodies thought, thus forging ghostly sorts of armatory and intellectual linkage. (1999: 37)

But, at the same time, I have found that the theatre text is not taken seriously as a technology that indiscriminately affects, mediates and embodies social relationships. I use the word, indiscriminate, firstly, in the sense that any encounter with the play text requires an openness towards the written or performed word and action. The text has no inherent capacity to impose itself upon anyone. However, once a person reads it or witnesses it enacted, the word intervenes into the person’s embodied experience, irrespective of it being interpreted or understood as a fiction. Secondly, what also makes a theatre text indiscriminate is that the producer of the text has little if any control over who subsequently is exposed to the text. Thus, the ever-expanding usage of writing as a technology of record and dispersion has caused anxiety about where it travels and who is exposed to it. John Durham Peters (1999), in his analysis of the idea of communication, revisits the anxieties of the ancient Greek scholars with regard to written texts. He argues that “Socrates” explicitly articulates what remains a key concern in contemporary performance, namely, the longing for living contact or connection with other human beings:

Whereas oral speech almost invariably occurs as a singular event shared by the parties privy to the discussion, writing allows all manner of strange couplings: the distant influence of the near, the dead speak to the living, and the many read what was intended for the few. Socrates’ interpretation of the cultural and human significance of the new medium of writing is governed by worries of erotic perversion; writing disembodies thought, thus forging ghostly sorts of armatory and intellectual linkage. (1999: 37)

However, what marks out the theatre text as a peculiar technological intervention is that while it initially functions as writing (purportedly “ghostly” and disembodied) – there is always the intention that this writing become re-embodied and enacted in relation to other performing and witnessing bodies. I want to consider afresh the intertwining relationship between the written word of the theatre text and the bodies that perform and witness the re-embodiment of these texts. Much of performance practice and discourse frames the bodies of all human agents, engaged in the Theatre, by what Karen Dale (2001) refers to as an “absent presence” – “that is, the body is assumed to be present but as an object that has not been explicitly theorised, and where it has come into direct focus, it is as an object of control” (2001: 204). Although Dale writes specifically to critique organisational practices, I believe this phrase – absent presence - can be equally applicable to the way in which embodiment is regarded by the organisational culture of the Theatre. In Occidental Theatre, over the centuries, audiences have variously appropriated or have been allocated their presence where they feel most comfortable and most in control. Likewise, most actors have come to find or establish their habitual places as performers. And this process of habituation towards the written text begins with an actor’s training.

Lindy Davies, Director of the School of Drama, Victorian College of Arts, in Melbourne, Australia, prepares actors by teaching them to create a state of active readiness, “by finding a point of stillness, and through active meditation achieving a state of dynamic receptivity.” She uses the metaphor of a still pond into which small pebbles are dropped. In a similar way, she suggests, actors learn to “drop language into the stillness of themselves and the meaning resonates through them until they find the impulse to speak.” (Davies 2000) Any actions are also developed spontaneously in the here and now. She challenges the actors to work off impulse to “advance meaning whilst creating and sustaining an imaginary world.” What is of dramaturgical significance is that she sees this practice creates an event where an audience “may experience the inexpressible and comprehend the inexplicable” (2000). I have personally witnessed her advising a group of auditionees for the School that “… you need focus, concentration, rigour, breath, centre of the moment and letting it happen to you … the language working on you … be willing to let anything happen …” (Seton 2004) This notion of letting the language shape
one’s performance and yet maintaining control of the body, as it embodies and transforms language, is a paradox that is taken granted in most actor training institutions.

I also want to especially take note of those bodies who initiate new theatre texts that actors and others bring into performance. There is a special significance in the occupational title that has been given to the person or persons usually designated as the author/s of a theatre text. The word ‘playwright’, contrary to common belief, does not signify a spelling error or an Old English spelling of “write”. The suffix, wright, refers to a craftsman or builder (Conner 2003: 1050). Dramatisation has never exclusively been a written tradition.

In ancient Greek times, playwrights not only constructed texts but were also responsible for rehearsing and training the actors, liaising with musicians, choreographing dances and explaining their play’s themes to the public. It was only in 1616 that the role of playwright was established as a reputable and respectful writerly profession when Ben Johnson, a working playwright, became the first to publish his collected works. However, the playwright’s function was now becoming specialised as primarily that of writer, rather than as a dramatist. According to scholar Eric Bentley, by the eighteenth century the separation of writer from dramatist was well established. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were periods of significance for the playwright as, variously, social commentator, reformer or provocateur, though these functions could be disputed in terms of cause and effect. Economically, the status of the playwright, potentially, improved with the introduction of copyright in relation to the printed text (2003: 1051). But, irrespective of whether copyright successfully protects a playwright’s interests or not, disputes continue about what constitutes ownership and legitimate control over what is often referred to as the work – the conceptual notion of the text in its entire potential realisation on the stage. Performers desire, or else, claim they need the flexibility to adapt the written text for living contexts; playwrights frequently expect performers to trust the text to do its work.

We mustn’t lose sight of the fact that, having been produced by a living body or bodies (in the case of collaborative works), the theatre text begins its phenomenological intervention the moment it is read by those who will begin the task of re-embodying it through performance. In Merleau-Ponty’s particular phenomenological perspective, each unique body shapes or forms experience as it is formed by experience:

There is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being – and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behaviour to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of leakage and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define human beings. (Merleau-Ponty in Casey 1998: 207)

Nature and culture, suggests Edward Casey (1998), meet in the lived body “in the insistent and subtle way that right- and left-handedness infiltrate and influence an entire metaphoricity and symbology in a given culture” (1998: 215). He gives the example of corporeal schemata of skilled actions such as swimming in which the natural and cultural are always already conjoined. Nothing is entirely natural or entirely cultural in that one swims with a biological body but as taught by others (1998: 212). Therefore, Casey suggests that skilled bodies (as culturally in-formed) can be considered “quasi-technical” (1998: 213). He proposes that skills represent the circumstances “when bodily capabilities and proclivities lend themselves to manipulation and training: when, as Foucault would say, the “intelligible body” becomes the “useful body”” (Foucault in Casey 1998: 215). It is therefore difficult to discern what relations of power emerge from physically unique bodies and what relations of power emerge from their engagement with culturally constructed texts. The cultural and the embodied are indeterminately intertwined and co-dependent.

In a similar spirit, Ralph D. Stacey, in his account of the organisation of communicative action, proposes that any meaningful themes or knowings arise “between people, while always, at the same time, being experienced in individual bodies as fluctuations, marked or subtle, in the feeling rhythms of those bodies” (2001: 141). In this account, bodies reciprocally form each other as they are, in turn, formed by each other, through various interactions, using “tools and cultural artifacts [sic]”. Stacey suggests that what is captured in artefacts, such as written texts (and, I believe, we can include theatre texts), “can only become knowledge when people use them as tools in their processes of gesturing and
responding to each other” (2001: 96). Therefore any “explicit, procedural or narrative knowledge” should only be regarded as functional resources (rather than objective realities) that people use “in the thematic patterning of experience” (2001: 144).

However, he cautions that the notion of themes organising the experience of being together doesn’t lead to all interacting bodies sharing the same theme. This brings into question the belief among actors that they are simply re-embodying the phenomenological experience and imagination of a playwright’s written expression. Stacey draws upon on a new interpretation of George Herbert Mead’s theories of mind, self and society, synthesised with analogical insights from the complexity sciences (particularly the writings of Nobel-winning chemist, Ilya Prigogine). On this account, knowledge is not something that can be stored but instead perpetually emerges, indeterminately, out of the interaction of the individual and the social (2001: 69). These are interactions principally between human bodies in the medium of various symbols (understood as gestures ‘thrown together’ with responses, which together constitute a meaning) (2001: 101-102). Stacey proposes that individuals and social groups can be better understood in terms of “complex responsive processes of relating” (2001: 98). It is in these responsive, bodily interactions of relating that knowledge is continuously reproduced and transformed, rather than stored and shared. Stacey reiterates:

Knowledge, therefore, is not an “it” but a process of action. Action is undertaken in the living present and is therefore ephemeral … Reified symbols can be expressed in the forms of marks and so stored as artifacts. However, these artifacts are not knowledge. They are tools that people use in their bodily communication with each other in which meaning and knowledge arise. (2001: 116)

Further, Stacey argues that such human interaction is also a process of changing relations of power in which the social can be thought of “as continuously replicating patters of themes and variations that organise the experience of being together … always a bodily experience” (2001: 140-141). His premise – that humans are fundamentally social animals – leads him to an understanding that, in a sophisticated way, distinct human bodies engage in joint action in order to survive and develop. This requires continuous communicative interaction between them (2001: 146). It is through acting and interacting, together, that meanings are produced and reproduced. Individuals respond differently, out of their unique bodily dispositions, to the emerging themes. Nothing is being shared as each body uniquely resonates around common themes to do with being together. Stacey concludes that they are not “sharing knowledge” but are really just responding and interacting with each other in meaningful ways (2001: 141). Therefore, I believe we can regard theatre texts and theatre practices (associated with their purported re-embodiment) as activities that are formational of bodies interacting with each other. Stacey understands any such group of people in the following terms:

[B]iological individuals relating to each other in the medium of symbols, thereby forming, while simultaneously being formed by, figurations of power relations between them, and between their group or organization and others in a community. (2001: 165)

The embodied word, whether read together in the classroom or enacted in performance, can have significance, as an intervention, without necessarily evoking determinate meanings. Carol Bigwood (1998) proposes a paradigm of the body as an indeterminate constancy. Her special focus is on Merleau-Ponty’s prepersonal, noncultural, nonlinguistic body that accompanies and is intertwined with its cultural existence. She reviews Merleau-Ponty’s claim that it is not intellectual judging that makes sentience possible but instead it is the silent, noncognitive, intimate bonding of the body with its environment. Therefore, proposes Bigwood, as living bodies, “we are not in full cognitive possession of determinate, sensed objects but are irretrievably immersed in an ever-changing and indeterminate context of relations” (1998: 106). The metaphysical dualism of passive matter and active spirit, or conscious subject and object-world is resolved by the insertion of bodily “sentience” as a third term. Although the body is primarily nonrational and nonlinguistic in its communications it is still full of meanings and schemata (1998: 106).

Bigwood’s particular interest is in the body’s noncognitive apprehension of immanent meanings in the field of sensations that unifies things without cognitive association or judgement – that is, without the need for particular words or
recognisable experiences. Again drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Bigwood understands the body as being attuned to life in that it simultaneously discovers the meanings that clusters of relations have, and sees to it that they have meaning. In French, “meaning” is sens, which means “sense”, “significance” and “direction”, so that the understanding of “meaning” can broaden to include nonlinguistic and noncognitive meanings (1998: 106-107). Therefore, human existence is always indeterminate to varying degrees as the potently meaningless takes on meaning, and it is ambiguous because primary sensory meanings that are reached though coexistence with others and things always have several meanings (1998: 108).

In her view the body is not a fixed given, untouched by the dominant representational system, yet its grounding in the world still consists of interconnections with the human and nonhuman, the cultural and the natural. This “nonpersonal” perceptual existence that underlies and intertwines with the personal cultural and intellectual existence is referred to by Merleau-Ponty as a “natural” body that provides the possibility of phenomenal presence (1998: 108). It is a nonpersonal body consisting of interdependent systems of anonymous functions that the conscious self has little or no control over. However, the nonpersonal body is not a firm foundation, argues Bigwood, in the sense of a fixed metaphysical ground that certifies – that recognises certain forms as given – but it is a ground in the sense of an indeterminate constancy that can be easily repressed, ignored or forgotten: “This “connatural” body is neither empirically nor logically prior to the “cultural” body but is existentially a codeterminant of the body and can thus be at least distinguished abstractly from cultural determinants” (1998: 108).

Therefore, Bigwood proposes that we exist simultaneously in cultural and natural ways that are complexly intertwined. Gender, as Bigwood’s specific example, is not “caused” by a fixed anatomical and biological functionalist structure of the sexual body. Yet at the same time it is “motivated” by ambiguous, natural-cultural structures of the body, so that there is a certain continuity in the connection of gender to the body (1998: 109). For Merleau-Ponty, everything in the human body is, at the same time, a “necessity” and a “contingency” because human existence is the perpetual transformation of contingency into necessity and the potential dissolution of necessity into contingency once again (1998: 109). Bigwood concludes that in everyday life, the body’s sentence tends to be sufficiently “attuned” only towards “culturally significant” presence and undervalues the nonhuman element that is also part of the thing’s presencing (1998: 111). Therefore, in considering the apparent efficacy of the written word, we need to take into account that the actual sounds and rhythms of language – its physical and sentient manifestations - are an integral part of its meaning-making history even though, culturally speaking, we may recognise that any particular signed will have many diverse signifiers.

Theatre texts are not just about dialogue. They include descriptions of place and character and action. It is as significant what is not said or only gestured. All these aspects offered in written words on a page attempt to convey not only knowledge but also relationships of power. Through speech and through silence, power circulates. Silence is not the absence of speech, when viewed from a phenomenological perspective, but potentially the presence of that which is either unrecognised or non-representational. What is complex is that various social groups privilege certain phenomena by means of speech and other phenomena by means of silence. Silence is as powerful a manifestation of power as speech. What we may not speak of, or not know how to speak of, is as powerful as how we perceive we may speak. The phenomenology of speech incorporates a phenomenology of silence as its correlate. Other modes of expression or intentionality such as gesture, social class, gender also intermingle with the phenomenological interplay of speech and silence.

In discourse analysis, or by an actor’s or director’s interpretation of theatre texts, we may examine who may speak, who may not speak, who cannot speak, who may not be heard, who will be heard, what will be said or not said, where will speaking be legitimate and where will speaking be illegitimate. However, although such analysis brings to attention what may have been taken for granted by those in the play, the practice may also make an assumption that what is being represented is also re-recognised and consequently either embraced or rejected by consciousness and consequent behaviour. A phenomenological interpretation makes this analysis practice even more complex and indeterminate. How much of what we hear, and by our behaviour appear to adhere to, is actually recognised and reflected upon by consciousness prior to consent? How much of what we hear, do we perceive as normal because it is what we are in the habit of hearing, and therefore bypasses consciousness, in much the way we ignore many of the sounds that our ears perceive as just background noise? This is why actors are often encouraged to improvise with the actions suggested by the text – without, initially, using the actual dialogue. It is believed that by such practices, actors and directors discover what is often referred to as the subtext –
that which has been misrecognised or ignored in the playing out of the scene.

In Spurling’s discussion of the phenomenology of speech (1977), she contrasts a phenomenological approach with those analytical methods that function from either an empiricist or rationalist premise. As empiricism can only regard speech as a series of physical sounds set alongside each other, there is no recognition of who sets these sounds in motion and with what intention. Although rationalism does allow words to have meaning, it is only because the word represents an external sign of internal thought and consciousness, which alone has meaning. However, Merleau-Ponty refutes both these positions “by simply saying that the word has a meaning” (Merleau-Ponty in Spurling 1977: 50).

Spurling proposes that meaning is embodied in words and in speech, in the same way that it is embodied in behaviour and perception. Therefore words actually express meaning in the way that the body expresses intentions by concurrently symbolising and realising them (1977: 50). Hence, the movement from silence to speech is not a movement from non-meaning to meaning. The silence is not a void but a promise or potentiality of speech that will emerge, in the same way that “a perceptual figure emerges from its vaguely apprehended ground” (1977: 51). Furthermore, speech itself is always incomplete and allusive in that every explicit signification makes references to a horizon of possible senses (1977: 51-52). Speech is an important manifestation of intersubjectivity and, thereby, intercorporeality. It is through speaking that human beings participate in a cultural object, language, which is publicly shared and negotiated. The rules of linguistic meaning act as a guide to making meaning ascription consistent, orderly and predictable. However, a phenomenological account would claim that speech is rule-guided rather than rule-governed in order to recognise the contingent and innovative applications of speech.

Therefore in order to engage in a phenomenological analysis of discourse, Spurling advocates it becomes necessary to place into doubt any constituted meanings and common understandings in order to identify the praxis and interpretive work carried out in each and every conversation (1977: 69). This is not to deny that there exist common understandings, assumptions and shared meanings, but their invocation is not enough to explain how speech occurs and how it is understood. Verbal interaction isn’t about exchanging pre-constituted meanings or habitual expressions. The ongoing interpretive work of the participants must be taken into account in order to observe which habitual expressions or common understandings are relevant to which context, what they entail, how they are followed, applied, invoked and enforced. Ways of speaking together cannot be isolated from ways of doing things together (1977: 71-72). Again, actors recognise the necessity to move the text in order to re-create what would appear to be its signifying moments. But what makes this technological intervention so powerful is that, for each new body (performer and witness) engaged in playing with and through the text, the words emerge for these human agents in indeterminate ways that leave their mark.

I believe that if we take the written word of the theatre text, as a powerful, technological intervention, then this has implications for the many human agents engaged in the performing arts. Firstly, it means that playwrights need to recognise that they have an ethical accountability for the words that are ‘forged’ into a text for performance. These words create places, characters, expression and emotion through which they shape bodies in profound ways. Playwrights create specific experiences that have never been known before by the bodies that interact with such words – in particular, actors and their audiences. Secondly, there must be a more responsible recognition by teachers of dramatic texts and their embodiment – whether at the secondary or tertiary level, the amateur or the professional level – that words shape embodied experience, for better or worse. Thirdly, actors need to acknowledge the techniques they are habitually attuned to taking up (or, in fact, into themselves), as spoken words and textured characterisations, may not always enable them to clearly debrief after playing the words towards others – fellow actors and witnessing audiences. Fourthly, directors need to support the well-being of both actors and audiences as it is directors who contribute, by their dramaturgical construction, to the environmental context in which these powerful words circulate. And, fifthly, audiences, especially, need to come to a performance ready and willing to be affected. They need to have appropriate resources in place to enable them to best negotiate the shifts they will experience by exposure to the embodied performance of words.

The theatre text is a powerful technology that has intervened and continues to intervene in many people’s lives. I think such actions that I have advocated are crucial to an ongoing intertwining of words and bodies, where it is unknown what may
emerge out of such encounters.

References


