

"When the grinding starts": Negotiating touch in rehearsal

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(i) Introduction

This essay proceeds with accounts of actors in rehearsals for two theatre productions. The first is taken from my field notes; the second is from a newspaper interview.

During a rehearsal for Patrick White's play *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, two actors playing lovers must kiss. Despite knowing one another for only a week, the man and woman are confronted with the stage direction: *He takes her breasts and begins to fondle them*. In the taped-out stage area of a large rehearsal room, the male actor doesn't touch the actress's breasts, but instead puts his hand on her waist, and they hug awkwardly and kiss lightly on the mouth. Earlier, the director had reassured the actors that they themselves could decide when the "grinding" – kissing – starts in rehearsals, and now the director quietly approaches them, explaining that they would all spend time getting the scene "comfortable" for them.

When Nicole Kidman first met her co-star, Iain Glen, for Sam Mendes's theatre production of David Hare's play *The Blue Room* (a play presenting a daisy-chain of sexual encounters) she says: "I was so shy I could hardly speak. I kept feeling like I was going to vomit: I had heard how brilliant Iain was on stage and he was formidable just as a person. I thought, I'm out of my league, but he really was so gentle and kind to me. He took my hand – not literally – and guided me through it, saying, 'Don't worry; I'm not going to let you fall.'" (in Wolf 2002). The interviewer, Matt Wolf, explains that "rehearsals were geared towards both vocal and physical demands, with Mendes introducing group massage into the rehearsal room because, reports Glen, 'he wanted us to be physically more comfortable'" (2002).

In *The Blue Room*, Kidman spent much of the performance in various states of undress and in various physical exchanges with her co-actor. The show played to sell-out audiences in London and New York, with one critic famously referring to Kidman's performance as "pure theatrical Viagra" (Spencer 1998). If moments of physical intimacy on stage are potentially charged for the audience, if, in phenomenological terms, a visceral "bodily-ness" is suddenly foregrounded, what must they be like for the actors?

As a means to further understand the practices and experiences of professional performers, I wish to tease out how and where intimate touch fits in the working lives of stage actors; specifically, how it gets negotiated in rehearsal. The opening accounts describe actors fumbling with sexually explicit stage directions; directors implementing coping strategies (allowing actors to take their time; introducing group massage); and a general concern that the actors feel physically "comfortable". What, for instance, is at stake that intimate touch needs to be "negotiated" at all? What does this tell us about acting and actors? And, if we accept Joseph Roach's argument that "conceptions of the human body drawn from physiology and psychology have dominated theories of acting from antiquity to the present" (1985: 11), how might a study of touch between actors in rehearsal offer insight into our taken-for-granted assumptions about people, bodies, inter-relationships?

Interestingly, while we, the general public, might want insight into the intimate happenings in rehearsal rooms – especially when a Hollywood star is involved – the actual content of such accounts rarely raises an eyebrow. Our common-sense understanding of actors and acting tells us that, yes, if a scene involves intimate touch between performers then, yes, surely a scene must be "managed" carefully in rehearsals so as to make it "safe" and "comfortable" for those involved. It is precisely the seemingly commonplace-ness of this that I wish to explore.

Rather than make a universal, homogenising claim about "our" attitudes to physical intimacy, and rather than dismiss as 'natural' actors' awkwardness at having to negotiate touch with strangers, it is worth examining such exchanges more

closely. Not only might we further understand the particularity of such imaginings around intimate touch, and the bodies that do the touching; but we may also appreciate radically different figurings of touch. As I explore later in this essay, some performers experience pelvises sliding across chests, and hands gripping backsides, and yet such exchanges are approached with a utilitarian appreciation of form and flow: the body, in this case, as instrument.

(ii) 'The meaning' versus 'the meaningful-ness' of touch

In the last 15 years or so in the humanities and social sciences, there has been, what David Howes terms, "a sensual revolution" (2005: 1); that is, a growing awareness and appreciation of the role of the senses in societies, (the launch in 2006 of *The Senses & Society* journal reflects just this). With it is an accompanying movement away from visual and textual metaphors – an orientation involving "reading culture" – as the primary lens through which to view the world. Constance Classen, for example, writes of the Ongee of the Andaman Island in the South Pacific who live in a world ordered by smell (1993: 2); and Steven Feld reflects on the ear- and voice- centered sensorium – the "acoustemology" – of the Kaluli people of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea (2005: 179).

The sense of touch, however, has only recently attracted more mainstream scholarly attention. As Classen points out, despite our tactile culture, "in the academic world touch has often passed under the radar. Like the air we breathe, it has been taken for granted as a fundamental fact of life" (2005: 2). Attention has been paid only in as much as acts of touch signify meaning – how, for instance, they might "signify" gender construction or "represent" social relationships – rather than coming to understand the ways in which touch is meaningful in people's lives. It has, in Classen's words, been approached as "a medium for the production of meaningful acts rather than meaningful in itself" (2005: 2).

This essay seeks to contribute to studies on touch by examining instances of intimate, physical contact between performers during theatre rehearsal. In this way it will simultaneously contribute to the growing field of rehearsal studies; a small and emerging sub-discipline of performance studies that, like touch, has until recently been overlooked as an area worthy of serious academic scrutiny (see McAuley 2006). My work is based on a decade of rehearsal observation and analysis, a series of studies observing social practices and creative labours in their empirical immediacy (see Rossmanith 2006, 2008, 2009 forthcoming). My fieldwork consisted of sitting in on weeks and months of performance-making practices of half a dozen productions in Sydney, Australia, including two mainstream theatre productions where sexually explicit moments were enacted: *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (or 'Season' as the practitioners called it) at New Theatre, and *My Night With Reg* (or 'Reg') at Newtown Theatre. By grounding this essay in the lived discourses, practices and experiences of scores of performance practitioners, I hope to take up Classen's call to explore how touch is meaningful in and of itself, acknowledging and grappling with "the tangled, bumpy and sticky nature of the topic" (2005: 5).

If we are to further understand how intimate touch in rehearsal (and, by extension, in performance) is meaningful to actors, we need to understand how actors make sense of bodies, selves and intersubjectivity. What constitute the material beings – these "lived bodies", as Leder (1990) might put it – that come together? And what happens between these bodies?

In modern Western actor training institutions, and in mainstream acting theories and practices, actors are repeatedly figured as deeply psychologised beings with vulnerable, complex interiors. This, of course, is not the only way in which we understand actors or actors understand themselves. Actors are also often thought of as excellent mimics, dynamic entertainers, and, in many cases, ambitious job-hunters. As Phillip Zarrilli points out, acting, for actors, involves "an ongoing set of intellectual and psychophysical negotiations [...] between one 'self' and a variety of (explicitly and implicitly) competing paradigms and discourses of acting/performance" (1995: 2). Actors encounter, and in turn are influenced by, ideas about acting manifest in folklore, mass media, stage shows, scholarship and specific training (Zarrilli 1995: 2), and we non-actors continually form and re-form our understanding of acting through such paradigms. Nonetheless, one of the most dominant and persistent discourses sees the actor as emotional, vulnerable, and psychologically complex.

We in the West are, of course, familiar with this discourse. In part it speaks to our default way of understanding ourselves. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously described the Western conception of the person

as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background (1976: 225).

It is largely due to this cross-over between our imaginings of self, and actors' imaginings of self, that make studying actors' touch in rehearsal so compelling. By concentrating on small exchanges in rehearsal, and the actors' associated lived experiences, we are, to a degree, reflecting on how intimate touch is meaningful to us too.

Rather than offer a genealogy of this dominant acting discourse – one that, for instance, would include the burgeoning of psychology in the nineteenth-century; the ideas of nineteenth-century Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavsky whose “System” is regarded as the underpinning of modern realist acting (see Carnicke 2000); and the profound influence such ideas had on American Method Acting (see Blum 1984) and mainstream Western actor training – I want, instead, to consider how the discourse operates and the effects it produces.

I am aware that, in my use of the term “actors”, it is foolish and undesirable to attempt to collapse all actors everywhere into a seemingly neat group. When I write of actors, I am primarily referring to Australian actors, many of whom have attended one of the prominent training institutions and now work in mainstream theatre. My own fieldwork is in part grounded in the practices and experiences of these social agents; likewise is the fieldwork of Mark Seton (2004, 2008 forthcoming) and Ian Maxwell (2001) whose research into Australian actor-training practices I draw on. That said, in concentrating on the particular – Australian mainstream theatre actors – it is possible to use such a study to reflect more generally on Western actors and acting.

(iii) The emotional, vulnerable, psychologically-complex actor

The figure of the emotionally complex, vulnerable actor is powerfully present in stage and screen reviews, interviews and rehearsal talk. And, as I shall argue later, this discourse and its associated practices and experiences produce significant effects when actors go to touch one another. Actor Simon Callow writes, “[u]nquestionably, rehearsals must be an emotional business” (1995: 161); director Edward Gordon Craig suggests that actors were not artists but were “slaves of emotion” (in Bharucha 1993: 17); director Declan Donnellan explains that he spends time in rehearsals trying to cure actors' fear (1996: 86); Nicole Kidman speaks of metaphorically needing her hand held (Wolf 2002); director Toby Robertson talks of increasing the actors' confidence (1964: 180); and in the Sydney New Theatre membership booklet – a document outlining the ‘standards’ the organisation expects – suggestions on how to conduct oneself backstage include: “if [an actor] is emotionally upset, make sure you are not the cause”.

Such discourse is similarly present in training and audition processes. In his ethnography of Australian actor training and audition practices, Seton recounts a repeated phrase an acting teacher used with her students: “We prefer to seduce you rather than rape you”. He writes: “Themes of vulnerability, seduction, rape and nakedness recurred [...] over the ten weeks that I participated in this course” (2008: 1, forthcoming). For Seton, “the notion of vulnerability emerged as the quality most valued and required as gestural symbol of commitment to the discipline of acting” (2004: 16). Importantly, rather than acting teachers *identifying* students' vulnerability, they are largely responsible for *forming* vulnerable bodies (Seton 2008: 2, forthcoming). So while teachers might employ discourses of “revelation” or a “stripping back” – that the process of training should involve the actor accessing a vulnerable interior – actor training is more a *generative* process: through repeated embodied practice, students come to figure themselves as vulnerable and emotional.

Caught up in the figure of the emotional, vulnerable actor are metaphors of psychological complexity. Actors take for granted that exploring their own psychology is a necessary and inevitable part of being an actor. This figuring is central to their training, for, as Ian Maxwell points out: “Within the Stanislavskian rubric, knowledge is constituted in the first instance as knowledge of the self” (2001: 105). For instance, at the heart of contemporary actor training in Australia is the studio: “a protected space, abstracted from everyday life, within which the (carefully selected) actors-in-training are encouraged, under intensive tutelage, to ‘explore’ themselves, psychologically and physically” (Maxwell 2001: 104).

This psychologically-centered self-exploration is in part carried into rehearsals through actors' approach to characters. In rehearsals I observed, actors spent much time sitting around a table together discussing the script and characters' backstories and personalities. They figured characters as whole people with histories, motivations, drives and subconscious desires. One actor was encouraged to reflect on why her character's marriage was “wrecked” and whether this character was “mean” or not; another actor was asked to think about his character's growing confidence. In this way, ontological claims were being made through the invoking of “is” or “has”: the character *is* mean. As David Hertzberg noted in his study

of rehearsal, “the script was increasingly being used as evidence for the reality of people who appear in it [...]. They were people who had patterns running through their lives” (1998: 14).

While such a practice lends itself to reflection on the status of the playtext – the practitioners understood themselves to be remaining “loyal” and “faithful” to the script – I instead wish to understand this practice of unearthing characters’ psychologies as being closely related to the formation and articulation of actors’ subjectivities. In rehearsals there is often a collapsing between what practitioners understand as psychologically dense characters, and the actors whose job it is to play them. Consider the following conversations from rehearsals for *The Season at Sarsaparilla* and *My Night With Reg* respectively. (In the first instance, Lyn’s character is GIRLIE, Jacqui’s character is PIPPY, and Mary-Anne directs; in the second, Steven’s character is GUY, and Tony directs.)

Lyn: “NOLA is a loose woman, I’m [GIRLIE] a tight woman.”

Mary-Anne (director): “What wrecked it [GIRLIE and CLIVE’S marriage]?”

Lyn: “They don’t have anything in common.”

Jacqui (to Lyn): “You’re [GIRLIE’S] not mean... but just in that suburban sense.”

Lyn: “I’m [GIRLIE’S] mean because I don’t know any better.”

Mary-Anne: “She’s [GIRLIE’S] not mean in that she’s not malicious.”

Jacqui (to Lyn): “Do you think MAVIS will end up like you [GIRLIE]?”

Lyn: “I don’t know. What do you think? [...] Last night, as I was washing up, I realised how I [GIRLIE/Lyn?] wipe down the bench seven thousand times a day.”

Steven: “GUY was able to co-ordinate and direct a production [of *The Bacchae*].”

Tony (director, to Steven): “Who do you think is most academic?”

Steven: “I s’pose it’s me [GUY].”

Tony: “Yes. It’s definitely you [GUY].”

There are at least three important factors working here. Firstly, actors slipped between using first person and third person pronouns when referring to their characters (I use the possessive “their” because actors commonly referred to “my character” or “your character”). In the *Season* example, Lyn repeatedly referred to herself as GIRLIE, indicated by the use of “I”: “I’m a tight woman”. However, when Mary-Anne asked her what wrecked the marriage, Lyn invoked “they” (“They don’t have anything in common”); that is, the third person plural. Similarly, in the *Reg* example, Steven referred to GUY (“GUY was to able to..”) in the third person, and then answers Tony’s question as GUY in the first person (“I s’pose it’s me”). Secondly, the practitioners would slip between modes when referring to one another. Jacqui addressed Lyn as GIRLIE (“You’re not mean”) while Mary-Anne used the third person (“She’s not mean”). Tony addressed Steven as GUY in the second person (...“definitely you”..). The result was that the table talk was littered with multiple personae—“I”s, “you”s, “she”s, “they”s were thrown around—and it often felt as if there were dozens of people being discussed at any given time.

And, lastly, while the practitioners moved between different modes, they never seemed confused as to who was being addressed and who was being spoken about at any given moment. So, although actors did not adopt any performance traits when they referred to characters in the first person (they did not effect a change in their behaviours to suggest that they were now in quotation marks), there was rarely an urgency amongst the group to make explicit who was being referenced.

They did not seem concerned to ascertain whether the “I” was the actor or the character. Instead, there was in fact no compulsion to separate the two: the practitioners were comfortable with the idea that the relationship between actor and character might exist as blurred. For example, Lyn’s comment “Last night, as I was washing up, I realised how I [Lyn/GIRLIE?] wipe down the bench seven thousand times a day” was ambiguous: who was this last “I” referring to? (Of course, it was further complicated by the split subjectivity of the previous two pronouns: “as I was washing up I realised”.) The point here is that the practitioners did not ask Lyn to clarify her comment as, according to them, it was natural for there to be a fluid relationship between actor and character. Sometimes the actors quite pointedly collapsed their characters into themselves. When another actor, Kate, discussed a scene involving her character, MAVIS, she said “Maybe I’m just seeing this as Mavis.. Maybe I [Kate] *am* Mavis...”. Similarly, in a later rehearsal, Lyn said of her character, “I mean, GIRLIE’S just like me [Lyn]”.

The above examples of Kate and Lyn’s comments in *Season* certainly approach what Terry Threadgold would call a “merging” (1997: 129) of actor and character—where, in these cases, the actors question whether they in fact are their characters. Overall, the relationship of actors to their characters was both a merging—a trope suggesting two discrete entities dissolving into one another—and it also involved the existence of an in-between place where it was unnecessary and undesirable to locate specific subjectivities. For Richard Schechner, this is when the performer goes through a phase of experiencing a “not-not-me”, where “‘me’ and ‘not me’, the performer and the thing to be performed, are transformed into ‘not me... not not me’” (1985: 110). In short, the same language and the same process used to analyse characters was used to analyse the actors as well, and this language and process constituted a psychoanalytic approach, positing both the actor’s self and the character’s self as logos (Auslander 1995: 60). This collapsing of character examination and self-examination is summed up by the actor (and director), Joseph Chaikin, as he is “forced to explore both his and his character’s personalities since ‘there’s a perplexity about who [I am]—I don’t know exactly’” (Kellman 1976: 21).

(iv) Lived metaphors, intersubjectivity, and intimate touch

These discourses of vulnerability and psychological complexity did not only work at the level of language and ideas. Following the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the tropes reflected a general “being-in-the-world”. How actors talk about themselves, the language they use and the practices associated with that language, is intimately connected to how they understand and perceive their relationships with others and with themselves. In this way, ideas around “vulnerability” and “interiority” work at the level of embodied effect: actors often really *feel* vulnerable, with a multiply-divided inner self. These ideas are, as Lakoff and Johnson might put it, “lived metaphors”, for metaphor is indeed not simply a characteristic of language alone; it is “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (1980: 3).

What happens, then, when these complex, potentially vulnerable actors go to enact intimate touch? What happens between bodies? In my previous section on discourses of acting and actors, I barely mentioned bodies at all. Such an absence is conspicuous given this essay purports to be exploring touch. However, the omission is less an oversight on my part than an accurate reflection of the status of bodies in these two rehearsal processes.

When practitioners sat around the table and discussed characters’ personalities and their own psychologies, they did not seem especially aware of their bodies. The rehearsal work involved psychological analysis, not physical bodywork. During this sit-down discussion, actors’ bodies had, in Drew Leder’s terms, disappeared. In *The Absent Body*, Leder explores our experiences of corporeal absence; “the question of why the body, as a general ground of experience, [...] tends to recede from direct experience” (1990: 1). In other words, we know the world through our embodied self, and yet this body largely remains absent from our immediate awareness. Leder argues, for instance, that our experience of bodily absence has played a crucial role in encouraging and supporting Cartesian dualism (1990: 3), a fact Zarrilli points out when he writes of the “persistent” mind-body dualism in actor training and practice: how actors are regularly taught to construct characters in their minds before “putting” them into their bodies. He writes: “Given the resilience of mind-body dualism, students often experience a “real” disjuncture between their minds and their bodies” (1995: 13).

When, in the rehearsals I observed, actors moved from seated discussion to “running” a scene “on the floor”, this not only involved “putting” characters “into” their bodies; it simultaneously involved the foregrounding of their own embodiment. Whereas at the table their bodies were largely absent to them, the moment they stood up and moved into the stage space they both “were” bodies and “had” bodies. Drawing on Leder, Lowell Lewis writes:

Embodied selves are not only sites for mediating language and experience, they are also where subjectivity meets objectivity, since we live our lives as our bodies, but these bodies also become objects other than (or ‘othered from’) ourselves (1995: 222).

Actors were told “not to hug the furniture” and to “tweak” or “sharpen” particular deliveries; they were told to “play” in the stage space so they could get used to the physical space. And they gradually shaped their bodies and movements around lines and exchanges.

However, this bodily-ness in the rehearsal space carried with it a sense of danger and risk when actors had to follow stage directions involving sexually explicit touch. Whereas there had been no awkwardness when practitioners read through and discussed the scene, the *enactment* of the scene had to be managed carefully. The director of *Season* quietly told the actors they could take their time in getting comfortable with the breast-fondling, kissing scene; the director of *Reg* went a step further: he asked me not to attend those rehearsals involving a sexually explicit scene between two men. I was welcome as they read through the scene, but not when it was to be physically negotiated.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson has observed that intersubjectivity – that is, our relationship with others – is partly shaped by “unconscious, habitual, taken-for-granted dispositions” (1998: 9). When actors go to touch intimately in the stage space, that touch primarily constitutes touch between two vulnerable bodies. For actors, the lived metaphors of interiority, inner complexity and emotionality are lived, in part, through the body. They largely constitute actors’ embodied selves. Actors’ understandings of themselves as being deep and vulnerable comprises, what Arjun Appadurai would call, “the topography of the self” (1990: 92) that underlies intersubjective expression. During these moments of touch, it seems that actors are not experiencing themselves as sites of rich semiosis, wondering, for example, how a potential audience might “read” or “interpret” their actions; rather, perhaps they are experiencing their skin as an extension of deep, individual interiority.

This in some way accounts for the ways in which such moments were delicately handled (that practitioners had to be careful when bringing two vulnerable bodies together); and, at the same time, how this negotiation further figures actors as vessels or conduits for intimate (and, by extension, “true”) emotion and feeling. At no stage, for instance, were actors’ bodies approached as forms that could momentarily connect or blend intercorporeally to produce powerful performance moments. Recall the director’s phrase: “You can decide when the grinding starts”. No doubt her use of the term ‘grinding’ was in part playful; an effort, perhaps, to lighten what was understood as a heavy, serious scene (with serious physical touch). But the metaphor is revealing. “Grinding” suggests two discrete objects rubbing uncomfortably against each other; not a mutual flow of form and energy – the sort of articulation found in dance rehearsals – but a kind of friction between bodies. For these actors, intersubjectivity continually involved complex individuals relating with complex individuals rather than, say, a momentary dissolving of the boundaries between bodies.

One reason I was compelled to reflect on the particular ways in which actors negotiate intimate touch stemmed from my realisation that they are just that: particular. At the same time, I realised that our own imaginings of touch were very particular also. This was brought to my awareness having watched rehearsals for very different productions. I noticed that, like some of the mainstream theatre rehearsals I had attended, rehearsals for these contemporary performance pieces included performers grasping and groping one another in explicit ways. The difference, however, is that such exchanges were never approached with embarrassment or awkwardness. The question is, why? It is therefore by way of a counterpart that I wish to conclude this essay.

(v) Performers as ‘bodies for hire’

Throughout this essay I have written of “actors” and “performers”. While in some contexts I might use such terms interchangeably, I want for a moment to foreground the differences between them as they circulate in the worlds of theatre and contemporary performance. Practitioners working in postmodern performance contexts, for example, rarely if ever understand themselves as “actors” – a term reserved for artists working largely with a paradigm of psychological realism, producing “plays”. As Philip Auslander writes:

Whereas the modernist and avant-gardist theatres of the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries conceived of their work in terms of innovations in acting, subsequent postmodernist innovations have resulted from a reconsideration of the very nature of the activity that takes place on the stage, and the development of performance art, in which artists from non-theatrical backgrounds have brought divergent

sensibilities to bear on the act of performance (1997: 1).

Similarly, practitioners working in comedy, burlesque, the circus, etc., would conceive of themselves less as ‘actors’ than ‘performers’. Built into these terms are differences concerning what it is to get in front of an audience, what exactly constitute artists’ selves, and what it means to be a lived body.

The rehearsals I’ve observed in my fieldwork have involved actors, directors and playtexts, but they have also involved “performers” developing group-devised theatre. These artists did not begin with a playscript but instead collaborated and draw on various texts and intense physical training to produce a blueprint for a production. In performance they were, in Zarrilli’s terms, sequentially playing multiple roles, playing roles and sequences of action requiring the development of a specific relationship to the audience, playing multiple personae, and enacting tasks without any “characterlogical” implications (1995: 21). During rehearsals, these performers were careful to distinguish themselves from actors, for actors were seen as melodramatic, overly interiorised, earnest creatures – so much so that the practitioners would reserve “actor” as a term of derision. “Don’t be such an actor!”, one performer might say to another. Instead, the performers primarily understood themselves as entertainers; semiotically-dense figures who could throw on a character or a persona much like we put on a suit. In this way, their bodies were not so much individual vessels for character psychology or vulnerable emotional expression, but were instruments of agency.

During two group-devised rehearsal processes I observed, performed moments included performers grabbing and lifting one other onto harnesses, kissing passionately, slapping backsides, nuzzling into breasts, and brushing one another’s hair. Instead of these exchanges carrying awkwardness or hesitation, their negotiation was largely utilitarian and consisted of two main concerns: physical safety and the extent to which such moments ‘worked’ performatively. “In the lift, make sure you support my butt”, a performer said to the man under her; “Does this work?”, asked a performer as he nestled into the breasts of a fellow practitioner; “How does this look?” asked another as she took large brush strokes of a fellow performer’s hair. These practitioners did not understand themselves as complex vulnerable beings so much as physical bodies creating and presenting – not acting – material to an audience.

Moreover, during these physical exchanges, each performer’s individuality seemed to be suspended as s/he would temporarily merge with another performer. How the two-bodies-as-one “looked” and “felt” was privileged over any investment in the existence of two separate psychologies. This approach to bodies is especially common in dance practice, as Rosie Findlay writes in her observation of dance rehearsals:

In the repetition of the intertwining of limbs, the lifting of each other’s bodies, the running of hands down breasts and over pelvises, the dancers literally seemed to be feeling their way towards how the dance would eventually look. In these times of physical intimacy, [they] seemed to not just be sensing the positioning of their own selves, but the positioning of the selves underneath and on top of and around them, to build the contours of the choreography (2007: 23).

Building contours, positioning selves underneath and on top: this is a very different negotiation than the hesitant, potentially embarrassing touching between actors. In other words, while the action might be the same (the touching of breasts), how that action is meaningful is very different. This emphasis on physical safety and outward aesthetics is likewise central to other performance acts. In her study of aerial performance, Peta Tait writes of muscular circus bodies that “deliver a unique aesthetic that blends athleticism and artistic expression” (2005: 2), such as

the graceful Frenchman, Leotard, leaping between trapeze bars, [...] the radical feats of his English female imitator, Azella, executing a somersault to a partner’s grasp, [and] the rapid action of Russian teams in Canada’s Cirque du Soleil productions (2005: 1).

In her 2006 Platform Paper on the state of dance in Australia, Amanda Card takes up Susan Lee Foster’s notion of “the body for hire” to think about some of the dancer-bodies being produced in Australia. Whereas Foster is dismissive of such a body – a body with layered training in ballet, contemporary dance, yoga, karate, pilates (Card 2006: 42); a body that has no tradition and whose motivation for training is purely monitory (Card 2006; 41-2) – Card rehabilitates this “body for hire”, recasting it in terms of a state of being. She celebrates the adaptability of many dancers, their ability “to ‘be’ and ‘become’, in various and different ways with apparent ease” (2006: 49). Following Foster and Card, we in turn might borrow this

“body for hire” to understand how many physical performers understand themselves in the world. They are not bodies (often passively) expressing internality; they are bodies that can do things. For them, it is not so much an issue of “I am”, but “I can”.

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Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney