



# Listening With The Body On The Stage Of Playback Theatre

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# **LISTENING WITH THE BODY ON THE STAGE OF PLAYBACK THEATRE**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Acting in the Playback Theatre has been my hobby since five years and this essay belongs to my studies of conductor. My teacher and the leader of my group has been a dancer and this has affected me as actor and conductor. My aspiration toward physical

expression and to minimize the use of verbal expression is due to my work as an actor at the Playback Theatre of Helsinki and it corresponds with the process where I have learned to give more value to the body and to intuitive knowledge instead of rational and conscious mind.

It is important for me to find words for what I have experienced in spontaneous improvisation and I am especially interested in what happens when an actor and a teller are communicating in the playback theatre. The purpose of this essay is to clarify the process where the actor listens to the teller and to the story and where he transforms it all into spontaneously improvised actions on the stage. I will try to find adequate words for that process.

I was encouraged to choose the title "Listening with the Body at the Stage of Playback Theatre" when I got acquainted with the concept of human being and other concepts of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I studied his corporal phenomenology in the thesis of Sara Heiniemaa.

The Alexander technique and the Rosen method have also helped me to put gradually into practice what I have learned about listening with the body. Alexander and Rosen teach working with your body and underline corporeality in such a way that it suits to the particular corporal phenomenon I find in the listening process of the actor in playback theatre. I have used the books of Michael Gelb and Elaine L. Mayland translated into Finnish (see the Bibliography). Beside reading I have participated in courses of Alexander technique, I have taken private lessons in it and experienced Rosen therapy as a client.

Corporality has gradually appeared to me as more and more important and my concept of archetypes has consequently adopted a new and corporal meaning. Especially the way in which Olavi Moilanen perceives archetypes as physical perceptions has been meaningful to me. I got acquainted with the Jungian archetypes through the system of twelve archetypes elaborated by Carol S. Pearson in her book "Awakening the Heroes Within" and through the Greek Mythology presented by Jean Shinoda Bolen in her books *"Goddesses in Everywoman"* and *"Gods in Everyman"*.

I have got a basic idea of corporality, spontaneity and improvisation by acting at the Playback Theatre and I have completed my comprehension in this matter by reading the book of Jonathan Fox, *"Acts on Service"*.

I will focus my study on the communication process between the actor and the teller from the actor's point of view. I will not try to explain how the teller chooses his actors. I will concentrate on the role of the actor and not on that of the conductor, though I might point at it. I will not describe the musician's role, because I think the musician listens with his body and creates the story on the stage just as the actor does. The difference between them lies on the forms of expression.

## 2. CORPORALITY

### 2.1. Body - Mind, choosing the words

In Finnish language the words 'keho', 'ruumis' and 'vartalo' can be used as synonyms. They all describe the physical body of a human being. 'Vartalo', however, is essentially limited to the trunk. The word 'ruumis' means both living and dead body. That is why we have introduced the word 'keho', which only refers to the living body.

Jaana Parviainen has chosen the word 'keho' (living body) for her study, because the word 'ruumis' (dead or living body) bears the Christian dichotomy of spirit and body. I do paradoxically employ that word just for the same reason. It seems useful to me because the word 'keho' refers to a frame that contains the conscious ego Using the body, and as such, it bears the dualistic conception which is not only Christian but also characteristic of the whole western philosophy. This dichotomy clearly appears in Parviainen's opposite concepts of "ego consciousness" and "body consciousness". It seems to me ambiguous to use the word 'keho', as it only refers to a living person and then hides the meanings it bears.

Our old concept 'ruumis' is loaded with meanings or connotations.

I use this word to sense better the dualism dwelling in my thoughts and experiences. Alan Watts describes our living dualism with the following analogy in his book "The Two Hands of God". 'We know for sure that we are living in a heliocentric world, but we still use a geocentric language to express our everyday perceptions when we admire the sunset and wait for the sunrise. It is important that we do not consider as separate phenomena the categories concerning mind and body, although we use those categories when speaking about the human being.

I also chose the word 'ruumis', because it refers to the living and dead person as a whole. This word includes the idea of the limits of life and death and the idea that a human being is connected with earth as well as-with the world.

The expression "listening with the body" implies a holistic conception of the human being where body and spirit or body and mind are not separated. Being human means to me being in my body: humanity is corporality. Marion Rosen, who invented the Rosen method, bases her ideas on her practical experience and states that the body is imbued with the colours of the mind and the mind is incarnated. Mind and body are included one in another forming an inseparable union.

## 2.2. Created from the Earth

I was brought up with a very early radicalized dualism. I learned to consider spirit as sacred and superior to body. Body was seen as bad and as a burden, and it was a sin to express it e.g. by dancing.

It was due to a pietistic Christian interpretation of human life that one should despise the body. My individual experience is only an example of the dualism that haunts the general western conception of human being. Sometimes it happens - as it happened in my youth - that dualism is applied to the extreme and thus it becomes visible.

The Christians started despising human body during the IIIrd and IVth century because of the Neoplatonic influence. The new doctrine was especially preached by the church father Augustine, who had a Manichean background. We have to go back to his ideas about body and sexuality if we want to understand why, for example, the Christians do not let women to be ordained ministers and celibacy has been a condition of becoming a priest (see German theologian Uta Ranke Heineman).

In my adolescence I started to understand and apprehend with abstract notions the dilemmas produced by strict dualism. My opinion of the human being gradually changed when I became more familiar with the stories of creation in the Old Testament and with the ancient Jewish conception that the human being is created from the earth, a body, and as such a godly creation, beloved and caressed by him.

I used at that time the Christian world of ideas and concepts in order to analyze and understand my experience of the world and of myself. According to my understanding the choice of words and concepts derives from one's own experience about the reality he wants to describe with those words and this has a great impact on one's existence. When

we want to speak about body and corporality it is important to see how the concepts we are using suit to our experience of our existence. Do those concepts correspond with the experience that we are allowed to exist in the world as corporal bodies? Do they permit to remain open toward all the messages and resonance of life in me?

### 2.3. The body is everything

When I studied the stories of creation as a young theologian I started to realize the same what the French philosopher MerleauPonty expresses clearly: A human being is simply his body and the body gives form to the life. The body is his way of being related to the world. The world and the physical movements form an inseparable couple. The functioning of the body is bound to the world with inherent ties. This means in Merleau-Ponty's thinking that neither the world nor the body would exist in the way they are existing without that link.

According to Merleau-Ponty my body is the subject of my individual acts, but also the repititor of my previous acts and of other people's acts, and my body perceives the world on both levels. Thus the body as a subject contains alien elements right from the beginning. It is not self-sufficient and my universe is not an individual creation but inherited.

Merleau-Ponty interpreted the Schneider case when developing his concepts of phenomenology and existential philosophy concerning corporal attitudes. Schneider was a veteran of the First World War whose optic part of the cortex had been damaged by a shell splinter.

Schneider was not able' to perform the slightest series of movements if it were separated from its concrete context. He could not, for example, point at his nose at request, although he could take a handkerchief out of his pocket and sneeze. He did not recognize his doctor's house if he did not have an appointment. If he did not see himself in a mirror, he was not able to tell whether he was standing or sitting.

Merleau-Ponty considered that the psychophysiological explanations for Schneider's behaviour did not clear up the essence of the problem, because they divided his behaviour into isolated functions. According to Merleau-Ponty movements and different perceptions are connected with each other by an inner relation forming a general way of

existence. The vision, the feeling and the faculty of motion are not factors that depend on the changes in the individual or in the situation. They are rather different expressions of our way of existing in this world. In Schneider's case it was a question of the particular nature of the relation between body and world, motion and universe. The illness covered his existence as a whole, it was a complete way of life.

When we want to understand how Schneider's form of life is we have to be aware that the movements and the objects take form in one common process that goes to two opposite directions. From one aspect the objects create the functional situation, and thus give the limits to the movement directing it. The objects include practical values and form through them a situation which leads to a specific action or anticipates it. From another point of view objects are, however, results from the movements, prints and crystallization of previous movements.

This double connection is the reason why we can say that the movements of my body are primarily directed through objects by other, previous movements. It should be, however, wrong to deduce from this that previous-movements determine later movements, because the body is also capable to tear an open space for new movements in the situation created by objects. This is based on the fact that the body can turn back to itself and feel the movement as a goal. The body does not only grasp the objects and reject them but it moves because of the movement itself. In such a movement the body is able to disconnect from the objects and from the world where they are situated, and it is then able to organize its perception of the whole situation in a new way. The world becomes a stage for skills - play and experiments, dance and music.

The nucleus of the difficulties Schneider has to encounter is the lack of the openness and commitment we have described above. The world is for him only a fossilization of previous movements and he is not able to give space to any new ones.

### 3. INTERACTION

#### 3.1. Communication is interaction between bodies

Only ten percent of human communication consists of words in spite of that they seem to be the most essential. We give messages through facial expressions, gestures and other corporal expressions. A human being is always an expression to another person. A human being is reading a person even though the person would not

want to send messages. One speaks to another purely through his existence. We do not send messages with our body but the states of the body are messages themselves.

Feelings - pain, hatred, love, joy and shame - take their existence in the body. They are not first psychic appearing then in the body, but they exist in the corporal aspects by which they can be recognized from outside. One can blush or sweat for shame.

According to the actual views of psychology a child does not learn the basic feelings but he is born with the possibility of feeling and recognizing them.

Corporal existence does not stop to the skin but reaches its environment and forms a part of it. The skin is then not something that separates a person from the world but it does, on the contrary, connect him with the world when a person touches other people and the objects of the environment. Being related is primarily characteristic of a human being. Being a human means being on different levels and it includes complex perceptions and responses.

Merleau-Ponty speaks of personal worlds, because each person perceives a specific world through his own action. A specific perception expects specific gestures, positions and movements. Every individual acts in a world which is organized and perceived in a certain way. As we do not set up ourselves the world we are acting in, but we perceive a given world, we are not living isolated in our own worlds. Corporal action is primarily co-action, acting together, interaction. We move together with other moving people, side by side with the others in a concrete way.

According to Merleau-Ponty human communication does not mean exchanging ideas. It would rather mean to recognize and to carry on expressions and gestures. The ideas of boxing or dancing together correspond better to communication than to the traditional definition of exchanging ideas.

Merleau-Ponty does not deny the fact that an idea or a thought might go through us, but we can handle or take it over only through an expression. Speech gives birth to or performs an idea. Merleau-Ponty argues against the classic opinion that speech would come after a thought and thinks that speech and thought cannot be isolated from each other and they express the way of existing in the universe. On the other hand speech is an expression of feelings and of an attitude towards the world and not an expression of beliefs or opinions.



According to Merleau-Ponty the original form of speech is expressed through gestures, facial expressions and corporal positions. "A spoken word is an authentic gesture and it contains its meaning in the same way as a gesture contains its own." (Heinamaa 1996,97). The spoken word as a gesture bears two aspects: it expresses a feeling and it shows an attitude towards the world. These two aspects are inseparable.

"We can see what a gesture and its meaning have in common, for instance, an emotion itself and its expression: in a smile, in an open and relaxed face and in happy gestures we can find the rhythm of action, the way of existing in the world which creates the real joy." (Heinamaa 1996, 89).

### 3.2. Listening with the body

A playback theatre actor improvises on the stage the fragments of real life or the whole life stories told by the audience. This improvisation follows a strictly limited form that supposes spontaneous physical action and creating interactive relationships with other actors. The conductor's task is to collect the stories from the audience. He weaves a net of successive stories and brings forward this new consecutive creation. Finally he has to tie together the themes of the performance.

If the actors, for instance, create fluid sculptures, each actor will show what has given the strongest impression to his ears that means', to his body - while listening to the story. When the actors are improvising on the stage, the teller has to choose the actors who will play the roles of the persons of the story. The actor has to accept the role given to him and he has to remain open to what the teller is telling about that role.

The teller is using words, but the actor has to listen not only to the words but also to the teller's non-verbal messages. The actor has to use his own non-verbal receptive capacity. Listening on a playback theatre stage is a strong physical experience. The actor has to concentrate on the tones and the colours of the teller's voice. He has to recognize the rhythm and place of his breathing and he has to observe and receive the teller's entire body language. The actor's mind is not only directed to the words or to the meanings of the sentences. It is a process where his mind and body are ready to resonate different tones, colours, movements, gestures, facial expressions, positions and forms of breathing.

My own experience of acting at the playback theatre made me to choose the metaphor of resonance in order to describe the process where my body is listening. Merleau-Ponty

has concluded: "I'm a resonating being, like crystals, metals and many other substances, but I perceive my vibrations from inside..."

My hypothesis is that this resonance that emerges from an actor is the source of energy that carries on the spontaneous improvisation of an actor on the stage. I also presume that it is because of this energy created by resonance that when we see a good performance, it is not -a mere illustration of a heard story but a new living story that satisfies the teller and the audience.

### 3.3. Interaction in Playback Theatre

The communication between the actor and the teller differs from the communication of everyday life in the fact that the actors only listen. They neither ask for more precise information nor comment on what they have heard. The conductor might ask the teller questions rising up and he also guides the actors accordingly to what he has heard and considered as essential. The actor has to listen to the teller, to the conductor and to their interaction. We can say in fact that the things that happen on the playback theatre stage just underline what happens in everyday life communication: we listen with our body.

It is quite common in interactive situations of everyday life that we are not heard. We feel that nobody understands us and we misunderstand each other. When it happens, we rather often try to hide that we have been misunderstood or offended.

The Playback Theatre actors express what they have heard and understood. Physical expressions, words they choose and the interaction between players reveal how precisely the actor has heard and reveal to what extent the teller's story is truly reflected through the actor and the audience.

The actors first listen to the teller and to the conductor. Then they let their roles become alive on the stage. They abandon themselves to spontaneous improvisation, and it is necessary to listen to each other: There is a relationship of interaction between the players. Improvisation is a kind of continuously transforming communication. It is a language between bodies, listening and being listened, sending and receiving impulses. It means to be open and committed with what happens on the stage so that the actor can even prefer not reacting. At the same time the player sticks to given models in a disciplined way and remains aware of the environment. When the players interact as fluid sculptures, life has to keep to that form and fill it with all its richness.

The actors also use words. In my opinion it is most important that words are gestures and express corporal life in the interactive situation. Words cannot be maps of lakes and mountains, they just are lakes and mountains. Instead of repeating events words are what is happening. The best situation is when a word is loaded with meanings. It is not unambiguous but rather productive and ambiguous. Word can become a flesh and flesh, life experience, can be expressed in words. They are living words, which recreate the audience. Words are resonating in the listener.

The story played by the actors becomes new and alive if the spontaneous improvisation gets its energy from the resonance produced in the actor's body when he listens to the teller. An interaction between resonating bodies produces energy continuously on the stage and this sound of feeling bodies can transform the story into something unpredictable and unrepeatable.

### 3.4. Archetypes as physical expressions

The actors also have to handle with communicational conflicts. How should they express the conflict between the words of the teller and his non verbal, corporal message? Should they reveal it as such or believe more the words than the physical experience? The actor does not arrive at a decision in a rational way or as a result of thorough reflection. His decision is the part of a spontaneous process of improvisation where he abandons himself. None of the players makes his decision alone but in cooperation, so it is unpredictable. I believe that it is easier to abandon oneself to a conflictual situation if the models found in the archetypes are used. They help the actor to analyze what he has heard and recognized.

We are all truly present in the playback theatre with all we are carrying within ourselves. We are living in the collective consciousness of the audience, of the actors and the conductor. The stories told emerge from this collective consciousness and the archetypes dwell in this consciousness. The archetypes are not only events and experiences that have come true but also possibilities of existence which are waiting for the rain and to be filled like rivers that have dried up.

The Jungian concept of archetypes consists of both a theoretical model and something real and living. As a theoretical model they can help an actor and a conductor to find the essential elements of a story. Olavi Moilanen uses the word spirit (as we know it from religions) to describe archetypes as something tangible. When we experience death or unemployment, for example, an archetype of destruction comes to our lives. It is not only a theoretical concept or instrument which we can use to analyze the situation but

also a strictly real "spirit" or "god" that we can feel in our bodies: archetypes live in our bodies and affect them. They take shape as true archetypes or as their shadows. Identifying archetypes means recognizing physical perceptions.

Perceived as verbal expression we can hear a story of a good nurturing mother. The words transmit the archetype of one who is caring. The tones of voice, the gestures and positions of the storyteller tell us more. We can perceive the shadow of the archetype: tiredness, the feeling of being abused, or maybe domination and power over the person who is being taken care of.

The recognizing of the archetype and its shadow can help the actor to handle more easily with the conflict we mentioned above.

Archetypes actually convince the actor that everything he has perceived in his body belongs to the story he has listened to. We do not need to ask whether to believe in words or in corporal expressions. There is no real conflict or dichotomy, because the story includes everything, all that has been heard as words and perceived as corporal expressions. Everything has to get the possibility to become alive on the stage, in the improvisation of the actors.

Resonance and archetypes help the actors to transform the story into a satisfactory experience. The play needs a mythic dimension. This does not include that the actors should study mythology or create something "mythical". They simply need to listen to and with their bodies, they need to express what they feel in their bodies and use their bodies as instruments.

#### 4. SPONTANEITY

Playback Theatre is based on spontaneous improvisation. What does spontaneity mean? I will present three conceptions of spontaneity. I think they all reflect the aspects of spontaneity which I consider as essential in Playback Theatre.

According to Jakob Levy Moreno a spontaneous person is able to act in a fresh way in familiar situations and in an adequate way in new situations. Spontaneity is a state of presence. It is the moment where I am present with regard to another person, a state of neutrality which makes it really possible to connect with each other. This connection is not motivated by needs or social requirements. Everybody is able to be spontaneous and

it is our fundamental right, not characteristic of a few privileged people. Action -or movement- can help a person to discover his own spontaneity.

Moreno makes a distinction between spontaneity and impulsiveness. Spontaneous acting is fresh but not a sign of "madness". Jean Paul Sartre's idea about impulsiveness is close to Moreno's idea in this context. Sartre names impulsive reaction pseudospontaneity. Spontaneity means to Sartre as well as to Moreno being present in the moment.

As claimed by Moreno and Sartre being present is characteristic, of spontaneity. Spontaneity undoubtedly means being present on the stage of playback theatre. The players, the conductor and the musician are present to the teller, to the audience and to each other. Their purpose is not to react to what they hear but just to listen. They are on the stage existing and letting the stories transform into new acts. The actor can avoid pseudospontaneity only if he abandons himself to the present moment.

Merleau-Ponty does not use the concept of spontaneity in the texts I had access to, but in my opinion he gives a fresh definition of spontaneity while describing Schneider's particular behaviour. A spontaneous moment is the instant when the body disconnects from its usual relation to the world; new movements and even a totally new world are then created. The relation between body and world is momentarily something that has not been experienced before and after this instant it will appear considerably more extensive and renewed.

## 5. LIVING BODY

Merleau-Ponty's concept of body phenomenology has helped me to find verbal expression to my physical experience on the playback theatre stage. It has given me valid arguments to use the term listening with the body. It has also given me good reasons to comprehend expressed words as corporal expressions and not as tools of rational mind. I will conclude my essay with a few concrete conclusions about the particular qualities of the actor of a playback theatre.

The actor should be receptive and move and react easily with his body - with his whole apparatus, his whole self. Rosen has discovered that the areas of the body that are stiff and react with some difficulty are usually blocked by chronically tensed muscles. The tension has been generated by an emotional experience that one has never been able to express. One needs the muscular tension to control emotions and often to such an extent

that the person does no more feel it and is no more aware of what he is controlling. The muscles are containing suppressed emotions and the stories lying behind.

Alexander says that when a person suppresses his emotions his carriage is destroyed. He cannot trust his kinesthetic sense because its perceptions are then perverted. It is therefore important to inhibit and not react in a "natural" way and to be directed by a teacher who guides and touches you toward the lost posture, which still exists in you and is still living and makes it possible to move in a sensitive way.

Inhibition means to stop: to stop, to observe and to listen. It does not mean that you should become motionless or suppress spontaneity. It gives a possibility to refuse to react rigidly in order to give space to spontaneity and to new movements. Merleau Ponty's idea of departing from external objects toward one's body might have the same meaning.

The movements and coordination of a little child reflect this kind of an attitude. The head is very big and the coordination is not perfect, but a child moves freely and without tension. While sitting he is alert with his back straight, he bends his knees and extends his spine in a natural way. His postural system is functioning well and he has been born with the ability to use his body in an optimal way.

Our body is able to perform a big amount of movements, but we are accustomed to only a few possibilities of moving in everyday life. We are, for instance, used to swing or nod in a certain way or express ourselves with very limited gestures. The body does not use all the movements that would be possible. That also limits our experience of our environment and our communication with the world.

The actor of a playback theatre does not need to master demanding series of movements. He should just give space in his world to himself, to his body. It does not require external exercises but it is always necessary for him to listen to what his body is telling. Listening to himself - to his body- teaches him to listen and to be open to the teller.

The actor of a playback theatre is a living body. A body which is able to turn toward itself, to disconnect from objects and the world formed by them. A body with a new perception of wholeness, a body which creates a new universe.

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