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The Active Text

*Unlocking Plays Through
Physical Theatre*



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Introduction

This book is rooted in uncovering visual dimensions and physical embodiment for theatre-makers working with a scripted play. Games, exercises and ideas for creative investigations are drawn both from those who use them in the rehearsal room and from my own work with student actors and directors. My approach is eclectic, raiding sources from playwrights as well as theatre-makers – directors, practitioners and actors – who have written about or been interviewed about their crafting and rehearsal practices, with references largely confined to them rather than those who theorise about theatre and performance.⁴ A continual process of practical exploration and experimentation leads to discoveries about a play rather than arriving at interpretation through round-the-table analysis and discussion. Work is orientated to activating signifying systems of the stage where the spoken word takes equal place with other elements. Critical viewing and feedback through showing and sharing become cornerstones of praxis. I advocate embracing an open stage/spectator relationship in rehearsals to promote an awareness of the eventual presence of the audience, one which fuels the players' ability to connect with them.

To truly understand a play is to discover it through embodiment. And that happens in the throes of exploring it practically rather than round a table or sat at a desk. A play is a complex web of interwoven threads; there are various logics at work in its construction, and these need to be accessed in order to fuel practical realisation. Events and themes in the plotting, characters and dialogue are entwined like threads in a rug. In the craft of weaving, needles are in constant motion to knit coloured threads together, and the design emerges

only once the rug comes off the loom. Uncovering the internal dynamics of a play, unravelling its threads and how these are knitted together, yields insights: its image structure becomes manifest when the language of performance embedded in its fabric is unearthed.

A text is always active in performance, always moving, vibrating, transmitting once it is embodied by players. During a performance, spectators may be affected by the agility of the movement, sonorities in actors' voices, moments where a player seems to offer something indefinable in response to events or to another player, because everything occurring on stage transmits dynamic and kinaesthetic signals. We accept this in dance. *The Active Text* views theatre as having the idea of dance at its centre. It offers a gestural approach to working with a scripted play: theatre is a game, actors are players, texts are re-inscribed through bodies in space.

Because we meet a play through words on a page there's a temptation to begin work by reading through, or walking through with script in hand, based on the idea that the words will be

*'I never start with a readthrough. For the first few days I do everything but the text!'*⁵

Declan Donnellan

fleshed out by action and gesture in order to bring the play to life. This is essentially a literary approach where activity is viewed as something ascertained through discussion, understanding is generated through reason, and 'action' becomes additional to the spoken word. A playscript may consist predominantly of dialogue, and it is dialogue that appears to hold it together. But ask yourself, once you've seen a play, what it was about? You are likely to answer by saying what *happens* in the play, because dialogue is, as Rib Davies reminds would-be playwrights, 'utterly entwined with... the characterisation, the plot, the action, the structure, the visual effects, the music'.⁶

'We are,' says the director Mike Alfreds, 'in search of deep structures that aren't necessarily apparent from a linear reading [and] what we find will lead us to matters of theme and form'.⁷ So we need to understand how the play functions. Working with a play means breathing life not only into the words but the text as a whole. The fuller an understanding of the text, the richer the acting. The word

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'text' comes from the Latin '*texere*', which means texture in association with weaving, and it is the interweaving of all the various elements of theatre that creates the play for an audience. Theatre isn't just about what we see and hear, and there are various components at work of which an unfolding narrative is just one. Theatre with the idea of dance at its centre is vital and physical for both performers and their audiences. There is a sensory nature to live theatre; it feels *alive*. Creating theatre to provoke sensorial effects demands invoking body and imagination to transform the players and transport the onlookers. To do this, it's necessary to separate out the parts, rather like a mechanic taking apart an engine, before reassembling it. For Eugenio Barba, 'dramaturgy [is] similar to "anatomy"... a practical way of working not only on the organism in its totality, but on its different organs and layers'.⁸ He talks of three levels that operate as layers, inseparable in performance yet distinct in the making: organic, narrative and evocative. The organic focuses on the actors' somatic and vocal work and how these affect spectators at a sensorial level; narrative dramaturgy concerns itself with the generation of meaning; and evocative dramaturgy 'distils or captures the performance's unintentional and concealed meanings, specific for each spectator'.⁹ For a play to come alive in performance, image, gesture, and words can be worked on separately in the rehearsal process before integrating them into the whole.

*'The text becomes a score of physical actions inspired by and attached to impulses.'*¹⁰

John Harrop

Too many preconceptions before rehearsals can place a play in a straitjacket, denying the growth of mutual understanding through practice. The same seriously playful process

applied in devising work is applied in this book to exploring a text. Like devising, this is a collaborative approach to experimenting through improvisation, finding and testing out what works theatrically and what doesn't work via physical engagement and interaction. So although *The Active Text* is not strictly speaking a 'sequel' to my earlier book *Through the Body: A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre*, for those familiar with that book there is an obvious correlation. Jacques Lecoq appears regularly as a point of

reference and inspiration, together with the voices of other practitioners who reiterate a similar concern with the actor's body, including the director Mike Alfreds who believes in the body 'as a means of reaching the imagination and releasing spontaneous truth'.¹¹ And it is Joan Littlewood, whom writer and director Stella Duffy calls the 'mother of modern British theatre', who has informed much of the thinking behind this book.¹² Her search for theatrical vitality in the latter half of the twentieth century led to highly imaginative staging solutions arrived at through collaborative work, using improvisatory and devising techniques rooted in active bodies.

There is no single way to produce a play. Stage and performance conventions of every age mean any new production of the same play discovers different meanings, and perhaps reveals new dimensions. Every so often theatre seems to reinvent itself; styles come and go as playwrights and practitioners respond to developments in society, culture, technology and art. The history of Western theatre is strewn with challenges to supposed authorities of style and form, whether in the kinds of plays written or kinds of performance created, as well as the styles of acting. My aim is not to come up with a new theory or method but to invigorate the rehearsal process with ideas and suggestions to combine the somatic with the semantic. What works for one play might not work for another. In this sense devising offers a useful model.

There are many excellent and inspirational books on acting and directing; the majority address the individual rather than a company of players. In this book the work is designed predominantly with a group in mind rather than an individual

*'In an ensemble, actors are part of the interpretative decision-making and they have to create things as a team.'*¹³

Annabel Arden

actor or director. Physical explorations help players communicate effectively with each other and with an audience who 'read with their eyes' to a large extent. Working through the body enables players to gain a fuller realisation of the text as they experience every aspect of it, from mapping its structure to playing with imagery and digging

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into the words. Storytelling techniques and strategies for creating stage pictures are offered that may challenge assumptions about particular plays or preconceived ideas about directing, acting and rehearsing a play. Employing playful processes, physical and imaginative improvisation creates a stripped-down aesthetic suited to workshop or studio performance, as well as fuelling production in professional contexts.

While it is beyond the parameters of this book to engage with design, if you intend to produce a performance with people responsible for designing set, costume, lighting, sound or digital technology, whether site-specifically or in a theatre, they should belong to the ensemble and be working alongside the company in rehearsals. The work suggested here does not depend on expensive production values or scenographic elements, rather it acquaints players with the concept of establishing scenic environments through image and sound. While the environment of a play's story needs to give characters' actions a distinct context, creating worlds can happen without piling scenery on stage. Necessary furniture can be substituted; a few blocks used imaginatively can represent a great deal even for a play assumed to be 'naturalistic'.

Labels are not always helpful in describing theatrical styles although we use them conversationally as a kind of shorthand, as for example 'naturalistic' and 'realistic', and some companies and practitioners become attached to certain labels by virtue of the way they are described by critics and academics. 'Physical theatre' is a case in point. The term 'physical theatre' has been hotly debated: theatre artists and companies often resent the label while academics and critics debate its provenance and application. Playwright and director Alan Ayckbourn complains that 'It suggests that somewhere there is a non-physical theatre. What theatre isn't or shouldn't be to some extent physical?'¹⁴ Frantic Assembly's co-directors, who choreograph like dancers but were not trained as dancers, work with scripted texts and call their productions 'shows', grumble that 'Physical theatre is actually quite a frustrating phrase as it barely manages to describe what we do never mind the wide range of styles and influences that are clustered under its banner.'¹⁵

'All theatre is visual. Not all theatre is verbal.'¹⁶

Mike Alfreds

As shorthand, 'physical theatre' served (and perhaps still serves) a valuable purpose in acknowledging a visually resonant style of theatre

created by a variety of spirited ensemble companies towards the end of the twentieth century: theatre celebrating its difference as an art form from film and television; theatre rediscovering storytelling through action; a theatre combining movement, music, design (including digital media) and text, in an integrated whole, underpinned by the potency of the language of the body. Their work continues to mature as well as influence the next generation of writers, directors and performers, who have begun forging new ways of making theatre and performance, making an impact on the way theatre is created, staged, received, studied and taught. Theatre ecology in the twenty-first century is already exceptionally mixed; despite the pervasive hangover of conventional methodologies and practices in some sectors, theatre has shown itself capable of much more than presenting a convincing slice of life. And twenty-first century audiences have a sophisticated acquaintance with visual aesthetics from exposure to cinema, television, cartoons, digital media and the visual arts. Our narrative vocabulary has reached new heights via rock concerts, pop videos, commercials and video games, so we are open not only to new ways of seeing but to new ways of storytelling.

As boundaries between traditional forms and styles of performance blur, it is no surprise that exciting physical and visual theatre is increasingly tangible in productions of scripted plays. But no discussion of physical theatre should ignore Jacques Lecoq, whose ideas permeate this book. His book is published in English as *The Moving Body* but was originally published in his native French as *Le Corps Poétique* – i.e. 'the poetic body'. Interestingly, Lecoq never used the term 'physical theatre', simply 'theatre'. Rather than viewing the body as the actor's instrument, for Lecoq the body is both instrument and player, where creativity, intuition, imagination and feeling coalesce. Together with two key personnel associated with his Paris school, Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux, his impact has been particularly noticeable as part of a trend in Britain for physically and

visually orientated theatre, and graduates and companies formed by Lecoq graduates appear on the touring circuit not only in Britain but across the globe.¹⁷

However, companies who are often labelled ‘physical theatre’ frequently sport directors who did not attend Lecoq’s school: *‘The body is where you begin in the rehearsal room.’*¹⁸

Simon McBurney

Kneehigh and Frantic Assembly are just two examples. Kneehigh’s Artistic Director Emma Rice trained as an actor and spent some time with the Polish company Gardzienice, who draw on folk and storytelling in vibrant physical/visual/musical ways. Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, joint artistic founders of Frantic Assembly,¹⁹ studied English Literature in Swansea when they were blown away by a workshop with Volcano Theatre and set out to emulate them; subsequently the dance films of David Hinton for DV8 exerted a significant influence and they have said they find film more inspirational than theatre. Declan Donnellan of Cheek by Jowl and Mike Alfreds, who set up Shared Experience, are two directors whose words and advice feature often in this book, and neither has trained with Lecoq.

While movement is a primary element in theatre, physicality has to earn its place when serving a piece. Explosive or high-octane expression excites an audience just as it does in circus or dance; yet physicality can also be nuanced and subtle, with stillness and minimal movement creating a searing intensity. Both can exist within the same performance, and both can offer an audience the visceral thrill that makes theatre so potently alive. Cheek by Jowl, Kneehigh, Frantic Assembly and Complicite are companies who exemplify this, presenting work where the spoken word is meshed with physical, visual and musical languages. Theirs is a theatre that acknowledges craftsmanship, passion and imagination, forged in collaborative and compositional ways with physically based improvisation as the bedrock, whether they are working on adapting a story, developing an original piece or working on a play. They enter the text through the body with devising methodologies as the seedbed of interpretation.

*'The best achievements of a good ensemble can far outstrip any virtuoso display an actor might pull off alone.'*²⁰

Harriet Walter

A key attribute of these companies is the notion of an actor-centred approach, with members who relish the creative charge of working collectively – not always purely as devisers since many are equally keen on working with

texts. For them, the challenge of working as equal partners is not only hugely appealing but the *only* way to make theatre. And, of course, that is not exclusive to the younger generation of theatre-makers. Littlewood, Brecht and Brook are recognised as hugely influential beyond the post-war period, and for all of them collaborative work with actors is at the centre of the process.

Many critics and commentators struggle with the idea and practice of collaboration. A preference persists for assigning artistic ownership by naming an individual as responsible for a piece of theatre. Although much is made of the ethos of collaborative work in devising, when it comes to text work a prevailing notion that hierarchical principles govern a rehearsal process seems to kick in, with the idea of the director as the 'visionary' rather like some orchestral conductors who are regarded as 'maestro'. Yet time and again companies where the director is admired and fêted are those whose working practices are rooted in genuine collaboration.

No one has articulated the ethos of collaboration better than Joan Littlewood in her 'Goodbye Note' of 1961:

I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor or even of the writer. It is through collaboration that this knockabout art of theatre survives and kicks. It was true of The Globe, The Curtain, The Crown... No one mind or imagination can foresee what a play will become until all the physical and intellectual stimuli, which are crystallised in the poetry of the author, have been understood by a company, and then tried out in terms of mime, discussion, and the precise music of grammar: words and movement allied and integrated.²¹

And it is her philosophy which governs the idea behind and the ideas within this book.

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Littlewood's way of working through improvisation and games served to sketch in the action in broad strokes before filling in the detail. While her approach owed much to Stanislavsky, with actors breaking down a play into units and objectives, her stagecraft had a radical edge, more attuned to the ideas of Meyerhold or Copeau and drawing on *commedia dell'arte* and Chinese principles in opening out the relationship between the stage and spectator. She was not a devotee of naturalistic staging techniques, preferring to use whatever worked in matters of style. And if something didn't work she had no compunction about scrapping it and starting again. Games and structured improvisation as routes to ensemble-building and approaching a text were key principles. She used a range of physical games and exercises as creative catalysts to open up the text.

Littlewood's notion of playful improvisation as the major approach to working with, and developing an interpretation of, a scripted text underpins this book. The idea of improvisation-

*Games and exercises 'develop initiative, excite curiosity, exercise the imagination.'*²²

Joan Littlewood

as-exploration is not new. Over a century ago, Stanislavsky realised improvisation gave actors a quicker and more vital access to experiencing a play than could be achieved through intellectual discussion. Theatre practitioners and directors who work collaboratively advocate harnessing the imagination, initiative, intuition and intelligence of everyone involved. The principle is 'don't talk, just do'.

There are thirteen plays referred to in the course of this book, drawn largely from the so-called classical repertoire and those featured regularly on higher education and school syllabi. They are: Sophocles's *Antigone*; Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*; Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*; Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*; Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*; Edward Bond's *Saved*; Steven Berkoff's *Greek*; Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*; Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Given my potential readership, I anticipate that most will be familiar with these plays as actors and directors, teachers and students of theatre. As examples of plays that have stood the test of time, they examine what we think

and feel about ourselves; the human condition doesn't change very much and these plays hang on in the repertoire and remain classic texts for study because they still have something to offer.²³ And they are plays that alter with every ensemble, who discover new nuances, new ideas, new possibilities latent in the scripts as they make them active for performance. The plays and editions used are listed separately in the bibliography.

What follows is designed to promote openness and simplicity, intensity in atmosphere, absolute focus and commitment from every player, whether they end up as the protagonist or a member of the chorus. It requires generosity of spirit. It is not intended as a linear 'method', although some logic exists in the order in which sections are presented. Feel free to dip in and out if that suits.

Section 1: Plays and Audiences looks at how meaning(s) operate through genre, theme, structure, suspense and time, and the impact of these on an audience during performance. The ways in which the audience offer their attention, curiosity and empathy, informs this and is central to ensuing sections.

Section 2: Serious Play establishes the fundamental importance of play as an essential training and rehearsal tool, opening doors to improvisatory states and opening up choices and possibilities for analysis and interpretation of scripted plays.

Section 3: Mapping a Play starts with animating and transforming space as an essential basis for working on stage as a precursor to discovering the topography of a play. It contains exercises to illustrate the nature of dramatic composition, providing routes for connecting players to the overall shape and pattern and a play's flow.

Section 4: Charting Journeys offers starting points for bringing characters alive through their connections to the design of the play, their route through it and the situations they face. Collective engagement as well as personal investment from players undergirds the practice.

Section 5: Workshopping Scenes assumes acquaintance with the previous two sections with work orientated to the detail of individual scenes. The emphasis is on expressing actions with visual resonance, with suggestions relating to scoring and framing these.

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Section 6: Inside the Words builds on the understanding gained, moving on to tackle the words to be spoken as an active force, exploring their sonic, rhythmic, dynamic and semantic values.

Section 7: Around the Words gets to grips with the words that speak without being uttered, activating stage directions, objects, locations and silence to unpeel the image structure of a play and its emotional and metaphorical dimensions.

Section 8: Shaping and Pacing incorporates work on music as a shaping device, tension states and the importance of rhythm and pace in making the maximum impact on the audience.

Section 3

Mapping a Play

Mapping a Play

Mapping is the first stage in building a relationship with a scripted play as active partners. It puts the concept of a play-as-landscape into action, giving a ‘global view’ of the whole before exploring how individual parts fit together.

‘We do not read the play. We tell the story, breaking it into themes and structures.’¹⁰⁰

Emma Rice

As discussed in Section 1, it is structural elements that govern the continuity of a play and its inherent cumulative nature.

Mapping is a way of making sense of a play’s progression, encouraging a connection with its ‘secret life’ by unearthing those elements in order to garner a shared knowledge of a play’s overall patterning and shape, its interior dynamics. The progression of incidents, whether chronological or not, is one dimension to uncover, yet there is also a lateral dimension encompassing tangential meanings as the play spreads out. The forward drive to a narrative works like gearing to propel a story forward, while its differential drive modifies speed and direction to encompass thematic and metaphorical aspects. Using image-making and storytelling techniques to fuel discoveries lays foundations for a deeper engagement with the play, giving access to both these dimensions. Understanding comes via embodied and shared experience within an ensemble as players gain an overall perspective on the whole play; this makes rehearsals far more productive later when getting to grips with the text in detail. At the start of rehearsals, Annabel Arden gets actors to stand up and tell the story of the play in five to fifteen minutes ‘because if you don’t understand what you’re performing in

its overall sweep, you can never really articulate its meaning as a member of an ensemble.¹⁰¹

Instead of starting with a readthrough and working through it scene by scene from the beginning, treat the play in a similar way to raw material for devising, working actively with initial impressions, especially those features which strike play-

*'I don't worry about detail so much early on, I'm more interested in exploring all sorts of different alleyways within the process.'*¹⁰²

Sam Mendes

ers as surprising or significant at first reading. Sketching out imagery and action allows the play to live more readily in shared visual and physical encounters before attempting work on dialogue.

Working with space

Since players occupy and engage with each other in space, they need to develop their physical memory of where they are in relation to space and each other. The following exercise gets everyone thinking visually and spatially. When it is repeated with only eye contact you gain a valuable basis for mapping work.

Entering the room 1

Ask everyone to leave the rehearsal room and re-enact exactly how they came into it for this session, following the same people, walking the same way, saying the same things.

In this replay of entering the room everyone needs to be exact:

- Who did you follow?
- What did you say?
- How did you walk?
- Where did you go?
- What did you do with your coat/bag, etc.?

After the initial chaos and corrections – in other words, once everyone has managed to render a reasonably accurate version of the group’s entry – this usually provokes interesting discussion and observations. How convincing was each individual reaction to the space once they’d opened the door? Did people ‘act’ coming into the room or did they succeed in reprising their earlier entrance accurately? What distances did players leave between each other? If they are new to each other, distances may be greater than between those who already know each other.

Entering the room 2

Now repeat the exercise but without any speech, allowing only eye contact and gesture to indicate when individuals speak to each other. By all means split a larger group in half – those who entered first and those who kept up the rear – so players can watch each other.

As observers, be very interested in identifying where people’s eyes settle and how they deport themselves in relation to the space around them and between them. You begin to see how relationships emerge in the dynamic of the space between them.

This exercise is an attempt to capture a very simple activity in order to demonstrate that the ability to recreate physical reactions to the space and each other is what conveys any sense of ‘truth’. Players may find it quite challenging to replicate the initial entry; while it stands as a useful metaphor for the idea of rehearsing-as-practice, it also lays a foundation for understanding how relationships in a space are read, how visual and kinaesthetic elements create meaning for anyone watching. Taking any spoken words away puts the focus on the physical and visual.

‘Actors in a theatre space can also manipulate and use the space to create meaning.’¹⁰³

Catherine Alexander

The way players inhabit and energeise space and how they activate it is a primary factor in generating meaning(s). From large-scale movements to the slightest gesture or glance,