

Plasticity

Plasticity, one of the two central principles of BoxWhatBox, first came into recognisable use as a term in theatre with the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the gifted and stubbornly independent disciple of Stanislavski. His work in developing *biomechanics* as a system of actor training emphasised the development of physical plasticity through work in acrobatics, gymnastics and corporal exercises he called *études*. Later, in the work of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, plasticity's meaning narrowed to refer to an actor's ability to create what is generally called "physical theatre", theatre that relies on the human form for its performance text rather than on written narrative. Plasticity has thus become equated with non-realistic movement through the work of these three practitioners of a physical theatre of extreme demands.

Plasticity in BoxWhatBox means far more than this. Certainly an actor should always be prepared to move in ways that extend beyond daily human life. Much of BoxWhatBox training focuses on this *Demechanisation* process. But plasticity is really a way of life, a life for artists. There is physical plasticity, but there also exist emotional plasticity, intellectual plasticity, and most importantly for the intercultural actor for whom BoxWhatBox is a foundation, social or cultural plasticity.

Each of these aspects can be described briefly. But first let's begin with its opposite, using a physical analogy. The opposite of plasticity in the human body is rigidity. Rigidity is the appearance of strength that masks brittle weakness. A rigid posture strains the bodies tendons, ligaments, joints and muscles. It requires more expenditure of energy than a relaxed position, for no greater gain. The apotheosis of rigidity, of course, is *rigor mortis*. No actor I know lists that kind of unbending rigidity as a career goal.

In life we exhibit rigidity most often when we feel we lack other options, when we feel cornered or desperate, or when we lack the plasticity of human empathy or compassion. This is emotional rigidity. Sometimes it works, especially when whomever or whatever we are being rigid towards has no options with which to challenge it. Even in such victories there is a deficit, a basic lack of humanity. I suppose rigidity in the face of the inhuman, or the inhumane, might be considered a human act, but this instance is rare. Rigidity is simply at odds, almost all the time, with being human. If one is charged with the recreation of human existence, then, as actors are, rigidity seems not only counterproductive but dangerous.

Emotional rigidity is often conflated with social or intellectual sclerosis, but it can be separated. The emotionally rigid lack access to a wide range of emotions. The emotions they express can be very powerful indeed, and in fact many actors rely on no more than one or two emotions with which they feel comfortable. (Anger and sadness are the two most hackneyed emotions in acting, for this reason.) The emotionally rigid often lack empathy, the ability to see the world (or feel it) the way others do. While such sociopathic, alpha-dog behaviour has been demonstrated to be fundamental to upper-level business success, this is a crippling deficiency for an actor. Quite simply, as actors we *never play ourselves*. Therefore the ability to feel the obsessions, concerns, desires and pain of others is fundamental to the task of characterisation.

Intellectual rigidity, in contrast, is associated more with arrogance. It is no less dehumanising in its refusal to countenance alternative ideas or perspectives, and, as with all forms of rigidity, its primary

danger is to itself, to those who practice it. The intellectually rigid are left behind by more flexible minds and by history. A great idea, perfectly conceived, could perhaps be defended by a rigid intellect. But it would be odd, even remarkable; for true brilliance is usually accompanied by an awareness of humanity's place in the greater scheme of existence, and thus tends to be accompanied by humility, or generosity, rather than by an unwillingness to bend to the needs or views of others.

Cultural or social rigidity is the most easily recognisable form of this psychic ankylosis. We recognise it as racism, ethnocentrism or class bias in its most obvious forms, but even the most benign and socially orthodox members of a society may exhibit its characteristics. These include an inability to adjust to the appearance, routines or practices of other peoples—the American traveler who “just wants a burger” or the Canadian mother who complains of the “smells down the hall” from a Somali family's traditional cooking. Rigidity is one of the things that distinguishes *tourists* from *travelers*. Tourists treat other cultures as exotic, temporary experiences¹, to be sampled or collected. Travelers look for ways of being, seeing and doing that are positive alternatives to their own and which they incorporate into their lives. Actors often fall into the attitude of tourists when encountering plays and performance styles outside their immediate experience; any level of resistance in approaching the material will guarantee its failure in anything but the most facile or superficial sense. Intercultural actors, by contrast, are travelers. They supplement their approach to performance with an open mind and heart directed toward the new cultures they experience, and incorporate what they can without losing a sense of who they are or from what culture they spring.

So, to the actor's use of plasticity as a way of life. No one can be utterly plastic all the time; we all feel, at different times, the need to *make a stand*, for reasons that are justifiable or not. Yet the plastic actor remains aware when she is being rigid, acknowledges its exceptional nature, prints it as a performable quality even as she attempts to minimise its prevalence in her life.

Physically: the actor who lives a life devoted to plasticity trains, every day, in the three major areas of exercise—cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility. All are essential, in equal measure, for the actor to maintain the flexible expressivity of her instrument. As generalised examples of avoidance, many female actors avoid strength-training, to their eventual detriment, out of a misguided idea that they will “become big”, or because they find gyms off-putting². Many male actors avoid flexibility training—this is not simply stretching after exercise—out of some misguided belief that short, contracted muscles look more attractive to the opposite sex and more indicative of strength³. Actors need to choose their means of training after leaving school, following principles of healthy training that will be outlined elsewhere in this book. They must commit to doing something positive for their body *every day*. This includes getting proper levels of rest, limiting the intake of toxins in the body, and maintaining at least minimum levels of nutrition. There is no perfect body for performance. What there is, is the actor's body in optimal condition to perform.

¹ There is an implicit colonialism in this, even amongst the most positive of tourists; a sense that one's own, “superior” culture, will always be returned to after having sampled some cuisine or national dance they can safely store in their hard drives.

² They have not been taught, or have refused to learn, that some impact training for women is essential to their osteopathic health, or that proportional strength conveys not only increased energy but allows the body to support itself in a healthy way.

³ They are not. Short muscles are not only less responsive to neural command, they are far more likely to tear and scar, further reducing their utility.

Emotionally: the plastic actor opens herself every day to the emotional world around her. This seems evident, and straightforward, but it is not. There's a world of pain out there, and most of us avoid it like a psychic plague. We simply cannot get through a day of encounters if we share the intensity of the agonies of the world with those who those express it to us. And yet, as actors, we must: not always, not each moment (for that would bring exhaustion and even a gradual hardening or rigidity). But at moments. We must be prepared to give in to sentiment, to cry at the manipulative advertisement or film scene or the forlorn young girl sitting, ragged and dirty, on boxes in the alley. But, as Brecht taught, we must not use such experiences pornographically. Too often extreme emotion is presented to us, both in media and in daily life, and we are expected to do nothing but use it as stimulus, as entertainment, or cheap moral instruction.

Instead, actors bear a responsibility to honour the emotion they witness. We feel its intensity, and then we withdraw from it, reflecting on our experience so that we may call it on it when required. If we do not feel emotion intensely on a regular basis our emotional apparatus atrophies. This produces mediocrity, the banal life of those too fearful to feel, or to reach the extremes of emotion. It's a manner of living, but not for actors. Cynicism and irony are popular coping pastimes in contemporary society, but they are seductive doorways to emotional hardening for the actor.

Intellectually: the actor tries on new ideas, or looks at received ideas with a different perspective. She becomes a contrarian to orthodoxy: *what if it doesn't have to be like that?* We could consider this a variant application of Stanislavski's *Magic If*, the concept he developed to assist actors in creating their imaginary worlds. But it works equally well in ours: *what if the routines I follow are actually hindering me?* The actor is a magpie. Theatre has always been an art prone to intellectual theft and the piracy of ideas, narratives, tropes and images. An actor who has not expanded her intellectual arsenal beyond the peat bog of internet memes and popular culture has little to offer a performance process beyond her subordination. Actor don't have to be intellectuals, but they are required to be smart. Being smart takes work, and daily attention, because we live in a world where appearances are not reality and the possibility of being duped by lies, misdirection and our own biases are ever-present.

Culturally: for the actor who desires to perform interculturally, this is the most important aspect of plasticity. We fall back on our acquired cultures when we need sustenance, when we are weak. We reach out to other cultures when we feel strong, when we are generous. One's home culture should never be erased, as sometimes happens in the romantic taking-on of the new ways of another culture. Nor should it be wielded like a big stick when cultures are brought together in a theatrical forum: *we always do it this way*. Cultures must meet each other half way, and the agents of this process are the performers, who bring their own rich trove of acculturated experience to blend with that of others. There is still a positive discrimination that must be exercised, and this is the daily business of the intercultural actor. Not everything about another culture is "good" or useful (just as elements of one's own culture are not, either in social or theatrical terms). Through constant exposure to other cultures we learn not only valuable alternatives and enrichments to our understanding of how to live, but we are enabled to look at our own culture more objectively. This enables the intercultural actor to avoid manipulations such as ethnic nationalism or what Americans call "exceptionalism". It helps her avoid superciliousness or patronisation in addressing the new culture. It makes all culture, her own and those she newly encounters, malleable; and creates a kind of muscular openness that is at the heart of the plastic actor.

The central question the actor who believes in plasticity as a way of artistic living is *How can I become better? How can I become More?*