

Introduction



Photo: Veronica Bala, F.I.S.T. Festival

BoxWhatBox began in 2004 as a way of synthesising my approach to training actors for intercultural performance. Already in mid-career, I had a project in Finland to organise, and the producers needed a title. My work was increasingly oriented to working in cultures that were distinct from my own, and discovering the links, in varying forms of human communication, between them. This work was the logical extension of the revelation I'd experienced, as a young actor, that feeling emotion was only the beginning of the task at hand; the more important bit was to select and modulate the proper emotion and then find the physical and vocal ways of sharing that feeling with the audience. Like most North American actors I'd been taught that if I didn't feel what the character was feeling in a scene, my work would be inauthentic. I slowly realised that this is nonsense: as an actor, *it's not about you*. There is a

romantic fiction that surrounds acting, full of tales of dangerous weight gain for a role, of working in the fields to “learn what it feels like” and “staying in character on the set.” This is a child’s approach to an adult discipline. By all means work in a field to learn how to hold a hoe, but don’t confuse this with the process of acting. These are what Stanislavsky called “extraneous aids”¹, rather than the central aspect of acting, which is about triggering your imagination, channelling it within the demands of a text, and providing illumination for spectators. Notice the omission of feeling from the spectator’s part of equation. If you can make an audience feel truthful emotion, terrific, if it acts as a stepping stone to illumination. If it merely provides a relaxing emotional bath (as in “bathetic”) or a purgative (as in “catharsis”) well, every field has its lesser forms, but there are pharmaceuticals that can provide more effective and less costly means of achieving this. *Acting is about illumination.*

BoxWhatBox is an intercultural acting process. By that I mean it can bridge work by actors from different backgrounds. It can be realistic in style, but mostly it is non-realistic, in the Brechtian sense of “objective acting”.² BoxWhatBox actors do not try to gull an audience into believing they are seeing a slice of reality. What they represent may indeed be, should be, authentic, and “real” in the sense of truthful human behaviour and insight. All acting is psychological. Psychology plays a role in communicating the necessary blend of entertainment and instruction to an audience. So the “psychological” in the term *psychological realism* is not the issue. It’s the realism. It’s the scope, or as that great evaluator of plays, Aristotle, termed it, the magnitude.³ Constantly placing one’s performance within the constraints of realism (or naturalism, realism’s extremist sibling) distorts our feeling of what is authentic and what is truthful lived experience. More fundamentally, it limits our agency, by taking us inside the problem, rather than viewing it in a larger human context—in much the same way as Method Acting limited actors in the 20th century to fascinating, but shortsighted, interiority.

Every actor possesses a rich lexicon of expressive languages. Most are not trained to use them to their full advantage. Stage actors are kinaesthetic magpies. They learn by watching and imitating. When a school tells them, through its curriculum, that voice training is separate from body training, they react like most school students. What is learned in one class is not transferred to another. This is exacerbated by scene study classes that focus on text analysis, as if the only way into a play or a character is through its words. Actors take the hint; their survival depends on taking hints. So they focus on the words, often to the detriment of all the clues a talented playwright places in a script.

In my daydreams I envisage a conservatory filled with young actors of every conceivable background, from every spot on the gender spectrum, none beholden to the bigotries or assumed status of their ancestors. True 21st century artists, they hunger to inhabit the frontiers between cultures, and the liminal space where those cultures overlap. They would spend their days in a **holistic acting class**, encouraged to explore every expressive vocabulary in their

¹ Magarshack, David (trans.) *Stanislavsky and the Art of the Stage*. Magarshack provides a clear explanation of the ten principles of Stanislavsky’s “System” in the Introduction (p. i—xxlvii).

² “Objective Acting”. Brecht, Bertolt. In *A Brecht Sourcebook*.

³ In *Poetics*. Many versions exist. I use the Ingram Bywater translation.

arsenal in both realistic and non-realistic ways. After lunch they immerse themselves in issues contemporary and timeless in **life class**, training in modes of discourse, as citizens. They'd learn sound nutritional and fitness practices, so as to amplify their energy and hone their critical faculties. Plato feared the actor because of their deviance; their deviance from truth, as he expressed it in *Republic*, but the actor who knows they are acting functions as a riposte to Plato's orthodox paranoia⁴. Even more so the actor who knows why they act, as a citizen and an active agent in social discourse. The actor is best served by a body and mind that functions, as Schiller said, to employ the supersensuous in mining meaning from the pits of emotion and refining that ore for its quality of illumination.⁵

So we come to BoxWhatBox. While I await the winning lottery ticket that will enable me to set up a training facility for actors which doesn't rely on revenue and where I can set the curriculum, *Republic*-like, as I wish it, BWB will work with a defined set of objectives.⁶ First, to deconstruct the bad habits—physical, mental, spiritual—actors have accrued through a lifetime of having been poorly informed of what constitutes authenticity in acting. Augusto Boal's work in *demechanisation* is a key influence here.⁷ Second, to connect everything actors do as parts of an expressive whole. That means focusing on *rhythm* as a concept that links the performer's body, voice, mind and spirit. Finally, using games, exercises and études, to take all these expressive islands of the actor's imagination and combine them into a world. The world of a play, yes. But more than this. To create that magic liminal space where the world of the play and the world of the spectator merge. Neither world is lost, both worlds remain distinct; no one is fooled by illusion; they *choose* to ally, to become a greater whole. To do this requires *non-linear creation* in addition to the linear realism that inhibits contemporary actors. The *four expressive vocabularies* are central to this work: postural, gestural, non-verbal and verbal, each limitless in scope and application. This, in my admittedly personal definition, defines intercultural performance. It's a style of performance that presupposes a world of distinct peoples who desire to work together, to link to each other in profound and not-so-profound ways. I write these words in dangerous times, where this presupposition cannot be assumed. But then it has always been so. Times are always dangerous in one way or the other, and all presuppositions should be questioned to test their tensile strength. We shouldn't wait. Let's get started.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*.

⁵ Schiller, Friedrich. *The Stage as a Moral Institution*. In Dukore, Bernard F. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*.

⁶ Hereafter when I use the abbreviation "BWB", note that it stands for "BoxWhatBox".

⁷ Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of The Oppressed*. Jackson, Adrian (trans.).



Photo: MESS Festival