



PUSH Physical Theatre
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A Case for Physical Theatre

by Darren Stevenson

Introduction

‘Physical Theatre’ has become a catchall phrase that incorporates many movement based theatre forms, with incredibly diverse companies adopting the term to describe themselves. If we define ‘dance’ as ‘a body moving through space’ this word would appropriately define our art. However, the narrow concept of what dance is yields a limited and misleading image for us. How then, do you describe an art form with no name? This question plagues all of us who fall outside of ‘traditional theatre’.

“Wow, that *thing* you did was great! I thought it was going to be like [*insert art form here*] but it was totally different.” is a sentiment I hear a lot after performances as I try to describe how we fit. Explaining what we do as ‘physical theatre’ doesn’t help much either. Instead, the performance itself becomes it’s own definition. Even though another physical theatre company may present a style completely different from our own, the audience leaves with their concept of physical theatre tied to the images they just witnessed. This is a huge responsibility for the artist who claims the title. We become the sole ambassador (eloquent or not) for everyone who uses this designation.

My aim here is to do just the opposite. I do not represent physical theatre as a whole. I am the founder one company, PUSH Physical Theatre. I can only speak of the connections we have made on our artistic journey. We are a small but insistent voice in a world of beautiful and gifted movers...



Beauty (in the eye of the beholder)

“Do not actual conditions of strength always conform to the secret conditions of harmony? The first principal of architectural aesthetics is that the essential lines of a movement be determined by their perfect appropriateness to their intent.”

- Gustave Eiffel

According to Thomas Leabhart, this was the voice of the spirit that destroyed the nineteenth century’s academics. The idea that true beauty comes from internal motivation rather than a contrived external idealism. Suddenly art did not need to transcend reality. It could be found in all of us. Jacques Copeau, observed beauty in working people that

“...Comes from their really doing something, that they do what they do and do it well, knowing the reason, absorbing themselves in it.”

- Jacques Copeau

For me, the beauty lies not only in the movement but in it’s context. Beauty lies in the ability of the performer to be emotionally vulnerable and honest with the audience and has little to do with cultural stereotypes. Understanding why specific movements affect us so profoundly is the artistic mission of PUSH Physical Theatre. Why a certain tilt of the head is comic or another with a subtle change is tragic. Why the same seemingly impossible gymnastic stunt can be profound or a mere affectation. The dramatic tension expressed through a specific twist of the torso or the hang of a wrist is far more important than any contrived position of classical training.

The fact that members of an audience respond to movement in similar ways points to the existence of a grammar, rules to the language of movement that can be analyzed and reproduced. But they do not parallel the rules of language, and movements cannot be substituted by speech. If they could, we would have no need for movement (a trip to the local coffee shop to observe couples gesturing vibrantly during conversation proves that this is not the case). Our movements betray the lies of our words. They express a depth of honesty and beauty that cannot be articulated or explained away with our mouths.



Simplify/Amplify (economy and breath)

To bring these movements to the stage as more than just observations, our job is two fold. We must simplify and amplify them.

Simplification

Art is achieved through restraint. The most difficult part of communication being: to choose what not to say in order to draw attention to the soul of the piece. As a student I was often given vague advice; “Just be honest in your work”, or “Allow the inner you come out”, as if these were easy things to do. In fact the ‘inner me’ was so hidden under piles of insecurity and camouflaged by technique and posturing that I barely even knew who I was. The idea of ‘allowing’ seemed so easy, so passive, and yet was totally elusive to me. Simplicity was indeed a complicated thing. Stripping away the masquerade to reveal my vulnerable self would take years of aggressive focused work. It would take me on a journey that I still travel.

Profound moments take place in front of us everyday, yet we fail to notice them in the surrounding clutter of life. On the stage we have the opportunity to isolate the details of these moments. To re-present them in a new, profoundly economical way so that they reach out and shake off our comfortable preconceptions... leaving us sensitive again.

Amplification

“Projection is not a matter of volume. It is a matter of diction.”

- Rev. Ken Lee

After simplifying my gesture, I am still left with a pedestrian gesture that the audience could easily observe anywhere without the ticket price. Placing it on the stage, removed from its context the movement becomes sterile, a hollow reminder of its former life. It must be amplified. I do not mean that it should be exaggerated. Waving our arms and contorting our face in a desperate attempt to reach the audience is the movement equivalent of an actor screaming his lines so that the audience can hear.

“Do not try to become part of their world. Invite them instead, to become a part of yours.”

- Frank Borst

Rather than exaggerating the gesture, we amplify the underlying motive for it. Still with a sense of perfect proportion between the emotion expressed through the face and through the body. Still with a style that communicates our deepest meditations. Instead of being pedestrian, we expand the thought that provokes movement. It is not enough to be naturalistic. We must be supernatural.



Time (one million years and one second)

“The manner of playing resembled the slow motion of film. But while that is the slowing down of fragments of reality, ours was the slow production of one gesture in which many others were synthesized.”

- Etienne Decroux (speaking of the Ecole du Vieux Colombier. Modern mime p27)

This idea of producing gestures that integrate complex thoughts is the foundation for physical theatre. Not to explain words through movement, but to illuminate the audience by expressing what words cannot. That is not to say that our art must be devoid of words. In fact, until Marcel Marceau popularized his classical form even mime was rarely silent except in the case of government restriction. However, words exist usually in real time. By giving ourselves freedom from words, we give ourselves freedom to manipulate time. We have the opportunity to draw the attention of the audience to the essence of the moment.

“The post-modern mime transforms and shapes his body not as a sign or symbol for some word he has chosen not to speak, or as a complement to a word he had chosen to speak, but as a metaphor for some other transformation, some other shaping, that cannot be seen, but which can be hinted at through the visible.”

- Thomas Leabhart

If I am portraying a gravedigger, which is most important: The action of digging, or the purpose for the digging? The action is only important in that it clearly communicates itself. But, unless I am digging a real hole, the communication of the action should take only seconds. By compressing time this way I am then able to expand the time taken to portray the nuances of character, the details of gesture, the profound pauses that truly express the essence of the moment. Show me the depth of the meaning. Not the depth of the hole.

The body can and should be trained to move outside real time using a variety of physical theatre techniques.

“The development of the action was skillful enough for them to condense several hours into a few seconds, and to contain several places in only one.”

- Etienne Decroux (speaking of the Ecole du Vieux Colombier)



Space (The empty stage)

Empty space on stage allows the manipulation of environment, of space itself, to allow the imagination of the audience to be freed. But on an empty stage there must be

“Actors of presence, actors who did not disappear on such a stage, actors large enough to fill the empty space.”

- Thomas Leabhart (describing Copeau’s struggle)

A note for mimes:

Though I did not realize it at the time, my years of training in objective illusionary mime technique were for more than the creation of amusing (and irritating) tricks. Objective mime is a tool of control. The trained body has full control of its environment. He can create the most sacred Holy Grail and, in a moment, turn it into a cup of poison. When he’s done... it disappears. More real than reality itself, it exists in the colorful imagination of the audience. Not a parlor trick, not an imitation, but the skillful application of art.

Where mime has failed, it was only because the mime performer has failed to gain control of his tool, the body. I have seen, too often, the performer trying desperately to tame his creation, throwing it at the audience as if playing some macabre game of charades for his eternal soul. Or he becomes mesmerized by his apparent mastery of technique, focusing hypnotically on it as an end in itself. He should be the master of his stage. Creating his world from the air as if it was second nature. This, of course, is no easy task.

There is an enormous difference between simply moving through space (however beautifully) and carving it, creating your environment by pushing the air around you. This leaves lasting imagery that hangs in the air long after you pass through it. For instance, when moving your hand, you utilize not only its own weight, but it’s weight, plus the weight of your arm, plus the weight of your torso, plus the weight of your body on the floor, pushing against the weight of the planet. Understanding this concept takes time. It’s not ever about executing correct technique (though this is crucial); rather, it’s about mastering the force of your presence filling the stage with meaning. Performers with this kind of ability have little need for props, which detract*. What we can give them through the magnificent tool of the human body on an empty stage is truly a rare and beautiful gift.



*This is not to say that we cannot utilize props and costume, but only that we understand their place.

Synergy

“Some people believe audiences need to be educated about dance. I feel exactly the opposite. Most dance people need to be educated in the ways of normal living and learn what body movements mean to other people.”

- Lloyd Newson, DV8 Physical Theatre

Our Physical Theatre is an art form created from borrowing. We are humbled in knowing that, at best, we are simply standing on the shoulders of others. We have been inspired by the concepts and ideas of corporeal mime (both objective and subjective), modern dance, non-traditional partnering, and those areas of acting technique that relate to the use of the body as tool of discovery; even gymnastics plays a part. Rather than forcing these theatre forms to share the same stage space, as in a variety show, we attempt to create a true synergy between them in which the whole is greater than, and different from, the sum of the parts.

This creates a problem. In articulating what our art form is, we tend to use comparisons. These tell us more about what the art form is not, than what it is. In addition, we draw from art forms that are often massively misunderstood. The public idea of mime, for instance, often relates to a group of under-trained street performers perpetually stuck in a box! I have asked some of mime’s harshest critics to describe to me what they believe a mime is. They invariably describe, instead, what they believe a mime wears. Striped shirts and white face have nothing at all to do with mime. If I asked what a musician was, would you describe that it is a man wearing a guitar? Or if I saw someone in the street wearing a tuxedo and beating a violin against a wall, would I declare that I dislike all orchestral music? We have formed our opinion of an entire art form based on jokes in the media and the costume that a few people have worn.

We cannot rely on old stereotypes. PUSH Physical Theatre attempts to find the movement method most appropriate to communicate in ways that are relevant to the audience. If the perfect method doesn’t exist, we should take the time to invent it. I do not wish to make a sacred cow out of my approach. But, rather than confining ourselves to one movement philosophy, we must be open to them all. All art forms have limitations. Their strength depends on this. We should all live in mutual respect of other forms, learning from them and sharing with them.

“Mimes must have bodies of gymnasts, minds of actors, and hearts of poets.”

- Etienne Decroux



Though this statement inspires me I find it difficult to implement. To expect to become proficient in one of these forms is a formidable task, but all three? For a synergistic art form we should employ a synergistic cast of people whose background and training has given them something original to offer to each other. There are many cookie cutter dancers, but there are also a few really interesting movers. I love to take people whose training contrasts and use that dynamic tension as our creative material. This is risky. It means placing creative power in the hands of the performers. It means walking into a rehearsal vulnerable and open to change. It means taking the time to fully listen to your collaborators' areas of expertise. I have experienced, first hand, the effects of giving power to the performers. A dancer is more than a body, and actor more than emotions with a mouth. These are artists. As directors and choreographers we must be comfortable enough with conflict to argue a point to its conclusion, instead of brow beating the artists we rely upon to save our own egos. More easily said than done...

Conclusions

Clearly we must be willing to turn some of our processes around to develop a new theatre. The form that these ideas should take has only been partially explored. Many careers will be lived out before we get to the bottom of this. Until then, let's embrace what we have now. This text should be accompanied by the readers' attendance at a performance or workshop to be fully considered. Ours is an art that, by definition, cannot be expressed on paper. Like a gourmet meal, it should be tasted. It's important to allow ideas to germinate by inviting training from people with unusual approaches. If you are in a leadership position, be willing to bring in teachers who experiment with untested methods. The great theatre traditions will always be with us. But, like the proverbial cure for cancer hidden in the rain forest, the next great idea could be cut down tomorrow, choked by the tyranny of using only what we know.

“Orthodox Theatre, scarcely being an art [since it suggests a thing by the thing itself] has little chance of being complete. For art to be, the idea of one thing must be given by another thing. Hence this paradox; an art is only complete if it is partial.”

- Etienne Decroux

