

We adapt some foundational somatic / movement exercise-games for a more primordial purpose : to enable and orient embodied sense of relation, field, rhyming, spacing,...

GAMES FOR ACTORS AND NON-ACTORS [Introduction](#)

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3 THE ARSENAL OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Introduction: a new system of exercises and games from Theatre of the Oppressed

In the poetics of Theatre of the Oppressed, various words which can, in other circumstances, carry a number of different meanings, are used in a very precise sense, with a particular connotation. Thus words such as 'ritual', 'mask', 'oppression', etc. are explained as and when necessary.

In this book, I use the word 'exercise' to designate all physical, muscular movement (respiratory, motor, vocal) which helps the doer to a better knowledge or recognition of his or her body, its muscles, its nerves, its relationship to other bodies, to gravity, to objects, to space, its dimensions, volumes, weights, speed, the interrelationship of these different forces, and so on. The goal of the exercises is a better awareness of the body and its mechanisms, its atrophies and hypertrophies, its capacities for recuperation, restructuring, reharmonisation. Each exercise is a 'physical reflection' on oneself. A monologue. An introversion.

The games, on the other hand, deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages. The games are a dialogue, they require an interlocutor. They are extroversion.

In fact, the games and exercises I offer are mostly 'gamesercises' – there is a fair proportion of exercise in the games and a fair proportion of game in the exercises. The difference on the whole is one of didactic intent.

This 'arsenal' has been chosen in pursuit of the general aims of Theatre of the Oppressed. Some of the games have been adapted to our needs (with children's games as the starting point, for example), some have been invented in the course of our practice and, as I have mentioned, some are as old as Brueghel.

Two unities

We start from the principle that the human being is a unity, an indivisible whole. Scientists have demonstrated that one's physical and psychic apparatuses are completely inseparable. Stanislavski's work on physical actions also tends to the same conclusion, i.e. that ideas, emotions and sensations are all indissolubly interwoven. A bodily movement 'is' a thought and a thought expresses itself in a corporeal form.

This concept is easily grasped in its most obvious manifestations – the idea of eating can induce salivation, the idea of making love can produce erection, love can bring a smile to the face, hate can produce a hardening of the features, etc. The phenomenon is less obvious when it relates to a particular way of walking, sitting, eating, drinking, speaking. And yet all ideas, all mental images, all emotions reveal themselves physically.

That is the first unity, the unity of the physical and psychic apparatuses. The second is that of the five senses – none exists separately, they too are all linked. Bodily activities are activities of the whole body. We breathe with our whole body, with our arms, our legs, our feet, etc., even though our respiratory apparatus takes a leading role in the process. We sing with our whole body, not just our vocal chords. We make love with our whole body, not just our genital organs.

Chess is a highly intellectual, cerebral game. And yet good chess players also do physical training before a match. They know that the whole body thinks – not just the brain.

Five categories of game and exercise

In the following section, I outline a series of exercises and games in five different categories. In the body's battle with the world, the senses suffer. And we start to feel very little of what we touch, to listen to very little of what we hear and to see very little of what we look at. We feel, listen and see according to our speciality; the body adapts itself to the job it has to do. This adaptation is at one and the same time atrophy and hypertrophy. In order for the body to be able to send out and receive all possible messages, it has to be reharmonised. It is with this end in mind that we have chosen exercises and games which focus on de-specialisation.

No one should undertake or continue any exercise or game if they have some injury or condition which might be exacerbated by taking part – a back problem, for instance. In Theatre of the Oppressed no one is compelled to do anything they don't wish to do.

In the first category, the aim is to bridge the gap between feeling and touching. In the second, between listening and hearing. In the third, to try to develop several senses at once. In the fourth category, to try to see what we look at. Finally, the senses also have a memory – in the fifth category, we try to awaken it.

I FEELING WHAT WE TOUCH (RESTRUCTURING MUSCULAR RELATIONS)

This category deals with tactile sensitivity: our naked bodies are constantly touching the air, our clothes, other parts of our own bodies and the bodies of others, but we feel very little of what we are touching – this series helps the actor to feel more of what she touches; also, it is concerned with mechanised ways of walking and moving, with externalising emotions, with feeling and discovering new ways of structuring her muscles and helping the actor to find new ways of expressing herself and acting on stage and in life.

The approach of death stiffens the body, starting with the joints. (In his last years, Chaplin, the greatest mime, the greatest dancer, could no longer bend his knees.) Thus it makes sense to do exercises which dissociate the different parts of the body, so that central cerebral control may be exercised over each and every muscle right down to the smallest portion of the body – tarsus, metatarsus, finger, head, thorax, pelvis, left-hand side of the face, right-hand side, etc.

First series: general exercises

1 The cross and the circle

We start with the exercise which is theoretically the easiest to do and yet, because of our psychological and physical mechanisations, is actually extremely difficult to achieve in practice. The participants in a workshop or a forum session can try it sitting down or standing up, on a chair, on a table or on the ground. As there is no need for preparation, non-actors have no fear of throwing themselves into it. As they are warned that it is almost impossible to do well, they aren't ashamed of not succeeding. As there is no compulsion to succeed, they feel free to give it a try.

The participants are asked to describe a circle with their right hand. Large or small, as they please. It's easy, everybody does it. Stop. Ask them to do a cross with their left hand. Even easier. Everyone gets there. Stop. Ask them to do both

at the same time. It's almost impossible. In a group of thirty people, sometimes one person manages it, almost never two. Three is the record!

Variation

Ask the participants to describe a circle with their right foot, seated (easier) or standing. They do it for a minute. They forget about the foot, still continuing to make circles. Then ask them to write their first name in the air with their right hand at the same time as the foot is doing circles. Again, this is almost impossible: the foot has a tendency to follow the hand and write the first name as well.

To make the exercise easier, try doing the circle with the left foot and writing with the right hand. This is easier, sometimes people manage it.

Why is this so difficult? Pure psychological mechanisation, since there is absolutely no physical obstacle. So, with practice, it can be done.

2 Colombian hypnosis

One actor holds her hand palm forward, fingers upright, anything between 20 and 40 centimetres away from the face of another, who is then as if hypnotised and must keep his face constantly the same distance from the hand of the hypnotiser, hairline level with her fingertips, chin more or less level with the base of her palm. The hypnotiser starts a series of movements with her hand, up and down, right and left, backwards and forwards, her hand vertical in relation to the ground, then horizontal, then diagonal, etc. – the partner must contort his body in every way possible to maintain the same distance between face and hand, so that face and hand remain parallel. If necessary, the hypnotic hand can be swapped; for instance, to force the hypnotised to go between the legs of the hypnotiser. The hand must never do movements too rapid to be followed, nor must it ever come to a complete halt. The hypnotiser must force her partner into all sorts of ridiculous, grotesque, uncomfortable positions. Her partner will thus put in motion a series of muscle structures which are never, or only rarely, activated. He will use certain 'forgotten' muscles in his body. After a few minutes, the two actors change, the follower and the leader. After some more time, both can extend a hypnotising right hand, becoming leaders and followers at one and the same time.