

# ‘Archetypes’ – Liberating increasingly diverse actors towards specific and deeply embodied playing for live and screen.

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Over the last seven years, acting cohorts at *Te Kura Toi Whakaari O Aotearoa - New Zealand Drama School* have reflected increasing diversity in their student base, comprising students of Māori, Pasifika, Pāheka (New Zealanders of European ancestry), Asian, Scandinavian, Middle Eastern and African descent. This is reflective of our ever-changing world and has called for changes in how acting craft is taught. Amidst this new landscape, one key inquiry has been how to liberate our young actors to reach for greater imaginative freedom and more sophisticated choices. This requires our students to go beyond a blinkered picture of ‘realism’ many enter the training with. Such liberation is crucial to achieve embodied, layered characterisation and targeted acting choices. Working with ‘action’ has been challenging in this regard; students routinely struggle to move beyond a cerebral conceptualisation of action and often get stuck in superficial, lifeless work. To address this, Heather Timms (*Director of Actor Training*) and Vaughan Slinn (*Senior Tutor, Screen and Creative Practice*) have developed an embodied approach to character and action, using a version of ‘*Archetypes*.’ This approach has been developed within rehearsal and performance across stage and screen. This evolving technique is both a process and tool that explores personas drawn from archetypal and poetic origin. Over time this approach has proven to quickly build and test embodied characterisation, liberate greater physical, vocal and imaginative range and scale, and employ the actor’s individual artistry. It has also created a pathway for more deeply integrated application of action and objective. This use of ‘*Archetype*,’ rather than creating broad, non-specific characterisation, has instead proven to create highly detailed categories of playable action, and allowed students to work more imaginatively in crafting affecting, idiosyncratic and original acting choices. With these discoveries,

this approach has now become a key acting tool, and supports Toi Whakaari's deeper acting pedagogical aim: creating self-sustainable, creative and unique actors.

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## OUR CONTEXT

*Te Kura Toi Whakaari ō Aotearoa* is the national drama school of Aotearoa–New Zealand and is located in Pōneke–Wellington. We are a bespoke tertiary arts training organisation and train 5 disciplines in the Performing Arts across live and screen: Acting, Performance Design, Arts Management, Costume Construction and Set & Props. Including staff and students, we are a kura-school of approximately 150 people.

In Acting, each year we take a maximum of 22 students and over the last five years we have been working to grow the diversity of our intake so it more authentically reflects Aotearoa-New Zealand, now. This has meant re-designing our audition process so it is more accessible, and opens up the notion of how we can ‘see’ talent and potential. These shifts in *how* we audition are working and currently, across the three years, we have actors of Māori, Samoan, Tongan, Tokelauan, Cook Island, Fijian, Pāheka (New Zealanders of European ancestry), Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Lao, Malay, Mongolian, Scandinavian, Afghani, Persian and Tanzanian descent. Pāheka actors are now in the minority which is a significant shift.

As the diversity has grown, so too have our questions around how best to liberate our actors to reach for greater imaginative freedom and more sophisticated acting choices, in screen and live performance. Working with ‘action’ has been challenging as the training actor has routinely struggled to move beyond a cerebral conceptualisation of action and often gets stuck in superficial, lifeless work. To address this, we’ve been developing an embodied approach that employs a version of ‘Archetypes’. It is now, effectively and efficiently, supporting our actors to build and play embodied characters and investigate and work with visceral action.

## FOUNDATIONS

It has been a rich process to reflect on where and how this work with Archetypes has evolved and developed.

Dorothy Heathcote, UK artist and educator, is a foundational source of inspiration. She worked with a wide diversity of performers and in everything she did the primary goal was dropping each individual into the ‘universal’ of human experience, asking “what is the inner significance of the outer act? (Wagner, 1976)”. Heathcote’s work with Brotherhoods was also very influential. The idea that *all* characters speak on behalf of a specific ‘voice’ of humanity: “*We are in the Brotherhood of all those who ...*”

The universal is the well spring, the source of human understanding. Instead of starting with this source, however, drama, like all art, starts with a very carefully selected, precise and particular, unrepeatable instance – one that acquires significance as it reverberates in the chambers of the universal. For most classes, the teacher needs to sensitise students to feeling this resonance, which takes them not out of themselves, but rather more fully into themselves, and into the experiences of the real world as well as those of the drama (Wagner, 1976: 76).

Interestingly, when naming a Brotherhood, Heathcote used the colloquial language of the group she worked with. A participant's familiarity and ownership of the language was pivotal to allowing the Brotherhood technique to trigger 'living' associations and images for each individual.

The thinking and use of Social Roles (Herrmann et al, 2004) and Role Theory (Biddle, 1979) in the field of Social Psychology concerns the study of "*roles, or patterns of behaviour that are characteristic of persons and contexts*" (Biddle, 1979: 20). Deepening our understanding of these territories of thinking influenced our experimentation and exploration across role, persona and archetype. It gave us confidence to explore how they might talk to each other and how we might collide them in new ways. Furthermore, the practical use of Social Roles and Role Theory in Playback Theatre and Psycho-Drama provided interesting models of how it can be applied to improvisational performance practice and, over the last decade, we have been exploring their application to text work. Social roles have proved to be a particularly accessible text tool for a wider range of performers. Regardless of an individual's positionally, social roles provoke specific, immediate and personal associations that can quickly be embodied: Father, Step Mother, Worker, Middle Child, Priest, Big Sister, Worker, Best Friend, Teacher. It is possible to get a quick, beginning window on a scene by examining the potential social roles at play, through asking, what 'role' is this character 'playing' in any given moment/scene? What are the potential relational dynamics at play? How do the Social Roles shift and change, across a scene and a character's journey? This can be liberating for creatives, trained and untrained, when working with complex texts. We can look at an example of this in application, with the "'I Burnt Dinner Scene' (Act 1, Scene 8) of Tony Kushner's *Angels In America. Millennium Approaches*. Is Harper enrolled as 'Lover', while Joe plays 'Father'? If we use this lens to go at the scene we have found it a more accessible tool for the actor to embody and reveal the complexity of this relationship and, most importantly, the specific nature of the love and grief that exists between this married couple. The actors move away from their idea of the 'drama' and can easily access and play the unconscious role the characters unwittingly adopt. This reveals a heart-aching humanity in the scene.

Joan Scheckel, founder of 'The Technique', has also had a profound effect on the developing practice, particularly her processes of physical investigation. 'The Technique' uses

investigation to unleash creative authenticity (Scheckel 2019). Joan puts everything through the physical body.

Everything MUST be actionable. It must be simple, you must GET it. Our striving to be clever is not helping. The depth will come through investigation. Key to my technique is trying it out physically and playing your way to a truth. I want an actor to find the physical action that makes the psychological action more deeply felt. (Joan Scheckel, July 2016, personal communication with Heather Timms during a teaching session in Los Angeles).

The body knows and through sketching at scale and with embodied exploration, creatives can connect to the deep instinctual knowing we all have. Scheckel is always searching for the ‘divining rod’ that connects actor, writer or director, to their source, their river of inner life, “because this river is always flowing” (Joan Scheckel, June 2016, communication with the group during the ACTION Masterclass in Los Angeles).

## THE DIVINING ROD

Many methodologies propose approaches to finding and wielding this divining rod; ways that connect the actor’s conscious, conceptual understanding of their character to a more intuitive knowing that leads to deeper authenticity. In methodologies derived from Stanislavski and focused on action, *language* (and specifically, action verbs) is the vehicle used as this divining rod. Consequently, the words we select and then play as actions are used as a performance score to construct and render the deep, layered evocation of what we call “character.” Many acting methods instruct us that the quality, speciality and artistic ingenuity of the choices of those words we choose are the key ingredients of the quality and potency of the performance of the actor. As Stella Adler famously says, “your talent lies in your choices.” (Adler, 1988: 4).

However, there is an inherent problem with this formula: it relies on an extensive vocabulary and a scholarly, sophisticated relationship to the written word. Furthermore, while such an approach was undoubtedly prudent and prescient in the era Stanislavski proposed it, the digital age has created a very different hegemony between image and written word. In our context, we are finding that most of our students have a more distant relationship to words and language, and words alone are not often sufficient to stimulate their embodied imagination. Working analytically with actions and text can leave them confused and then paralysed when they attempt to explore this action word on the floor. In our experience, the application of action, when not sensorially stimulating and understood in the body, often leads to *disembodied* performance, typified by a thin, superficial rendering of character.

As we’ve wrestled with a response to this issue in our training, we’ve been challenged to ask: what are the vehicles, the divining rods of today, here in Aotearoa and, for each individual?

How do we translate and update Stanislavski's early 20th century Eurocentric technique into something useful for our young people? What's the combination of language, image and poetics that can stimulate more embodied, and a sensorially alive reaction in the actor? And how do we awaken each actor's deep knowing in relationship to character?

Our current answer to these complex questions is a version of *Archetypes/Archetypal Personas*. More specifically, these are co-created, poetic labels that weave *contemporary personas, social roles and metaphors*. These labels are co-created between director and actor, to stimulate their own embodied response, and through doing so, allow them their own way to tap the vein of inner life. Archetypes are used early in the process of the character development process, and then become a shared language between director and actor, that can be used to score scenes, character arcs and to coach performance. So why call the process *Archetypes*, and not simply *Personas*?

Our experience is that when the actor simply uses persona, the results remain thinner. Although we might start with a label more akin to a contemporary persona, something such as "Deranged Valley Girl" or "Charismatic Preacher," our process of co-creation and embodied exploration moves the contemporary persona into something fuller, richer, with more dimension - something we would describe as an *archetypal persona*. In other words, a persona that is more fully embodied by the actor, and therefore one that becomes more innately recognised and felt by an audience.

## THE PROCESS - TEXT LAB

The actors are introduced to our *Archetypal Personas* process in Year One through their first major project, Text Lab. In 2020 we worked with Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* and the actors were cast as one of six characters: Mother, Bride, Servant, Leonardo, Wife and Moon.

The process has five stages and in Year One we, as tutors and directors, actively hold and guide the work. In the second week of the project we focus on *Archetypal Personas*. Each character group, which has anything from two to five actors in it, attends a two and a half hour Archetype session with the directors/tutors.

### ONE. Prepared Individual Offers.

In preparation for the session, actors are asked to choose the top five *archetypal personas* their character plays, or adopts, through the journey of the story. We simply give them the provocation: what are the major *Archetypal Personas*, for your character, you see at play inside the story?

Prior to Text Lab the students have learnt about, and experimented with, Social Roles and *Archetypal Personas* during Acting classes. The director/tutors also come to the session with their top 5 archetypes for each of the characters.

## TWO. Settling on the Character *Archetypal Personas* – An Action of Co-Creation

The actors arrive with their offers and we make space and time for a rich conversation. We share our archetypes, tease out thinking and images, identify key qualities, go back and look at the text, choose the strongest offers, share stories as we get clearer about the archetypes, and collaboratively enrich the names so they evoke qualities we feel strongly about. For example Queen becomes Queen Bee, becomes Cat Walk Queen Bee. Or, Shy Girl becomes Wallflower, becomes Alien Wallflower.

It's important to spend time here. There is no clear, clean beginning point. There is only what Dorothy Heathcote calls "edging in" (Wagner 1976): working from where you are, listening with all your senses, and working in response. This conversation must build relevant, living, breathing pictures and associations, for each actor, with each archetype. As the conversation evolves the director is looking for when the actor energetically 'lights up' in response to a name, a gesture, a word, a persona, an image. Director/tutor and actor/student are weaving between the personal and the universal, the known with the unknown. The conversation finishes with a shared list of five archetypes to now test on the floor.

## THREE. Embodied Sketching – Instinctual Knowing Comes to Roost

The sketching process happens directly after the conversation and usually lasts for 60-80 minutes. The process has grown out of Scheckel's techniques of physical sketching which she uses to explore action words, emotional qualities and the inner life of a scene.

Drop any need for this to be 'good'. We are working to find the inner life so we must start from where we are. We are here to investigate what it means. Say the word, like liquid. Let it roll through you. Don't have an opinion about it. Don't colour it. The most important thing is to be yourself and open up to your intuitive knowing. Stay with the moment, stay in, walk the tight rope and let it bloom...Sketching with the inner life requires the director to make space for the impulse to arrive. Then as the director, blow on it. (Heather Timms Workshop Notes. July 2013. Joan Scheckel Masterclasses. Los Angeles)

The embodied sketching is a form of improvisational exploration that employs the actor's body, voice and imagination and can range anywhere from non-specific, sensorial free play, to specific given-circumstance driven improvisation, with the actors inside an archetypal persona.

The studio is set up with simple lights, transformative objects (blankets, sticks, rostra, chairs, buckets, piano) and a sound system. One tutor coaches the sketching process and one tutor feeds, provokes and builds atmospheres through light, music and diegetic sound: rain, applause, laughter, etc.

Before beginning the director clarifies the process and reminds the actors it is all about truly ‘playing’ their way to some potential discoveries and is impossible to get wrong. The actors are not *playing the character* adopting an archetypal persona, they are purely *exploring the potential* of an archetypal persona. Across the session the director moves the group through all five Archetypal Personas the group have settled on, starting with the most ‘graspable.’ The sequence of the remaining, organically reveals itself from the floor.

Coaching the sketching process is another texture alongside light, sound and object. The actors are encouraged to both listen and not listen. Throughout this process they must be empowered to investigate on their own terms. Coaching involves supporting the actors to go deeper into potent moments that emerge on the floor, reflect back to them what is occurring so they can more consciously and strongly build, and encourage greater physical, vocal and energetic range and scale. Scale is important because it allows the actor to more easily see and feel the territory they are in. Once they are in the territory the coach also operates as a disruptor, an external force the archetype can not control. This releases new discoveries as they instinctually respond to the stakes shifting and changing.

At the end of the session all actors have traversed multiple worlds, experienced a wide palate of embodied emotion and moved through new portals of knowing. The original rich list of Archetypal Personas have taken on a whole new depth, scope and nuance. And it is achieved with purpose, levity and playfulness.

#### FOUR. Sharing Discoveries and Insights

Immediately after the sketching there is space for a second conversation. Just as in Dorothy Heathcote’s process of ‘Dropping to the Universal’ (Wagner 1976) we put emphasis on reflection and building depth, insight and conscious understanding from these deeply intuitive and felt experiences. This is key to this process of working with Archetypal Personas. The catalyst for the conversation is the simple question - what are you waking up to and learning about your character? The function of the conversation is two fold. It is important to share the ‘felt’ insights the actors have had about *how* the character experiences their world.

”I never thought about how claustrophobic and heavy it would be and how much energy it takes for him to be there, day after day, after day... She might be a mother but she’s still a woman, a vibrant woman who so much wants to be loved, it aches... Their heart is SO open and they’re trying to hold everything together. It’s really

sad...They hold so much rage, so much, but they need to keep it hidden from everyone. I couldn't meet anyone's eyes"

Actors' Responses. 2020 Text Lab.

The other area of reflection focuses on the actor and their choices. What they are discovering about how the character holds themselves, physically, gesturally, vocally, energetically, spatially in each archetype. They share, note and draw these discoveries. It's important to capture the choices made inside the sketching because, without exception, the work is always braver, more connected, more sensory and more interesting.

This conversation allows the cacophony of discoveries to be noticed and named. Through experience the actors have dropped into a palpable empathy for the character and have a felt understanding of how they can embody them.

#### FIVE. Territories of Action

The final stage is to go through each archetype and make a list of all the actions they instinctually played during the sketching. So often, the action words now tumble out. This gives them a palate of action to draw from, specific to the character. These action words are now infused with rich inner life, embodied experience and potent imagery. After the session the directors and actors have a shared language, rich with image and experience. Going forward, the Archetypal Personas are used to score scenes and the characters journey, to layer into choices, use in beats and use in heightened moments where inner and outer action is useful.

### THE PROCESS – MISE EN SCÈNE

In Year Two, this process of working with Archetypal Personas is applied to a screen project called *Mise En Scène*. *Mise En Scène* asks actors to create their own embodied characters based on film scripts, which are then filmed with a professional crew. This process uses the framework of Text Lab as a basis, yet asks students to take more agency in the creation, testing and application of archetypal persona into performance.

In week one, students bring offers of archetypes, and then drive their own embodied sketching in individual studios. Consistently we have been struck by their ownership and liberation inside this independent testing. They then select and curate key results from their long-form investigation, and present these as 20 minute showings to the directors. The directors workshop these offerings on the floor, before a joint reflection is held and the archetypal personas are discussed, distilled and agreed upon. We have found that this process develops a shared language between performer and director, that works extremely quickly as a means to coach the actor on screen, and allows the actor to play inside 'containers' that provide vast playable actions, all appropriate to that character. As the film form allows

multiple takes, and encourages exploration and investigation even in the act of ‘realised performance,’ we will often continue to direct the actors inside these archetypal personas on set, rather than always moving to more specific actions.

Furthermore, in the film frame, what has been fascinating to explore is the layering of these archetypal personas on top of each other to coach, explore and harness the inner life of character. Rather than getting caught up in psychological motivation and analysis, we have witnessed actors working with freedom and liberation in harnessing multiple aspects of ‘persona’ at the same time. This has opened up an useful means of accessing inner life and subtextual layers, and provided an useful means to achieve greater complexity in screen performance.

Such an approach has given students an alternate lens to generate character for film. Most of our students come to screen acting with an inherent bias of the need for a psychological convergence with character, informed by pop-cultural notions of Method Acting. This work challenges that thinking. Rather than exclusively pursuing a unified psychological through-line or searching furiously for some sort of essential self, they begin to explore character on film as a fluid *collection* of selves and personas, that reveal themselves in different moments of the cinematic journey. This has led to more dynamic acting choices, which feel more authentic, and truer to the idiosyncratic mysteries and strangeness of real life.

## CHALLENGING THE ASSUMPTIONS

This work has thrown up many surprises for us. Firstly, when we started, a reasonable assumption would be that the use of broad archetypes would produce broad, non-specific characterisation. We’ve found the opposite to be true. The actors’ sense of ownership in identifying these archetypal personas, combined with the process of co-creation, creates deep nuance and detail. Furthermore, the archetypal personas act as containers that hold a huge range of playable actions, all true to that character. They act as lighthouses, as homing beacons, as goalposts, that the actor knows to play inside.

Alongside this, we have been surprised how strongly these archetypes hold in the body. In the 2020 Mise en Scène there was a break of six months between rehearsal and filming due to lockdown. Yet, once production resumed, actors were immediately able to drop back into a deep specificity of character through returning to the Archetypal Personas, without any directorial supervision. This showcased even further agency, and the liveness and potency of their work was striking.

Most significantly, the key aspect of this work is just how accessible this tool is for our actors. After only one deep experience of the process during Year One most actors in Year

Two are independently owning and wielding the tool. It fires up their imagination, emboldens their exploration, broadens their view of humanity and locates them firmly in their bodies.

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