

Reconstructing Actor Training Within a Social Constructionist World View

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Transact - to act across/through

Pandemic lockdowns, challenges to the economic sustainability of theatre and theatre training institutions and calls to take action on broader social and environmental responsibilities have propelled many in actor training into unfamiliar and unsettling territories. With the future that students are being prepared for radically changing, and the fiscal environment for training them being for many, drastically reshaped, is this an opportune moment to re-evaluate the actor training curriculum?

Key words: Materials of construction, performance as transaction, performance as artefact, dramaturgy

In this essay Mark Radvan takes the position that a review of the conceptual foundations of traditional actor training curriculum is long overdue. He argues that many difficulties associated with that curriculum, the subject of recent debate among academics in actor-training, may arise from philosophical and epistemological assumptions built into those foundations, that are less than helpful in addressing the challenges of contemporaneity.

In this paper, he takes a number of social constructionist ideas articulated by Vivien Burr (2015) in her study of social constructionism and applies them to a mainstream understanding of actor training generally characterised as a conservatoire approach within the Stanislavski tradition.

He suggests that taking an alternative conceptual framework, to reframe the assumptions underlying the Stanislavsky-based actor training heritage, can stimulate the development of new ideas, approaches and pedagogies around actor-training and performance. In addition, there are broader advantages in adopting a social constructionist conceptual framework,

including the enabling of a critical view of how knowledge in the field is constructed and sustained by social processes, how it is historically and culturally specific, how power is constituted and transacted through particular constructions of knowledge, and how personal and social identity is constructed through interaction and relationship.

For actors and performance makers, adopting the notion that perceptions of reality are socially constructed is potentially liberating. On one hand it drives a useful critique of the positivist psychological and cultural assumptions, conventions and problematics underpinning actor training, and on the other provoking an enriched practical and aesthetic understanding of the arts of acting and performance.

Arising from this perspective, Radvan presents a social constructionist model of acting and performance that suggests alternative ways of understanding and constructing acting curriculum and pedagogy and of making performance. He argues that adopting this model would see a repositioning of the actor to the centre of the creative act as a ‘co-author’ or creative originator of performance, with useful ramifications for actor training methodologies, and indeed for how we think about the role of the director in the new zeitgeist.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Not everyone will necessarily agree that traditional actor-training is problematic. Indeed, the model has served us well. There is a lot to love in its high contact teaching built onto a replication of an ensemble-based theatre company, even if that company model rarely exists today outside drama schools. Students are drawn to it, and school production seasons have played an important role in local arts ecologies, offering professional artists a range of opportunities to develop their craft while working with and mentoring ambitious and gifted students. However, the position adopted in this essay takes a contrary view. This view sees actor-training as built on an eclectic, idiosyncratic and often contradictory mix of training traditions, inefficient pedagogies and hand-me-down epistemologies. That student demand continues to be strong, does not mask the uncomfortable fact that professional opportunities

for conservatoire-trained graduates are limited, and in a climate of cost-cutting, the complex resource base on which this model of training depends is rapidly diminishing.

Actor-training is in trouble, in one way or another, and the challenge to reconstruct it in a different way is being faced by many in the field. The purpose of this essay is to contribute to discussion around how to address this challenge, but also to argue that the need for overhaul is as much philosophical as it is financial.

The premise of its argument is that the crisis will not be addressed by simply disassembling current practice and reassembling it in a financially trimmer format. Unquestionably, previous assemblages led to rich student experiences, and it could be argued that they were effective, in a toolbox of techniques sort of way, but epistemologically they were always a mess. In a typical training program, there could be found pseudo-scientific Stanislavski overlaying nineteenth century spiritualist Stanislavski, mixed with Freudian, and even Jungian psychology. There would be psychophysical Suzuki and Viewpoints, a mix of Berry and Linklater, a look-in given to a Michael Chekhov, a Mamet, or a Meisner, and then as much practice programmed as possible in an attempt to pull it all together on the rehearsal room floor. However thoughtful its curation, conceptually it was always a tips-and-tricks muddle of methods, metaphor and mysticism.

Anyone looking for an explicit, overarching philosophical framework that organises and categorises the specialist knowledge and skills associated with acting into delivery modes and cumulatively coherent learning experiences that speak to contemporary ideas, would have difficulty finding it. What they would find is that the entire architecture of traditional actor-training has been built on an inherited tradition of social and cultural capital that turns out to be instantly destabilised by a wave of critique questioning its often elitist, class, colonialist or even racist foundations, a point insightfully explored by Peter Zazzali (2021, p. 28-30) in his forthcoming book.

All is not lost, however. Gifted students continue to flourish, excellent teaching sets them on their way, and the richness of the student experience is evidenced in the competition to participate in it. It is not demolition that is called for, but rather thoughtful renovation. This

essay proposes that one way to begin the overhaul required is to reconsider actor-training through the lens of a contemporary philosophical framework that is sympathetic to the acting enterprise, that speaks to the zeitgeist, and at the same time is helpfully critical. Such a lens would enable an ontological and epistemological review of acting, leading to an affirmation of its knowledge base and a convincing statement of its contemporary relevance as a mode of inquiry, as a credible artistic enterprise and as a way of knowing.

Of the several frameworks one might consider, the one explored here is social constructionism, and in particular an understanding of it articulated by a major scholar in her field, Vivien Burr (2015). The exploration begins with a brief overview of what social constructionism represents, how its worldview helps illuminate the basis of the Stanislavski-based acting tradition, and then proceeds to sketch out an alternative model of the performative act informed by social constructionist principles, the application of which might change current thinking about how acting, or indeed performance-making, is taught.

According to Burr, social constructionism is a poststructuralist philosophical position that came out of the social sciences and social psychology and has influence in education, in psychology and in approaches to counselling. The core idea underpinning social constructionism, is that knowledge is constructed through social processes rather than from a linear relationship with ‘reality’. This is a view that challenges taken-for-granted understandings of the world.

“It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It therefore opposes what is referred to as positivism and empiricism, epistemological positions that are characteristic of the ‘hard’ sciences such as physics or biology. Positivism and empiricism entail the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist.” (p.2)

This key epistemological and philosophical position forms the basis for this essay's argument, even if as Paul Rae recently observed in the introduction to his book *Real Theatre*, social constructionism as a critical theory has in turn attracted critique.

KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Burr's outline of social constructionism encompasses six defining characteristics. First that knowledge is recognised as historically and culturally specific and is created, sustained and discarded by social processes. Second, its position is anti-essentialist and anti-reductionist. Third, knowledge and social action are regarded as going together. Fourth, there is a focus on the dynamics of social interaction and social practices. Fifth, in common with symbolic interactionism—people 'construct their own and each other's identities through everyday encounters with each other. (Burr p. 15). Finally, it is critical of positivism which assumes that reality is 'out there' and can be accurately apprehended and described through language and logical processes.

Burr argues that social constructionism offers a particularly sharp critique of the assumptions of mainstream psychology, which she characterises in four keywords as 'universalist, essentialist, realist and individualist' (2015, p. 14). That those four keywords can be equally applied to the field of Stanislavski-based acting theory, makes social constructionism of immediate interest to this inquiry.

Key features of traditional Stanislavski-based acting theory and its grounding in positivism
Adopting a social constructionist framework enables us to see how Stanislavski-based acting theory is universalist in its explanations, expressed in a positivist worldview reflected in a search for identifying universal principles and laws and on cause and effect explanations. It is essentialist in its notions of fixed identity, and its view of human psychology as explicable in terms of fixed categories, including character, objective, motivation, emotion, un/sub-conscious. Character is regarded as a construct to be built or found arising from within an essentialist view of the self. It is realist in its notions of realism as an imitation or representation of reality—a positivist worldview that assumes that we can objectively see the world, and then construct a theatrical imitation of it, holding, as it were a mirror up to its

nature. It is individualist in its model of human behaviours as a Skinner Box of competing objectives, attempting to override obstacles toward a super-objective. These are all taken-for-granted understandings of Stanislavski-based acting theory that are immediately problematised when viewed through the lens of a social constructionist critique.

If we think of Stanislavski-based acting theory as belonging in a positivist paradigm, we can see how it draws its model of what acting is, by pulling on positivist psychology and a corresponding positivist dramaturgy from this worldview. In the period of its formation, it was a revolutionary idea, enabling acting and performance-making to speak to the early 20th century Modernist zeitgeist. However, there it remained, as if acting's eclectic assemblage of skills and pedagogies were somehow fixed, timeless and ideology-free and could be reapplied without critique into any subsequent genre or worldview.

Few would argue that acting can ever be ideology-free. The rules for its production, the industry processes it articulates with, the power structures encoded in them, and the cultural assumptions embedded in its training pedagogies all serve to reinforce the dominant discourses of power, and in turn to disempower the actor, to abstract the craft of acting out of its historical and cultural specificity, and to alienate acting methodologies from the dramaturgies they supposedly serve. Contemporary actors are rendered as servants of extractive capitalism, and their suffering reflects the pick-up and discard culture of the gig economy they are meant to flourish in as tradable commodities.

If we were to reorientate into a social constructionist perspective, what would acting look like? How would it see differently what the actor is doing? Would that help us?

THROUGH THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM LENS

Social constructionism offers an alternative stance to the positivist discourse of Stanislavski-based acting, with a worldview that proposes we do not objectively see the world, we only enter into it through our *relationality*. This relationality is constructed by our language and discourse, and encoding social agreements, and privilege that is often only visible to those who stand outside it.

Within a social constructionist perspective, identity is viewed as fluid, in constant adaptation to social circumstance. Character, in the theatrical sense, is an *emergent* quality, arising for the audience out of the multiplicity of interactions that they observe and interpret.

Importantly, a social constructionist view would constitute performance not from a positivist perspective as an *imitation* of observable reality, but rather as an authentic moment-by-moment living encounter between the actors and their environment that skillfully creates a temporary *analogy* of the real world. It is not an imitation of the world, but an analogous creation, made in the moment of the encounter, that offers a multi-dimensional commentary on the world. From this perspective, what makes a performance exciting is its *contingency*. It is a unique creation in the moment, driven by the performer's encounters with each other, with the performance environment and with the audience. Positioned within this perspective, the meaning of a performance could not be determined in advance, for example by a director analysing a script, and then worked towards in rehearsal. As with identity, meaning is similarly *emergent*, arising from a performance's moment-by-moment encounters and is contingent on them.

WHAT MIGHT A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF THE PERFORMATIVE ACT LOOK LIKE?

A social constructionist approach shifts the focus to constituting performance around relationships, moving from a linear, additive, production line approach to performance-making, with the actor brought in towards the end to contribute a commoditised physical and vocal expressiveness, instead positioning the actor as absolutely central in a creative process characterised by relationality, fluidity, contingency, emergence and analogy. Granted that this distinction suggests a black and white binary, when reality is shaded in more complex ways, nonetheless it leads us to privilege a different way of thinking about performance and performer-training that we will now turn our attention to, in the consideration of an alternative model.

Taking its cue from the central idea that our knowledge of the world is constructed through our social relationships, this model suggests that performance can be viewed as a dynamic transaction of a variety of relationships that construct dramatic meaning through the manipulation of its constituent materials of construction. Though initially a notion of ‘materials of construction’ might seem to be a mechanically reductionist way of thinking about artistic processes, in reality it leads to an enriched understanding of the actor’s role and the creative powers they bring.

At the centre of this proposed model are the actors and the dynamic interactions that they transact in both rehearsal and performance. These dynamic interactions can be understood as the actors’ ‘materials of construction’, because it is out of their interacting, combining and juxtaposing these materials that the actors craft their performances. These dynamic interactive relationships can be grouped across across five key dimensions:

1. interactive relationships between actor and actor
2. interactive relationships between actor and verbal text (usually written)
3. interactive relationships between actor and space
4. interactive relationships between actor and objects
5. interactive relationships between actor and audience/camera

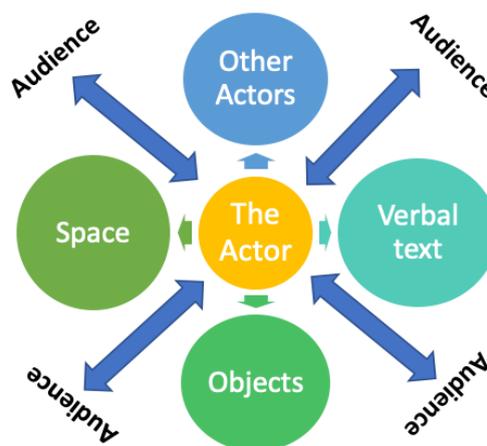


Fig 1: The actor and their materials of construction

The actors can be said to be manipulating each of these materials of construction, transacting between and among them to create the artefact we call the performance.

The significance of this premise is firstly, in its positioning of the actor (or actors) as the ‘author’ or creative originator, at the centre of the creative act, manipulating their materials of construction, in real time, to compose an original artefact out of their interactions with each other, with their immediate environment, and with the audience. And secondly, in the recognition that the actor’s relationship with everything, including material objects, is live, interactive and generating meaning. And thirdly, that the dramatic meaning generated for the audience emerges as much from the relational juxtaposition of the elements of transacted text, space and objects, as it comes from each of them separately.

This transactional model proposes that within a performance, the actors are constantly transacting within and between their materials of construction, advancing story, challenging or resisting meanings, yielding to or applying pressure on relationships, transforming social rituals in space and with objects, evoking a range of imaginaries, and transacting a range of audience relationships. The resulting performance is characterised by its responsiveness, by its sense of advancing via living, authentic, real reactions, and by the centrality of the actor. This realness is sufficiently engaging (to the audience) for the performance to function as an analogy of aspects of actual life.

In speaking of realness, the fascinating problematics of which are explored by Paul Rae (2019), each of these materials of construction can be said to exist in two domains. There is firstly the domain of the realness or actuality, of not just the bodies, objects, and material environment of the theatrical enterprise, but also of the perceivable personal and cultural contexts of the artists, texts, materials and audiences. Secondly, there is the endowed or imaginative domain, with each of the materials of construction contributing to the fictional stories and the characters who populate them in the analogy of the world that they evoke in the imaginations of the audience. Indeed, much of the pleasure of theatre lies in the way that actors can skillfully transact between the real and the fictional, teasing us as they hover in the transitional space in between. This is a distinction made by Swedish theatre scholar Wilma Sauter (2000, p. 191-5) and further explored by audience researcher Matthew Reason (2010,

p. 59). Although this sounds impossibly complicated, its realisation is generally much simpler in practice, giving us the whole delicious dance of interweaving relationships, of fluidity, of emergence, of contingency, and of plurality of analogy and therefore of meaning.

This contrasts with a positivist view of performance as an imitation of an observable, singular and knowable reality, with the playwright and director's vision of that reality usually privileged with the greatest authority. The tighter the control exercised in the name of that authority, then the more depleted and 'thin' the resulting theatre is, the more un-negotiated its relationships, the more mechanical its construction and the more that audiences are positioned as passive receivers of meaning, rather than as active interpreters or creators of meaning.

By choosing to think about acting as an *artefact* composed moment-by-moment in real time out of its materials of construction, we can then rethink how the making of these artefacts can be taught, assessed, and applied.

We can say that each of these materials of construction, for example — interactive relationships with objects, has its own inherent communicative value, it contributes its own story, has its own poetic, and the knowledge and skills associated with its construction can be called its dramaturgy. It is completely possible to talk about and separately investigate the individual dramaturgies of text, of space, of objects and even of audience.

Pedagogically, this offers an interesting shift. When we learn, teach or practice in the field of dramaturgy, we are more likely to adopt a *compositional* perspective, rather than an instrumental or expressive perspective. The focus is on understanding, making and developing the multiple stories evoked by, in and through the artefact, composing them out of the available materials of construction, rather than on the development of the actor's expressiveness. This means that as curriculum designers and teachers, the core skills we focus on are creative, imaginative and externally focused on the artefact, and on its materials of construction, rather than instrumental, expressive and internally focused on the actor. It means that the actors enter the creative enterprise via the doorway of their imaginations as

makers of story, rather than diving into themselves to offer their interiorities as obedient instruments of another's imagination.

It follows that in designing curriculum for teaching the creation of this artefact, we will need to investigate and engage with each of the materials of construction - of other actors, text, space, objects and audience. We have to discover the potential of each one's poetics, we have to explore its dramaturgy, the meanings it makes possible and the negotiations required to bring it into being. And then we can explore what happens for the audience when we transact between them.

The first benefit of this approach lies in its categorisation of performance into separable, compositional elements that are philosophically justifiable within an identifiable conceptual framework. Each element is immediately conducive to a corresponding pedagogy of self-directed, problem-based learning. We can set practical tasks, giving students specific compositional objectives that can be critiqued or contributed to by their peers. As with other artists working their materials, acting students are able to learn independently, exploring and testing the dramaturgical possibilities of dynamic interactions with each of their materials of construction. With the target, as Donnellan (2005) puts it, always outside the actor, it is more amenable to independent investigation and appraisal.

The second benefit lies in the dramaturgical expertise this develops. The outcomes from each exploration and each compositional exercise are stories. The actors are creating stories out of the manipulation of each of their materials of construction, and then dynamically interweaving these as they explore the meta-stories that are created when they bring them into juxtaposition. Character emerges as a functional requirement within the story, rather than as a structuralist, interiority-centric, psychological preconception. The actor's discourse is in collaborative story-making rather than in a self-regarding, obscurely metaphored virtuosity of expression. This expertise can be easily reapplied into related creative areas such as directing or writing.

The third benefit, from a graduate outcome perspective, is that students skilled in collaborative problem-solving, in independent learning and in creating, evaluating, interpreting and developing story for live or virtual audiences will flourish in independent

practice as well as in industry, and have the confidence and experience to apply their skills in other contexts.

IF WE ADOPT A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST POSITION, WHAT CAN WE LET GO OF?

Perhaps the most contentious part of this argument will be in suggesting which aspects of current practice could potentially be retired. Reference has already been made to problematising the primacy of positivist psychological notions such as character, motivation, intention and emotion, all of which are based on an assumption that such mental categories exist as locatable phenomena within the actor's interiority. However, once a social constructionist stance leads us to question that assumption, the models of human behaviour they contribute to, suddenly appear superficial and simplistic. The entire baseload of acting theory, with its language of objectives and obstacles, is pitifully inadequate to convey the rich complexity of human interaction. While not suggesting that we cease to use those terms, we should certainly treat them with heightened skepticism and redefine them in their meaning and application.

Also problematic is the frequent pathologizing of the actor as a flawed instrument of expressiveness with interiority problems in need of fixing, for example, experiencing 'blocks', or compromised 'access to emotion'. The conceptual foundation for this notion of inhibition must surely sit with Freud's model of the human mind divided between Id, Ego and Superego. However, it also sits in a view of acting that positions the actor as one who projects or expresses emotion. The commodification of 'emotion' is inconceivable within a social constructionist framework. Indeed, the pressure on the actor to produce this decontextualised commodity on demand, is revealed as the aesthetic fallacy it has always been.

Equally dispensable is the notion that there is a fixed, comprehensible 'truth' in objective reality that can be observed, captured and then expressed in a performance, and that based on their claim to a privileged view of reality, a director or acting teacher in some way 'corrects' or 'deepens' or in other ways exerts control of the actor's portrayal of reality. The power

relation this idea encapsulates similarly underpins the notion that a performance is a fixed, repeatable score of actions and words sanctioned by a director.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that traditional acting theory is dominated by assumptions coming from its roots in positivism and psychology, and that contemporary training tends to take those assumptions and weld them onto an eclectic assemblage of methods and metaphors. Questioning these assumptions and adopting a more coherent and contemporary philosophical and epistemological position, such as is offered by a social constructionist perspective, could help us reorganise how we think about acting and actor training, and how we could apply this thinking. Shifting from an expressive to a compositional understanding of acting, enables the kinds of problem-based and independent learning pedagogies that better fit our current tertiary environments than the immersive and indeed invasive pedagogies associated with traditional actor-training. Shifting away from delivering meaning through shaping instrumental expression to creating meaning compositionally out of the manipulation of the materials of construction, offers ways to rethink how acting can be learned, and how its curriculum can be restructured.

The salient features of this transactional model reflect its social constructionist perspective. Firstly, it privileges the view that the performance is constructed out of dynamically interconnecting relationships that are in constant change, evoking multiple perspectives and inviting multiple readings. Secondly, it creates an analogy of actual life by recreating its multiplicity of relationships and interactions.

In giving parity of weight to the non-verbal materials of relationships with space, objects and audience, we correspondingly shift the centrality of focus from the writer (or director, or designer) to the actor whose art is grounded in the manipulation of those materials. In this view, the actor is now the primary author and originator of the performance artefact, rather than occupying a secondary role as an expressive interpreter for the writer, or as a material of construction for the director. It is the actor who manipulates or acts across these fields of dramaturgy (space, objects, text, actors, audience), dynamically transacting between them,

thereby bringing the artefact (the performance) into being. This artefact exists partly in the materialities of performance, and primarily in a collaborative act of imagination between the audience and the actors transacting between each other, text, space and objects in the imaginative domain.

A social constructionist view yields a more dynamic model of what constitutes the performative act than is offered by traditional conceptual frameworks, and in turn offers more dynamic ways of thinking about actor training. Adopting this more dynamic model may help us better understand how the things that work, work, and why they do so, as well as helping us be more openly critical of the things we're discontent with.

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