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Passing It On: Genealogies and Legacies of Training

Ghost Transmissions:

Concrete objects and ephemeral encounters

By James McLaughlin

How are training practices transmitted between different contexts?

This paper is an attempt, from a personal perspective, to answer how training practices are transmitted between different contexts. I will discuss my experience of training in the Meisner Technique in New Zealand, far removed from its origins in New York. I will relate this to the cultural dynamic of teaching world theatre practices within UK universities and how this highlights things that might be overlooked when we work with western traditions. I will conclude with a suggested approach that combines documentation and experience of the original practice, an appreciation for the source culture as well as the context to which the training is being transmitted. I suggest that this perspective shows the original practice haunting new work, not being replicated in the new situation, but inspiring a creative and organic evolution of the practice.

As a young man I wanted to be an actor. Growing up in New Zealand, I sometimes felt a long way away from the rest of the world. I read the plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, and Bertolt Brecht and these things were like windows into other worlds. Of course, each of the playwrights that I read and studied expressed particular and personal imaginations and dramatic strategies. But they also spoke to me from far across the sea, from other places, other times, and other cultures. I might imagine myself escaping into the worlds they

evoked, but in truth I was bound with feet of clay, on an island in the middle of the South Pacific. What I didn't appreciate at the time was that this was not an impediment, but an immutable fact that would provide new ways into the dramatic worlds that I admired so much. I began to realize that this perspective was something to be embraced and not ashamed of. As I trained as an actor, I became increasingly fascinated by how training practices, the ways of bringing these other worlds to life, are transmitted between different contexts.

When I was 21, after performing in my first role outside education, my acting partner and friend Paul Paice recommended me to his acting teacher Michael Saccente. Michael was originally from New York, where he had studied at The Neighborhood Playhouse under Sanford Meisner. A working actor, Michael relocated to New Zealand where he began to run eighty-week courses in the Meisner Technique. He'd been doing this for nearly a decade when I joined and the experience made a very strong impression.

Michael was an alien. He would preach to us in his unsoftened New Yorker's accent about the life and death stakes of the stage, about getting out of our heads and into the moment. He would laugh or cry along with our scenes, sometimes leaping up to interrupt them with a swearsy rant about what we had got right or wrong on that day. He was the embodiment of the impulsive, desperate, emotional actor he wanted us to become. This was a glimpse into another world, similar to my encounters with great plays from the Northern Hemisphere. It was vibrant, alive and enormously compelling.

It was a shock to a room of stoic, softly-spoken kiwis, who less 'went for it' than 'went around it', ending our sentences with an upward inflection like a question more often than

not. As part of my research into the Meisner Technique I interviewed Michael about the difference between teaching it in the US and New Zealand. He said,

Americans are just, you know... they're idiots. They're... their own world... a very insular country, three-hundred-million people and, you know, their fucking world is, they just go for it, you know, there's... there's also more at stake over there in some ways. I think what I try to teach now is to tell people that your careers are on the line every moment that you work – it's gotta be, because there's not enough urgency, and in the theatre there's always urgency. It needs to be emergency, emergency, emergency. And kiwis are a very ... resolute kind of people – and it's getting better.

(Saccente, 2008)

This catches the enormous energy that Michael exhibited when he was teaching. But significantly, it goes beyond acting technique into attitude, into culture. It contrasts the New Yorker attitude he brought with him with the 'resolute' demeanor of the New Zealanders that he taught and significantly places a value judgement on it, indicating that the kiwis will be better actors insofar as they become more like New Yorkers. Earlier in the conversation Michael said, 'I am autocratic about [the technique] because I know it to be the truth.' Beyond the fervent passion of an artist that I respect, it is apparent that one thing that Michael sees as important to the acting craft is the cultural attitude that it emerged from.

In recordings of Meisner teaching, it is apparent that his personality was just as crucial to his teaching as Michael's is. Following throat cancer, he had his voice box removed, forcing him to re-learn to speak by swallowing air and belching it up, shaping the words and having this amplified in the classroom. This made his students hang on his every word and instilled a sense of deference and respect. Despite that, his fiery temper shone through and his

exchanges with students added to a sense that each word was precious. However, the students in the surviving recordings are all American, if not New Yorkers, so there is not the same sense of a cultural divide being crossed as there is with Michael's teaching. However, despite being less explicit, what is still obvious is that the personalities of the students and the teacher are combining in a particular cultural context. To look at it another way, the transmission of this training is a particular encounter between personalities which are themselves an expression of a cultural situation.

As Michael found in his teaching of this New York acting practice in New Zealand, transmitting performer training between contexts is different. Even if the same exercises are undertaken, the same guidance given, and the same principles passed on, the training will be different.

This presents scholars of performer training with a difficulty, especially when considering 'passing it on', and genealogies or lineages of training. The question is what is the 'it' that's being passed on?

It is true that something is being passed on. My own experience of the eighty weeks of Meisner training changed my approach to acting in significant and positive ways. However, the acting technique that I had assimilated was not what actors in Meisner's class adopted, nor was it probably the acting that Michael Saccente imagined I should be absorbing. It was the coming together of my own body and imagination shaped by my culture with the priorities and practices that Michael had brought from New York. This was something new and unique to the circumstances of my own training.

I returned to these questions as I taught UK undergraduate drama students world theatre practices over the past seven years. I currently introduce students to a range of performance practices from other cultures, including kathakali, pansori, noh theatre, and Yoruba performance. Here the question of culture that was under the surface in my Meisner training is front and centre. I foreground a constant focus on the ethics of what we are doing in the classroom, acknowledging my own lack of ownership over the practices we are working with and endeavour to involve voices from the cultures of origin. However, beyond the ethics and the power relations of this teaching, it does allow me to see more clearly what is also occurring in other cases of transmission within the western world. This is that when trainings are transmitted from one cultural context to another it will be different than what it might have been in its original context.

This leads to the conclusion that we need to be careful with cultural specificity and claims of ownership when we are working with Western approaches to performance, just as we are when working with non-Western forms. What is occurring in the studio when we work with pre-existing performance practices is not the same thing that was happening in the studio where they emerged. We are getting a carbon copy of the original practices, but it is a carbon copy on different paper, where not all of the inscriptions come through and the sheet below carries its own marks and texture, showing an impression, but not a duplicate of the original.

There have been some excellent examinations of other situations in which this occurs, notably in the edited collections of *Performer Training: Developments Across Cultures* edited by Ian Watson and Jonathan Pitches and Stephen Aquilina's *Stanislavsky in the World. The System and its Transformations Across Continents*. The way that yoga practices have evolved

through intercultural transmission has recently been explored in Maria Kapsali and Dorinda Hulton's *Yoga and Actor Training*.

Transmission in these instances might be separated into two pathways, documentation and experience.

Transmitting through documentation requires the interpretation of accounts, recordings, interviews, and other relics that describe the training. This form of transmission enables exercises to be standardized, approaches to be defined and fixed, and an agreed version of the practice to be established.

Experience is inherently ephemeral but holds the promise of a comparatively rich imprint of practice. Given the unreliability of organic memory and bodies over time, the subjective experience of training will fade and/or mutate. Also, once the original trainer is no longer available, the authenticity of training might be judged by the degrees of separation between the new trainer and the 'pure source'. For example, Michael Saccente, my Meisner teacher gained much of his authority by having studied with Meisner himself.

A constructive approach might be to do both; to respect the documented accounts of the original training, and the ephemeral encounters of the trainer and trainees in both situations. Both must be anchored in an appreciation of the context that it came from, but crucially also that in which it is being applied. This might allow a weaving together of the facts of the training with the experiential dimension which allows the training to be reimagined in a new context – respecting the source, but also the destination, and allowing a creative and organic evolution of the practice.

By taking this approach we undermine any claims of ownership or authority, just as we might when teaching non-western performance practices within UK universities. The original practice is not being transmitted, but we are being affected by it and potentially inspired to make something new in response to it. The original practice is not transmitted or replicated, but haunts the new work.

In the interim meeting of this group at Sussex this year, Niamh Dowling led us through an exercise in which we visualized our teacher standing behind us, their teacher standing behind them, and so on. Some found this empowering, while others actively stepped out of the line, rejecting practices that they had been trained in. In either case, the previous training is haunting the current practice, either positively or negatively, and we will either build upon the original practice or react against it accordingly. But regardless, what we are doing is something new.

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Biography:

Dr. James McLaughlin (University of Greenwich) is an improviser, actor and trainer for theatre and popular performance. He has further research interests in the surprisingly synergistic fields of the Meisner Technique of Acting and intercultural performance and training. He is also a co-editor of the Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Blog (<http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/>).