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Essai

Queering psychophysical training: politics of the body in actor pedagogy

Richard Delaney 

A student stands quietly and is invited to take ease. Attention drops from the head into the chest, where an ‘ideal centre’ is imagined. An image is then offered. First arrives an inner sensation, then a conscious bodily shift. A psychology appears after the fact, as if the body has taught the mind what it is attending to. In the Michael Chekhov tradition, the sequence is often described as imaginative stimulus leading to sensation, from which psychology follows. I have added an explicit third stage – the bodily shift – as a pedagogical emphasis. With contemporary students, many of whom are digital natives, naming this stage helps prevent disembodiment and guards against lapsing into neutral, habitual postures. It reminds them that imagination and sensation must flow through the body rather than remain cerebral. What follows reflects my practice as an actor-trainer working within UK conservatoires, asking how psychophysical methods can both reproduce and interrupt the politics at play in the training room, and how queering these methods might reorient what bodies are permitted to know and do.

Actor training is never politically neutral. Even when framed as ‘craft’ or ‘technique’, training disciplines bodies, imaginations, and behaviours in ways that reflect wider structures of power. In conservatoires, the hidden curriculum teaches punctuality, employability, market-readiness. Students learn not only how to act, but how to embody discipline, resilience, and productivity in line with institutional expectations. Similarly, bodies themselves are never neutral terrain but rather sites where cultural values and institutional expectations are inscribed through repeated practice. In actor training, every instruction about posture, breath, and attention is simultaneously shaping what kinds of bodies – and by extension, what kinds of people – are deemed professionally viable. This

includes marking queer and disabled bodies as deficient or requiring assimilation into narrow expressive models.

Much of this disciplining hides beneath the language of neutrality. Students are taught – explicitly or implicitly – that a neutral state is the prerequisite for good work. Even when neutrality is admitted to be aspirational rather than achievable, the signal is that it carries value – it remains positioned as a destination towards which the body should strive. In current revalidation work I am involved with, we have instead repositioned neutral mask within a wider exploration of the narrative body, recognising the actor's specificity as the starting point of storytelling rather than something to be temporarily erased. Yet however critically it is framed, positioning neutrality as an ideal still implies that the body must move closer to a fixed norm in order to be considered ready to work. The difficulty is that such aspiration undermines the integrity of students' embodied politics. They strive for correctness, not curiosity. They attempt to make the exercise 'work', to look aligned, to be read as ready. The outcome is often technically impressive but drained of liveliness, because the imaginative chain has been bypassed: the body is asked to present a finished psychology rather than discover one through sensation. Queer and crip theories can reframe such assumptions through insisting that non-normative embodiment generates its own logics of creativity and perception. I write this as a neurodivergent practitioner, acknowledging crip theory's vital contribution to progressive training discussions and the necessity of continuing this dialogue within conservatoires. This perspective shapes the political stakes of my use of Chekhovian psychophysical practice.

Chekhovian preparation can support a training grounded in responsiveness rather than correction and control. As Rushe (2019) emphasises, the technique privileges the imagination, it functions through the body as a psychophysical continuum, and it invites actors to transform beyond the personal. For Chekhov and his technique, *Ease* encourages comfort and availability without demanding removal of lived habits. The *ideal centre* gathers attention in the chest as a site of vitality. *Receiving* cultivates perceptual openness, allowing impulses to be noticed before the rationalising mind takes hold. These principles value perception over correction. They train actors not to eradicate deficiencies but to locate, extend, and organise the range of expression already present in their bodies.

I propose there is something intrinsically queer about this. In Sarah Ahmed's (2006) terms, queerness is about orientation – how bodies become directed through repeated encounters with objects and others, shaping what comes into view and what becomes possible. Ahmed shows orientations follow socially sanctioned lines that make certain ways of moving feel straight, familiar, and rewarded. Queerness, then, can be understood as a reorientation: turning away from those normative lines and towards other possibilities of relation. I use Chekhov's practice to ask actors to orient away from rational mastery, and towards sensation and imagination. This reorients training away from the straight lines of neutrality and correction, towards slanted lines of embodied discovery. It redistributes what Rancière (2004) calls *the distribution of the sensible*: the hierarchy that allocates value to certain forms of perception and excludes others. In Chekhov's work, the sensible shifts: sensation becomes knowledge. The body is not a vessel to be corrected but an intelligent site of learning.

Yet to queer actor training through Chekhov-inspired practice means not only drawing out its radical potential but also interrogating the cultural assumptions that shape the technique itself. Chekhov's notion of the 'ideal centre' is positioned in the chest, in what he calls the feeling centre. This locates vitality firmly within a Western, Eurocentric conception of the body, and carries assumptions about where creativity 'resides'. Likewise, his references to 'backspace' as history reproduce a linear, European model of time. By contrast, many Aboriginal Australian cosmologies situate the past laterally, to the left and right rather than behind, while other Indigenous traditions conceive of time as cyclical or layered (Rose 2004). Recent scholarship has also begun interrogating these Eurocentric assumptions, underscoring the need to queer and reframe the technique in dialogue with broader cultural perspectives. We should also remain alert to how psychophysical cues can subtly privilege particular sensory logics – asking bodies to feel in ways that align with dominant norms. While the full implications of this point exceed the scope of this Essai, it remains a crucial line of inquiry I pursue in my wider research.

Engagement with failure is central to the queer potential of this practice, because it resists the demand for polish and correctness by letting perceptual integrity lead. In institutional frameworks, failure is a deficit to be corrected. In Chekhovian practice, failure is diagnostic and generative. A student may follow a stimulus that leads somewhere unexpected. Yet this 'failure' indicates that the imaginative chain – stimulus, sensation, bodily shift, psychology – has been allowed to run its course. As Halberstam (2011) argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure can be a deliberate refusal of success on dominant terms, opening other futures. Muñoz (2019) extends this by insisting that failure contains utopian potential – the not-yet – that unsettles present orders and gestures towards alternative futures. This revaluation of failure exemplifies a queer pedagogy – one that finds productive potential in what dominant systems mark as deficiency.

This queer compositional stance counters neutrality by insisting that responsiveness, not erasure, is the basis of training. Neutrality abstracts the actor from their sensory life, presenting the body as a blank slate. Readiness, by contrast, assumes specificity. It trains attention as a chain of perception: imaginative stimulus, sensation, bodily shift (sometimes visible, sometimes subtle), and the psychology that arises. The body becomes an intelligent site of knowledge production, challenging Western hierarchies of mind over matter. Craft is not abandoned but redefined: not mastery of a fixed state, but mastery of perception and response.

The political implications are clear. Neutrality sustains assessment metrics by standardising beginnings and outcomes, making performances legible to rubrics. Readiness disrupts that legibility by foregrounding processes that are contingent, felt and not always reproducible, insisting that responsiveness matters more than polish. Queering psychophysical training in this sense means loosening the grip of normative orientations: inviting trajectories that pass through sensation rather than bypass it and allowing the body's logic, not the rubric's, to lead. These slanted lines are inherently queer – not only metaphorically but analytically – because they

unsettle expectations of correctness and progression while asking institutions to decide whether to reward compliance or cultivate curiosity.

All of this can be enacted without spectacle. A class that begins in ease and the ideal centre; that proceeds through receiving; that treats images and atmospheres as provocations rather than prompts; that evaluates not polish but perceptual integrity – such a class already resists institutional flows that prefer surface to process. It is modest resistance, but it is material. It changes what students practise and value. And because it is repeatable, it is training, not merely a political stance.

What emerges is not just actor training that develops embodied perception but a challenge to institutional logics that prioritise compliance over curiosity, the appearance of ‘readiness’ over the perceptual processes, and standardised efficiency over embodied intelligence. The student in the opening paragraph did not ‘get the exercise right’. Instead they allowed the exercise to work on them. In doing so, they demonstrated the central proposition of this essay: Actor training is political in its methods: it can either discipline bodies towards correctness or cultivate perception as the basis of learning. Chekhovian preparation orientates towards perception. The rest follows from there.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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