

Title: The What Happened of Experience:
Reflections on the practice of The Method of Analysis through Action.

Author: Paul Christie

Email: p.christie@staffs.ac.uk

Biography: Paul Christie trained as an actor at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now known as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) before going on to work professionally for ten years performing in theatre, television and radio. Following this he undertook a further years training as a theatre director at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He has combined directing alongside the teaching of acting for several years with a commitment to exploring and deepening the collaboration between actor, director and playwright in the rehearsal room.

Keywords: Action, Analysis, Rehearsal, Actor, Director, Audience, Étude, Improvisation, Movement, Uncertainty

Abstract

Achieving a genuine connection between the actor's felt experience and the need to speak words is the holy grail of many rehearsal processes; words spoken from an impulse beyond mere ink on the page. This is the promise the actor presents to audience. In this article I reflect on The Method of Analysis through Action as a means of achieving this. The role of this rehearsal process is beginning to play an increasingly important part in our understanding of Stanislavski's work thanks in large part to the many excellent teachers and writers who are bringing the latter period of his work to the fore. Here, I will consider the use of this process as both a means of rehearsal and training following on a three week collaborative research project entitled *The Russian Connection* which brought together professional actors steeped in the British tradition alongside British drama student graduates to explore the method in practice. Particular attention was paid to the nature of the collaborative relationships in the rehearsal room alongside the practical impact of conversations between actors and directors. A recurring theme contained within is that by putting the primacy of the actor's individual experience at the heart of the creative process we change the nature of the relationship between actor and director in the rehearsal room significantly.

The What Happened of Experience:

Reflections on the practice of The Method of Analysis through Action.

We experience and then we speak. This is the way of things. Experience leads to words. In the theatre when rehearsing a play we have the words already of course, the playwright has given them to us, but we have not the experience to go with them yet. A wealth of words and a poverty of experience. This is our starting point.

This connection between felt experience and the speaking of words is key to appreciating the depths of what the rehearsal method of Action Analysis has to offer. The nature of this connection alongside the practical impact of the relationship between actor and director in the pursuit of it will underpin much of what follows.

The reflections in this article are largely taken from my experience leading a practice-based research project entitled *The Russian Connection* (2014) which brought together two highly experienced professional actors rooted in the British rehearsal tradition alongside three Drama Degree graduates already trained in Action Analysis to explore the use of this rehearsal process. The writer as an observer-participant kept a diary of the rehearsal process and extracts are presented here. This project was documented on video over three weeks including the final work-in-progress performance and post-show discussions. We focused our explorations around the use of Maxim Gorki's *Philistines*. I have also included some observations from my experience teaching or simply using Action Analysis with students over the last few years where it seemed helpful in articulating a point.

The ideas presented here would ideally be interwoven; one not necessarily following the other but rather all clamoring for attention at the same time. Expressing them purely in words is therefore far from ideal - words, typically, requiring a logical order if they are to be understood. Action Analysis in its immediacy tends to lean towards chaos rather than order and this is the source of much of its power. This article is therefore my attempt to unpick chaos with orderly words. It is also an entirely subjective attempt, there is no stab at a scholarly objectivity here, these reflections are indeed just that, reflections, they are not the thing itself.

For those who may be unfamiliar with Action Analysis it is enough, for the purposes of this article at least, to understand that it is a means of rehearsing a play in which the script is never taken on to the rehearsal room floor, so at no point will the actor be reading lines from a page whilst attempting to interact with another actor. The entire process works through the *action of improvisation* followed by the *action of conversation* as a continuing cycle until the actor is eventually speaking the playwright's words from their own experience. The key shift in perspective here, from a British viewpoint at least, is that the actor begins with a series of fully felt improvised experiences in order to find their way to the playwright's words as opposed to beginning with speaking the playwright's words in an attempt to have fully felt experiences later in the process. Experience leads to words, to the need to speak. Which is conveniently how the rest of our lives happen to happen also.

In many ways I see Action Analysis as a continuation of the search Stanislavski began over a hundred years ago for a grammar of acting. By putting the primacy of the actor's individual experience at the heart of the creative process, as Action

Analysis surely does, it changes the nature of the relationship between actor and director and as a consequence the fundamental substance of rehearsal conversations. The bedrock of these conversations is the étude.

Études are like Dreams: reflections on reflections

“We will only ever have words for dreams, the description, never the thing itself. Our dreams will only ever be apparently available in language. This is one of the many reasons why the attempt to give what one might call an accurate account of one’s dream is such an interesting experience; by the time you are providing your account the dream is no longer there, and the listener is never in a position to compare the account with its object.”

(Phillips 2013: 263)

Following an étude the actor reflects on their experience. The reflection is not the experience itself; in much the same way as Phillips points out in relation to the dreamer describing their dream. This is a fairly obvious point and as such is easy to overlook despite its significance. We have all, probably, at some point in our lives attempted to recall a dream and describe what happened in it to somebody else. Searching inward, we recall fragments and piece together bits. The major events might stand out in some way but we never know how much we missed. Often there is the feeling of something absent, something we can’t quite get a grip on. Something in the dark.

As any actor will tell you, describing what happened in an étude (or any performance for that matter) carries the same darkness. To recall the fullness of what happened is beyond the actor just as it is beyond the dreamer.

Phillips' description of the dreamer describing their dream and the listener not being in a position to compare the account with its object, the dream, is pertinent here.

Clearly the director *is* in a position to compare the account with its object, the étude.

If we were able to watch a person's dream immediately before having the dreamer interpret it to us in language how might this affect our response to the dreamer? The director working with the études of Action Analysis is clearly in an extraordinarily influential position. It's perhaps worth exploring this position a little further in relation to the current realities of the rehearsal room.

The Rehearsal Room: a crisis of hierarchy

Smeliansky suggests in *The Russian theatre after Stalin* that there is a 'crisis in Russian theatre'; that in the 'situation of freedom and spiritual vacuum' following Gorbachev's *glasnost* 'the 'super-theatre' became just 'theatre'.' He goes on to say that 'all forms of spiritual activity lost their status' and calls for a new Slavyansky Bazar meeting (in reference to the renowned epic conversation which created the Moscow Arts Theatre and all that followed) to discuss the main question facing the Russian theatre today:

'Now that we have our freedom, are we prepared to create a genuinely free theatre that is capable of combining (1) supreme artistic standards plus the ethics of long-term creative collaboration (without which there can be no

theatre-church), with (2) the ruthless laws of natural selection that are synonymous with the ‘free market’?

(Smeliansky 2009: 145-146)

In Britain we have been living under those *ruthless laws* for considerably longer and the *ethics of long-term collaboration* are so far behind us that to many they exist only as a fairy tale but the problem we face is not so different. British director Sean Holmes of *The Lyric Hammersmith* in London suggested in 2013 that “maybe the existing structures of theatre in this country, whilst not corrupt, are corrupting” (*Guardian*, September 9, 2013). It’s worth noting that Holmes went on to offer us the beginnings of our own Slavyanky Bazar proposal with his ‘Secret Theatre’ seasons at *The Lyric Hammersmith* inviting a new relationship between actor, director and audience. A small but highly significant beginning. The boldness of ‘Secret Theatre’ and the courage of those who made it happen we can only hope might generate ripples which give rise to mighty waves. The task appears to be giant however; the edifice of ‘Great British Theatre’ built so high that it presents itself as unscalable. Perhaps we don’t need to scale it however, perhaps we can dig *under* it instead and perhaps Action Analysis offers us *one* more way to begin doing so. In line with what Smeliansky terms ‘free market ruthlessness’ I would like to identify the structure that is *hierarchy* and in line with his ‘ethics of long-term collaboration’ the structure of a *network* and discuss how shifting to the latter, enabled by Action Analysis, may offer a new freedom for actor, director and audience.

In our current hierarchical structure directors are very much in charge. The title suggests so. Put someone in a seat at the front of the room whose job is ostensibly

to provide *a direction to others* and they're really in charge. Put someone in a seat at the front of the room with the power to employ or not employ you again in an industry in which employment is a major problem, in a society in which money is a major need, then they're really, really in charge. Whether we like it or not there is almost always a perceived hierarchy between director and actor at work in the rehearsal room and the very existence of this hierarchy is enough to have a significant impact on the creative flow of the rehearsal process. There is a head and a body and between these there all too often exists an unconscious contract written in the hand of hierarchy:

'Of course it is not news...that people engage in unconscious contracts with each other, though the extent of these contracts - the small print, as it were - should never cease to amaze us.' (Phillips 2013: 81)

It is in the small print of hierarchy where we will surely find the blocks to a genuinely collaborative relationship. Action Analysis does not naturally incline towards a hierarchy. In fact it actively generates a clear alternative - a network. Where the hierarchy is strictly vertical and ends at the top the network is horizontal and extends in all directions, seeking, firing and wiring new connections all the time. It moves. Like breath and blood, it refuses to distinguish between head and body. As a result the director's job is fundamentally changed. Where they had small influence before they now have big influence. Where they had a somewhat artificial task before, they now have a real task and the real freedom to do it. Everyone gets promoted and the shared task of revealing a *fullness of the inner spiritual life of working people* (Benedetti 1991: 353), as Stanislavsky termed it in his courageous letter to Stalin in

the Autumn of 1935 is placed firmly within our grasp. The industry is not short of directors who wish to be co-creators, who wish for actors to see them differently and therefore *allow* them to be part of the deeper conversation. The non-hierarchical relationship which Action Analysis invites offers us a way to make this happen. To dig under the edifice and find new ground on which to experience with all of our available spirit.

Beginning with uncertainty

The early silent études of Action Analysis are a particularly effective means for the actor to connect with their already present spirit before any small print gets in the way. In the work on Gorki's play, the actor playing Vassilly expressed the following in relation to his experience during the silent études:

“One of the things that's really good about the silent improvisation is that it's... it's a very unthreatening way to start working with someone new. I mean I don't know about you, but when you work professionally it's always nice if you work with the same people several times because you become much more relaxed.

If you work with a lot of new people there's always a feeling, to sort of, almost from the read through be showing them that you *can* do it, do you know what I mean? When you've worked with someone that you've worked with before there isn't that pressure because they *know* you can do it.

Not having a read through and just starting with [the silent études] it's much less threatening... and I really enjoyed the silent improvisations."

(*The Russian Connection* 2014: Day 12)

I think the above is a fairly common feeling amongst actors, directors too possibly, and that it is perhaps true of many environments other than the rehearsal room also. It makes me wonder at what point in rehearsals that this feeling goes away. If indeed it does go away at all. Does it merely filter down to a lower level? There is always a new pressure to face; getting it up on its feet, coming off book, first run through - each one presenting a different kind of *doing it* to prove yourself at before the biggest pressure of all arrives in the shape of the audience.

Of course there is a myriad of unthreatening things that can be done as a company together before beginning rehearsals in earnest but sooner or later the threat of the other actors and the director trusting whether you can do it or not will have to be faced. The early silent études of Action Analysis immediately begin work on the play and immediately allow discoveries of a deep kind without ever taking the actor to that place of needing to prove to the other actors that they can *do it*. There is nothing to do as such. No goal to focus on. The actor is liberated from his unconscious contract with the other actors, a contract binding him to the need to prove himself. But what of the need for the actor to prove himself in the silent études, is this any different? I think it is. For whilst an actor might be uncomfortable with the idea of the silent étude there is nothing for him to actually *do* which would resolve that discomfort. The actor in his habitually capable reading can read with shining brilliance in the hope that this will prove to the others that he can do it. The silent étude simply requires him to be

present. So, I am suggesting that the silent étude allows the actor to begin at the beginning instead of tempting him to run before he has even begun to walk in the shoes of another. How else can the actor be expected to reveal *the fullness of the inner spiritual life* of a human being if he has missed out on the joy of the crawling, sliding, bum-shuffling, falling, rising, collapsing, toe-spreading, balance finding first-steps of discovery - spirit emerges through this journey of freshly felt moments?

There is, of course, a beginning that comes before the first silent études of Action Analysis and that is the first time the actors read the scene out loud together prior to improvising. Why should the pressure on this first scene reading, and those that follow, be different to any other read through? There is, of course, no definite reason why they should be. It could be argued that the purpose of the read-through in Action Analysis is different which might therefore change its nature somewhat and whilst I would in part agree with this it still doesn't necessarily release our actor from the need to *prove* that they can do it. Proving you can do it might be simply expressed in this instance as *saying it like you mean it*. Is there anything wrong with doing so? Perhaps not, but I do wonder if it begins a habit which can be hard to shake, a habit which covers a deep hole in the heart of the actor-director-audience relationship with *uncertainty*.

In his essay *Contingency for Beginners* the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips delves in to the nature of the problematic relationship that human beings have with uncertainty; with the unknown future. In particular how we attempt to exert control over it; to encapsulate it and in doing so seal ourselves off from its uncertainties, from '*the accidents and chances we are negotiating and using all the time.*' (Phillips 2013:

83). Considering the actor works from a position in which they are expected to *encapsulate time* on a regular basis (the capsule being defined by the time of the play) whilst also remain open to *accidents and chances* it seems pertinent to investigate how the actor might accomplish this conflicting task.

I'd like to discuss the possibility that in a non-improvisation led rehearsal method, in which the actor *begins by speaking the playwrights words in an attempt to discover experience later in the process*, that there is a leaning towards the actor closing themselves off from accidents and chances: cutting themselves off from uncertainty. And I'm going to suggest that in the improvisatory method of Action Analysis, in which conversely the actor *begins with experience in an attempt to discover the need to speak the playwright's words later in the process*, that there is a leaning towards the actor opening themselves to accidents and chances: welcoming uncertainties.

Consider, for example, *the missed opportunity*. To be clear I'm taking about that moment when we experience the impulse to do or say something and just as we are about to commit to the doing or saying - something else happens and we no longer feel able to pursue that impulse. We are overruled. In our work on Gorky's *Philistines* the actress playing the daughter Tanya expressed the following in relation to the mother Akulina as a result of what happened in the étude.

"I felt like I wanted to...not comfort you... but I felt a bit like....i needed to do something just to...make you feel just a tiny bit better, and I was just about to go and sit next to you and you *left* and I was like... urgh!" [*Actress thumps arm of sofa*]

(*The Russian Connection* 2014: Day 8)

To miss an opportunity it has to be genuinely available to us in the first place, as it was in the above example. There must be uncertainty available. Felt experiences such as this are commonplace working with Action Analysis; they arise without any effort as the natural accidents and chances of time. As the actor searches for the playwright's words through her own felt experiences these happenings weave themselves into the whole body of her uncertain experience and begin to create that fullness of the inner spiritual life which Stanislavski sought (Benedetti 1991).

How might this uncertainty become present for the actor in every conceivable moment? Before even the silent études begin. Could making space for uncertainty in the first readings release the actor from the habit of saying it like they mean it.

The poverty of certainty: saying it like you mean it

Throughout *The Russian Connection* project we used the following method for the early readings of each scene: when reading a scene the actor looks down at the page, takes in their line, allows it to land internally for themselves - to connect beyond mere comprehension; and only then looks up to speak the line, usually with a focus on the individual who the line appears to be being spoken to. The other actors are waiting and listening, they do not look down at the page in preparation whilst the other actor is speaking their lines. They simply listen.

I began using this method some years ago after reading Harold Guskin's *How to Stop Acting* (2003). Similar process's are described by Kristin Linklater in *Freeing the*

Natural Voice (2006) and Harriet Walter in *Other People's Shoes* (2003). The common ground they share is an attempt to assist the actor in finding a deeper need for words beyond the surface; for the lines of the play to be more than simply a proficient vocal interpretation which happens to be attached to a moving body. As such it shares much ground with Action Analysis. There are several differences to be identified in reading this way.

- I. It is much slower.
- II. There is a lot of silence.
- III. Connecting words to others is paramount.
- IV. Listening is given greater importance than speaking.
- V. The physical body of the speaker is opened up.
- VI. The actor is given freedom to be silent.
- VII. The potential of the spoken word to call something up in the listener is made available.

Slower. Silence. Connecting. Listening. Physical. Freedom. Potential.

In slowing down the actors focus shifts from reading well to listening well. The silence allows space to connect and for the playwrights words to fulfill their potential, to call something up in the listener. The body is open to allow this instead of intent on the page. Reading well, or as I have come to refer to it - *saying it like you mean it* - is, I would suggest, a significant problem for actors, directors and audience.

The more we continue sitting around reading from a script, head buried in the page, perhaps momentarily glancing up towards the end of a line to make contact with the top of the head of the actor we are talking to (who is busy looking down at the line they are about to say back to us) then the more we are practicing a habit which is harmful. It is a habit of disconnection, of false listening. A habit of solitude leading to a poverty of experience. If we begin with a poverty of experience, as suggested at the beginning of this article, then the last thing we need is a habit which impoverishes us further. And the worst thing about this habit is that it pretends to be otherwise and can be very convincing indeed.

Action Analysis deals with many of the other challenges that actors and directors must face if they are to explore the inner spiritual life of people together. Using this method throughout *The Russian Connection* project has led me to feel that it is a very useful addition to the Action Analysis experience. It not only frees the actor from the tyranny of their own desire to read well but also prepares their creative state for all that is to follow by cultivating a habit of richness in every moment of connection between people.

I have used the word connection many times already in this article. It might fairly be said that we humans are always connecting on some level, that this is something we can safely assume happens quite naturally, that we need pay the idea far less attention than I am paying it now. Indeed, in the average professional rehearsal room, the word connection is hardly commonplace despite a great deal of the work which goes on in a rehearsal room being an attempting to find a connection. We talk about the importance of *listening* for instance, which appears to be about connection,

yet we can listen and not connect. We talk about what we are *doing* to one another, which appears to be about connection, yet we can do and not connect.

The root meaning of the word is useful here; the *OED* has it forming from the Middle English *to unite* or *bind* together¹, suggesting that we can listen and we can do but unless the listening and doing is *bound up* within one another, *united* in the experience of what happens then, by this definition, there is no connection. When the connection does happen, when an actor becomes truly *bound up* in spontaneous experiencing within the imaginary action of the play then all else is irrelevant.

Two students 'bound up'

The boy trapped in a dark room, in almost complete blackness, searches for a light source. He feels along the walls, thinks about what he might be missing, keeps searching, tries all the surfaces, corners and cracks looking for the means to make light all to no avail. He pursues his goal. Having failed repeatedly, he stops searching and gives himself to the blackness.

The girl watches, curious. Having been here longer, she sees him searching quite clearly; her eyes have adjusted to the dark. She feels no responsibility to assist him. Indeed she has no responsibility to assist him and, in fact, to do so would only delay his own adjustment anyway; she would make it worse. None of these thoughts cross her mind, however. She is just watching until something else catches her attention.

¹*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v “connect”,

Let's call the boy Freddy. He was an intelligent and thoughtful student, curious and clearly enjoyed thinking and conversing about the world. I had seen him act a few times and he had never achieved that quality of honesty we call believable. Other students clearly struggled to act with him. There was little connection if any to the presence of others and this was visible in the body, audible in the voice and clear from his own observations. His acting was that which often acquires the name, rightly or wrongly, of being blocked, and deeply so, full of effort and dull. I was not alone in making this observation. Indeed he made similar observations himself.

On the first day of working with Action Analysis he made some very astute observations with regards to subtle shifts he was seeing in others but was resistant to the process himself. When he was acting I got a strong sense of his still thinking himself doing so. Outside of himself. Blocked still. He didn't 'get it' but true to form he remained curious and thoughtful about what was happening for others.

On the second day he began a silent étude with very little information about the scene, just the basics of the circumstances. The student with whom he was improvising, the girl, let's call her Jenny, was a student who constantly surprised me with her ability to stay present under any circumstances. Not once did I see her get in the way of herself. No matter what was happening in the space her focus allowed everything through her without distraction or dishonesty. In Mamet's words from *True and False* she *invented nothing and denied nothing* all of the time (1997: 41). Being present with a blocked actor for example would not present a difficulty to her; she would fold it in to her experience of the moment and allow his disconnect to be part of her connection to him. They began.

A short period of orientation and then, about thirty seconds in, Freddy learnt how to act. The boy gives himself to the blackness and suddenly the shapes in the room change and he sees the girl. And most importantly Freddy *felt* it. The first one to speak following the étude he said the following:

“That’s never happened before. I’ve never acted like that.”

(Action Analysis Student 2014)

Pleasure expressed from the group. The discovery shared deeply. This is not an isolated incident, it stands out perhaps for the length of the learning journey which appeared to be necessary for this particular student relative to the instantaneous nature of his discovery - that a full inner spiritual life is *always* there. Action Analysis as a method of training in itself is, I would suggest, a powerful means of allowing the student to encounter effortless embodied acting which releases them from the prison of the spoken word filtered through mind alone. Was the student changed forevermore by his discovery? No, certainly not, but a crack of light had appeared where only blackness seemed possible before.

Études are like Daydreams:

When we daydream we are conscious that we’re dreaming, there is lucidity to the imaginings, an awareness as to what is happening and a small degree of control of it. We can subtly direct it without it turning into planning; instead it is as if something pulls us gently in an uncertain direction. The silent étude in particular lends itself to this lucid state. An example from *The Russian Connection* project (2014):

Vassilly, the father figure in Gorky's play *Philistines* tends to increase the level of negative tension whenever he walks in to a room. People seem to be afraid of him; he spoils their enjoyment, casts a cloud. His three children in particular suffer from the weight of his presence.

Day five of the research project, our third silent étude exploring Act Two of the play in which Vassilly attempts to persuade his adult children that he knows what is best for them, a scene many of us are more than likely to be familiar with from modern life. The parent attempts to help the child and only makes things worse. I simplify a little in order to give quick access to the scene. The études so far had revealed a great deal as to what was happening for the characters and had, on the whole, been faithful to the reality as presented by the playwright. This being a family in crisis with the father figure playing what would largely be regarded as a dominant role in which his actions had a negative affect. On this occasion however things went very differently.

Out of nowhere, it seemed, Vassilly began to *enjoy* his children; he played with them, joked, laughed, teased, beguiled them and they in turn seemed to enjoy his presence whilst also dealing with the unexpectedness of his behavior. He still exerted his dominance but he did so in a way which led to pleasurable outcomes.

Watching it I was reminded of the time when as a child my bright blue budgie, Sammy, unexpectedly came out of his cage one evening and played for the very first time. Hopping over the little obstacle course I hastily created of pencils, match boxes

and child fingers he was like a different bird. Not once before, in years of having him, had he done anything other than eat, chirp from his perch and once in a while give an aggressive nibble to my fingertip. The next day I found him dead at the bottom of his cage.

Vassilly was like Sammy on the night before his death. And the actor was as surprised by it as everybody else whilst also being aware of it throughout - like daydreaming. Following the étude the actor said:

“I started playing things the way I wanted them to be rather than the way they were...and I was also very aware of Pyotr’s pain and was upset by it.”

(The Russian Connection 2014: Day 5)

To be clear, what happened in this étude happened entirely by chance, as in all the other études also. At no point did we have the conversation where we decided it might be useful for Vassilly to play the scene how he would like it to be rather than how it actually is. My experience as a director suggests that had we decided to explore this intentionally then the outcome would have been very different. The strength of this étude, of all our études, lay in the nature of the way in which they happened without being planned. It was made without knowing what was being made. There was no goal. And the absence of the goal allowed the experience to be without compromise. This strikes me as being a magnificent aspect of Action Analysis. It allows for discoveries of unusual depth without there needing to be a defined goal in advance. Had we planned the étude then we would have had to decide *whose* ideal world we were going to allow and this would undoubtedly have

impacted on the reactions of those whose ideal world was by default, disallowed, the other characters. Would it have been of any worth had we planned it? Well, yes, probably to some extent, but it would almost certainly have been a lesser experience. The unusual power of études as a process of rehearsal seems to me to be a result of their daydream-like happening, of their having no clearly definable goal and therefore giving the actor a vast amount of space in which to play with their own lucid daydream like discoveries - guided only by the experience of what is in front and inside of them in each moment.

None of this is to say that some way through an étude individual goals do not present themselves to the actors - experience suggests they certainly do - and this is of especial significance in relation to the actors work with the *want*; the objective, intention, motivation, desire, wish, purpose - however we choose to name it this *want* has come to be terribly familiar territory. I'm calling it *terribly* familiar because I feel it has the potential to be something of a terror. And I use terror here in the same sense as we might call the naughty little boy who lives next door *a right little terror*; always chucking his ball in to our garden, climbs over the fence, crushes the flowers and leaves muddy footprints all over the place. I sometimes feel this way about the want. Often given pride of place amongst the pantheon of acting tenets, it suggests itself as the unquestionable solution to the problem of the actor's presence.

It's not that it's not useful, it clearly can be. It's not that it's not essential, it appears to be. It's not that actors don't have them, they obviously do. It's that it is often presented as something distinct, unambiguous, *singular*. And perhaps sometimes it is these things, but it is also often not these things. Often, it is inexpressible, elusive,

multiple. In pursuing its singularity we reduce its potential to release that which is infinite within the actor. 'Our desires and needs are preconscious, inchoate,' Stuart Brown writes in his exhilarating book *Play*, 'and the act of play gives them form and breathes life in to them.' (2010:105). The play of Action Analysis invites a multiplicity of wants effortlessly, without ever creating the need to identify and pursue a singular want with which to swamp all else with its muddy prints.

Put simply, it allows for wants which didn't know they were wanted. These ineffable wants are given the freedom to make themselves known in Action Analysis because the actors journey is of a different kind. It is the difference between a movement which gradually narrows, towards a fixed point, and a movement which gradually widens towards infinity. It is the difference between an ascent and a descent.

The Descent

When a climber ascends a mountain they start at the bottom and work their way to the top. On the way they often leave ropes fixed behind them, where possible, in order to make the downward journey possible. Getting to the top without unnecessary aid of equipment is the primary task. Getting back down again having achieved the summit can be done however you like. And then the climber has a few drinks in the bar, rests and begins to look for the next mountain.

For the actor, in Britain, as things currently stand I would suggest the task could be perceived in a similar vein, he starts at the bottom on day one of rehearsals looking for a route up, one that is logical and will make for an interesting journey with lots of opportunities for exploring the different aspects of the mountain on the way up.

Always heading for the goal, the peak. And once this is achieved, on opening night, the actor heads back down the fixed ropes, has a few drinks in the bar, and rests ready to repeat the chosen route, the perfect ascent, once more the next day.

The only difference between the actor and the climber is that the actor is bound to climb the same mountain again the next day. And again the day after. He must repeat. And repeat and repeat and repeat. The summit is repeatedly achieved beginning each day from the same point. As the actor repeatedly works the route of the play it gets technically cleaner each time. The moves become smoother, the shifts of the body easier as the muscle memory kicks in and, amongst this technical cleaning, occasions present themselves to make the route more challenging, more interesting - slight deviations from the original route which allow for explorations in to surrounding territory before coming back en route. And, of course, there will be the usual variations presented by life too, quite naturally, the skin on the fingers will be a little more coarse, an edge of rock used last attempt might have crumbled a little so the journey shifts a little this way, a little the other, but on the whole the route is repeated.

In Action Analysis the journey is of an entirely different nature; the actor begins on day one of rehearsal at the *top* of the mountain. Dropped by an invisible force on to the peak in the dead of night they must make their way down, in the darkness, without any fixed ropes. Their journey is not an ascent but a descent. From the peak, where blue skies reign, where orientation is possible the actor begins their blind journey down the mountain, the way is felt not seen, and there is no discernible end point as the bottom of the mountain contains no peak. The actor who chooses to

Rachel: I could play a lot more... because you've got the freedom [to move] you are allowed to play and so I could relax and with that relaxation comes *more* freedom.

Ian: Relaxation but also greater attention because if you're in a show that's blocked there's a sort of security that when you say *that* line Actor A is going to be over there and you're sort of prepared for it, and therefore to a certain extent your attention is diminished because you know what's going to happen. And in this the process demands that you are constantly alert because you don't know where Actor A is going to be at that moment."
(*The Russian Connection* 2014: Day 12)

The one thing that has consistently been picked out by actors working with Action Analysis is the *transformative* power of the freedom of movement. Transformative is not a word I use lightly. It comes with a heavy burden, particularly in relation to the job of the actor whose task is regularly described as being one of transformation. *Chambers* has the word coming from the Latin relating to that which is *across* or *beyond* form². Which seems a bit of a leap to ask of a human being. Caterpillars we are not. What strikes me about the word, and the reason I'm making a bit of a fuss about it here, is that it *moves*. It takes us *across* to somewhere *beyond form*. And how often is the actor blunted by working in a fixed form which does not move? A form which has been chosen above other forms for its rightness; its better, clearer, cleaner, more original, more artistic beauty than the infinite number of other forms which were never invited to form in the first place.

² Chambers Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v "trans-"

The subjugation of the actor's freedom of movement to the director is a colossal act of self-betrayal on the part of the actor. This self-betrayal lives in a forced marriage with an absurd act of authority on the part of the director. Freedom of movement, complete freedom, for the whole body in their environment, can genuinely lay claim to transforming the actor's task. Not the actor but their *task*, and the director's task also is transformed. A new shape to the rehearsal room begins to form and through it new relationships are possible, new conversations are conceived and the *real* beauty of bodies in motion, connecting to one another with nothing in the way, brings in to being an infinite number of what might traditionally be called stage pictures, the *mise-en-scène*, which would not have otherwise been possible.

The director no longer needs to concern himself with the trivialities of searching for a perfect form because perfect form is a natural happening of the considerably more stimulating and stretching task of co-creating the full inner spiritual life of people. Life which recognizes that transformation is as unnecessary as it is impossible; for the actor already is all that is necessary, if only given the freedom to be so.

Fear of the uncertain audience

It seems appropriate to end where all plays ultimately end; with the audience, and a suggestion as to how Action Analysis is deeply relevant to their experience. If the actor could be confident that the audience would not be at all bothered if they forgot their lines every once in while then how would this change what happens for the actor in performance? If the actor is afraid of forgetting their lines, or to put it another way, of having nothing to do - a perfectly understandable fear amongst actors - then

they easily become trapped in the need to close off to uncertainties and make safe their experience.

Action Analysis does not magically remove the possibility of actors forgetting their lines but it does offer two new relationships which go a long way to allowing the actors to relax beyond this fear. Firstly, the actors relationship with one another. Secondly, the actors relationship with the uncertain audience.

The first relationship is changed because the actors have cultivated the habit, together, of putting impulse before words. Through improvisation they have faced the possibility of *nothing* together time after time after time and they have come to know it as a welcome place. They are confident in one another and the life of the play to accept nothingness and work from it honestly. That unknown quantity of who will be able to cope with nothingness should it present itself is no longer unknown. Familiarity has proven to them that it is not worth the fearing. The change in the second relationship is less obvious perhaps but not dissimilar to the first in its solution. It comes from the actor reversing the current assumption about the unknown audience which is the cause of the fear. One way of describing this fear of the uncertain audience might be the following:

The audience wants me to remember all my lines more than they want me to experience the full inner spiritual life of the character.

If the actor reverses this to:

The audience wants me to experience the full inner spiritual life of the character even if that means I forget my lines sometimes.

Then a new relationship is created. I don't think it particularly matters whether the audience knows how the play has been rehearsed as the actor can never be sure whether the audience knows this information anyway, the actor can only assume. So let the actor make a *useful* assumption. The experience of Action Analysis makes this reversed assumption an easy one to make.

Following the performance element of the research project I asked the audience the following question:

“Could I open this out to the audience a little bit and ask you what your perception of the show was? I'm particularly interested in whether the quality of what you saw, and I don't mean quality as in was it better than other stuff, I mean just in kind of *the feel* of it. Does it feel just like watching any other piece of theatre?”

The first audience member responded with the following:

“I think it felt more tangible...you felt like you were still an observer but you could tell that the atmosphere was a lot more real, like it was being created a lot more deeply, if that makes sense? Like you were an observer but you were still very much a part of it, but in a very different way than I've experienced before.”

(The Russian Connection 2014: Day 12)

This, seems to me, to be something worth the pursuing. Much thought has gone in to the deepening of the craft of acting in western theatre over the past hundred years but how much of that has affected the craft of rehearsal? Not nearly enough I would suggest. It's as if we're building Ferrari's and then driving them on car parks; the engine has a great deal more to offer.

I would like to leave the final thought here to Sammy, my afore-mentioned bright blue budgie, sadly deceased. It always troubled me that the reason for Sammy's sudden willingness to play and subsequent swift death will never be known. I have two theories however, the first is that in some sort of bird knowledge premonition of the end of all things he found the courage to have one last hurrah, risk it all and see if the giant whose finger he occasionally attacked might just be friendly after all. The second is that the excitement of unfettered play was too much for his tiny heart and killed him in his dream filled sleep. We'll never know, but either way he found the inspiration to leave the cage and experience a very different kind of connection before making his final exit.

Bibliography

Brown, S. (2010) *Play*. New York. Avery Penguin.

Christie, P. (2014) *The Russian Connection*. Stoke-on-Trent. Staffordshire University.

Guskin, H. (2004). *How To Stop Acting*. London. Methuen.

Linklater, K. (2006) *Freeing the Natural Voice*. London. Nick Hern Books

Mamet, D. (1997) *True and False*. New York. Random House.

Nachmanovitch, S. (1990) *Free Play*. New York. Tarcher Penguin.

Phillips, A. (2013) *One Way and Another*. London. Hamish Hamilton.

Smeliansky, A. (1999) *The Russian theatre after Stalin*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Walter, H. (2003) *Other People's Shoes*. London. Nick Hern Books.