

## Sensitive Space: Malmgren's Inner Attitudes

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**Janys Hayes** completed her PhD at the University of Western Sydney. Her thesis, now a book, 'The Knowing Body: Yat Malmgren's acting technique' is recognised as a pioneer study on the internationally taught actor training technique initiated by Malmgren and known as Character Analysis or Movement Psychology. She trained as an actor with Yat Malmgren at Drama Centre London and has trained actors in Melbourne, Sydney and Wollongong, using Malmgren's method. She retains close links with Drama Centre London as a member of the Yat Malmgren research group. Her research interlinks her initial studies in Zoology at the University of Melbourne with an understanding of performed human action. Using phenomenology as a research methodology she has presented at numerous national and international conferences on embodiment and agency in performance.

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Every year thousands of young people across Australia audition to join actor-training institutions.<sup>1</sup> In major cities, as well as the existing university-based performing arts degrees, independent institutions have proliferated, teaching acting via full-time, part-time and short courses.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Bureau of Statistics reveals that the number of Australians claiming to earn a living from the performing arts is low.<sup>3</sup> Whilst parents often caution their teenage school leavers against University courses in the performing arts, the numbers applying have not dropped in response to the reality of the career outcomes, as would be expected. This paper suggests a phenomenological approach to this conundrum, and draws on both Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as well as Rudolf Laban's theories of space.<sup>4</sup>

I begin this paper with an overview of Merleau-Ponty's *flesh*,<sup>5</sup> a peculiar term which he uses to grapple with his ontological comprehension of embodied perception. From there I provide evidence of how actors in training view their courses, with reference to a term that Sue L.

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Cataldi, a phenomenologist and Professor in Philosophy from Minnesota State University Morehead (MUM), offers in relation to Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* - that of 'sensitive space'.<sup>6</sup> In particular I examine how Yat Malmgren's actor training technique, utilising his concept of Laban's kinesphere<sup>7</sup> and his Inner Attitudes aligns clearly with Merleau-Ponty's perception of depth and embodied emotion. Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh* is hopefully going to provide a circuitous route to examine why actor-training courses are attractive to so many and how processes of embodied learning offered under the rubric of actor training produce a personal resilience for the student.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty establishes our lived bodies as the sites of our construction of intersubjectivity. He writes:

it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world ... so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Any subject sustains meanings through reciprocities and relationships that do not require reflective consciousness for enactment.

In his posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) Merleau-Ponty steps further in revising the whole Cartesian construct of subject and object. His term *flesh* is a concept of 'lived distance',<sup>10</sup> implying a bond, an interconnection between all embodied perceivers and all that is perceived. We move in intertwining bodily engagement with our 'lived world',<sup>11</sup> with each 'thing' being 'constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it'.<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty begins by meshing the body/subject into a perceptible world that by its existence inevitably involves depth perception. He writes:

My body must itself be meshed into the visible world ... Thus it is a thing, but a thing I dwell in ... The relationship between my body and things is that of the absolute here to there, ... If the distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body ... it is also blurred in the thing ... the flesh of what is perceived, this compact particle which stops exploration ... reflect[s] my own incarnation and [is] its counterpart.<sup>13</sup>

It is a difficult concept to come to terms with because we, coming from western philosophical traditions are so used to dichotomising. Living versus non-living; self versus other; environment versus people; human versus other animals and so it goes. We also place all these differentiations in a flattened environment of objectified 'things'. But Merleau-Ponty circumvents these distinctions by insisting on a pre-existent unity, a fabric of perceptibility, in which things 'are themselves not flat beings, but beings in depth ... open to him alone that ...would coexist with them in the same world.'<sup>14</sup> This *flesh* is a fabric or field implicating all within it with one another.

The field, the *flesh*, has depth, which emanates from a central point, that of our bodily perception. Cataldi, uses Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* to investigate emotional experiences and locates these in space and depth as 'sensitive space'. Any subject's goals and desires are lived through the links between that subject and the accessibility or inaccessibility of positioned things. This accords with John Dewey's definition of emotion as, 'the effort of the organism to adjust its formed habits or co-ordinations of the past to present necessities as made known in the perception or idea'.<sup>15</sup> The perceptions or ideas, which present themselves via our intentions, become in Merleau-Ponty's three-dimensional design, things in depth that we move into being 'at grips with'.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst we all know that the creation of theatre is a holistic undertaking, involving the unified commitment of each creative component to present a living embodied artform performed in real time, it is the element of acting within this enterprise where processes of embodiment are most apparent and most complex. The actor-in-training is physically present for an unknown audience, speaking words not her own, interacting often intimately with others publicly, embodying motivations set through a text, seemingly belonging to another character. It would appear that these circumstances are the antithesis of Merleau-Ponty's unified field of the *flesh*! However my contention is that these demands on the student actor to stay interconnected in numerous physical planes is not only what produces the desire to study acting, but also produces a reconfigured body/mind for the student. The requirement, to reach beyond habitual adjustments, thrusts actors-in-training into an emotional three-dimensional lived world, or in Cataldi's terms, into 'sensitive space', enabling new and reflective modes of being that empower professional and personal resilience.

The many forms of actor training on offer throughout Australia's major cities have been documented previously almost as snapshots at various times over the last two decades.<sup>17</sup> *Australasian Drama Studies (ADS)* has been a contributor to these ongoing surveys.<sup>18</sup> Whilst tertiary institutions present a range of courses and subjects, based on theatrical legacies from Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Konstantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, and from the more corporally centred performance lineages of Jacques Lecoq, Tadashi Suzuki, and from Japanese Butoh, the independent training colleges emerging partly in response to a growing flow of actors from Australia to LA in search of work, have centred their actor trainings primarily based on Stanislavskian approaches to realism in cinema. In Melbourne, the popular Howard Fine Acting Studio teaches acting using a variation of Uta Hagen's exercises, and 16th street Film and Actors Studio takes Ivana Chubbuck's approach, itself a derivative of Stanislavski's method of physical action. Whilst in Sydney, The Actors Centre (now Actors Centre Australia) relies on Dean Carey's techniques, again formulated originally from Stanislavski's system.<sup>19</sup>

In the *ADS* journal article, 'Cyborg presence in narrative theatre', Gorkem Acaroglu presents a striking take on Stanislavski's system writing that

Stanislavski's entire mission was based on ensuring that the actor's thought is as connected to her speech as possible – to eliminate the trace of writing; to bring presence to the absence of the written word.<sup>20</sup>

If we can understand that the 'written word' is a 'thing' in the actor's perceived and lived world then in Cataldi's understanding there is a sensitive space between the actor's subjective body/mind and this 'thing' that needs to be grasped or embodied: the text. In the same way there is sensitive space between the actor and her objectified body, between the actor and her character, between the actor and her fellow actors. Each of these is a process of embodiment that plunges the actor-in-training into sensitive space.

Malmgren's acting technique,<sup>21</sup> whilst not necessarily concentrating on emotional recall (as in Stanislavski's system), draws attention to the spatial significance of embodiment through Malmgren's use of Laban's movement theories.<sup>22</sup> Laban created a kinesphere, the space in which each person moves and where the dimensions of the sphere are expressed through Weight (as Height), Time (as Length) and Flow (as Width)<sup>23</sup> (see Fig. 1). It is Flow, which Laban

defines as 'the extraverted adjustment of oneself to the world and the introverted relating of one's conscious self with the subconscious'<sup>24</sup> which most clearly aligns with Merleau-Ponty's notions of chiasmic interrelatedness.<sup>25</sup> A body/mind moving under the influence of Flow may or may not be aware of her interconnectedness with others, things, and ideas but in either case, whether conscious or not, feels affectively conjoined. Whilst both Laban and Malmgren were concerned with practices and experiences of dance and acting respectively both have underlying philosophical principles to their teachings, concerning embodiment and agency. The kinesphere establishes that only certain intentional actions by the dancer or actor capture and/or convey feeling, whilst more habitual intentional actions, that lie closer in length and width to the body/mind of the performer, do not. Only particular encounters engender or are open to sensitive space.

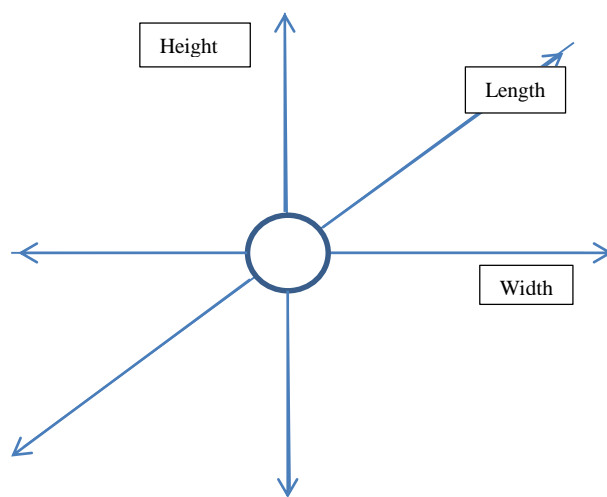


Fig.1 Laban's Planes of Space

What is most significant and what I hope to emphasise in this paper is that Laban (and Malmgren via him) and Merleau-Ponty envisaged the human body in movement, in response to an environment of perceptions, towards that which the perceiver is already 'at grips'.<sup>26</sup> In this, Malmgren's acting technique differs substantially from the teaching of

Stanislavski's system in the twentieth century. Malmgren used to say, What is it that you are moving towards or away from? A person? An idea? Or a thing? He was asking whether we could become conscious of that with which we were intertwined and whether we perceived these things, ideas or people as being accessible or inaccessible. Whilst Cataldi refers to *emotional* connections in her sensitive space, and whilst she points to language constructs that reflect these factors, such as 'jumping for joy' or being 'down in the dumps' or 'falling in love',<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty's image of the chiasm,<sup>28</sup> a crossing-over or interpenetration between self and other, is probably closer to the experiences of actors in training and of what Malmgren's technique delineates. Sometimes this has been termed 'boundary blurring' in relation to the study of acting.<sup>29</sup> Often in acting classes, students cannot put words to what they are experiencing but they subsequently know the value of those experiences. Whether the student actor joins the acting profession or not her lived world has been altered allowing greater interconnection.

The following is a rather typical reflection by a student of acting from the University of Wollongong where the Malmgren actor training technique is taught. Alex<sup>30</sup> states:

I did have romantic, idealised visions of what an acting course would be like; it would get intense, and that's something I found appealing. But then when I was here and going through stuff like that ... it was quite uncomfortable. The training has taught me experientially ... how specific each utterance, inflection and gesture must be, or how it is, in real life ... I feel that it has awakened my consciousness of self and my place in the world.<sup>31</sup>

In this business of actor training, the co-presence of others and their physical expressiveness, the implication with one another in embodying the text, the conjoining with the audience in their reading of the text/performance, becomes pressingly necessary - perhaps even uncomfortably so. These experiences, so often heard about, become romanticised and sought after. As Merleau-Ponty has put it, 'Round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in.'<sup>32</sup> The desire for actor training has mounted as those undertaking it have embodied experiences which have enabled

profound reflections on what embodied existence means. Resilience is the outcome of these expansive life-long learnings, empowering flexibility and adaptability.<sup>33</sup>

Laban in his comprehension of depth and of each body's differing consciousness of engagement with her lived world structured, what became in Malmgren's actor training, the Inner Attitudes. These are six types of differing postures that each body/mind can take towards reality. Malmgren insists in his training that clarity of performance on stage and screen can be achieved through adopting actions stemming from only one Inner Attitude for any one character. A decision needs to be made by the actor as to the world that their character perceives. There are several ways in which Inner Attitudes are defined; through Jungian personality factors of Sensing, Thinking, Intuiting and Feeling;<sup>34</sup> through Laban's terms of Weight, Space, Time or Flow;<sup>35</sup> and even through a differing set of Laban's terms, of Passion, Spell, Doing and Vision.<sup>36</sup> For this paper I want simply to set out the names of the Inner Attitudes, which are Near, Remote, Adream, Awake, Stable and Mobile and present the fact that these postures involve depth perception.<sup>37</sup>

Bodies move in differing ways depending on our perceptions of what we intuitively move towards or encounter. What is Near to us is what we are familiar with, it is most often set through social habits, without reflection. In the Inner Attitude of Near, objectives are close, easily achievable in Time, and close, in that we think what we want is for our sole purpose. In Remote, we cannot even use the term objective, because what draws us is furthest on our horizons and reflection of interconnection is part of the makeup of our posture towards what we view. The other Inner Attitudes lie in between these two in depth perception.<sup>38</sup> In Stable and Adream,<sup>39</sup> Mobile and Awake, perhaps there is a sense that we are interconnected with some things or people or ideas, but there are other parts of our environment that we are more likely to objectify.

Cataldi's 'sensitive space' is one resonant with feeling, but if body/minds encounter only the habitual then there is little room for a sensitive intertwinement. As Merleau-Ponty states, 'What we do in effect is to iron out the I and the Thou in an experience shared by a plurality, thus introducing the impersonal into the heart of subjectivity and eliminating the individuality of perspectives.'<sup>40</sup> We flatten the landscape with common views where we

consider that what we encounter are objects that can be manipulated for our sole purposes. We allow the field of our vision to be dominated by what we regard as the impersonal.

Actor training, with its embodied learning, shakes up simple perceptions of the relationship between the self and others and environments. The blurring of boundaries is more apparent than in other academic trainings. In fact academic trainings on the whole rely now on objectifying the outcomes of knowledge acquisition. This paper contends that the experience of sensitive space is possible only when an individual subjectivity experiences an interpenetration with a thought, thing or person. Actor trainings based on embodied understandings continue to provide these extraordinary experiences in a very flattened consumerist-driven educational environment. Whether students become actors or join the performing arts or not, the existential experiences of these forms of embodied knowledge have guaranteed the development of new resilient personal understandings for students within a broadening sense of an enlivened landscape.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Konrad Marshall, 'The next step to stardom for aspiring performing arts students,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 December 2013).

Online: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/the-next-step-to-stardom-for-aspiring-performing-arts-students-20131209-2z1ek.html>. Marshall lists figures for numbers auditioning for both WAAPA and NIDA acting courses as 750 for 18 places and over 2,000 for 24 places respectively.

In 'NIDA 2015 Application Now Open' Online: <https://www.nida.edu.au/about-nida/news/nida-2015-applications-now-open>, Lynne Williams Director and CEO of NIDA states that 'nearly 2,000' applicants auditioned for the 2015 intake.

<sup>2</sup> John Freeman notes in 2013 that in Australian Universities students often join Performance Studies courses seeking actor training. See John Freeman, 'Performance studies, actor training and boutique borrowing', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 33.1 (2013): 77-90.

<sup>3</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics website indicates that in 2011 less than 5,000 people were employed both within and external to the performing arts industry as actors.

Online: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/7D6288C8EFE03679CA257968000CBDD8?open=document>.

<sup>4</sup> For resonances between Merleau-Ponty and Rudolf Laban see Maureen Connolly and Anna Lathrop, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Rudolf Laban: An interactive appropriation of parallels and resonances', *Human Studies* 20.1 (1997): 27-45.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

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<sup>6</sup> Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Laban, *Choreutics* (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1966) 10.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge and Taylor Francis, 2005) 412. (Original work published 1945)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 412.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'lived distance' in relation to Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* comes from Cataldi, *Emotion*, 3. She also calls it, 'this elemental surface of sensibility'.

<sup>11</sup> Phenomenologists use differing terms to express the inseparable nature of Being from the world. 'Being-in-the-world', 'lifeworld', 'lived-through-world' and my term 'lived world' all arise originally from Heidegger's concept of *Lebenswelt*. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A translation of Sein and Zeit*, ed. and trans. J. Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty refers to 'things' when speaking of any body/mind encounter with anything that presents itself to consciousness. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The philosopher and his shadow', trans. Richard C. McCleary, in *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 166-7.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, 'The theory of emotion', in Robert Solomon and Cheshire Calhoun, ed., *What is an Emotion?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 171

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 409.

<sup>17</sup> See Barry O'Connor, 'Mapping training/Mapping performance: Current trends in Australian actor training', in Ian Watson, ed., *Performer Training: Developments Across Cultures* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001) 47-60. Barry O'Connor's research is from 1996. Bree Hadley surveys the field from 1979 to 2004 in Bree Hadley, 'Influences, institutions and outcomes: A survey of Masters and Doctoral theses on actor training in Australia 1979-2004', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 53 (October, 2008): 8-16; John Freeman critiques the phenomenon of students undertaking Performance Studies or Theatre Studies courses in Australia and the UK seeking to study acting. John Freeman, 'Drama at a time of crisis: Actor training, performance study and the creative workplace', *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 13.4 (2012) Online: <http://www.ijea.org/v13n4/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Australasian Drama Studies* 53, is a focus issue on 'Lineages, Techniques, Training and Tradition; *Australasian Drama Studies* 57 is a focus issue on 'Teaching Theatre, Performance & Drama Studies'.

<sup>19</sup> See the following websites Howard Fine Acting Studio, Online: <http://www.howardfinestudio.com.au/>; 16th street Film and Actors Studio, Online: <http://www.16thstreet.com.au/>; Actors Centre Australia, Online: <http://www.actorscentre.com.au/ACA/actorscentre.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Gorkem Acaroglu, 'Cyborg presence in narrative theatre,' *Australasian Drama Studies* 65 (October, 2012): 239.

<sup>21</sup> See Janys Hayes, *The Knowing Body: Yat Malmgren's Acting Technique* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> See Jean Newlove, *Laban for Actors and Dancers* (London: Nick Hern, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Clive Barker provides a comprehensive diagram of Laban's spatial concept of the kinesphere. Clive Barker, *Theatre Games* (London: Methuen, 1983) 140.

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<sup>24</sup> Yat Malmgren's unpublished lecture notes were utilised in all Drama Centre London actor trainings from 1963-2001. They outlined definitions of the terms, gathered from Rudolf Laban, used in Malmgren's technique, firstly called Movement Psychology and then later named Character Analysis. The definition of Flow comes from Malmgren's 2002 notes.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty speaks of a crossing-over or interpenetration between the subject and others, including things. See Merleau-Ponty, 1968. Also Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, ed., *Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000)

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 409.

<sup>27</sup> Cataldi, *Emotion*, 7-11.

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 152-3.

<sup>29</sup> See Suzanne Burgoyne, Karen Poukin and Ashley Rearden, 'The impact of acting on student actors: Boundary blurring, growth, and emotional distress', *Theatre Topics*, 9.2 (1990): 157-179.

<sup>30</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>31</sup> Hayes, *The Knowing Body*, 141, 186.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 412.

<sup>33</sup> Lotte Latukefu, Marcus O'Donnell, Shawn Burns, Janys Hayes, Grant Ellmers, & Joanna Stirling, 'Fire in the belly: Building resilience in creative practitioners through experiential, practice-led and authentically designed learning environments', *The CALTN Papers: the Refereed Proceedings of the Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network Symposium*, ed. J. Holmes (Hobart: Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network, 2013) 61-89.

<sup>34</sup> See Calvin Hall and Vernon Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Mentor, 1973) 96-110.

<sup>35</sup> Laban's terms of Weight, Space, Time and Flow are known as his Motion Factors. See Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 2nd edn, Lisa Ullman ed. (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1960) 127.

<sup>36</sup> Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 3rd edn, Lisa Ullman, ed. (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1971) 87-89.

<sup>37</sup> In a series of personal interviews, 28/9 November 2000, Malmgren indicated the connection between Inner Attitudes and perception of space.

<sup>38</sup> A full table of the Inner Attitudes and their factors can be found in Hayes, *The Knowing Body*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> The Inner Attitude of Adream (one word) arose in Yat Malmgren's teaching from Laban's term 'dreamlike' from Laban 127. Malmgren's Swedish background and his often deliberate obfuscation of English was a well known characteristic of his teaching.

<sup>40</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 414.