

In Search of Stillness

Capturing the purity and energy of not moving is the root of the invisible body

BY ELLEN LAUREN



Ellen Lauren
in SITI Company's
Room.

I'VE BEEN HAVING A DIFFICULT TIME SITTING still to write about stillness.

What does the study and practice of stillness entail for the theatre artist? Perhaps my difficulty is an illustration of how elusive this knowledge remains, and how potent it is, once harnessed, in an unsettled world. Perhaps the difficulty lies in the fact that this subject, stillness, is at the root of all the essential values I hold in the making, teaching and study of the art of theatre.

To achieve stillness as part of one's expressive abilities requires training. In my case, the foundation of my practice and teaching has been the Suzuki Method of Actor Training. Created by Tadashi Suzuki and his remarkable Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT), the work is widely known for its exact and rigorous physical vocabulary that gives the actor insights into basic issues of control.

As I write this I am preparing to return to Japan for rehearsals with Suzuki-san. The snows have already come to the high mountain village of Toga-mura, where SCOT centers its activities, but it was summer when I first traveled there almost 30 years ago. Many artists have made this journey, and some of them are my colleagues to this day. Our company, SITI, was founded in Toga with an allegiance between Suzuki, Anne Bogart and a group of like-minded artists from the U.S. Even then, Suzuki's company was changing the course of theatre and actor-training, not only in Japan but around the world. Their message—that the qualities of human energy, breath and stillness could be examined together in the context of performance—reinstated the actor as the primary element in theatre. Coming as I did from a background in the not-for-profit resident theatre in the United States, nothing was more astonishing to me than the performances, training practices and work ethic of this group called SCOT.

In the beginning, it was the challenging movement that attracted me. I had an athletic background as an equestrian, and found the heat of the work suited to my temperament. Each summer I returned, and eventually over the years transitioned from visiting student to full-fledged actor within SCOT. As I matured under Suzuki's direction, I gradually understood that all the energy expended in the studio was a pragmatic way to arrive at the confrontation between habit and objectivity. I have come to understand that the real significance of Suzuki training lies in creating a vivid presence in stillness, and a sharpening of concentration to the present moment on stage.

No training can address the internal differences in all actors. Each of us is psychologically and emotionally unique. What is productive is training that helps you gain perspective into the abilities you have and cultivate those you lack, then effectively translate those abilities into expression. Suzuki training examines the things we hold in common as human beings: the use of our bodies and our voices.

What happens to the body and the voice when an actor is placed in the demanding situation of being watched as he or she tries to convince someone of something? What happens to us when we are placed in this relationship of being seen and of showing? What kinds of sensations occur? What kind of concentration is created? What kind of excitement is generated inside us?

One consequence of the performance dynamic is that it becomes almost impossible to hold onto the excitement inside us and *not* move. The movement becomes unconscious and habitual. Breath becomes shallow, tension rises, concentration is disrupted—these effects are universal. How can we become more sensitive and monitor those effects that stand between our desire to communicate and our actual execution? The answer is: by practicing stillness, which is the art of seduction. Once the actor is able to make clear decisions in the body, his or her concentration excites the space, and the audience

experiences something beyond the quotidian, something that transcends daily life. What is moving inside you is made manifest. It is a deeply personal and intimate revelation of the self. Stillness allows the strength of your convictions to become visible.

The basic tenets of Suzuki training are helpful for all actors: Be still on stage. Risk commitment to stillness. It is good for you and better for the audience. Stabilize your center of gravity as if braking against some force, so that the stillness is born of directing energy forward against some fictional resistance. Both the problem and the solution are self-generated. Bring consciousness to your feet and legs. We have become insensitive to the feeling of our feet against the floor; hold them still and press against the stage. Soften the shoulders and arms, the chest and neck, the face. Breathe deeply, silently, accurately. Direct all consciousness in a straight line to a specific focus outside the self. Compose the energy of your body, breathing and voice around the center of the space, through which you communicate your idea to your focus. Stillness provides a structure, a reference point for the event.

This concentration is most difficult to maintain while speaking. When you speak, the words tend to take precedence over the attention on the body. The audience, however, isn't fooled by the words we speak. The fight is to not let the voice overwhelm consciousness of the body and breath. The body explains the words you are speaking. The actor is able to capture the energy and essence, not just the appearance, of someone who would be saying those particular words.

The specific tests of this training are designed to replicate the extraordinary conditions of being on stage. Suzuki training is often mistaken as movement instruction, but the work is far more complex in its logic. Movement is done to create the sensation of not moving. Suzuki likens the actor to a spinning top that appears most calm and still when going top speed. The problems that arise in practicing the training are one's personal obstacles, visible or unseen. The training provides a tangible way to diagnose these problems. It is then up to the artist to discover how to overcome them. It is critical to have some objective criteria against which to measure the self, as we grow and problems change. Certainly, they never go away. They only change.

So I continue to train, knowing that I often stumble in my attempts, and always will. Finding the compression needed in rehearsal while at the same time trying to envision the destination I am aiming for and create the map to find my way there—all this is daunting. Capturing the purity of this heightened state in performance is even more challenging. Undertaking any art training seriously, however, is a kind of contract one makes with oneself, a contract that has to do more with experience than with accomplishment. The moments of grace are fleeting and addictive. Now older, unquestionably slower, I look at the training through a thicker lens of experience and find its message shocking in its clarity. I am more ferocious in my faith in this work, more convinced that it is a way to look at fundamental criteria for the actor, whatever artistic road you wish to go down.

Suzuki is passionate in his belief that individual talent develops as a result of one's curiosity about the world and about the unknown. Learning to relate to stillness that is born of energy is to discover a meaning beyond the words you speak. It restores us to our senses. It reveals to us the invisible—which seems to me an essential pursuit in any creative act. It is the actor who reminds us that the past, present and the eternal coexist in each moment. ❏

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