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**PSYCHOPHYSICAL ACTING:  
an intercultural approach after Stanislavski, by Phillip B. Zarrilli**

ATUAÇÃO PSICOFÍSICA:  
uma abordagem intercultural após Stanislavski de Phillip B. Zarrilli

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**Psychophysical acting:  
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**Abstract:** This review focuses on the second part of Phillip B. Zarrilli's book *Work on oneself* (2009), with a preface by Eugenio Barba. Centered on the psychophysical dimension of acting, the selected section addresses the importance of the actor's psychic dimension and the ability to work on oneself.

**Keywords:** theatre; psychophysical acting; work on oneself; training.

**Atuação psicofísica:  
uma abordagem intercultural após Stanislavski de Phillip B. Zarrilli**

**Resumo:** Esta resenha dedica-se à segunda parte do livro, *Trabalho sobre si mesmo*, de Phillip B. Zarrilli (2009) com prefácio de Eugenio Barba. Centrado na questão da dimensão psicofísica do trabalho de atuação, o trecho do livro escolhido para a resenha trata da importância da dimensão psíquica do ator e da habilidade de se trabalhar sobre si.

**Palavras-chave:** teatro; atuação psicofísica; princípios de trabalho sobre si; treinamento.



Asian martial arts employ a concrete physiological process to dismantle everyday automatisms and to generate another quality of bodily energy. They present a body that is resolute and ready to launch into action. This attitude constitutes an extra-daily technical form, akin to the posture of an animal poised to attack or defend itself. (Barba, 1991, p. 77).

## Introduction

After Denis Diderot's "Paradox of the Actor" (initiated in 1769 and published posthumously in 1830), the Western world witnessed, in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, at the Moscow Art Theatre, the development and deepening of the actor's craft through the work and writings of Konstantin Stanislavski. In the theatrical canon, an emphasis on acting that considers its psychophysical dimension can be observed throughout the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century.

Since then, acting theory has developed extensively, yet without disregarding what was elaborated, tested, researched, and staged over many years by Stanislavski and his students, affiliates, critics, and followers. Figures such as Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), Lee Strasberg (1901–1982), and Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), among others, contributed to and advanced understandings of the actor's work grounded in the psychophysical body.

Another relevant point to consider is the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, as it established the understanding of the human psyche as fundamental (from a transdisciplinary perspective). Consequently, it influenced both the actor's bodily constitution (the psychic dimension) and acting practice. This perspective is present in the chapters devoted to affective memory in Stanislavski's "An Actor's Work" (2001), as well as in his artistic practice.

This understanding and consideration of the emotions of the actor, and of emotion within the actor, give rise to the intercultural updating proposed by Phillip Zarrilli (2009) in his approach to the integration of the psyche and the physical body as inseparable elements that must be studied and developed as such. Actors' psychological aspects must be considered in acting practice. Breathing as a foundational principle, yoga, and aspects related to energy and energy patterns constitute contemporary acting work. In other words, psychophysical work is part of an investigative contemporaneity of the art of acting.

Following the work of the Russian actor, director, pedagogue, and writer Stanislavski, Zarrilli undertook an intercultural reexamination, linking East and West through a transcultural perspective, thereby advancing and updating Stanislavski's studies in the first decade of the twenty-first century.



From this historical preamble, necessary to move forward, this review offers a brief discussion of the second part of Phillip Zarrilli's book, published in 2009 with a preface by Eugenio Barba, entitled "Work on oneself."

## Work on oneself

The actor's domain of action is the actor's own person. This domain is richer than that of the painter, richer than that of the musician, because in order to explore it, the actor must call upon all aspects of being. Hands, eyes, ears, and heart are both what is studied and what is used to study. Seen in this way, the actor's work is the work of a lifetime. (Brook, 2009, p. 21).

From the actor's point of view, acting is essentially a work on oneself, as the psychophysical body is the instrument through which the work takes place. From this principle follows the understanding that the actor has extensive work to be undertaken on oneself (although not alone). Then it can be said that psychophysical training constitutes a foundational principle to be established and developed throughout acting practice. This is a lifelong task in the art of acting.

Based on the research conducted by Phillip Zarrilli, it becomes necessary to identify and transpose certain key elements and principles into acting practice, particularly with regard to the establishment of training. Traditional training in Asian disciplines generally begins in childhood. Energy associated with breathing is a fundamental foundation, as it is in yoga.

From an intercultural perspective, it is worth asking how, in the Latin American –more specifically Brazilian – context, contemporary actors may appropriate these principles. What adaptations are required when considering the socio-historical realities and life trajectories of contemporary actors in the establishment of training practices? These questions are essential so that, in an anthropophagic mode, Brazilian practitioners and researchers situated within this canon may incorporate them.

According to Zarrilli, mastery in the development of training lies in the degree of excellence of practice rather than in the ability to explain what one does. In other words, this marks a distinction between *knowing-how* and *knowing-that*: the actor should show rather than talk about the work, except in specific moments of reflection, which must always return to practice. Broadly speaking, one acts in order to speak about what has been done and then returns to doing, avoiding speculation about what one will or intends to do.

The core elements and dynamic qualities of psychophysical training must be contextualized to be accessible and useful to contemporary actors across cultures. Such training requires clear structure, focus, objectives, and appropriate methods and techniques. In other words:

One cannot work on oneself without being within something structured, which repeats itself, with a beginning, middle, and end. Something in which every element has its logical place and its technical need. (Grotowski, 1995, p. 130).



### **The ideal psychophysical state of the actor: *I CAN!***

According to Zarrilli, six principles common to psychophysical training systems in practice may be considered:

1. Awakening energy
2. Attuning body and mind
3. Increasing awareness
4. Readiness and openness
5. Doing (taking form) and being done (being shaped)
6. Dual and multiple awareness

### **Overview of the actor's psychophysical process**

#### **Phase 1 – Training**

a) Psychophysical training prepares the two dimensions of the actors bodies – the physical body and the mind – toward body–mind integration as a Gestalt. It awakens inner energy that had been dormant, inert, or automated in the body and behavior, leading to a state of readiness. In other words, it involves moving from the everyday body–mind (logical–emotional) to a ready and alert body–mind, prepared within an extra-daily body for acting performance.

b) Work on the body–mind relationship continuously, refining psychophysical behavior with the aim of improving performance. In other words, furthering the investigation, work, and expansion of the actors' psychophysical capacities, seeking harmony and attunement between body and mind.

c) Awakened attunement and sensitization open a deeper capacity to perceive and feel. This begins with the perception of form assimilated through training exercises. As a result, actors become open and receptive to the resonance or sensation of what is being done at the moment of scenic performance, becoming more available and more emotionally credible.

#### **Phase 2 – From training to performance**

a) As the energy of readiness awakens, actors learn to give form and to shape such energy in practice, applying it with the awareness required by specific aesthetic and dramaturgical proposals.

b) For each performance, actors can develop an appropriate degree of psychophysical performance.



### **Phase 3 – In performance (acting)**

1. Based on what has been developed through psychophysical training and its principles, actors prepare and attune their bodies and minds to the aesthetic and dramaturgical proposal specific to that performative context.

### **Phase 4 – Returning to training (phase 1)**

2. Actors ensure the continuous process of developing increasingly subtle and expanded awareness by returning to psychophysical training.

Continuous psychophysical training fosters ever more refined integration between body and mind; consequently, actors become, more open and available, in an optimized way.

### **Considerations**

Based on Zarrilli's work, situated within the historical canon of Western and Brazilian theatre, it can be inferred – anthropagogically, in reference to Brazilian modernist principles – that acting, understood through the psychophysical dimension of the contemporary actor's body, permeates the actor's formation. This process spans physical and emotional development from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

The development of the actor's psychophysical body throughout life, shaped by the ways emotions are experienced and registered, determines how professional training will unfold. This development also affects the transition into professional practice, when daily work on oneself reveals its importance and necessity.

The actors' work may be understood as beginning with the development of bodily awareness, oriented toward overcoming limitations and expanding abilities, which is indispensable. This is followed by the bodily expression of the conscious body–mind, in the effects of training become perceptible. In other words, the changes that occur in the actors' physical and psychic dimensions through training gradually become visible and verifiable in expressive terms, expanding the range of expressivities.

Training then becomes directed toward the specific purpose of staging, i.e., toward a particular aesthetic and dramaturgical proposal. The specificity of actors' work unfolds within two spatial dimensions: the space of dramaturgy and narrative, and the physical space of staging within the theatre. Acting unfolds in this field, always across these two spatial dimensions. After each performance, actors return to training in pursuit of further development, sustaining an ongoing process of refinement and evolution in acting practice.



The need to establish training as a pathway for scenic construction, from the perspective of acting, remains essential beyond the ideal conditions that might enable it. Thus, in contemporary contexts, practice must adapt to rarely ideal conditions while maintaining structured psychophysical training, developed according to the actors' availability, as emphasized by Phillip Zarrilli.



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