

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF THEATRE AND TELEVISION**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**Towards a re-appreciation of the actor’s work on the ‘self’:
personal training as a potential spiritual discipline**

PhD Summary

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Keywords: theatre, performance, physical and vocal training, actor, spirituality, mind-body disciplines, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook

The present paper argues that the actor's specific physical and vocal training (as developed in the twentieth century by artists such as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook), if executed purposefully, could (and perhaps should) be considered a spiritual discipline. It is connected with a will to change, transcend, re-form oneself, an attempt to live life in a holistic way, in its integrity and entirety. "Technologies of the self" is the name Michel Foucault gives those proceedings the main aim of which is to change or transform the doer with the intent to reach another state of existence, one of "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality"¹. These proceedings, according to Foucault's research, are a number of actions or "operations" that one can perform on oneself (i.e., on one's body and one's soul), either alone or with the help of others. He lists technologies of the self among four main categories of technologies that humans use to obtain information ("develop knowledge") about themselves, and these are: the technologies of production; those of sign systems; of power; and finally the technologies of the self. I consider personal training just such a technology of the self. More specifically, it is related to the Greek concept of *epimeleia heautou*, which can be translated as "care for the self"².

In my paper I examine closely not just the actor's technique, the history of training, but also several oriental disciplines as well as a few recent findings in neurobiology and other sciences that have a strong connection to the theme (and the theory of acting and theatre in general).

As I argue in this paper, (1) negative connotations should not make us abandon this word, spirituality, and (2) spirituality in all the traditions is a set of very concrete practices having a clear goal, it has nothing to do with being lost, spaced out, looking for mystical truths and so on. This paper is not a handbook on 'how to be spiritual'. It is not a textbook, not a method. It does

¹ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self", in Martin, L.H. et al (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988, p. 18.

² Michel Foucault, *The hermeneutics of the subject; lectures at the College de France 1982-1983*, translated by Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, p. 58.

not advocate that solely through the use of the exercises it mentions, or the approach informed by the practitioners it mentions, can acting or the practice of the actor become/be seen as spiritual. However, it does advocate, that some sort of personal training is needed *for sure*, if not for ‘spiritual reasons’, then at least for the sake of our continuous practice and expansion of the craft.

Part I pinpoints (both in actor forming and in the world of theatre in general) some problems that I consider a hindrance to the evolution of the craft and the discovery of what else there is out there for actors (other than rehearsing for a premiere and performing). I examine how certain influences became ‘corrupted’ and effectively delayed the possibility of a certain type of findings to occur, and how, in the course of the 20th century, an interconnection between the change to approaching character, the placement of the body in the centre of theatrical creation and exploration, and turning towards Eastern techniques and philosophy allowed for a different view to rise.

This new view did not bother with sacrificing everything in the name of (re)presenting fictional characters on stage in a believable manner, but instead made the actor the object of research, allowing for the actor’s work to gradually become truly a work ‘on the self’. The next step in the natural evolution of this approach was the development of ‘training’, of which I said (outlining its’ general history,) that I consider the trio of Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook the most exponential proponents of a spiritual side to the actor’s work within training.

However, I argue – giving examples – that the existence of such a spiritual side has faced many (separate) socio-political and cultural challenges, resulting in not only the wider public’s ignorance to such a possibility, but also (crucially and sadly) theatre creators’ general ignorance to such issues. I suggest that it is possible to trace a thread running through the ages, taken up in the 20th century by proponents such Konstantin Stanislavski, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, which attributes spiritual significance to that which could be called the actor’s work, while proposing in more and more articulate ways that the actor’s work is first and foremost a work on the self, and developing this work to an extent where at a certain point it breaks free from the condition of work as preparation for performance and becomes an independent activity, with its own values and usefulness.

In **Part II** the focus shifts towards the word ‘spirituality’, its’ characteristics, and several forms it has taken. The contextual analysis reveals to us the (at present) inherently dual nature of

the word (or rather of what it invokes): on the one side, it seems to be ‘the word of our times’, on the other, it invokes ignorance at best and scornful rejection at worst. The semantic analysis yields that in its’ original meaning(s) the words spiritual and spirituality have had authentic content full of meaning, thus I argue for the restoration of our trust in the notion, and the continuing of interdisciplinary approaches (both scholarly as well as practical), linking spirituality to arts, theatre, acting as well as other fields. The argument is delivered in the form of reflections on the future of spirituality, proposing that it can be a catalyst for wider societal changes.

Following this, concrete forms or disciplines of spirituality are analysed, among them a range of Oriental disciplines such as Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and Zen (the former’s Japanese strand), and the various concrete somatic (bodily) techniques which have either grown out of them, influenced them, or on the contrary, were influenced by them (Yoga, Kalaripayattu, Tai Chi, Kyudo, Aikido).

Moreover, a specifically 20th century discipline, Gurdjieff’s teachings and the Movements developed by him were also taken into account, as well as the ancient Greek practice of *epimeleia heautou*. These two could be said to be European incarnations of spirituality (even though many of the roots of Gurdjieff’s syncretic efforts lie in Asian forms as well as elsewhere), and I find it important that one is from the 20th century (it constitutes strong evidence that the creation of ‘new’ spiritual disciplines is possible), while the other is retrieved (thanks to Foucault) from the burial ground of history. This Greek concept and praxis of *epimeleia heautou* from my perspective sums up in a way closest to us everything that was investigated under the heading of ‘spiritual practice or discipline’.

All these techniques and approaches are analysed for the idea inherent in them that spiritual advancement is a work on the self, and for the various discoveries that can be found in them regarding the nature of spirituality, of reality, and their different ways of operating. The analysis sheds light on several shared characteristics and techniques, which I’ve collected together under the term ‘prerequisites of spirituality’. My proposal is that these prerequisites are shared/can be found also in the type of training that I suggest as suitable for consideration as a potential spiritual discipline.

Part III attempts to connect the first two parts and makes a final summary of how training can be practiced as a spiritual discipline leading to Foucault's *epimeleia heautou*. First the historic development of how this specific type of training came to be is presented, then the argument links conditions and elements of the training to the 'prerequisites of spirituality'. I suggest a number of exercises which I have found to contain the seed for being used with purposes attaining to spirituality, without suggesting that this would be an exclusive list.

In summary, this thesis provides a deeper insight into re-appreciating the actor's personal training (a 20th century development and in many theatre circles still not a given,) as a potential spiritual discipline, perhaps best summed up by Jung's notion of individuation and the Greek concept of *epimeleia heautou*, with the study shedding new light on a number of elements of the past and present of what could be called 'the actor's work on the self'.

In this new incarnation of the actor that I suggest, the fact that the actor's work is a work on selfhood (self-knowledge, wholeness) is self-evident. It is also evident that this work on the self happens only partially (or perhaps none at all) through the performing of shows or systematic rehearsals of new shows, but rather through systematic work on our bodies, mind, soul and emotions through personal training (a set of precise exercises which function according to the prerequisites of somatic spiritual disciplines found throughout the world).

In this way the actor working on the self through personal training becomes a seeker, with the potential to become a knower. This elevates the actor's status and gives him/her more societal responsibilities. Theatre needs to change and find the ways to better contribute to sustainable 'production', and better fit into an ecological outlook on our relationship to our planet's resources. It needs to find a more organic existence and it needs to re-appreciate its' relation to its' audiences. For this, the system needs to change. The actor needs to be at the forefront of such changes and drive such changes.

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