

TRANSGRESSING THE SELF: HOW ACTORS BECOME CHARACTERS

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Abstract

This paper explores how Sri Lankan theatre actress Kaushalya Fernando articulates her experience of self-preparation and becoming character in an enactive situation. From Diderot to Stanislavski and many other acting theorists have addressed this issue and further proposed various methods and remedies for actors. In this research, a particular attention is made on Kaushalya's descriptive narratives on self-preparation and the process of impersonation in acting. In order to understand how she perceives her inner preparedness and becoming a character, this research intends to analyse a semi-structured interview conducted with Kaushalya Fernando in light with phenomenology and cognitive science. In the first section of this paper, respondent's description of body-mind relation are explored as a way of achieving inner preparedness. Later Kaushalya's ideas on becoming a character and inter-subjectivity between herself and other actors are discussed and analysed. A close analysis of her interview further reveals that Kaushalya's articulation of body-mind experience and ways of becoming a character are described within three ontological categories. These ontologies of 'being' of the actor reveals acting as a self-revelation as well as inter-subjective operation. Hence, this paper argues, that mental preparedness, impersonation and attunement with other actors are understood as binaries of body vs mind, self vs character, and self vs other. Furthermore this paper concludes that the actor's inner and outer ambiguities do not resemble any psychical function but are the register of which the actor's engagement with her environment is displayed.

Key words: Actor, self, character, phenomenology, ontology, other

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Figure 1: Kaushalya Fernando

Introduction

This paper explores how actors prepare their body-mind and becoming characters in enactive situations. The problem of impersonation and becoming another self has been thoroughly contested in the history of acting. French philosopher Denis Diderot was one of the foremost thinkers who addressed this issue and formulated disengagement theory for the actor (Diderot 1883). Early 19th Century, Stanislavski, the father of modern acting articulated a psychophysical approach to actor-character relation (Stanislavski 1949, Pitches 2006).

Thus, in this paper, Sri Lankan actor Kaushalya Fernando¹ and her experience and understanding of body-mind involvement and character portrayal are discussed and analysed. Through a close reading of semi-structured interview, this paper identifies three ontological categories through which the actor, Kaushalya articulates her involvements in acting:

1. The actor possess an inner psyche through which she elevates her emotional engagement during rehearsals and character portrayal
2. Character is an empty existence via which the actor generates a living entity
3. The actor perceives her co-actor's existence as a void created between the self and the other.

Thus this paper finally concludes that the actor's relationship with the character is imaginary construction that emanated through series of metaphors.

Body and Mind

Contradictions between everyday body techniques and their application in performance situations reflect the ways that the actor understands her body-mind in theatrical enactments. This division between the physical and mental aspects in acting are apparent throughout Kaushalya's description of acting. She repeatedly mentions the imperative of cultivating the 'psychological competence' of the performer. This psychological competence, according to her, provides 'food for thoughts' (මනසට ආහාරයක්). Thus, Kaushalya makes no connection between her daily body practices and characters' habits on stage. For her, daily body practices are mere physical acquaintances and lack of 'inner content'. These physical trainings, according to her fail to provide training for her *manasa*, or the psyche (2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

I realized that when I am acting, I use my body, my walk, and my hands in a very monotonous way. I feel that all the movements of my body are the same in the characters that I play. The voice is

¹ Kaushalya Fernando is an award winning theatre and film actor who has been working in the Sri Lankan performance industry for the last three decades. She was brought up within a family where her mother is a well-known theatre director and a veteran actress in Sri Lanka. Kaushalya graduated from the University of Colombo and had worked as an English instructor. She continues her theatre career with the theatre ensemble formed by her mother and has directed new plays in the recent past. I conducted an interview with Kaushalya in 2012 at her residence in Kotte, Colombo.

monotonous. As I said, I had a problem with my hand; it is a problem because I have not been able to immerse into the characterization process (Fernando K 2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

As Kaushalya argues her walking, speech and gestures on stage are too-closely resembled to body techniques acquired in everyday life. Her body schemata such as walking, standing and other bodily compartments begin to contradict with the bodily habits she cultivates on stage.

Stanislavski states that the main challenge for the actor perhaps is to learn ‘how to walk on the stage’ (Lutterbie and Palgrave 2011, p. 137). What Stanislavski meant by this statement is that the actor is always confronted by so-called natural and the theatrical behaviours on stage. Everyday skill acquisition and the requirement of stage action collide with each other requiring a need for a new habit body.



Figure 2: Kaushalya Fernando in ‘*Kalumali*’ a play by Ruwanthi De Chickera

Attention, concentration, and relaxation are some of the vital elements that Kaushalya emphasizes as the ‘mental aspects’ of the actor’s work. Talking about her performance in the recent

bilingual play *Kalu Māli*,² directed by Ruwanthi De Chickera, Kaushalya explains the problem of ‘attention’ in her acting. In some instances, she assumes that her attention is directed towards something else outside the current task and this creates a panicked situation. She argues that improved ‘attention’ enables her to ‘concentrate’ on the role and eliminates panic situation. However, if her ‘attention’ wanders beyond the performance space, her concentration is disturbed.

Stanislavski explores the notion of attention and emphasises the value of attention to be able to develop self-communion for the actor. Stanislavski’s notion of self-communion is not purely a mental state but a bodily attentiveness that the actor develops towards the target environment (Stanislavski and Hapgood 1967). Attention allows the actor to ‘bracket’ mundane daily life and to develop the attentiveness towards the scenic situation. (Stanislavski and Hapgood 1967, pp. 75-77). Phenomenological philosophy affirms that the ‘attention’ is a bodily perceptual faculty which intends to couple with the outer object. The relationship between the attention and the object is explained through the gestalt of figure-background structure (1962, pp. 31-32). For Kaushalya, ‘attention’ is a ‘mental process’ and enhances her concentration.

When I am performing in the theatre, at least for two hours, I am concentrating on someone else, the role that I am performing. So I forget everything; I even forget my kids which means I am in a different state. In the theatre when you are performing, your mind does not travel anywhere else. Because I know that if my mind is attached to something outside this act, then it ruins everything, my lines and so on (Fernando K. 2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

² *Kalu Māli*, directed by Ruwanthi De Chickera

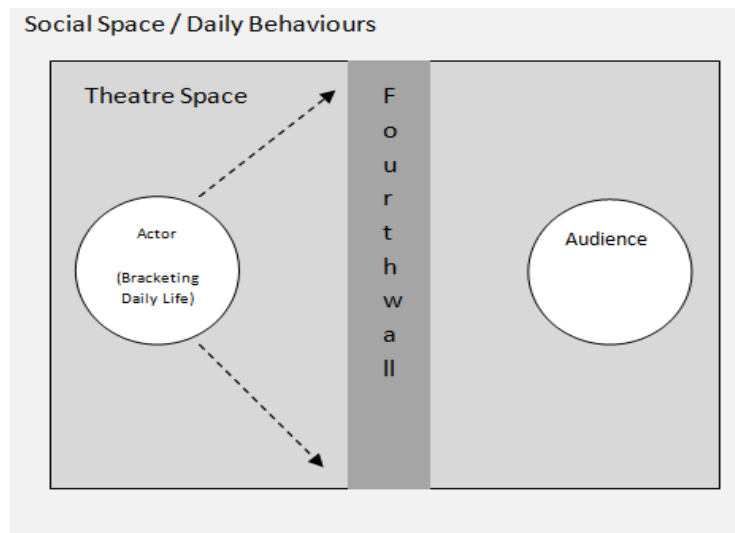


Figure 3: Actor's attention and public solitude in the performance space

For Kaushalya, attention and concentration are mind aspects of the actor's art. She argues that if she is able to concentrate on the task fully on the stage by 'bracketing' the everyday life, she is capable of performing on stage and forgets her everyday tasks. However, Kaushalya's identification of the "forgetfulness" in her acting practice also verifies how her body-mind is intertwined and ingrained in the knowing process in the enactive situations. Attention and concentration are interlinked processes for her. If her attention is increased towards the acting task, then her concentration on the task is also increased. For her, this concentration on the task environment provides relaxation for the body and mind.

The relaxation is very important; the whole body and mind. But being relaxed you cannot achieve the craft of acting. There is another thing, the preparedness. You need to be sure about your movements, your dialogues, positions, props, etc (Fernando K 2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

However the actor faces a dilemma in this situation; first in order to retain her concentration and attention on the acting task she needs bracketing daily tasks. On the other hand, she needs to enact daily life on stage while bracketing the mandarin life.

Self and the Character

The actor's approach to character building and attuning to the role is a vital stage of the acting process. The actor's relationship with the character, as Rick Kemp suggests, is mysterious as well as obvious (Kemp 2012). It is mysterious because the spectator cannot see how the actor attunes to the role. It is obvious because it is the actor who presents herself on the stage (2012, p. 93). The actor's task is to hide behind the role and present the character according to the given circumstances set by the dramatic text.

In a realistic performance, the actor perceives the character as a living/transcendental entity that emerges from the dramatic text. Very often, actors tend to think that the role they 'give birth' to should be a separate being that emanates from the actor's own self. In order to get this result, the actor should be fully immersed in the role and disappear in the performance process. This approach is famously known as 'impersonation' or 'transformational acting' (Kemp 2012, p. 130). Kaushalya's approach to character portrayal is also akin to such embodiment through which the actor immerses into the character and disappears in the performance process.

When I played in *Marat/Sade*, all the people said that my performance was really good. But I personally know that I cheated; my acting was not truthful. I tried to develop some external forms that I perceived, modulated my voice, sang all the songs and projected myself to be able to be seen and heard by the audience; nothing else. But there was one advantage that the role was quite similar to my age. So I presented the role as I present myself. I did not have any inner relation with it (Fernando K 2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

Kaushalya explains that her previous acting experience in *Marat/Sade*³ is a mere representation of the outer structure of her 'self' (2012 pers. comm., 17 September). According to her, if the actor represents the 'self' as the role in the enactment, that performance seems a 'false representation'; whereas, the actor's intention should be finding the 'truth' of the role by immersing in the role she enacts.⁴

³ Sri Lankan adaptation of the Play *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* by Peter Wiess was translated and directed by Sugathapala De Silva in 1992.

⁴ The description closely parallels Stanislavski's notion of the 'inner life of the human spirit' he explicated in *An Actor Prepares*.

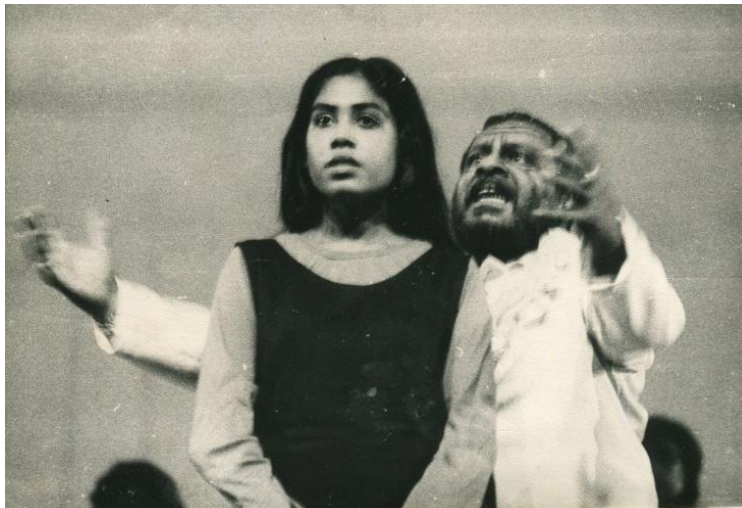


Figure 4: Kaushalya Fernando and W. Jayasiri in *Marat/Sade*, a play by Sugathapala De Silva.

She called this process as an ‘authentic’ approach to character playing. Kaushalya claims that she did not feel her character playing in *Marat/Sade* because she could not fully embody the inner content of the role she played.⁵ She argues, “When I am performing, I want the other to see the role but not me. I like to dissolve myself in the role from which one cannot identify me” (2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

The individual’s body image creates the sense of self. The self is a metaphorical construction that results due to perceptual and motor grasping of the subject with the environment. Whether the actor is projecting the self or impersonating the role, the process involves the actor’s perceptual and motor movements coupled with the actions given in the text. Cognitive science affirms that the actor’s preparation and creation of certain actions of the role develops a neural feedback process of how she feels what she does. As Kemp argues, this process is largely inaccessible to the individual’s reflective consciousness (2012, p. 93).

⁵ As Kaushalya depicts her description of acting in *Marat/Sade* reveals a method employed in acting style known as ‘alienation effect’ or ‘theory of estrangement’ developed by Bertolt Brecht. In estrangement theory of acting, the actor does not emotionally engages with the role she play but enacts or displays the role as if she demonstrates the critical distancing of the self and the character.

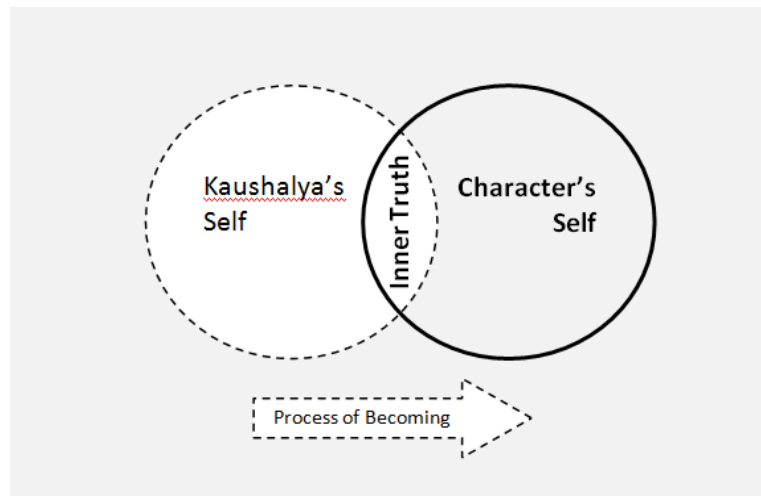


Figure 5: Merging the actor's self with the character's self to find the inner truth

Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson, Kemp shows how two different approaches of empathic relationships function in such a situation to immerse with the character. They are known as 'advisory projection' and 'empathic projection' (2012, p. 106). In 'advisory projection', the actor tries to project her values onto the character she imagines. Then the actor experiences the character's life with her own values. This process is widely known as 'persona acting'. In 'empathic projection,' the actor experiences the character's life while projecting this role's values onto her own self (2012, p. 106). This mode of empathy is known as transformational acting.

According to this analysis, Kaushalya's approaches to character playing seem empathic as she tries to project the character's values and qualities onto her own self in order to empathise with the roles she enacts. As Kaushalya further describes, finding the 'inner truth' of the role helps to find what the character's intention is. The relationship between the actor and the character according to Kaushalya is characterized by inner and outer dualities. The finding of an 'inner self', the correct 'mood' or the 'intention' of the role designates her understanding of the character which consists of dualities: interior and exterior parts.

In Kaushalya's experience of acting in the play *Yadam* (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), she exclaims the difficulties of finding a correct 'internality' of the role while trying to find the outer structure of the role.

I first learnt how those African women walk, sit, behave, etc. Then I started performing the play. While I was doing this character, one member from our theatre group once came up to me and said "Kaushi, your acting is ok but your soul is not there". What he meant was that I was technically doing the character but there was no underlying thread in it. With this insight, I began to think what should I do to tackle this problem? Then I started thinking about this African woman. What is her 'intention'? Then gradually I realized that I was beginning to immerse into her *process*; the intention of that woman (Fernando K 2012 pers. comm., 17 September *emphasis added*).



Figure 6: Kaushalya Fernando & Pujitha De Mel in 'Yadam' a play by Somalatha Subasinghe

In *Embodied Acting* (2012) Rick Kemp discusses a 'model of learning' strategy applied to the actor's mastering of her art. The first stage of the learning process is for the actor to obtain the preliminary knowledge about the work she does. At this 'conscious incompetence' stage, the actor's body is opened to absorb new changes that will arise through the connection between the body and the object attached (2012, p. 137). In the second stage, the actor tries to learn what he has explored in the text through transforming these textual meanings into physical process. This is a 'conscious competence' stage for him. The actor is still conscious about what he does and tries

to achieve the competence through repetition. The final stage of learning is the ‘unconscious competence’ state where the actor is no longer conscious about her body and allows the body to execute the action that she has assimilated in the rehearsal process.⁶ The ‘skill has been assimilated to the extent that it has become part of the body schema’ (Kemp 2012, p. 137).

Being with others

Performance environment is always interactive and inter-personal. This inter-subjective domain poses various challenges for the actor. For example, Kaushalya experiences uncertainties apparent between herself and her interactions with partner actors in the rehearsal situations. These uncertainties of interacting with other bodies signify the tension created between herself and her perceiving subjectivities of others.

When I first go for a theatre production, I always have difficulties to interact with actors. So, it takes a while for me to get into other people’s bodies and interaction. I remember the director once said to me, “Kaushalya, don’t stay isolated, come and join with the group; otherwise you won’t be able to act.” I remember that I was so reluctant to embrace a male body that I was supposed to do in this play (Fernando K 2012 pers. comm., 17 September).

First, cultural, social or gender structures seem to be a part of the construction of her individual self which demarcates the ‘self’ as a separate existence from the others. On the other hand, as phenomenology suggests, this otherness is paradoxically bound with her cultural self through a not-yet-free level (Kwant 1963). Merleau-Ponty argues how cultural artefacts may render a sense of otherness to the perceiver. These cultural artefacts sediment ‘atmosphere of humanity’ in and around them (2002, p. 405).

⁶ The actor’s competency in mastering a craft is also similarly described in Asian martial arts traditions and in related Buddhist teachings and meditational practices. The compelling example comes from the oldest text written by a Buddhist Zen monk, Takuan Zōhō. As Nagatomo describes, Takuan identifies the dualistic nature of mind and body. In order to overcome this duality he suggests applying particular cultivation practices pertaining to Buddhist meditational practice (*techné*). Once the practitioner embodies the *techné* through unremitting attention towards the body practice, this contradiction will disappear. This achievement is thus characterised by the state of ‘no-mind’ (Nagatomo and Leisman 1996, p. 443).



Figure 7: Kaushalya Fernando and Prasad Sooriarachchi in '*Dhavala Bheeshana*' by Dharmasiri Bandaranayake

For Kaushalya, cultural sedimentations appear highly determined prior to the sensing of the generic human presence. In the theatrical context, when Kaushalya confronts with the other, she perceives the other as a highly determined cultural object. In other words, she senses the other as an 'opposite sex' and marks her territoriality of the self as a conscious subject against the opposite actor's self. When she engages with another actor, she begins to perceive the other not as a similar human being, but as a 'cultural object' saturated with gender identities that divide herself from the other.

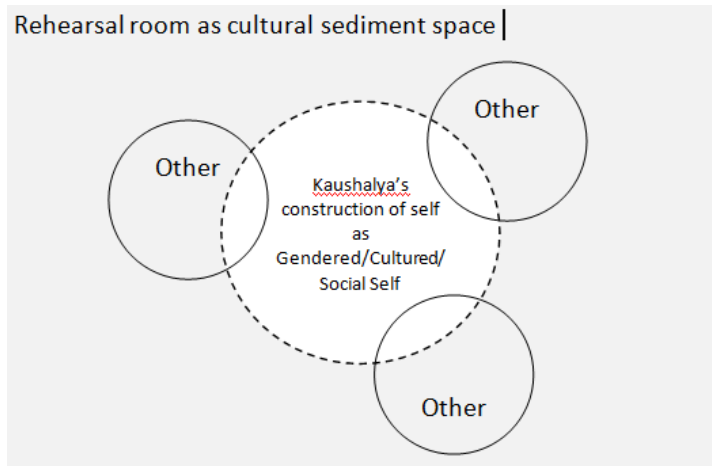


Figure 8: The actor's self and other in the rehearsal space as a convergence

The division between the self and the other is the result of this operation of the ego consciousness, however, according to Merleau-Ponty's assertion ego consciousness is the result of the actor's higher-order operation (conscious operation) of the perceptual faculties and their interactions with the outer world (Kwant 1963). These conscious operations reflect cultural and social inhibitions between the self and the other by hiding its inherent reversibility between individuals and the other. The actor's body-mind is already being attuned to others beneath the layer of these social and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to explore some of the fundamental problems pertaining to acting practice on stage. Kaushalya Fernando's acting practice as a theatre actor was discussed and analysed to understand how actors perceives the process of self-preparation in acting and how the idea of body-mind is interpreted through this process. Further actor and the character relation and the actor's self and other actor's presence in the rehearsal situations also were analysed through the light of phenomenology. In this research, based on semi-structured interview with the actor in focus, it is argued that the actor's metaphysical understanding of the body-mind, actor-character relation and the self and the other actor are a mere representation of psychophysical functions that are generated through actor's corporeal interaction with her outer world.

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