

An Exercise is a Lever – teaching training
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This paper sets out to propose a model for understanding how an exercise is constructed, utilising the analogy of a 'lever'. It aims to unpack this model in relation to the purpose and function of exercises in performer training, whilst situating it within the context of Eugenio Barba's conception of an exercise, and exemplifying it through an examination of Meyerhold's Dactyl.

This model has arisen out of my experiences leading a module on training methodologies for Rose Bruford College's BA European Theatre Arts. The model aims to offer students in, and of, training a relatively easy-to-grasp way of constructing & deconstructing exercises, divested of some of the more opaque language of training that can surround specific training methodologies. It is in itself an exercise in perceiving and talking about training in a specific way, and for a specific purpose.

As many practitioners have noted training is a work on the actor themselves, not on the art work. Ingemar Lindh expresses this in his assertion that [and I quote] "Training was never meant to provide a 'grammar' for theatre (as in classical dance) which could be used in the construction of performances. It was more concerned with finding a way for the actor to liberate his resources through a personal process." [End quote] (Lindh, 2012) whilst Dick McCaw, in the context of training the actor's body, states, [and I quote] "The actor's range is not developed through a proliferation of different movement skills and techniques but in developing a process of responding to movement itself." [End quote] (McCaw, 2018). What both articulate here is that exercises are not gymnastic (about the acquisition of skills or tricks, or the improvement of the body), but about developing something deeper within the performer, about stretching their capacity to work in any performance. In this way exercises are about guiding performers to a point where they can manifest a specific way of *being and doing* appropriate to the enhanced world of performance. These ways of being & doing are

achieved by performers understanding, experiencing and embodying different *principles in action*.

For the purpose of this paper, I offer the definition of a principle as an *organising idea*, that when manifested shapes and guides the performer's way of being and doing. Principles are frameworks that give the performer direction and provide an anchor for their work. Principles, as Frank Camilleri proposes, [and I quote] "lend themselves to transmission outside their original context of generation, to others who did not partake of the process." [End quote] (Camilleri, 2013). That is, the principle is not the exercise itself, but the thing that the exercise offers to the performer. As Barba describes, [and I quote] "Exercises are like amulets, which the actor carries around, not to show them, but to draw from them certain qualities of energy out of which a second nervous system slowly develops." [End quote] (Barba, 1997) Thus, by training one or more principles an exercise offers the performer something to carry-over or translate into their creative work without needing to replicate the exercise. Key to the understanding of the

relationship between the principle and the exercise is that specific principles may be trained by a range of exercises, and vice-versa. In this way an exercise that seeks to train a principle, can be seen as a tool for that purpose.

This notion of the tool is useful for the performer to grapple with, as it places them in a specific relationship with the exercise: they are not passive recipients of the exercise's offer but instead need to take an independent and active role in utilising the exercise. As McCaw states, [and I quote] "An exercise is a process in which the student is invited to participate. It is important to stress...that an exercise isn't a thing with a certain value, but a process whose outcome depends on the nature of this participation". [End quote] (McCaw, 2018) What assists students in understanding how to take control of their participation in training, is a grasp of how and why exercises work.

Eugenio Barba's 1997 article *An Amulet Made of Memory* offers a starting point for a trainee looking to understand the nature of

exercises, specifically Barba's list of [and I quote] "...at least ten characteristics that distinguish an exercise and explain its effectiveness as dramaturgy reserved for non-public work of actors, i.e., the work on oneself." [End quote] (Barba, 1997) These characteristics are a useful checklist for verifying the functionality of an exercise, but do not necessarily provide an easy means by which the trainee can construct an exercise. They are though vital in setting key ground rules; some of which I will draw-on in this paper.

At the heart of Barba's list is the notion that it is the exercise that is 'teaching' the performer – *it*, not the leader of training, is doing something to the body-mind of the individual. In this way the exercise is working as a 'lever' to shift the performer from one state of doing & being to another, as Barba would term it: from daily behaviour to extra-daily behaviour.

The choice of the word lever is very specific, firstly because it foregrounds the fact that an exercise is a tool, something I can pick-up

and use. That is to say, it is a mechanism that is used consciously and deliberately for achieving something concrete. Secondly, it is a mechanism that is designed, over time, to effect (or leverage) a real and noticeable change in the performer. Like a crowbar an exercise directs specific 'forces' for this specific result. Of course, by forces I do not mean crude physical force (though exercises may certainly be demanding physically), but rather the exercise applies physical and mental strictures in order to create this change. Barba phrases this in his tenth characteristic with the observation that an exercise [and I quote] "allows the actor to get to know him- or herself - through an encounter with his or her own limits, not through self-analysis." [End quote] (Barba, 1997). It is this engagement with their limits that provides the performer with the *experience* of the *principle in action* in themselves.

Alexia Kokkali points out a deeper benefit of considering the notion of the tool in training. Using the analogy of another lever, a car jack, she says, [and I quote] "When you use it to change a tyre, you lift the car and you get a new perspective of the car and its tyres. I see the car very

differently by being underneath it and I need to be able to recognise that; I see the mechanics of something that I take for granted.” [End quote] (Kokkali in Roberts et. al., 2015). This revealing of the mechanics of something is of central importance to the function of the exercise as a tool, for if an exercise works effectively it provides the performer with a deeper understanding of how their craft is working. They do not just execute the principle in action, but they also come to recognise and understand what it means to realise the principle.

For an exercise to function, it needs a clear relationship between the principle it is seeking to train and the means by which it seeks to do this. The how and the why. This relationship is a causal one. A specific exercise teaches or embodies a specific principle for the trainee, and thus the principle the performer is seeking to train defines the nature and form of the exercise. A cursory analysis of the mechanics of levers in general suggests the need for a pivot point, a fulcrum, which allows the lever to function. The notion of a fulcrum in an exercise suggest that

there are specific elements that are the facilitator of the change the trainee is looking for.

In order to articulate what these elements might be it is useful to identify the different elements that an exercise might contain; I will term these the *components* of the mechanism. These components can be broadly separated out into external and internal components. This might be a crude distinction, but it allows a functional approach to understanding how to build an exercise.

For the purposes of this model external components deal with the manifestation of actions in space and time, including those elements that are rooted in tangible physical processes such as the use of the voice. This includes the shape, orientation, direction of the body in space, physical tempos and rhythms, and the application of breath and vocalisations, amongst others. Whilst an exercise may prescribe the exact execution of the external components to a greater or lesser degree, in any exercise the actions need to be considered in a concrete

and detailed manner. Barba notes this in his second and third characteristics that: [and I quote] "Exercises teach you how to carry out a real action (not "realistic", but real)." and "Exercises teach that precision in form is essential to a real action..." [End quote] (Barba, 1997)

In this way the external components of an exercise also provide the performer with a repeatable architecture of action to hold onto. Often this may be the first part of an exercise a trainer teaches or describes. This does not mean that exercises need to be strictly choreographed or even particularly physically taxing – rather that the *parameters* of the external score are concretely defined for the trainee. There may be the capacity for improvisation within the delineation of the external components, but this improvisation would be a clearly defined parameter. It is helpful here to think of Anna Halprin's use of the notion of closed/open scoring, where [and I quote] "an open score contains a minimum of instructions leaving the participant free to explore, while a closed score consists of detailed, precise directions predetermining

much of the action and severely limiting the freedom of the participant.” [End quote] (Worth & Poyner, 2004).

In correlation with the external components, the internal components are those processes of the actor’s experience which are noted or activated by the performer consciously. These encompass those tasks that the trainee has to undertake in the intangible realm: the intensity of focus, the location of their attention, their ability to foreground one or more senses – sight, hearing, kinaesthetic sense - or the activation of their imagination for example. These are the components that breathe life into an exercise, as Barba notes, [and I quote] “If, in the end, it is not enlivened by an inner dimension, then the action remains empty and the actor appears to be controlled by the form of the score.” [End quote] (Barba, 1997). If these internal components are activated, they ensure that the exercise in question is not mere gymnastics - that is it remains useful as theatrical training.

Of course, the external and internal components are not executed in a separate manner –they must be integrated in the moment of the execution of the action. In his seventh characteristic Barba identifies, [and I quote] “The different phases of the exercise make the actor experience his or her own body not as a unity but as a center for simultaneous actions.” [End quote] [End quote] (Barba, 1997) Barba’s rejection of the idea of a ‘unity’ is an important distinction here: for unity implies a merging of these actions (or components), when it is their distinctness and their dialogue that challenges the performer. If the performer unifies the components, then this has the risk of erasing the productive collisions between external and internal components that effective exercises require. Josette Féral relates this point when she says, [and I quote] “Most frequently, it is through the means of exercises that the actor learns how to make interiority and exteriority coincide, how to express one through the other.” [End quote] (Féral, 2009) but it is not just a matter of coinciding, it is the collision of the internal and external components within the performer that makes them change; that gives the exercise its fulcrum.

Barba's offer instead of the notion of simultaneity is central to articulating how these collisions happen, the performer executes multiple external and internal actions/tasks alongside one another without ever eliding one or the other. Eilon Morris provides a useful sense of this in illustrated form: [show Morris slide]. An image that suggests a sense of how the performer must execute the different components not only at the same time, but in a shifting dialogue with each other – or more pragmatically the idea of an oscillating attention to the different components. In clarifying this, Morris offers Lee Worley's description of a [and I quote] "process of 'flickering' between sense modalities" [End quote] (Morris, 2017) as a way to describe how this manifests in the performer; that there needs to be a capacity to simultaneously experience the distinctive but inter-related process of executing external and internal components of an exercise.

The central tenet here is that the work cannot become automatic and unthinking. As McCaw observes, [and I quote] "If you aren't emotionally

and mentally engaged in the exercise, you will be robotic.” [End quote]
(McCaw, 2018). With the distinction between external and internal components, the model of the exercise as a lever aims to support the trainee in identifying the possible modes of engagement the trainee may foreground. In doing so, it also helps them understand their role in preventing the exercise becoming merely routine.

A useful example of the nature of, and the relationship between, the two sets of components can be found in the dactyl of Theatrical Biomechanics. This is the first complete training form that a trainee in Theatrical Biomechanics acquires and it looks like this: [Demo]

In terms of the external components the Dactyl is fairly tightly prescribed. The coordination of the folding and unfolding of legs, the spine and the arms, the distribution of weight, the momentum and rhythm of the action are the key elements that offer the trainee a specific and defined action. In the beginning the trainee needs to spend time acquiring these specific elements, applying conscious

attention to the organisation of their physical form in order to learn it. Once the external form has been learnt then the trainee can specifically direct this attention to other components. In this way, as Pitches notes in, in relation to its use in the longer Biomechanical exercises, [and I quote] “It gathers the performer’s attention together and sets a rhythmic pattern for the rest of the exercise.” [End quote] (Pitches, 2003) That is, the physical form gives the performer a kinaesthetic experience of the dactyl’s rhythmic structure of one long swinging action and two short claps, and so begins to train the principle that rhythm lies at the heart of all action. This isn’t something that is acquired quickly though, and repetition and refinement of the dactyl, alongside a wider array of rhythm work, supports the performer in working to accomplish this.

The dactyl also offers training in a variety of other principles, each activated by shifting the focus of the execution of the dactyl to foreground the interaction of different external and internal components. For example, the performer might be invited to use their

kinaesthetic sense to trace the contraction of the muscles in the torso leading to an initial understanding of how to utilise the principle of *gruipprovka* in controlling and managing the momentum of an action. (In Biomechanics the *gruppirovka* is the centre of the body)

In addition to internal and external components, the trainee may also utilise a third category of components alongside the internal and external ones – those that are extraneous to themselves, those not of their person. This includes the use of objects, of music or other sound sources, and of course the wider training ensemble. In work with the dactyl, this can manifest in a variety of paired and ensemble-based tasks. For example, to train the individual's sensitivity to the ensemble the dactyl can be performed as a group with each individual facing in different directions. When doing this, the group has to coordinate the timing of the two claps. To begin with this task may be initiated by a command from the trainer, with the group later working without this external command to begin. In another application of the dactyl, two partners can execute the dactyl facing one another. In this orientation,

not only are they required to coordinate the clapping, but also must look into each other's eyes at the three points during the dactyl that their eye-line crosses the horizontal plane – building the performer's capacity to divide their attention between themselves and their partner.

When considering the use of extraneous components alongside external and internal components, what becomes clearer is that this model offers a way to understand how it is also possible to adjust existing exercises for your own training needs. By adjusting one or more components of an existing exercise, the trainee is able to redirect the exercise to train a different principle. It also invites a less reverential attitude to existing exercises. It gives permission to adjust the tool to do what I need it to do.

Whilst the trainee or trainer may make edits or adjustments to exercises, it is still the exercise itself that is doing the teaching. In this context the trainer is there to aid in the selection of suitable exercises and to operate as an external guide, but it is the exercise itself that allows the

performer to understand the principle, to find a lived experience of it in action. This means that an exercise isn't really teaching knowledge or just giving experiences, but fundamentally changing the performer's way of being and doing. Barba conjures this through his metaphor of the exercise as an amulet, [and I quote] "An exercise is made up of body memory. An exercise becomes memory, which acts through the entire body." [End quote] (Barba, 1997)

The model of the exercise as a lever is, as I stated at the start, a tool in itself. It is only as useful as the trainer/trainee finds it. The analogy has its limitation – it is perhaps a little too mechanistic for some trainees, who may find alternative modes of framing and imparting training of more benefit. However, used in the right context and in a suitable manner, it allows a performer to unpack what an exercise is and to take command of their own training, which can - for some - appear mysterious and arcane. And I believe that this makes them better trainees and ultimately better performers.

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