Chapter 18

Physical Performance and the Languages of Translation

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I. Performance and Physicality

Performance is a physical experience. The words spoken in a theatre are mediated through, and interpreted by, an actor’s body, and received by physically-present spectators experiencing a specific set of corporeal conditions. As Erika Fischer-Lichte reminds us, ‘a performance takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators’.¹ As a spectator, my engagement with Greek tragedy is strongly coloured by the bodily experience of the theatre-event. For example, the National Theatre of Scotland’s 2007 Bacchae is primarily registered in my memory as a burning sensation of the eyes.² By contrast, recalling In Blood: The Bacchae conjures the smell of theatrical smoke, the waft of displaced air hitting my face, and a dizzy sense of the room spinning.³ Each remembered experience brings with it a set of characteristic physical associations, which are central to my understanding of the performance.

It has been suggested by some dance theorists that ‘viewer’s bodies, even in their seated stillness’ can actually ‘feel what the dancing body is feeling – the tensions or expansiveness, the floating or driving momentums that compose the dancer’s motion’⁴. I suspect that the intensity of this posited identification between dancer and spectator is at least partially the result of the degree to which dancers and their audiences (often themselves the recipients of a dance training) share a detailed kinaesthetic knowledge of specific movement vocabularies, which permits a high degree of corporeal empathy between performer and observer. Still, even the untrained observer receives and remembers and interprets the theatre-event partly through its impact upon their physically-present body.

As a performer, my relationship with the languages of ancient tragedy in translation is even more profoundly corporeal. Different texts feel different, breathe differently, taste different in the mouth. Each variant version, each different cluster of
morphemes, breath-patterns, vowels, consonants, and pauses has a different impact upon the body. And the performer’s response to these somatically-experienced differences has consequences not only for the physical enactment of the drama, but also for the physically-present spectator’s reception of a text-in-performance.

Our lack of reliable information concerning the physical and choreographic aspects of ancient tragic performance permits modern writers to construct their own imaginative re-creations of the ancient text/body relationship in a wide variety of modes. The range of ways in which texts translated or adapted from ancient tragedy are capable of suggesting performative physicalities is accordingly broad. However, we often respond to these new theatre works as if they were linguistic artefacts, as if theatre translation were merely the replacement of one counter with another in a word game played out at the level of the printed text, and relayed to an audience without the crucial corporeal intervention of breath, bone, tissue and muscle. This chapter is concerned with what physically happens in that moment when the written text of a drama is filtered and resonated and shared though the medium of an actor’s body. It is also concerned with the opportunities presented by the multiple re-versioning of Greek drama in the contemporary theatre to explore the multiple ways in which the formal qualities of dramatic text, especially poetic texts, can influence the physical life of a performance.

II. Language in the Body

Speech is an intensely physical act. As well as the obvious motions of the lips and tongue, the frictions of breath being shaped against the larynx, teeth and palate, many other areas of the body are involved:

The most active part of the body as we vocalize is the breath system: the rib cage, diaphragm and the deeper support muscles of the abdomen going down as far as the groin. Literally half of your body and a number of organs housed in your torso are utilized to manufacture the breath necessary to produce human sound.
Speech is the result of a complex set of physical actions and reflexes. Some specialists argue that ‘it is impossible even to think of a word without moving’:

Language-based thought (and most thought is contained in language) is accompanied by the beginnings of the motor actions required to articulate the words aloud. The area of the brain most closely concerned with speech production, Broca’s area, is essentially a movement area – it triggers activity in the muscles that allows the lips, tongue and throat to produce sounds. When people read, even quietly, alone, to and for themselves, this area produces tiny contractions of those muscles, even if we long ago learned to stop our lips moving. 8

Even silent reading (and readers were not silent in antiquity9) may contain the roots of physical motion. All articulated speech is certainly motion. However, poet Robert Pinsky is a relatively lonely voice among his literary colleagues in asserting that ‘poetry is a vocal, which is to say, a bodily, art’:

The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing.10

This chapter contends that the textual choices of the translator, a writer’s individual responses to a set of lexical and stylistic variables presented by the translation process, significantly affect the bodies as well as the minds and voices of performers. The performer putting their bodily all into saying ‘Ten years since’ is actually physically different from the same person embarking upon a speech that begins ‘Ten years ago’, and different again from that same person wrapping themselves around a chorus beginning ‘The tenth year this’. In each case, their body changes in response to the varying demands of the language being enunciated. Further, I would suggest that any engagement with dramatic text remains incomplete so long as it fails to recognise and respond to the physical qualities of embodied language.

III. The Actor and The Text
Voice practitioners primarily concerned with the performance of Shakespeare give us a good place to start. The methods of Cicely Berry, and those who have been inspired by and developed her work, encourage performers to engage personally and with physical as well as intellectual commitment to the aural qualities of spoken language, especially the challenging and complex language of formal dramatic speech. This approach stresses the importance of a detailed awareness of the contours of a poet’s language and argument as defined by metrical phrasing and punctuation. Berry emphasises the performative importance of understanding and possessing a character’s thought and speech patterns as encoded in dramatic verse ‘physically through the breath’.

Likewise, Patsy Rodenberg insists upon the insight that ‘proper voice work is very physical’ and ‘involves the use of the entire body’. One of Rodenberg’s rehearsal exercises gives some idea of the range of physical movements and movement qualities which can be prompted by the process of becoming bodily receptive to the influence of poetic speech:

Walk while speaking the text, allow the different rhythms, phrasing units, changes of thought and emotional mood swings to shift the direction, speed and quality of your walking. In this exercise you will discover many corners, bends and U-turns in the journey of a text. Don’t be frightened of permitting the text to throw you forward, slow you down, make great sweeping walks or runs across the room or even stop you cold or mow you down. You are making the intellectual, emotional and physical journey of the words actual and real. Imagine that if someone was observing you from above they would see a journey traced out below them, a picture drawn in time and space. When you return to speaking the text standing still, allow your body and voice to be filled with the physical journey you have just experienced.

The great joy of this sort of approach to appreciating the somatic qualities of a text is its accessibility. Almost anyone can pick up a text, and start reading aloud and pacing round the room. In fact, if no-one’s watching, then I strongly recommend that you have a go right now, with these three different Agamemnon choruses for starters.
Ten years ago
The sons of Atreus,
Menelaus and Agamemnon,
Both divine kings,
Assembled a thousand ships
Crammed with the youth of Hellas
And sailed across the sea to punish Priam.

Ten years since clanchief Menelaus
and his bloodkin Agamemnon
(the twin-yoked rule from clan-chief Atreus –
double thronestones, double chief-staves)
pursued the war-suit against Priam,
lunched the thousand-ship armada
off from Argos to smash Troy.

The tenth year this, since Priamos’ great match,
King Menelaos, Agamemnon King,
- The strenuous yoke-pair of the Atreidai’s honour,
Two-throned, two-sceptered, whereof Zeus was donor –
Did from this land the aid, the armament dispatch,
The thousand-sailed force of Argives clamouring
“Ares” from out the indignant breast [...]
Browning’s *Agamemnon* (1877) the ensuing tongue-and-foot tangle, with its directional complexity, can actually make it easier to get to grips with the semantic logic of the different fragments of the choppy text. The conflict the verse describes is going on in my mouth, which recruits the rest of my body into the struggle to turn tragic violence into meaningful poetic utterance.

Of course, these are my personal responses, and everyone’s personal response will be different. But even something as simple as walking whilst speaking a text can reveal crucial characteristics of phrasing, breath patterning, stress and emphasis, verbal register, pace and style, all of which impart different qualities to a speaker’s physical movement. The body discovers difficulties and possibilities in a spoken text that the silently-reading eye is blind to. This sort of exercise can be intensely personally liberating, as well as revealing of the workings and resonances of a dramatic text.

What both Berry and Rodenberg offer are ways in which individuals (not just professional actors) can become more sensitively attuned to the qualities of dramatic language, and especially the qualities of theatrical verse. However, the central concern of this work is with ‘communication through the word’. It is based upon the attempt to develop a conscious awareness of the physical presence of language within our own bodies, in order that our intellectual selves can make more purposeful and skilful decisions about the speech-acts that we perform. Despite the immense range of physical possibilities implicit in this sort of voice work, the vocal techniques associated with classical western acting are built around the idea that speech is the primary physical process. Vigorous physical activity, in this tradition, is regarded as a menace to diction and clarity, with potential physical expressivity being more or less ruthlessly subjugated to semantic comprehensibility and aural beauty. Peter Hall speaks for a sizeable section of the theatrical establishment when he authoritatively pronounces that ‘eloquent movement destroys eloquent words’.

IV. Psychosomatic Co-operation

By contrast, Jerzy Grotowski (pioneer of the cruel and holy theatres of the 1960s and 70s), proposed a method of exploring heightened, traditional verses which demanded the deliberate subjugation of the conscious, self-critical mind to the deep,
somatic, irrational impulses of embodied language. This work was inspired by the visionary manifesti of Antonin Artaud who, in a 1933 *Letter on Language*, demanded:

Let there be the least return to the active, plastic, respiratory sources of language, let words be joined again to the physical motions that gave them birth, and let the discursive, logical aspect of speech disappear beneath its affective, physical side, i.e., let words be heard in their sonority rather than be exclusively taken for what they mean grammatically, let them be perceived as movements, and let these movements themselves turn into other simple, direct movements as occurs in all the circumstances of life but not sufficiently with actors on the stage, and behold! the language of literature is reconstituted, revivified.20

Grotowski was fascinated by the way the reactions of the body to intensely-experienced vocal stimuli can illuminate aspects of a role that evade intellectual analysis. In his work in collaboration with Thomas Richards, Grotowski explored the potential of poetic language to act upon and provoke the elusive psycho-physical ‘impulses’ which lie at the root of bodily action, and which he considered to be the ‘morphemes’, or ‘basic beats’ of performance.21 This work drew upon ‘the traditional song’ which was used as a ‘mantra’ for the actor, a vocal tool which might release them from a fixation upon the meaning of words, instead allowing them to focus on experiencing the vibratory qualities of language:

When we begin to catch the vibratory qualities, this finds its rooting in the impulses and the actions. And then, all of a sudden, the song begins to sing us’.

The resulting ‘song-body’ - a body in which the qualities of the song are concretely, visibly manifested - depends upon the recognition that ‘the impulses which run in the body are exactly that which carries the song’.22 As Richards described the process:

When a doer begins to sing a song of tradition, and begins to initiate something of the inner process, the song and the melody will start to descend in the body. The melody is precise. The person, who is singing begins to let the song descend into the organism, and the sonic vibration begins to change. The syllable and the melody of these songs begins to
touch and activate something I perceive to be like energy seats in the organism.  

Within this singularly intense mode of working, the sonic qualities of the embodied song have the power to alter the psycho-physical impulses of the sensitised and attentive performer. This is quintessentially ‘holy theatre’, a ‘Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible’, with the usually intangible vibratory qualities of embodied sound forming the basis for physical performance. The processes Grotowski and Richards describe offer a way of conceptualising the links between the words performers put into their mouths, the psycho-somatic impulses resulting from this ingestion, and the impulse-activated physical actions that can be the external product of this procedure.

Grotowski’s experiments and insights, which inspired a generation of avant-garde theatre-makers, potentially point the way to a fully-embodied relationship between the sensitive, disciplined performer and the dramatic language they articulate. Poet and dramatist Ted Hughes, who became familiar with the ideas of Grotowski through director Peter Brook, had his own belief in the fundamental corporeality of poetic language reinforced by the experience: ‘Poetry is not made out of thoughts or casual fancies. It is made out of experiences which change our bodies, and spirits, whether momentarily or for good’.

In a detailed study of the poems of Coleridge and Hopkins, Hughes elaborated upon his idea that poetic language can ‘compel the reader to co-operate physically’:

Each line is like a dancer who, if you are going to read the line at all, forces you to be a partner and dance … You can pronounce the line as silently as you like, but that launching of the inner self into full kinaesthetic participation is, so to speak, compulsory. Otherwise you can’t read the line. You have to back off, stay a wallflower, and call it ‘unsayable’. As everybody knows, between the sitting or standing person and that same person dancing there gapes an immense biological gulf … In fact, what is required is that the familiar person becomes, in a flash, an entirely different animal with entirely different body chemistry, brain rhythms and physiological awareness.
This ‘psychosomatic co-operation with the vitality of the statement’ is a powerful and persuasive imagining of the potential of heightened language, whether poetic or dramatic, to transform the body through which its resonances and meanings are transmitted.\(^{28}\) The all-encompassing physical and spiritual demands of Grotowski’s avowedly cruel theatre might be well beyond the aspirations of most readers and players of ancient drama. Still, the idea that the performer capable of abandoning conventional psycho-physical restraint, of deciding – in Hughes’ terms - not to be a wallflower, might thereby free themselves to become increasingly responsive to the impulses contained within dramatic language is both suggestive and seductive.

V. The Corporeality of the Word

Peter Hall outlines the following prescription for an adequate appreciation of the words of a theatre text: ‘We must add to these words an understanding of how they operate when spoken aloud, and what their form, shape and rhythm contribute to the emotional meaning of the character who is speaking them. We must also be aware of what the dramatist was asking of the actor – indeed almost what kind of acting is indicated by the text’.\(^{29}\) I go further than Hall, and consider not only what kind of acting but also what kind of physical presence and/or movement might be indicated to, or demanded of, the performer by the verbal score of a dramatic text. The spoken word, absorbed into the receptive body, can be a powerful shaper of physical presence and motion.

There are many difficulties attached to exploring this complex and analysis-resistant area of performance. Different actors, with different physiologies, different trainings in enunciation and breath control and different intellectual readings of a text’s meanings will all respond differently to the somatic promptings of a script. Directors, choreographers and designers also exert significant controls upon the appearance and motion of the performer's body, their decisions and demands often serving concepts and ideas not necessarily related, or sympathetic to the somatic promptings of embodied language. This is a mode of exploration which resists formal theorisation, which depends upon intuitive, subjective and highly personal experience. But even if the challenge of unravelling the elusively symbiotic relationship between spoken text and the performer's body is ultimately unachievable, still the process of
attempting to engage with and understand the physical life of a text within a body can only enrich our experience and understanding of ancient drama, indeed any drama, in performance.

This question is particularly relevant to the study of the reception of ancient drama, as our grasp of what might constitute an appropriate physical response to the ancient dramatic text is partial, vague, and therefore open to a wide range of interpretations in different times and places, different cultures, and in the variously plausible speculations of different scholars and theatre-makers. Multiple re-visions and re-versionings each contain within their texts a set of assumptions about, aspirations for and parameters defining their possible onstage embodiment. The attempt to get at and make use of the implicit information about physical presence and/or movement embedded within dramatic text is a complex, often intuitive and inevitably subjective one. But only by risking our own bodily engagement with a text can we begin to excavate and appreciate these latent provocations and promptings concerning the potential physical life of ancient drama in subsequent theatrical performance.30

1 See Fischer-Lichte in this volume.


3 Text by Frances Viner, directed by Noah Birkstead-Breen. Arcola Theatre (London), January 2009. My experience of this show was perhaps more physically memorable than most. See review at:
http://www.londontheatreblog.co.uk/in-blood-the-bacchae/ (accessed 14 March 2009)

4 Leigh Foster 2008: 49.

5 Thus ‘vocality always brings forth corporeality’: see Fischer-Lichte in this volume.

6 There is far more (albeit circumstantial) evidence for the dancers of ancient myth in the ‘pantomime’ of the Roman Empire. See Webb 2008.
However quixotic this veneration for the minutiae of inevitably imperfect and corrupted period source-text(s) might seem.

Always bearing in mind that such choral lyrics would probably have been sung, or at least intoned to aulos accompaniment, in ancient performance. See Hall 1999 and 2002b.

Though I would contend otherwise: an argument made briefly in Harrop and Wiles 2008, and at length in Harrop 2007.

Harrop and Wiles 2008: 54.


Brook 1968: 47.

Brook’s celebrated version of Seneca’s Oedipus (Old Vic, London, 1968), and the Orghast project (CIRT, 1970-71) resulted from this collaboration.
26 Hughes 1967: 32.

27 It ought to be noted that the latter was deeply influenced by the lyric poetry of Aeschylus.


30 Further analysis of the issues raised here can be found in Harrop and Wiles 2008, and at greater length in Harrop 2007. I am grateful to David Wiles for his support and criticism, and to Edith Hall for commenting on an earlier version of this chapter.