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Ellen W. Kaplan
Smith College, Philadelphia

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Cover Page Footnote

Ellen W. Kaplan is Assistant Professor of Acting and Directing at Smith College, formerly Director of Theater at Beaver College in Philadelphia, and former A rtistic Director of Full Circle, an intergenerational theater company.

The Subversive Element of Play: Using Play, Dream and the Body in the Classroom

Ellen W. Kaplan

On the summit of Mt. Greylock, mid-hike on a Sunday, my family and I witnessed an event that transformed us from casual observers into enthralled spectators. Three “actors” were engaged in an extraordinary performance: They were preparing to leap off a cliff. We stood spellbound as they unfurled their gear, strapped themselves into it, and soared aloft. The performers, who received warm applause from the folks gathered around, were hang gliders. As an actor and acting teacher, I was struck by the analogy to theater: the concentration, the risk, the resistance to obstacle (gravity).

Acting, at its best, is like jumping off a cliff: intense, detailed preparation followed by a jump into the unknown; playful improvisation within constraints; clarity and precision in observation; responsiveness to minute and ever-changing stimuli, and, above all, trust of our resources, trust of the body; feeling, reacting in the moment to catch a current and stay aloft.

Hang gliding, like acting, is an embodied experience; the knowing is in the doing. And learning to do it, so gliders say, comes from the “playing around” they can only do in the air. Knowing, doing, and playing are inextricably linked through the body—which is not to suggest that intellectual knowing is irrelevant. An ability to understand and analyze the engineering principles behind glider design or the aerodynamic principles that govern wind currents is essential knowledge for anyone wishing to leave the ground. But, plainly, one can’t fly if one doesn’t fly.

An embodied experience puts body knowledge at the center of learning, the sensate often unvoiced and unexamined knowledge that is part of a body’s history. But, like that which exists in dream and fantasy, what the body can’t tell us is valid precisely because it is often farthest from the reach of social prescription and the authority of others.

The mind abstracts experience, names, and categorizes it, bringing it into conformity with the already known, the normative, the accepted. But the body resists. It knows and has the capacity to act on its knowledge. Dance theorist Randy Martin (1990) finds that the body in action threatens to subvert rational order, because it may well be a more reliable source of knowledge than the “polluted” (i.e., socially influenced) mind. In this sense valuing embodied experience is fundamental to personal autonomy, to what Bruno Bettelheim (1960)

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calls a person's "inner ability to govern [him or herself]" (p. 74). The very materiality of the body makes it a subject, a site of agency; its actuality, its "presence," is intrinsic to agency.

Meaning, like agency, is directly linked to bodily experience. Mark Johnson (1987), formulating a position that "put[s] the body back into the mind" (p. xxxvi), contends that much of our understanding of the world takes the form of "metaphorical projection from the realm of physical bodily interactions onto so-called rational processes" (p. xx). In other words, meaning is derived from our bodily experience; the meaning of balance, for example, (literal *and* conceptual; the latter elaborated in metaphor) emerges from physical acts of balancing.

Acting—performing—is body-centered knowing. There is a chasm between my everyday self and the body that reveals itself in performance. When I act, the shift in my physical life alters my perception. My understanding shifts with alterations in alignment, adjustments to my spine, changes in my center of gravity, pauses in the rhythms of my breath. Paring my toenails with a rusty knife, gripping the earth with strong ankles and bare toes as the peasant Agata in Betti's *Goat Island* (1966), profoundly alters my preverbal, precognitive understanding. I play the lover of a woman (with whom I am unacquainted) and inhibition is replaced by intimacy; I act differently until "the act" is over. What I experience in those moments is an alternative self, a way of processing experience that comes from re-ordering it, the stuff of creativity.

Repression and Subjugation of the Body

Society demands regulation of the body; we contain it: what flows from it, the space it occupies, the magnitude of its gestures, the loudness of its sounds. But prohibition, censure, the filtering of impulse have corrosive effects on individuals *and* the larger community, both of which are diminished by their inability to use the unexpected gesture as a source of knowledge. Reclaiming the body, unlocking and welcoming it also releases the voice. Helene Cixous (1981), speaking of women's bodies as "confiscated," says, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard" (p. 250). Fluency, expressiveness, and the body's disinhibition are interconnected qualities, with social and political implications beyond personal/psychological ones. The needs of communities to regulate themselves are valid, but so too are the need of individuals' to assert themselves, to question, to advocate, to find and use their voices. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1992) makes a strong point about the ownership of meaning: "[Language/the word] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions;...one must take the work, and make it 'one's own'" (p. 44). A pluralistic, participatory society needs individuals who can make the *word* their own and become the *authors* of that experience.

Playing and Doing

The body knows because it *does*. Doing relates to the world; we are social "actors," and we change the world with our acts. Play, an "as if" doing, may be a rehearsal for life, but it is also a rehearsal for social change. Perhaps, echoing

Augusto Boal (1979), we could take the idea further: "Theater is action! Perhaps not revolutionary in itself; but...a rehearsal of revolution" (p. 155).

When we play, we set up alternate worlds; we create an artifice, a structure of rules that may mirror, invert, or negate the restrictions of everyday life. We re-arrange, explode, connect, juxtapose, by virtue of our curiosity alone. Play is both unruly and rule-bound, expansive and subversive; the release of energy, desire, voice and power that emanates from playful bodies is disturbing and often liberating.

In *Art as Experience* (1934) John Dewey traces the Western predilection for opposing play, the arts, all things physical, material, and actual with an emphasis on abstraction and the ideal. But the serious play of art, doing, being, and making contains within it the potential for transformation, the possibility of redefining ourselves (and our students) as *meaning-creating* beings.

Going Inside

For several years while working in rural Pennsylvania and inner city Philadelphia, I gave workshops in writing and creative drama for special education students (i.e., those identified with severe mental and physical impairments or social maladjustment), ranging in age from kindergarten to high school. In a room of rowdy and rambunctious kids who had been classified as disabled or disturbed, I asked who in the room considered themselves a poet. Not too many students responded "yes." Very few teenagers are eager to call themselves poets under any circumstances, certainly not in front of their friends and especially not to some stranger who's dumb enough to *admit* to being an actor and, worse, a writer. Yet, these were kids with more passion and poetry and vivid insight than could fit on the page. By what definition were they not budding, incipient poets?

What didn't work in these classrooms was instantly apparent: I couldn't go in and say, for example: Let's get out on the floor and act; Let's pretend to be other people, move from impulse, or be playful. Using your body is a commitment; dignity and psychological candor are at stake. The deep silent breathing, guided imagery, and free play with music that comprise the typical entry for beginning actors was out of the question; the risks for these students were too great.

Every age group presented different challenges, of course. But what worked consistently was finding the "group temperature," a sense of the dynamics, personalities, issues, and weaving a story with them that spoke out who they were in that moment. Responses to a simple set of questions (Where would we be if we weren't here? Describe it, envision it, see it, say it. Who's there? Who's talking? What do you see there that makes you angry? What do you do about it? How does it change? Is there a lesson?) became an out-loud story we created and shared. From there we would make an environment and live in it, move through it, respond to it: a riverbed, a drive-in. And trust a story to emerge.

With some groups the work remained preverbal; with others, dialogue and role-play allowed for reworking dramatic material from students' own lives. In one third grade class, for example, Aesop's fable, "The Lion and the Mouse," developed into a parable about an uncle jailed for selling drugs and the child's ambivalence toward him. She understood the dramatic action by embodying it.

She scurried, nibbled, squealed, and hid in the face of danger (in her neighborhood), and he protected her from harm. But when he needed her help (in this case, her acceptance), she had to make choices about loyalty and her own sense of moral behavior; she communicated her inner struggles eloquently and acted on her decisions; in fact, she felt she couldn't stick by him, contrary to the mouse in the fable. She and her classmates explored and considered the implications of all this in the context of play.

Through this work I found voices and bodies responding accurately to inner impulses. Two years ago, in Orange, Massachusetts, I developed a theater piece at a literacy center that celebrated the history of this rural town and the grit of its inhabitants. At first the adults who wrote and performed *Hometown Tales* looked at the blank page as a mortal enemy (the empty stage filled them with an even greater degree of terror). They began slowly, telling stories about their working lives, then recording and rewriting and shaping those stories into monologues. A few brave individuals began to improvise, writing on their feet, so to speak. And little by little they faced down the empty page, some beginning to express themselves in bursts of raw, gutsy writing. Others worked with dialogue, exploring an issue from two perspectives. Many found that not only had they something to say, but they could say it and enjoy the experience. As one student stated after the performance, "You know, you can act. You can really act. A lot of people out there, they don't really realize what they can do.... When you do it,... you'd be a lot more stronger about things" (Kingsley, 1993, p. 15).

Principles and Strategies

How do we make the body and its experience available to writers/performers? The trick is to find the strategies that unhook buttoned-up creativity in students and channel it into forms that strengthen their expression. The problems of self-censorship and stereotypical thinking haunt every classroom. With my special students (many of whom were highly expressive verbally and physically but unable to articulate their insights), I used some of the same basic strategies that I use in teaching acting, strategies designed to unleash the stream of imagery and association we carry with us, and designed to connect this inner life with physical impulse.

Crossing the Border

In acting classes I often layer in core images and texts, myth, music, fragments of poetry, and dream journals to provide stimuli. In one class we used myths of transformation to create a theater collage entitled *Crossing the Border*. In small groups the class worked through a process of physical exploration, journal and poetry writing, mimesis, interview, and historical research to create short improvisational pieces. The texts included selections from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, an Inuit creation story, a Japanese legend about a geisha who turns into a cat, and fragments of a tale from *The Arabian Nights*.

The process (which took place over several weeks) follows: First, the myths are read aloud to the "dreamers," all the actors who are in a quiet state; they then

draw their dream/responses without giving thought to the literal content, but working from sense impressions and fleeting images. With music serving as a focus, the actors envision and slowly move into the landscape they have imagined. Supported by quiet side-coaching, they use movement and sensory response to create an evocative terrain of obstacles, attractions, fearful and forceful objects. Actors then focus on a powerful sensory event: the sound of an axe, the smell of plantains. They allow it to act on them, to effect movement, motive, and imagery. Voices might whisper in the shadows; others might live here. Actors begin to find a character, what that character wants, how that character experiences this place. The actor then creates a ritual activity with significance to his or her imaginary life. Finally, each actor recovers something of value and leaves.

The private experience of the actors now needs to be shaped and shared. The actors, working in the voice of their embryonic characters, write poems and read them aloud in small groups. The groups are able to discern motifs, points of connection and contradiction; this leads to discussion and the initial staging of the myth.

As the rehearsal progresses the groups research sources, keep a dream journal, and write personal response material, including a dramatic monologue. Music is chosen, visual images are collected, text is written, and the piece is rehearsed. Each actor within the group takes on the function of writer, designer, director, or choreographer. The final phase involves structuring a group piece that often incorporates elements of the myth with poetry, music, staging, and dialogue.

Lynne

The progress that one student, Lynne, made through this work illustrates both its effectiveness and its drawbacks. Lynne is a nontraditional student with no background in writing or performing; her reasons for taking the class were, she said, shyness and discomfort with her body. In one preparatory activity in which the class began from silence and gradually connected movement to breath, Lynne remained virtually frozen on the floor. When we added text (using phrases like “Voice,” “My voice,” “I can speak,” and then bits of poetry), she whispered softly but began to move more freely. Only when we wrote short passages after the experience, however, could she explore and expand on her feelings.

Things changed for Lynne when she was asked to come to class as a seven-year-old child. “That’s when I got past the adult part, the judging part. I got to the child...the one I wanted to be, not the one that I was.” She was becoming attuned to the impulses beneath her movements as well. When her group chose to work on “Orpheus and Eurydice,” they contemporized the story. It became one of betrayal and loss of self; Eurydice was lost in a private hell, mesmerized by a musician boyfriend who seduced her and saved her only to hurt her again in a cycle of abuse, abandonment, and rescue. Lynne found this character’s voice in a powerful, beautifully rendered monologue of a battered woman. (She told me later that she had not experienced this herself but had gained insight through empathy, role-play, and research.) Cheryl, her Eurydice in the monologue, seemed

to disappear in her lover, living through and for him, justifying his behavior, unable to extricate herself. Eurydice's hell was the loss of her own identity and the abuse she withstood. The rescue of the myth was turned on its head. Cheryl finally had the courage to leave her abusive lover.

Keys to the Kingdom

In staging the myths students found connections between their own lives and the texts that were released and enriched by the playful and uncensored use of their bodies. Let me list the basic elements which need to be integrated into this work:

- Physical warmups, not calisthenics, but free movement connecting body, breath, image, and impulse;
- Inner listening (deep relaxation, meditation, focus on breath) to become aware of the flow of images inside;
- Sensory work to sharpen perception;
- Countering the inner censor that is tied to shame (This means working against an atmosphere of discomfort with oddity, emotion, the "too-big" response.);
- Respecting muscle memory, following physical impulse; and
- Welcoming the random, the chaotic, the unpredictable.

There is a need to "three-dimensionalize" learning, to consider body, emotion, intuition, and imagination as partners with intellect. There are strong pedagogical reasons to consider teaching literature through rhythm, science through simulation, and politics through role-play. As we endorse playful ways of learning, we also move toward interdisciplinary, less field-specific approaches.

Play is work or at least it might be. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) wrote a series of essays subtitled "The Human Seriousness of Play" in which he explains how play, which is a form of work for a child, may also perform work in society. In preindustrial cultures, he suggests, play contains "the seeds of cultural transformation, discontent with the way things are culturally, and social criticism" (p. 45). The opportunity to "play" with variables, to experiment beyond the limits of the norm, to offer freedom from constraint, is what makes play ergic or work-like; play changes society, or rather, allows the experimentation beyond constraint that contains the seeds of change. The ergic potential of play is restricted in industrial societies; the question is to what extent might we be able to make use of its power.

Through play we meet a different order of knowing, a way of knowing in which, to paraphrase Henri Bergson (1946), we place ourselves directly at the heart of the subject. We do with our bodies, and doing is a way of knowing. Play, which is an unencumbered doing in an "as if" world, is a crucial part of the way we know. ☺

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