

# CULTURE IS THE BODY!

## The Theory and Practice of My Method of Training Actors

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In my opinion, a 'cultured' society is one where the perceptive and expressive abilities of the human body are used to the full; where they provide the basic means of communication. A civilized country is not always a 'cultured' society.

It is true that civilization originated in connection with the functions of the human body; it may be interpreted as the expansion of basic functions of the human body or the extension of the physical faculties—of the eyes, ears, tongue, the hands and feet. For example, the invention of such devices as the telescope and microscope is a result of human aspiration and endeavor to *see more*, radicalizing the faculty of sight. The accumulated effect of such endeavors is civilization—the product of the expansion and extension of physical faculties.

What we have to consider, then, is the kind of energy required to materialize such aspirations. That leads us to think about modernization. A criterion some sociologists in the United States apply to distinguish between modernized and pre-modernized societies is the ratio of animal-energy to non-animal-energy used in production processes. Animal-energy here refers to the physical energy supplied by human beings, horses or cattle, etc.; while non-animal-energy refers to electric power, nuclear power and the like. One way of showing whether a country is modernized is to calculate how much non-animal-energy is used. Roughly speaking, in African and Near Eastern countries, for example, the ratio of animal-energy used is very high, compared with such countries as the United States or Japan, where energy derived from oil, electricity, nuclear power is used in all processes of production.

If we apply this thinking to the theater, we notice that most contemporary theater is 'modernized'; non-animal-energy is fully utilized. Lighting is done through electricity. Elevators and revolving stages are operated by electrical energy. The building of the theater itself is the end-product of a variety of industrial activities from the concrete foundation to the props and scenery.

On the contrary, the Japanese Noh theater is a surviving example of premodern theater in which almost no non-animal-energy is used. Take music for example. In the modern theater, it is recorded and reproduced through amplifiers and loudspeakers, whereas the voices of the dancer-actor and the chorus and the sound of the instruments played on stage in the Noh theater are conveyed *directly* to the audience. Costumes and masks for Noh plays are made by hand, and the stage itself is built based on traditional principles of carpentry. Although electricity is used for lighting nowadays (which I still object to—in the old days it used to be done by candles and tapers), it is limited to the minimum, never like the elaborate and colorful lighting of the 'modern' theater. Noh theater is pervaded by the spirit of creating something out of human skill and effort. So much so that the Noh can be said to be the epitome of pre-modern theater! It is a creation of animal-energy.

As the theater, either in Europe or in Japan, has kept up with the times and has come to use non-animal-energy in every facet of its activities, one of the resulting evils is that the faculties of the human body and physical sensibility have been overspecialized to the point of separation. Just as civilization has specialized the job of the eyes and created the microscope,

modernization has 'dismembered' our physical faculties from our essential selves.

What I am striving to do is to restore the wholeness of the human body in the theatrical context, not simply by going back to such traditional theatrical forms as Noh and Kabuki; but by employing their unique virtues, to create something transcending current practice in the modern theater.

We need to bring together the physical functions once 'dismembered'; to regain the perceptive and expressive abilities and powers of the human body. In doing so, we can maintain culture within civilization.

In my method of training actors, I place special emphasis on the feet, because I believe that consciousness of the body's communication with the ground leads to a great awareness of all the physical functions of the body.

A basic part of my method of training involves actors stomping on the floor for a certain period of time to rhythmic music, or rather, walking around fiercely beating the floor with the feet in a semi-squatting posture. Then, the moment the music stops, the actors relax their body totally, falling on the floor. They lie completely still and quiet. After a while, music starts again, but this time it must be slow and smooth. In accordance with the change in the music, they slowly rise to their feet in any way they like, eventually standing upright, back in a natural posture. This training consists of a pair of contrasting movements, that is to say, the dynamic and the static (motion and rest), in other words, emission and repression of physical power. The purpose of this training is to develop concentration on the body through controlling the breathing.

The essential point of the first half of this training is to keep stomping with a constant force, without swaying the upper half of the body. If the actor does not concentrate his consciousness on his feet, legs and hips which must be well-disciplined, it is impossible for him to continue to stomp consistently, however energetic he may be. Moreover, without the spiritual power and will to control his breathing, the upper half of his body gradually begins to sway and then the rhythm of the stomping becomes irregular. If you beat the floor with your feet, the force naturally influences the upper half of the body to make it sway. As I get actors to stomp as forcefully as possible, a reaction rises upwards so the more strongly they stomp the more the upper half of their body sways. If they try to minimize the sway, they have to repress the force with their hips. They have to stomp while always being aware of the relationship between the upper and lower halves of the body which are pivoted together at the hips.

Of course, emphasizing the fact that the construction of the human body and the balance of the forces which support it are centered on the pelvic region is not thinking unique to my method; but almost all the performing arts invariably use such thinking. Only, I believe it is specific to my training that first of all the actors are made to feel conscious of this by stomping and beating the ground with their feet. This is derived from my belief that the basic physical sensibility of any stage actor depends on his feet. In our daily life, we tend to disregard the

importance of the feet. It is necessary for us to be aware of the fact that the human body makes contact with the ground through the feet, that the ground and the human body are inseparable, as the latter is, in fact, part of the former, meaning that when we die we return to the earth—to make the body, which usually functions unconscious of its relationship aware of this fact by creating a strong sense of impact through the beating of the ground with the feet.

This idea of mine has often been said to be quite Japanese, but it is not. Even in classical European ballet in which the dancers seem to aim at jumping from the ground to soar through the air, the basic physical sensibility consists of a feeling of affinity to the ground.

Again in the traditional Japanese theatrical forms, such as Noh and Kabuki, the balance of the two vectors leading towards the sky and the earth, towards the heights and the depths, has been very important in physical expression. Only, in the traditional Japanese theatrical forms, these two forces with vectors contrary to each other meet at the pelvic region, and the energy derived from this tends to radiate horizontally. Therefore, the higher the upper half of the body tries to go, the lower half of the body tries to sink to balance this movement. The feeling that the feet are planted firmly on the ground is, thus, increased. This is symbolized in such movements as sliding steps (Suri-ashi) or stomping (Ashi-byoshi) which express the affinity with the earth.

The late Shinobu Origuchi, a prominent Japanese anthropologist and man of letters, said that when examining Japanese performing arts, he found that the performers invariably stomp at some part of the performance and that the appearing on the stage in itself signifies the treading down of evil spirits under the ground; the stomping is called Hembai. Seen from this point of view, the sliding steps (Suri-ashi) in Noh plays can be considered as a preparatory movement to set off the stomping. According to Origuchi, the essence of traditional Japanese dancing is wandering around the stage, which originally signified sanctifying the place by treading down the evil spirits. The series of movements in my training consists of two parts—first, straining the whole body, concentrating the forces at the hips, stomping to the same constant rhythm; and then, after collapsing on the floor to lie still, getting up again to music like a marionette, by extending a calm strength throughout the body. All is achieved by completely changing the quality of what we might call the raw, unconcentrated body of everyday life. That is why many beginners feel that they are just forced to move mechanically and that the delicate nuances of their own bodies disappear. According to my own experience in giving this training, actors in the United States, who are close to realistic acting, tend to feel like that. Even though they begin stomping forcefully and seriously, they soon lose their concentration and their bodies 'loosen'. There are some people who watch this and consider my training particularly Japanese; who say that the training is unsuitable for American actors because their legs are long compared with those of the Japanese actors. However, it has nothing to do with the length of the legs or the stamina, but with the discovery of an inner physical sensibility or with the recognition of an inner and profound memory innate to the human body. In other words, it is to do with the ability to uncover this

profound physical sensibility and to give it full play. Therefore, it is not necessarily only Japanese actors who are likely to assimilate the aim of my training into their body. Whether in Europe or in Japan, stomping or beating the ground with the feet is a universal physical movement necessary for us to become highly conscious of our own body or to create a 'fictional' space, which might also be called a ritualistic space, where we can achieve a personal metamorphosis.

The stomping or beating the floor with the feet originates in ancient Japanese rituals.

In his 'Six Lectures on the History of Traditional Japanese Performing Art' Shinobu Origuchi mentions the Opening Ritual of the Heavenly Stone Wall in the Japanese Creation Myth as the origin of the Sacred Dance (Kagura), and talks about the rhythmical dancing to calm down the spirits, which a goddess named Ameno-Uzumeno-Mikoto danced, turning over a wooden tub and stomping on it and striking it with the end of a stick. He says:

"Perhaps the tub symbolized the earth. The goddess stomped on it and struck it with a stick while making loud noises; actions supposed to wake up and bring out the soul or spirit that was believed to be under the tub, whether sleeping or hiding, in order to send it to the unseen sacred body of the god nearby."

What he means to say is that the purpose of the action of stomping and striking is not necessarily to tread down or suppress evil enemies but to arouse their energy in order to use it to activate human life. As a result, the same effect as of exorcism is brought about, for by acquiring the spirit of the evil it is possible to overcome it. The fact that Noh and Kabuki actors often stomp on the stage floor can be regarded as a practice related to this old tradition.

Thus, the ancient Japanese stages were built on graves or mounds where the souls of the dead were considered to dwell. This has led to the custom that even now people hollow out the ground or bury a pot before building a Noh stage over it. This is not only for the sake of technical effectiveness—that the hollow ground makes the sound of stomping resound better—but it is a procedure to create an illusion that the actor can

conjure up earth spirits or the spirits of ancestors who have returned to the earth, in order to acquire their energy. The resonance enforces the physical feeling of responding to the spirits. Even today such an illusion is necessary for actors on stage. For, the illusion that the energy of the spirits can be felt through the feet to activate our own bodies is a most natural and valuable illusion for human beings. Noh is well blessed because it has continued to cherish this idea right up to the present. Graves and mounds can be regarded as wombs from which we have been born. In that sense the earth is a 'Mother' herself. Actors can undertake their roles on the premise that they are connected with all humanity integrating individuals.

Perhaps it is not the upper half but the lower half of our body through which the physical sensibility common to all races is consciously expressed; to be more specific, the feet. The feet are the last remaining part of the human body which has kept, literally, in touch with the earth, the very supporting base of all human activities.

(Compiled from "The Grammar of Footwork")

