

Stomp in Australia

Dominique Sweeney¹

Abstract

This article investigates one actor training exercise in order to question what we are doing as actor trainers. *The Stomp* is a particularly strenuous repetitive exercise imported from Japan in the 1990s and still used in Australian actor training systems like John Nobbs and Jacqui Carroll's 'NSP' and Zen Zen Zo's practice. Another much older stomp from traditional public Aboriginal performance practices exists in styles like *wangga* and offers knowledges that provide direct ways of appreciating our connection to country. The awareness developed through traditional performance practices involves careful and detailed observation of place. Traditional Aboriginal public performance practices contain deep knowledges of aesthetic and technical connection to country. Connection to country reaches beyond abstract performance aesthetics and physical training. It is a connection to the environment and to the history and future of places that Aboriginal performers embody while sharing their country with their audience. The question we need to ask ourselves is, how as actors and actor trainers do we learn respectfully from the elders of traditional practices that live, walk and breathe the country to tell our stories not as interloping invaders but as artists alongside Aboriginal performers and potential future creators? In negotiation with Traditional Owners Australian Actor Trainers could offer participant student actors power and the right to work respectfully located and developed in place. Actor training practices with an awareness of being emplaced in country is the starting point for representation and connection to 'play'. Play, a term used by Jacques Lecoq as "le jeu", is the basis of all acting. To enhance the ability to play actor training at Charles Sturt University extends students imaginations through identification beyond the constricts of the human body and psychology. Actors explore shape, colour, animals, elements, substances and poetry in the great themes of existence – the mundane, love, youth, aging, death, exodus, betrayal, conquest, exaltation, injustice and suffering. Training orients actors in their local environment as a starting point inseparable from the history, politics and social context of that place.

Keywords

Place; Actor Training; Country; Pedagogy; Theatre; Wangga

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“*Preparing them for that moment*” Geoffrey Coleman, Head of Acting at Central School of Speech and Drama. (Colman)

In 2018 Robert Lewis, lecturer in Acting for Stage and Screen, Charles Sturt University, initiated a conference in Wagga Wagga celebrating the work of Australian Actor Training teachers in tertiary institutions. This formalised as AusAct. But what for and why? As Robert’s colleague and co-lecturer I became involved at the outset and immediately sought to involve Liza-Mare Syron in the first conference because of her expertise with Actor Training and in particular Indigenous Actor Training (Syron “The Place of ‘Culture’ in Actor Training for Indigenous Australians”; Syron “Training Indigenous Actors in Australia”; Syron and Milne). Place and relationship to place is core to the primary concerns.

For the 2nd AusAct conference in 2019 at QUT the Indigenous AusAct Panel was powerful but added as a last-minute consideration and was not planned as a major thread of the conference. I question the overarching discourse that ventured away from the initial reasons for founding AusAct and why the conversation chose to ignore the core of what makes Australian Actor Training unique and how we go about analysing, questioning and developing that.

To provoke discussion, I relate the opening statement by Coleman about what actor training is to the exercise from Tadashi Suzuki’s training that has been influential in Australia and other countries. “The Stomp” provides a useful example in order to tease out questions concerning localised approaches to actor training. *The Stomp* is a training means to approach preparedness for acting and is similar to Jacques Lecoq’s *Neutral Mask* aesthetic considerations being sought through training.

Before developing this argument, in referring to Coleman it is necessary to dispel any concept that aligns with the idea he proposes that an actor must experience the stories that their characters experience. My proposition is that for actor training this is fundamentally flawed. Coleman says

Becoming an actor is about signing a lifelong contract which does contain a lifelong clause. And the clause is to go to dark places and light places, to live, to die, to represent us. It is not just about pretending, it is about experiencing some of the most challenging stories to be told or to be told in the future... some of the exercises are repetitious by design, some of the requirements of training are muscular and to develop muscle takes months and years. And so there is nothing instant about becoming an actor. (Colman)

The use of the word ‘pretending’ is the problem. If pretending implies indicating an intent to an audience, as in charades, we are far from “Play” in the pedagogy of actor training. Play is not pretending and play is also not experiencing the thing itself. In this discussion I position that an actor’s role is to not get confused with character and go beyond play. The reason we train is to increase actor skills; the ability to focus and play. A notion that it is necessary or part of a contract for an actor to experience the challenges of the character that they play is a dangerous suggestion. When an actor

becomes the character, they are no longer acting. We should not train actors to do that. We do need to train actors to help enliven their play so that audiences believe that their character experiences the travails the playwright puts the character through. Enlivened actors require imaginations that convey ideas clearly to their audience and training helps develop steps to open those channels. Imagination in the way traditional Aboriginal performers tie their association with country to enliven their performances is another consideration. This differentiation between ‘acting’ and ‘being’ in other systems causes problems. In this instance it does not entertain the same confusion ascribed to “the method”.

As another precursor to the main discussion I take the example of a ‘universal’ training system to justify ‘the system’ rather than the intended use of the system. Actor training systems seek ways to strengthen and encourage flexible artists whose technique should be invisible in performance. Meyerhold’s system of biomechanics is one example of a training system designed to do this. However, Biomechanics was critiqued by Igor Ilinsky, Meyerhold’s principle actor and practitioner of the training, precisely for the excessive use of ballet steps favouring the ‘ballet style’ which Ilinsky decried and he sought training methods freed from superfluous mannerisms and style boundaries. In contrast, ardent “biomechanicians” continued to propose mannered systems branding biomechanics as an end in itself (Cole and Chinoy, p.505).

The 21st century Performance Studies debacle with Philip Auslander plagiarising *Theory for Performance Studies* offers a moment of clarity in Judith Butler’s response:

Both the approach to theory as "tool" and as "great thinkers" misses the fact that theory emerges in a dynamic and crucial relation to the various disciplinary modes of thinking, popular culture, art, and performance... theory cannot be "exterior" to what it thinks about; it has its own multiple histories and trajectories... How does one theorize performance to the side of the proscenium stage, and how does that come to redefine our understanding of the stage, of public space, of public movement? What is the relation of performance and ritual? How do we understand the body, gesture, movement, and stillness? And how do we understand cultural action and practice in new ways? (Schechner et al.)

So where/how do we start with an Australian theory of actor training that is neither plagiarising nor ignoring the practices of our teachers? Anne Marshall explored working with acting students and central Australian Traditional Owners. She says

Aboriginal performances carry with them a vast range of kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences. Apart from human interaction, this variety is connected with seasonal changes; location changes; particular vegetation; topography of the surrounding countryside; altitude; fire and wood smoke; food; animals, birds and insects; the scent of rain on dry dust; pollen carried by the wind and the tang of seasonal flowers and fruits. (Marshall, pp.311-312)

Marshall provides a launchpad into what we mean by careful and detailed observation of place describing how non-Aboriginal performer students are awkward learning traditional performance moves because of their untrained and unattuned bodies. (Marshall, pp.311-312). Australian actor-training research is located in the place we find ourselves. We are a continent contingent on many different language speaking groups and diverse cultural practices. This recognition of who and where we are is the starting point for research into Australian actor training. We can and do draw on systems outside of this continent and new technologies as we explore means of representation however an emplaced awareness is the foundation. Careful and detailed observation of place must come from appreciating the performance cultures of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Those knowledges come in styles of public performance practices (theatre) like *wangga* and *mungamunga*. Once we have an understanding, permission and an ability to join in that understanding then we have a viable position from which to deal with other places. If we start with a sensitivity to country, we can move away from the brutal colonial dissociative state that continues to destroy the land and its people. That line prolongates the great Australian silence. Anthologist William Stanner said 50 years ago that he would hope that our history begins to address

*the other side of the story over which the great Australian silence reigns...
Aborigines have always been looking for two things: a decent union of
their lives with ours but on terms that let them preserve their own identity,
not their inclusion willy-nilly in our scheme of things and a fake identity,
but development within a new way of life that has the imprint of their own
ideas.*

It is time that we find a way to recognise that the union that is to all our benefits starts with the acknowledgement that we have much to learn. And still we look elsewhere for training to emulate that foreign thing which glitters as ‘the system’ for Australia. I take this further and suggest that performers stomping the earth needs special attention.

Branding oneself as a practitioner of a particular actor training system brings associated labelling both negative and positive. In recognition of this I qualify my use of Jacques Lecoq’s system. The actor training pedagogy based in ‘play’ is a focal point in my argument. I propose that the point of play must rest in an understanding of the place from which we enter into play. I draw on references to Jacques Lecoq from his classes and in private discussion while I attended his school in Paris between 1991 and 1993. In the previous AusAct conference proceedings Robert Lewis and I discussed how our teachers, in my case Lecoq, recommended that we develop our own creative work from our country. Lewis quotes from his experience with Butoh trainer Yoshito Ohno that the significance of place in performance training should be a priority in the actor’s “ability to be highly flexible, agile and responsive to the performance environment.” (Sweeney and Lewis). Lewis uses Suzuki’s pedagogy to offer an alternative approach to Stanislavsky’s *Active Analysis* in actor training and raises the ‘mystery world’ where actors have an understanding of the dualities of practice, actors ‘play’ with and within the ‘mystery’ rather than simply navigate a mapped sequence of psychological actions.

Lewis extends his non-psychological path interrogating the Suzuki based actor training of the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP). John Nobbs recognises this and says that we might offer an anti-aesthetical vision of Suzuki. The proposition identifies an embodied sense of the expansive space that the continent holds and is encoded in the movement of Australian actors. This may offer insights and is similar to the way Lecoq conceived Australian actors' embodied awareness on stage. Lecoq explored the embodied sensibility to place through the neutral mask and was constantly researching the cultural and physical imprints of movement on bodies. Examples of this research in Australia are in Liza-Mare Syron's work on Indigenous actor training (Syron "Artistic Practice in Contemporary Indigenous Theatre"; Syron "The Place of 'Culture' in Actor Training for Indigenous Australians"; Syron "Training Indigenous Actors in Australia") and Rachael Swain's collaboration with *Marrugeku* (Swain "Listening to Country: Indigenous Dance Dramaturgy in Remote Australia"; Swain "Ways of Listening: Dramaturgy as Deep Mapping in Intercultural-Indigenous Performance"). There are also developments in works like Belloo Creative's 'Sand' creating a new Australian/Japanese aesthetic (Belloo Creative).

Australian based Suzuki training opens up actors to exhaust their bodies of the tendency to be controlled by rigid conscious thought alone. The stomp is a pivotal point for this inquiry, the primary exercise that trains actors to move in the theatrical space without clutter. While it offers lower body muscular strength and agility, an aspect of training many systems demand, there is a martial component and a crowded linearity implicit in the exercise. Nobbs also suggests that there is a Japanese cultural embodied sense of the temporal different to the Australian temporal awareness in bodies focused through this exercise. A colonial Australian historical viewing of non-Aboriginal actors offers just that but when we look deeper into the cultural practices of the multitude of traditional Australian performance practices temporal visions in body awareness change radically.

Nobbs says that the benefits of the stomp are

Focus, Grounding, Self-Definition and History. For us the stomp is not banging the ground but embracing the ground at high energy. Planting the weight forcefully but with great sensitivity onto the stage floor. It is not so much expressing energy out from the body, but actors impressing energy into the centre of their bodies. (Nobbs)

A stomp brings feet and vital forces into connection with the earth – the connecting material between us all. This primary movement is the basis of many performance forms and in Australia and other countries we have seen the growing enthusiasm with Viewpoints, various Suzuki offshoots and in the 1960s it was part of pop culture. In 1963 an ABC News Magazine piece titled "Should the Stomp be banned?" documented dance form imported from American surf culture. Resident dance expert Miss Phyllis Bates described that, while primitive, the stomp was "just a bit of fun that can't hurt anyone" (ABC). At the same time as dance floors were shaking across capital cities and country towns, in the north of Australia traditional theatre styles like, *wangga*, had for much longer employed stomping as an aesthetic performance technique. Today, nearly sixty years later the awareness of this ongoing tradition still lies beyond theatre culture

and continues in the domains of the practitioners and amongst researchers in musicology, anthropology and linguistics.

What is the theatrical stomp understood in current actor training?

With Suzuki, the purpose of his stomp is to enhance neutrality utilising physical endurance through exhaustion and repetition as well as providing the aesthetic of moving laterally across the stage – an aesthetic that exists in many of the highly stylised forms of theatre that Lecoq called the 6th level of theatrical tension. Levels of theatrical tension in Lecoq's pedagogy awaken actors to enliven bodies to style. The 6th level of theatrical tension describes stylised theatrical expressions like Khon, Kabuki, Nō, Kathakali, Dalag puppeteering and Commedia dell'arte. This also applies to the masked performance styles of traditional Australian *balga* and *junba*.

When I first saw Suzuki's stomp in Melbourne at the Playbox workshop in 1992 the endurance aspect puzzled me. I saw the physical effort as a test rather than as a pathway to a performance aesthetic. It was not clear to me as an observer that the purpose of the militaristic stomping for an actor was to pass beyond exhaustion into movement driven action. The mind must let go and disassociate from the exhaustion while the focus rests on just breathing.

In 2019 participating in an NSP (Carrol and Knobbs) workshop with much stomping I discovered the current adaptations are made to suit an Australian aesthetic which focus not on perfection of movement but on a process of revelation of habitual mannerisms that hinder and hold back an actor. In a Lecoq based pedagogy this is neutral mask. These devices put the actor on show and reveal very quickly tensions and parts of the body that respond more or less quickly to imaginative stimuli. NSP constantly challenges the actor to never rest comfortably and sink back on your haunches. This is the same 'ready to go' state that Neutral Mask demands.

What NSP offers is that you don't have time to think and therefore your body must respond without a cluttered head centred mind intervening. Once you give up thinking through the head and allow the consciousness to be through the entire body then the learning begins. There is a differentiation between economy of movement which is what the stomp aims for in the training and the neutral which is the result of that ease with the strength gained in the lower half of the body able to move into style, unrestricted smoothly across the performance space. Had we been performing from the time we could walk, like many Traditional Owners in the north of Australia, this would be implicit and filled with the relationships to country that enliven minds and bodies.

The following excerpt is my personal experience as a participant in the 2019 NSP Wagga Wagga workshop written as a flow of consciousness. The point of view of participant observer considers some insider/outsider actor training implications prior to discussing how we enter into the public performance practices of Traditional Owners.

Spaces in between. Inside the Knobs Suzuki practice as the other.

The other – I am the other and NSP welcomes the other and there is no level of difficulty which isn't immediately appropriate for the novice. In NSP not being caught inside enables the position that's being asked for, 'welcoming the other'.

The research is both internal and external.

Here we go – ready to go.

The work is a constant process of pushing the body to its limits so that it releases the mind, enables the complete being to be ready to go.

Jackie Carroll is instrumental in this process using her dance training as the mode to inquire into actors' bodies, touching the face, touching all different parts of the body to do what has been called 'release', activating certain areas to either relax or add tension and the word soften is used constantly...

so that activation and softening are happening at the same time.

There can be an enormous sense of tension in putting the effort into the work and that tension needs to be transferred into theatrical tension which includes the softness and a constant witness of the audience.

The spacing between is like music.

It's the play, it's where everything lies so the constant sense of being in between is where this is that and the question of boundaries is always there

so there are often two contradictory positions

everyone is placed within and the paradox is to keep both of those positions alive and...

that's the play.

Miles Davis's famous adage purports that there's no wrong note, it's the note that follows that shows whether the performer knows where they're going (Jones).

This is the play, it's the space in between that is the life.

This space in between is where Gordon Craig's idea of performance comes to life and today is reflected in ideas from the St. Petersburg Institute of Performing Arts Puppetry school who propose that the "most important skill of the future puppeteer is the ability to 'comprehend the soul of objects,' to see a character in any inanimate object and bring it to life"(Institute of Performing Arts).

There is no separation between the actor and puppeteer – ready to go – ready to animate in a constant process of being available, listening to the body, looking at where tension rises and impedes communication

... and yet it's in that tension – in that struggle that is the very act of play – is the act of performance.

Wangga

In the northwest of Australia, the ‘rock and roll’ *wangga* has many parts to it, one of which is the public tradition of improvised stomping. The men and women encircle a dancer who steps forward to show off their improvised stomping accompanied by a digeridoo with boomerang or clapstick rhythm. The moves tell stories as well as show off the dancer’s prowess (Sweeney "Masked Corroborees of the Northwest"). This stomping technique as a theatrical device is used in *balga* as well. The training that goes into *wangga* and *balga* is inculcated in children from the time they can walk. These theatrical forms are profound in their dramatic structure and in their meaning. The following is my summary of the thirty-one *Gurirr Gurirr balga* songs.

It begins with the woman’s spirit led by Jimpi, another juari (devil devil) spirit and together they make the journey to Mount House where they approach a big swamp. From there they pass over Yulunpu on the tablelands northwest of Halls Creek. At a cave near Elgee Cliffs the two spirits see the half-kangaroo Ngarranggarni and then at Mount King encounter the shadows of their people burned in a massacre by Gardiya (white people). They call to the shadows but those spirits don’t answer. Jimpi accidentally kicks a stone that is the possum Ngarranggarni. They see a shadow move over the hill in front of them at Bedford Downs. This is certainly the shadow of death and refers to the massacre of Traditional Owners by Gardiya that features in another famous balga: Marnem Marnem Dililib Benuwarrenji (Fire Fire Burning Bright). They see no people there and are confused. At Clara Springs the two spirits argue about the ownership of the corroboree being sung. They make their way to Bow River and to Warmun, where the story began with the road accident. They follow the path the ambulance took with the gravely injured woman to Wyndham and there, at Mount Cockburn, Jimpi leaves to return to her country. The Gurirr Gurirr spirit then visits Ngarranggarni sites around Kununurra and finally, looking eastward, sees Darwin annihilated by Wunggurr through the force of cyclone Tracy (Sweeney "Masked Corroborees of the Northwest – ‘Stand up in My Head’", p.107).

Here each place is brought to life in the performance through the beat, the words and melody and the way the feet touch the earth.

Conclusion

The stomp has many manifestations in Australia from pop culture, Japanese martial actor training to Australian variants of that imported training system. Then there are the Aboriginal theatre traditions that are much older. The aesthetic in the way stomping movements offer actor strength and clarity of performance is one consideration. The stomp provides a microcosm of issues involved in assessing what we are doing with Australian actor training. Alongside the stomping *wangga* styles of the men there are other theatre forms like the women’s *mungamunga* with their feet shuffling, making tracks and not leaving the earth, offering a whole other world of research considerations. The ‘preparation for the moment’ through stylised stomping

and other movement styles is the beginning of research considerations in Australian actor training to take us deeper in our connections to how and why we perform.

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