The Problem of Presence

We’ve all heard it said; “You’ve either got it or you haven’t”.

We have - I am sure - all encountered ways of training performers that suggest that while you can teach ‘technique’ to anyone, what makes a ‘good’ performer is somehow mysterious, god-given, genetic or innate.

I think that buying into that myth is an abdication of our responsibility as teachers and trainers. I’ll go further - if we cannot teach a person to be a more watchable performer, we should not take them money by claiming that we can teach them to perform. Because technique is not performance.

Performance consists of two things - what a performer does and how she does it. Much training and rehearsal is focused on helping performers know what to do, but should we not pay just as much attention to the detail of how she should
do it - to the essential qualities of 'liveness' that transform rehearsed material into a vibrant, shared experience?

What we ask performers to do is very simple and very complicated.

We ask them to move, respond to music, create images, be in relationship with one another, wear clothes that communicate an image or create an effect. We ask them to repeat things that other people wrote, to pretend to be people they are not, to feel things they are not actually feeling. We ask them to do things and to pretend things.

We all do all of this all the time! It is the stuff of our daily life.

However, a performer has to do these things while being watched. She or he must perform relatively simple actions under the eye first of a teacher, then a choreographer/director and finally of an audience. Stanislavsky noted (though he put it rather more elegantly than this): any fool can sit on a chair, but as soon as you put that chair on a stage and ask the same fool to sit on it while being watched, he or she forgets everything about how to use their body.......

This is one of the paradoxes of performance. It is one of the paradoxes we need to help our students negotiate if they are to leave our training, leave our rehearsals, able fully to do their jobs under the eye of the audience.

What is a performer's job?
Well - and here is another paradox - unless the performer is working in pure and unstructured improvisation, we ask her to reproduce (or perhaps recreate) detailed work that she has practiced many times - perhaps performed many time - ‘as if for the first time’. We ask her to perform remembered actions in a way that is spontaneously live and reactive. Not giving only the impression of spontaneity, but actually responding spontaneously to the unfolding of the performance - creating, at some level, a real and deep experience with her live audience. We ask that she communicate that her work is happening here, now, alive and dynamic - however tightly rehearsed, scripted, choreographed or otherwise structured it is.

We want her to be present. We want her to be live. We want her to be rehearsed and spontaneous.

It is some of these qualities that I'm going to explore in this paper. I want to suggest that it is not enough to hope that somehow liveness and presence will appear in performers when they walk in front of an audience. It is not enough to leave the dynamics of live performance to chance, and train only the technical languages of performance, trusting that what has been exhaustively rehearsed will somehow come alive when an audience shuffles into a room.

The ability to be present and live are also techniques. They are performance techniques which need attention and training just like every other element of a performer's vocabulary.

I'm going to spend a little time looking at three key words - ‘presence’, 'liveness' and ‘embodiment’ - to see if we can
move some way towards understanding what each actually requires of a performer. If we do not, at least at some level, understand these elements of performance, how can we teach them?

So let's start with considering the quality of 'presence'. It's talked about a lot, but what do we really mean by it?

Many of us will know of the work of Eugenio Barba of Odin Teatret. He has researched extensively what it is that energises a performer's body - that draws the eye of a spectator to one person, and not to another. This might serve as a starting point for a definition of presence - a quality of being, of energy, that draws the eye of a spectator. Barba's work is based round analysing techniques of performance from diverse cultures - forms such as Classical Ballet, Kathakali, Butoh. He identifies common features that exist in all 'formal' performance languages, features that help energise the body of the performer. Among these common features are:

- the existence of opposing tensions in the body:

- the use of precarious balance (giving a sense that performers are always having actively to maintain a position or a movement rather than simply relaxing into inertia)

- the energising of each moment through the use of excessive energy to achieve simple ends - for example, standing still ‘on point’ in ballet - an enormous expenditure of energy to achieve something that could be achieved much more easily.
Barba's perspectives offer a useful starting point. If we want to train performers to be present - to draw the eye of the audience - we need to train them to pay attention to what they are doing with their bodies. In other words, ‘presence” is based in attention to physicality. Certain technical things generate an energetic quality which makes a performer more present. Their bodies, their actions, become defined, decided, visible.

For those teaching a formal technique such as ballet or corporeal mime, the ways of generating physical presence that I mentioned earlier are intrinsic to the technique. Formal techniques embody the balance of opposing forces, precarious balance etc. Nonetheless it is useful for a student to understand something of HOW the technique works. Because if she does not, she will not know how to maintain her presence when she is asked to perform outside of her learned technique. I see this often. Performers who, when working in a dance language, are poised, precise, energised, present, when they start to to improvise or to ‘act’ become imprecise, inert, absent. It helps not only to teach technique, but also HOW that technique is operating - so performers can transfer skills from the work they do within technique to performance that transcends or operates outside of learned physical languages.

Teaching students to pay detailed attention to their bodies - to what they are actually doing with their bodies - helps them energise and make present their performance. A performer needs to learn to organise her body, in each moment of performance, never allowing the architecture of her body to dissolve into an energy-less inertia.
Presence involves paying attention to the detail of what one is actually doing in each moment. Let’s state the obvious - the origin of the word ‘presence’ is ‘present’. If a performer’s attention is not focused on what she is actually doing, in each moment, she will not be ‘present’ and she cannot, therefore, achieve a quality of ‘presence’.

Presence involves applying the actions of the mind - ones attention - to the actions of the body. A performer whose mind is worrying about what is coming up later in the show, or worrying about an earlier mistake, or who is bored or (to use a phrase I detest from the British acting world) 'doing it on automatic', who is worried what a critic on the third row is writing in his notebook, is not mentally present in the room with her co-performers or her audience. Her mind is elsewhere. Her lack of attention will be experienced by an audience. Even if the audience cannot necessarily explain why they feel the performer is absent - after all she seems to be doing everything the performance requires of her - there is a sense that somehow she is not quite all there.

We will all have the experience of watching a group of performers and sensing that one performer is somehow more there than the others, somehow more alive,... possibly we might speak of charisma.

There's an interesting word - 'charisma'. What is it that makes one person more visible than another? While Barba suggests that energised presence is encoded in physical technique, Angela de Castro, a Brazilian clown, defines charisma as 'loving being where you are'. I like that. It
suggests the ability to attract the eye of the audience is not only a physical technique, but a mental attitude.

This makes sense to me. Watch a young child interacting with an unfamiliar environment or a new and complex toy. They are present in what they are doing because they are paying detailed attention to what they are doing. And they are paying attention to what they are doing because they are curious and they WANT to discover. And the more delighted they become with their exploration - the more they love being where they are, doing what they are doing - the more watchable and charismatic they become. Their activity is fuelled by curiosity and delight. And that curiosity and delight, in turn, makes them present in their actions.

How about this? We need continually, repeatedly and without embarrassment, to encourage our students to love, utterly love, their work. To work because there is nothing they would rather do. A commitment to enthusiasm and love is also a mental technique - as possible to learn as the disappointed and cynical detachment that passes for 'professionalism' is learned. To develop charisma, perhaps we need to train the capacity to be loving and enthusiastic. We need to train both what a performer does and how she does it.

This is not some general, feel-good attitude of mind. To encourage love of what one is doing is to encourage attention to detail and precision. We need, at the core of our teaching, to develop the capacity of our students to be delighted by the details of what they are doing. We need to confront our students with certain core questions: 'why are you here?'; 'what makes you love being where you are?';
'What makes you charismatic?' These questions are at the heart of developing presence.

Let's talk about ‘liveness’.

'Liveness' follows presence. When I talk of 'liveness', I am talking about the ability of a performer to react, in the moment, to the unfolding of the performance around her. It is about being engaged, connected, open and ... well... alive.....

Liveness - even in the most tightly choreographed or directed of pieces, is a kind of improvisatory freedom. It requires the performer to have the confidence to adapt the performance she has rehearsed to the reality of each new moment. After all every performance is slightly different. Every performance is a first performance. Every performance needs the performer to discover what the particular qualities of this space and this audience and this performance are now.

To make a performance really live involves minute adaptations of the performance, moment by moment, to the unfolding reality the performer notices around her. Liveness requires the performer to be able to adapt, often spontaneously, her rehearsed actions so they become appropriate to the space and internal dynamics of each new performance. Sometimes those adaptations are minute, sometimes larger. It depends on what is appropriate.

The quality of 'liveness', requires presence. If the performer is not present, then she cannot react to what is going on around her. She won't notice it! If a performer is to inhabit
the moment by moment unfolding of a performance, she needs to be seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling and inhabiting each moment as it happens. But it requires more than simple presence, it requires connection, relationship, sensitivity and the self-confidence to respond.

So we need to train performers to react, appropriately to the unexpected or the unimagined. We need to train them to love to improvise, to trust their abilities as improvisors - so that the unique qualities of each performance become welcome stimuli in the creation of a unique event, not terrifying divergences from some kind of ‘prepared presentation’. We need to train performers to relax a little, to open their senses to what is around them and to know that how they respond to the unexpected and unique experience of each performance is the fundamental energetic of what the audience will experience.

So far I have suggested that presence and liveness are two core performance techniques that we need to teach. I have suggested that presence is generated both by techniques of use of the body and by mental attitude. I have suggested that the quality of liveness not only requires presence, but requires relationship and an ability, spontaneously, to react to the slight alterations and disruptions within a performance that characterise any live event.

But of course we do not usually want a performer simply to respond to the moment. We want her to communicate the shape and dynamic of her prepared performance. We need her to be both responsive to the reality of each moment and to follow and adhere to what she has rehearsed.
A performance is a flow and the performer must find and go with that flow. But she must also be able to shape and alter the direction of that flow when necessary. To shape the flow without blocking the flow. And it is here that the techniques of what the performer does - her skills - intersect with techniques of how she does it - her charisma, her presence, her liveness.

And at the core of this intersection is the process of 'embodiment'.

It is only once a performer has fully embodied her work that she can enter into the flow of her rehearsed actions. Only when she can follow the flow of her actions without having to think about what comes next, can she pay attention to the 'live' journey of how this moment NOW flows to this next moment NOW - in other words only once a performance is adequately embodied can a performer both deliver her rehearsed performance and react, live and fearless, to the emerging, sometimes unexpected liveness of the event.

There is no clear agreement about a definition of embodiment, and rather than dig too deeply into the area, I am going to work from my own understanding of what it is and what it requires.

I think of an embodied action as one that can be performed without a person having consciously to think about it, but which is available to immediate alteration if necessary. What I mean by that is that an embodied action is one which we can do without having to think; 'how do I do this and what happens next', but, unlike a physical habit or an action
performed quite unconsciously, it is something we can, relatively easily, adapt to changing situations.

For many of us one of the most common embodied actions we experience is driving. You start in your first lesson gripping the wheel and trying to remember which leg to use to speed up or slow down, and two years later you are listening to the radio and having conversations while driving through complex traffic. However, when the unexpected happens, in the moment, you can take conscious control over the process of driving and make immediate, spontaneous, sometimes even counter-intuitive decisions, that alter the habitual, rehearsed processes of daily driving.

For a performer to be able to enter into the flow of her performance, she needs to embody that performance. She cannot flow if she is constantly trying to remember her next move, next line, next cue. But her performance, if it is to be really live, must not be habitual, performed mindlessly, remaining entirely unaltered by each fresh venue or audience. She needs to be able to perform in flow and to manage the speed, direction and intensity of that flow. She needs to be able to do what her performance requires of her and, if necessary, manipulate how she does it.

Once a performer has embodied her actions, she can enter into the flow of her performance and free her mind to pay attention to being present, live and reactive. She remains aware of her performance - just as (I hope) one remains aware when driving - but she does not have to 'think about' each moment of what she is doing. Her awareness enables her to be responsive and live, her embodiment enables her to be rigorous and disciplined.
So what should we train a performer to think about as she performs? Well, in many ways the answer, ideally, is that she is not 'thinking about' anything. She is aware of everything, not thinking about anything. To use a term that comes more from the domain of meditation, the performer, through training herself to be both present and embodied, trains herself to be 'mindful' - to be aware of and responsive to her performance without having to 'think about' it - if by 'think about' we mean having some sort of ongoing internal verbal conversation.

In training performers both to embody their technique AND to be live, we are teaching them to maintain a calm and mindful flow through the chaos of moment-by-moment live action, especially when under the gaze of the audience. To use a phrase I often use in training performers, I encourage them to 'know everything that is happening in the room, but only do what needs to be done'. We are training them both to perform and to observe themselves as performer simultaneously.

As well as training performers to love their work, we need to train them to quieten their minds.

All physical training is, ultimately, a training of the mind. To train a body to move requires that we train the mind to think - to think the appropriate sequence and appropriate qualities of that movement. To learn a sequence of movements is, in fact, to learn a sequence of thoughts. These need not, ought not, be conscious thoughts (at least, not once appropriately embodied), but they are activities of the mind nonetheless. So this, ultimately is where the training of technique and the
training of liveness come together, for both of them are actually a training of the mind. Both of them require a performer to think more efficiently, more healthily and to react more spontaneously.

This does not mean that we sit around and discuss theories of embodiment and presence endlessly. Just as performers communicate their work to their audience through the body, so the learning of performance and aesthetic technique takes place through the body. We learn by doing. It is embodied learning that we offer because they are embodied skills that we are training, but don't let that distract us from this basic understanding - what we train in the studio is a performer's ability to think.

Should we name these processes to those we train? Is there not a danger that we destroy the 'magic' and 'mystery' of performance if we open up the technical foundations on which it is based? I don't think so. Unless we want to train performers who are simply puppets in the hands of their directors and choreographers, we need to empower them to be able to take responsibility for the skilful and consistent delivery of their work. This consistent skilful delivery of performance is a performer's job - the job for which we are training them.

The 'magic' of performance is not something that is accidental or falls from God as a strange blessing, it is a consequence of techniques that are within the gift of each performer, on every occasion, to 'warm-up', just as she warms up her body or voice. Just because they are trainable does not mean of course that everyone will ended up with equal capacity in every area. Everyone can benefit from
voice training, not everyone will end up as Maria Callas. Everyone can benefit from dance training, not everyone will end up as Nureyev. Everyone can train their capacity to be present, not everyone will end up as Marlon Brando.

If we train performers in an understanding of how embodiment works, we train them to be able to embody their actions when they are struggling to find the flow of their work. We empower their personal rehearsal process. When we help them understand that presence and liveness are performance techniques, with solid practical foundations, we train them to understand that before a performance they might perhaps practice listening, practice responding to impulse, practice some useful ways of thinking; in other words they might practice performance techniques that will turn the paradoxes of performance I outlined at the start of this talk into a series of exciting and welcome challenges. If liveness and presence are understood as core elements of a performer's technique, then they become something that we can teach - we can train our students to apply those techniques to their own work in any situation.

If we want performers to be able to become present and reactive, we need to train them in techniques of presence and reactivity. These skills should be as central to the performer's vocabulary as every other technical performance skill.

That way all the techniques that we spend our time training performers to embody and use, have a chance to be seen vibrant, fresh, dynamic and alive. This surely is the heart of live performance - that every time a performer does her job,
it seems, to those who watch, magically to be happening as if for the first time.