"Finding a greater presence"

What tasks can I use and how can I implement them, to create and enhance "presence" in actors working in text-based theatre, during rehearsals and workshops?

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As human beings we are able to pick up on many different impressions around us all the time. Whilst I am sitting here writing this, I hear the builders from outside my house hammering away but I also hear the person who is mowing the lawn. I am at the same time cooking so I can hear the fan in the kitchen and smell the food that I am making in the oven but also at the same time I hear and feel my fingers touching the computer. I feel a draft from the window and I see the computer screen but also I see the room and the window and the clouds moving up in the sky but I also feel my body sitting on the chair and my hands feel the table and the computer and at the same time I am composing what I am writing, thinking of what I should write next and also at the same time I feel hungry and thirsty and thinking that I will take a break soon. All of this and more is happening simultaneously. As an actor I have trained my body and my senses so when I am in a rehearsal process or on stage all of this is heightened and I am experiencing everything at the same time. But how do I use this in a rehearsal process? How do I choose what to pick up and when?

Being an actor for 30 years, I have accumulated a lot of acting methods. I am always interested in learning new methods and have throughout my years tried most of the existing ones while being educated as an actor, in workshop situations, work situations or when devising a new play. What I have done is take a little from this and a little from that and built my own method. Having performed in so many different settings such as small and big theatres, various outdoor settings, many different spaces, in hospital corridors, on a circus stage, in a swimming pool area, on film, on radio, at weddings, in libraries, by a dying person’s bed and much much more. There has to be an experience in me that can be seen and may be made accessible. I became an actor because I had to, out of necessity and after undergone psychotherapy and having a family I kept on being an actor out of curiosity.

I am a story teller, I enjoy telling stories and may be one of my stories can help someone. Having worked at Cirque du Soleil and recreating the same performance about 1250 times (a milestone in my acting career), it became apparent to me that focus/concentration and presence are three key components to my performance. So I could just sit back and relax and say; that it all has to do with experience. But just saying, that what we have is experience and leave it at that is uninteresting to me. There has to be a way to see what we do, to understand in depth what an actor actually does. Looking at this in the rehearsal and workshop process, when we are open to all impulses, then becomes very interesting because there we can start trying to see what happens. Often our knowledge is reduced to anecdotes but is there a way to decipher this knowledge? On the other hand, without experience we cannot do what we do.
Like the story about the indigenous population in Amerika, they did not see the ships with Spanish explores coming because they had not seen those kind of ships before, thus had no experience of ships, thus could not know or see them and thus were very surprised when people came ashore. I want to be able to look at my experience and see what it is that I do as an actor and then boil it down to knowledge that I can possibly teach. But is this possible? Could it be that I come to the conclusion that, when you have been an actor for 30 years, you will know. The experience is needed and it cannot be taught....I cannot know this until I try, hence this research.

All my knowledge is completely intuitive and embodied and needs to be deciphered. Just as I breathe not thinking about it, I act without thinking about it. It is knowledge that my body and senses has accumulated over the years and in a rehearsal situation kicks in instantaneously. Or one could say that all my knowledge is tacit knowledge and needs to be listened to, in order to find out what that knowledge is. Just as I can look at my breathing and choose to control it or not, I will look at acting. I will try and look at the different components of acting and presence. As Bornemark, the philosopher says; when we look at trees, we first see a lot of trees and then we start to look at the different sort of trees and then the different individuals in that and so on. There are so many facets to acting and presence and I will not be able to fit them all in this exploration, so I will focus on a few.

**Why presence?**

Having worked as an actor for many years I have worked with many different actors. Many actors I have met throughout my career are using different methods from me. This doesn’t really matter, it is how we meet each other in the process that matters. I believe that there are a few corner stones to acting that we share. The ones I have found so far are; the body and voice, the passion to ones work, the ability to play/imagine and focus/concentration and presence. There may be more but these are the ones I found to start off with. Presence is the one that stuck with me because we often talk about it in a performance context. People can say that the actor was charismatic or I really felt the actor’s presence. According to P.Auslander; Acting theories such as Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski are “subject to the limits of the metaphysical assumptions on which they are based. If we are to use them, we must realize that, like metaphysics, they demand that we speak of acting in terms of presence.” (Zarilli, 2002, p.58). This is for me the interesting thing about presence, since it is something that is beyond our reality. When I have experienced presence on stage it is almost like a reality timed by a thousand.
I want to look at presence, especially in a rehearsal/workshop context because during my years as an actor, I have met other actors who haven’t really been present during the rehearsal but once the camera is switched on or we meet an audience they are there. I have always felt that it has been unfair because we could have gotten so much further, if we all would have been present. So I want to see how we as actors can reach this bubble, where we find that our work becomes easy and creative, where the imagination flows by using different tasks.

**What do I mean by presence?**

Presence can refer to the state of being present, either physically or mentally in which an individual is fully engaged with the present moment, free from distraction. It can involve a deep sense of connection with oneself, others, and the environment, as well as an openness to experiencing the full range of emotions and sensations that arise in the moment. In interpersonal communication and social psychology, presence can refer to the degree of engagement, connection, and attention that a person conveys to others in a conversation or interaction. For example, someone who has a strong presence may project confidence, charisma, and authority that capture the attention and interest of others. “As Chinese performers describe it, a good actor must “radiate presence (faqi发起) while a poor performer would have no presence (meiyou qi 没有起)” (Riley 1997: 206) Zarilli. 2011, p. 85). Presence can refer to different things depending on the context, but in general, it describes the state of being mentally and/or physically present in a particular moment, place, or situation. Overall, being present means being fully engaged and focused on the present moment physically and mentally.

What is “presence” in a western theatre context? Since I was trained in Sweden, England and the USA, my experience is very western and it will be from my own experiences I will look into this. I will try and find this out by using different tasks. When do I reach presence and are there experiences outside of the rehearsal room when they exist? I have a pair of acupuncture shoes (I know!!) when I wear them I am totally present because of the pain they cause. Are there other examples of this? How do I know that I have reached presence in a rehearsal? There is a difference between presence and presence. Yes of course if I am in a room my body is present. That doesn’t necessarily mean that my mind is. I can be thinking about where I am going to after work or next weekend or what happened this morning. An old acting teacher once told me that I should leave my private life as a coat on a hook before entering the
rehearsal room. I don’t necessarily agree with this, because we are not machines that can act and react without being ourselves. So what do I mean by presence in a theatre text based context? I am dealing with presence as a professional actor based on my implicit sensibility to what this is. As Lenard Petit says in a you tube video on 5 acting tips for young actors “an atmosphere that was consciously being created by the actors”. (13.08, 20230106)

All of this may seem very abstract. Here is a poem I wrote about presence after the first few rehearsals and workshops. Since my language is Swedish, my poem is firstly written in Swedish but I have also translate it further down.

**Närvaro**

*Spikskorna påminner mig om att jag finns just här just nu*

*I teaterrummet blir allt som spikskorna*

*Alla sinnen sätts på högsta volym*

*Jag ser hur du rör dig*

*Jag ser vad du säger*

*Jag ser vad du inte säger*

*Jag kan gå med*

*Jag kan gå emot*

*Jag kan bara vara*

*Jag vet att du vill mig väl så jag kan släppa på kraven*

*Det behöver inte vara perfekt*

*Bara vara*
Presence

My acupuncture shoes reminds me that I am here and now

In the rehearsal space everything becomes the acupuncture shoes

All my senses are put on the highest volume

I see how you move

I see what you say

I see what you don’t say

I can go with

I can go against

I can just be

I know that I am safe with you so I can let go

It doesn’t need to be perfect

Just be

Clues to presence

A newcomer may experience presence differently. As actors we all know what this presence is when we feel it or reach it. It is very hard to describe. Presence can occur differently within the actor-actors, the director, the teacher, the spectator and in-between. However I have noticed so far that it occurs in the interaction and there can be no presence in a rehearsal or workshop situation without communication. So communication is one of the clues because it enables the performers to synchronize their actions and movements with one another, creating a sense of unity and coherence in the interaction. When performers communicate effectively, they can respond to each other's cues, adjust their timing and pace. It also allows the actors to express their ideas, concerns, and suggestions to each other, leading to a collaborative and creative process. It also increases the performers' confidence and enhances their sense of
being. It allows performers to feel heard, understood, and valued, leading to a more meaningful and fulfilling experience in the rehearsal or workshop. Martin Buber who was an Austrian philosopher who also studied sociology writes about the importance of communication between people. He says, to be able to perceive another person, we need to be fully present which also means, fully accept the other in the communication. By communicating we become part of the other person’s reality. When it comes to acting I translate it into, becoming part of the other person’s imagination and fantasy world. By communicating as actors we say yes to each other’s worlds.

One colleague said that she would expect her co-actors to have the tools to reach presence but what are these tools? Are they the same for all of us or can I find tasks that no matter what tools we have, we can reach it together? Focus is another clue and can be difficult because sometimes it can take over. I wrote poem about this.

**Focus**

*The black hole that just takes and takes and takes*

*So focus*

*I have nothing more to give YOU because I have given everything to the theater*

*The focus required to stand there night after night after night*

*It eats the time I have with You*

*My privacy is pulled in to the hole*

*Eaten up*

*There are only so many hours in a day*

*Hours I give to the hole who wants and wants and wants*

*Which demands*

*The audience and the theatre*

The poem has more to do with the performance context but I think it describes focus in a way that is interesting. Can focus be when all my senses interact towards a common goal? For example when I interact with other actors on stage? During an audition, nervousness plays a big role in the focus. It is important to be able to focus "correctly" in order to be able to use the nervousness so that it doesn’t take over. The nervousness can also help the focus. As actors we can also give focus but we can also take focus. How do we do this?
Feeling safe is another clue. In order to connect to our inner most feelings, imagination and fantasies we need to have a safe place to do this in. I am very vulnerable when I create because I use myself as an instrument. I may be worried about making mistakes or looking foolish in front of others. This can lead to a lack of creativity and spontaneity, which can ultimately impact on my work negatively. However, if I feel safe and supported, I am more likely to take risks and be creative. I will feel free to experiment and try new things, knowing that I am in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. “It makes no difference how clever, quick-witted or funny the individuals of the company are; if there is no mutual trust among them, the ensembles work will be chaotic and uninspired.[…]the players must work their invention without obstruction, resistance protection, or control. In short, they must share trust.” (Izzo, 1997, p. 140-141)

Concentration and being able to concentrate is also an important part of reaching presence. One cannot however concentrate for an eight hour rehearsal, we wouldn’t have the stamina for that. Concentration starts with relaxation which turns in to concentration which then leads to action in the rehearsal or workshop. This is beautifully described in a book called Dramik by Kongsrud and Rosdahl They are talking about educational/pedagogical drama but it has the same pattern when we enter a rehearsal or a workshop room. It is a pattern of relaxation, concentration and action that repeats itself. They describe it as a spiral. See picture (Kongsrud&Rosdahl, 1968, 117).
I will talk about concentration concerning presence a little bit further down when I write about the workshops that I have had with actors. I then noticed that we have to choose to concentrate.

**Looking at the process on giving tasks to create “presence” without judging.**

I will within certain rehearsals with Åse Nelson, my co-actor give ourselves tasks to see what happens. Åse Nelson is an actor since 45 years and we have been working together, on and off for 15 years. We are currently rehearsing a play. How can I give tasks? How do I formulate these tasks? As Peter Brook says; “creating an atmosphere in which the actor can dig, probe and investigate” (1989, p.4) I want to make a space where we are totally free to explore this. What happens? I will look at the results without judging them. As Merleau-Ponty says in his thesis; Phénoménologie de la perception, I will look at things and how they unfold in front of me by being inside the action. I have translated it into; “To see is to enter a world of beings that show themselves, and they would not show themselves if they could not be hidden behind each other and behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to come to it and inhabit it and from there to perceive things according to the side it shows in relation to it.” (1945, p. 14) This also means that however I look at what happens in the rehearsal, I will always falter
because I cannot see everything, but just as I wrote in the beginning; I will experience everything with my body and senses. “Phenomenological reflection sets in motion a process of translating, transposing, or transgressing lived experience into writing” (Kozel, 2018, p. 54). Something exists and then afterwards to look at that, means that the moment is gone….what is left is the content, therefore I want to recreate the existence in order for the knowledge to appear again. I will record the sound to listen to afterwards to help me remember what happened in the present, when we used the tasks. I will write down the tasks and also write a work diary, so that I can do them again and possibly recreate the presence. I will not use a camera since presence can be frightened of the camera in a process where we are exploring new grounds. I will also run workshops with actors to see if there are tasks that we can do to enhance presence in these situations when encountering a new text. The tasks that I will use with me and Åse, will differ from the tasks that I will use in the workshops. I will describe four rehearsals that me and Åse did with tasks and our reflections. Further on I will describe four workshops. If you want to see some pictures and see some excerpts of tasks, or an embodied presentation, you can look at my exposition at the Research Catalogue:

Research Catalogue - an international database for artistic research

Rehearsal 1 with Åse

We start as always our rehearsal with a discussion, today about fiction. The fiction gives birth to life and real life gives birth to fiction. We are rehearsing a play that is written from interviews with nurses working a nightshift at the hospital. We have already done most of our character work since we have made a play before with these characters so the tasks that we do, in these explorations will not change the groundwork we have done with the characters.

We notice that when we are having this discussion, our presence deepens, when we are discussing what we have done on stage, when we can relate to our lives. We find emotional memories to share and the presence becomes stronger.

Today’s task is to use the first few scenes from the play. We have decided to give each other tasks for this rehearsal. The task is to give each other characteristics, using the text from the play and react to each other. We’re sound recording today’s trials.

Task number 1. Åse is to use the position of clay, however she interprets it. I will be burnt out, however I interpret that.
Task number 2. Åse is a three year old child and I am hard of hearing.

Task number 3. Åse is manly in a harsh way a little bit stupid/mansplaining. My character is depreciating everything Åse’s character says because I am tired of her character.

Task number 4. Åse is focusing on sex, she wants to talk about all the dates she has had on a dating app. I am in love with Eva my wife and adds comments about here all the time. Here we are allowed to add or change lines.

All the characteristics are negotiable and we interpret the instructions however we want. We then swop, so we get to play/use the task that the other had. The focus in on playing the characteristics and the text.

Our reflection

We noticed that; we create a bubble and are totally focused on the task. We don’t actually look at each other as much but just being, and we let go of having to look at each other all the time, as we would do when talking in real life. Åse had more problem with clay, she reflects, but when listening to the recording, we are very present so may be having a certain amount of resistance can create presence. We feel safe and are allowed to fail. We felt that we were listening to each other a lot. It is like we are walking on a tightrope that is not very tight. We don’t know how the other person will react and therefore we need to listen more and react to the other one. We are constantly trying not knowing and ready to fall and fail. We are in a flow, nothing else exists than the scene, our characters and creating this relationship between the two of them. It feels like suddenly the scene ends and we are thrown back into reality. We acknowledge each other constantly and the imagination sparkles, it is easy, it is like we are playing. When we play, we are actively engaged in the activity and aware of our surroundings, thoughts, and actions. When we play, we enter a state of flow, which is a state of focused attention and engagement in the activity at hand. In this state, we lose track of time and become fully immersed in the experience of play. Flow in this sense is a psychological concept that describes a state of optimal experience, often referred to as being "in the zone". It was first introduced, I think, by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studied people who engaged in activities that they found enjoyable and rewarding. In this state of flow, we were fully immersed and focused on the task at hand, losing track of time and being completely absorbed in the present moment. We noticed that our characters become similar. Why? Is it that we want to meet each other, a sort of mirroring or is it because of the tasks that we give each other?
Task for next meeting, find two contrary characteristics to work with.

Rehearsal 2 with Åse

We started our session with discussing the lecture/interview with Gunilla Nyroos we had been to earlier. We spoke about the actor’s toolbox. Some key points were; “The text is communication, Commitment and empathy is our profession, The meeting of actors is non-negotiable (that we see each other and meet for real on stage), Feeling safe makes us grow, Preparation is our platform, like your colleagues and seeing them grow, fear closes”. We added; breathing, relaxation/meditation and being present.

Always this present. We decided that one way to presence is through communication, being curious and unconditionally enter the scene with other actors and to listen. Again we felt our presence deepen when having this discussion.

After an hours discussion we started our rehearsal. We decided to do the first few pages of the play from start. This session is not recorded. We decided that we were doing the scene four times. With two different tasks.

Task 1; I interpreted the character of ill/tired and Åse; perky/full of energy. Then we swopped to play the opposite.

Task 2; we played absurd and sensible, however this could be interpreted. And then we swopped.

After having done the tasks we realised that we didn’t feel as present as the former rehearsal. Why? Could be that we were too occupied with our tasks so we didn’t listen as much. Was the task to difficult? Were we too scared to fail and therefore focused on the task even stronger and therefore became less present? May be we were more tired this evening. We have both worked hard this past month. Although we both felt energised whilst focusing on the task. We had fun doing the tasks and having fun is important to our work. It is a corner stone to play and play is not always easy, or is it? As Jon Wright writes in his book; Why is that so funny; “if the work is playful it becomes a pleasure, and when you’re enjoying yourself you get bolder and take more risks. Choices proliferate. Problems become more manageable our perspectives change once the work becomes a pleasure” (2007, p 27.) We didn’t feel like we had failed, we just felt like balloons with lesser air in them.
For the next rehearsal we have decided to set tasks for ourselves. Not telling the other person what that task is, may be that will enhance our listening to each other, as we were doing in the first session. We will talk about it afterwards. We have also decided to have more pauses and listen to each other more. How do we do that?

We realised that if the task is too hard, for example playing the absurd it gets harder to find presence but at the same time we agreed that, we need some resistance for the task to be fun and sparking the imagination.

Rehearsal 3 with Åse

Today we started by reading the whole play and really going through the text and finding our characters in the text. We had set ourselves two tasks that we weren’t going to tell each other what it was. Today’s session is being sound recorded.

Something interesting happened. Because we didn’t know what the other one had as a task we started listening to each other more, with body and mind, interpreting what was said in-between the lines. This made me feel present. I believe that it is the element of improvisation that made us feel more present with this task. We had to pay attention to each other in order for the scene to function and for it to make sense. “Sensemaking” is something we have intuitively and always strive for as actors. Because we didn’t know what the other person’s task was, we had to really be in the moment and this made the scene more dynamic and interesting. Keith Johnstone talks about this in his book Impro, where he says that he teaches spontaneity and not to think ahead or controlling the future or trying to win, just be in the exercise and that gives us presence. He also writes about the actor being open and emptying their mind. I suppose because me and Åse didn’t have any preconceptions about the other characters motives, our minds were really open. As in the first session we felt that we were playing more rather than focusing on the task.

For the next rehearsal we will set ourselves tasks that will focus on the other person’s character.
Rehearsal 4 with Åse

We started the rehearsal with reading the text as usual. The play has now been updated and we were able to read the new version which we both liked.

The task today was to give oneself an incentive towards the other actor. We chose as always to use the first few pages of the play for this task. Today’s session is being sound recorded.

Task 1; I gave myself the task that I really like the other Karin and I want her to find a relationship. Åse gave herself the task that her character was in love with me and wanted to let me know.

It was a fun experiment because we really listened to each other and yet again our characters started playing with each other. As Zarilli describes it; ”" the actors’ bodymind becomes “all eyes” [.....] Is activated so that she is able to “play” freely in the moment between as she acts and reacts to and within the immediate environment.”(Zarilli 2009, p. 99) It is not enough to give each other the task of listening or taking pauses, we need a task that will sparkle the play which in turn will sparkle the flow, which create presence.

Task 2; we then swapped. Åse took my task and I took hers. This still sparkled the act of playing but the task didn’t work as well with our characters since it had been thought of from the other characters point of view. My character Karin is in a relationship where she is happy (at least we think so for now), she wouldn’t want to become lovers with the other Karin. It was still fun and we found common grounds for the characters. But mainly we found presence in the resistance of the task.

An Idea: Would also like to do two rehearsals after each other with the same tasks to see if they are the same or what happens. As we have noticed, some tasks don’t work sometimes although they look good on paper. It might be because some days we are more tired or have a lot of other stuff going on and have a harder time focusing on the task. Or it might be that the task isn’t as challenging and therefore it doesn’t give enough resistance and so that doesn’t give presence. There are so many components to make presence.
Workshop with actors to experience a “greater presence”

There are many different acting methods for actors. I would say that there are as many methods as there are actors. We may start off with training a method of acting but we then get inspired by and learn from other actors and directors. I have also experienced that most actors are curious people who enjoy exploring new methods in workshops or work situations. So after a few years the actor have found their own method. “Every time an actor performs, he or she implicitly enacts a “theory” of acting” (Zarilli, 2009, p. 3) because that shows how intricate the theory of acting is and that there isn’t just one but hundreds of different theories behind each actor.

There are a few similarities in training that actors have in the western theatre context, which I have noticed. These could be; 1. Breathing exercises: most actors use specific breathing techniques to connect with their body and emotions. All actors I have met are trained in breathing techniques. 2. Physical exercises: actors use movement and gesture to explore the many dimensions in character work. All the actors I have met are trained more or less in movement and are able to use their bodies to explore the different characters. 3. Using our senses: actors focus on their senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) to deepen their connection to a scene and/or character. I myself always take a breath and smell at a movie set, to find presence. 4. Imagination/Emotional memory: actors have a lot of imagination and use this in their character and scene work. Emotional memory: actors draw on personal memories and experiences to access the emotional states of their characters and enabling the character to grow. (If you trained the method of Stanislavsky or of one of his disciples: Lee Strasberg, Meisner, Chekov, Mamet, Adler and many more, you are trained in this but I would say that even though you haven’t trained it, it comes naturally to most actors.)

To what extent different actors use these different techniques varies but shortly described these are the four main bases of acting techniques, used in the western world. For the actors to have some similar ground in the workshops I ran, I started by doing acting exercises to have an experience of what I mean by presence. Presence can also be called awareness;

“Awareness is simple. Just notice, without bias, what is happening. “Pay attention.” Rest the mind and let the senses be noticed. It seems easy. Everyone gets the idea. But it is hard to do.”(Barbara Dilley in the foreword to Action Theatre, (1995, p. xviii)). I had a discussion with a director at one of the workshops; that person was saying, that our work is totally intuitive and cannot be named. As Immanuel Cant says; that we can’t reach certain things. It is all about not thinking or reflecting and just letting go in order to be present so that we can
make a scene happen. I don’t necessarily agree, since being able to reflect is a good thing in finding presence. I have focused on finding tasks that can create this awareness. All these exercises give a sense of presence. And we always reflect afterwards to find out what has happened.

We did exercises like meditation/relaxation together. In meditation practices, presence refers to the state of being fully aware and attentive to the present moment, without judgment or distraction. It involves being mindful of one’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, and surroundings, and cultivating a sense of clarity and calmness. For example; they would lay down on the floor and we would focus on the breathing and the body. Tensing the different body parts and then relaxing them. Breathing in and out with different instructions. All these tasks, gives the actor a shortcut into their body in order to connect body and mind.

We would also try and make sounds together. First by listening to the room, sometimes mimicking the sounds of the room or then starting with sounds using our voices to listen to each other. Then evolving the sounds to sound alike or sounding not alike. I could use different instructions for the actors to make sounds but the importance is to take in the room whilst sounding and sometimes walking.

I also do an exercise that uses a matchstick that the actors put between their point fingers and try and keep it there. First you let one person move the other, then swop and lastly it is a dance where both take turns leading. This exercise is exhausting in the beginning. The actors needed a break after this. Probably because they focus so much on the matchstick from falling to the floor. I did however notice, that when the actors got to do this several times they found a way to relax in to it and also they started playing more. “The effort it takes to concentrate is not unlike the effort it takes to relax” (Izzo, 1997, p.163)

As I said in the part about presence, one big part is being able to concentrate and choosing to do so. “Concentration is not a squeezing or condensing of thought but a relaxing and releasing of them. Concentration is letting go of every thought other than the one you are centered on […]Concentration is really just selective perception.”(Izzo, 1997, p. 163) Without concentration there will be no presence. In the book Dramik they write, that as humans we are trained to choose to concentrate from an early age and that that gives us the ability to concentrate and therefor make progress. Also in theatre we make progress with the text, our characters and the play when we are able to concentrate. This was also discussed at a couple
of workshops. Some actors had noticed that on days when they hadn’t concentrated they had not reached presence.

I could also start a workshop with experiencing an aspect of an acting method in short together. Just so we would have a common ground to work on.

Improvisation is also an easy way into presence, since the actors then have to listen to each other, in order to take the scene forward. “In improve there are always two things to listen to: What is going on in your mind, and what is going on in the scene” (Izzo, 1997, p.165) So for the actors to start listening they need to feel free and trust. We can always start improvising by using simple tasks like free association; “Offer the mind a thought, and it will immediately connect it to another […].don’t think, be. Absorb the scene, and let your mind work for you “ (Izzo, 1997, p.151-152). Simple games like telling a one word for each person story or adding on to another actor’s movement, making it into another movement are simple tasks that can be used to open up the improvisation. The actor also needs to feel free; “In order that the characters may be truly free, no limitations are to be placed on his action, except those that are imposed by the will of another character, equally free.”(Boal, 1979, p.89) And of course the ability to concentrate is yet again important; “Concentration is of paramount importance to the improviser. Without it he or she cannot tune out the blocks to spontaneity, be present in the scene and fully aware of its action, or be open to the creative process of free-association and incorporation.(Izzo, 1997, p.164) I let the actors improvise for some of the workshops using simple tasks like; Where are you? Who are you? What are you doing? Find a turning point. Find a suitable ending. Not telling them anything else or giving any more circumstances. I could also do the same task but giving the actors more circumstance, for example; you are at the hospital, or a romantic dinner and so on. Just making scenes up. They would do the task two and two and then swop partners. Sometimes three and three. This opens up the playfulness that the actors later need to explore and do scene work.

We also worked a lot with emotional memory; “type of memory, which makes you relive the sensations you once felt” (Stanislavsky, 1945, p. 168). An actor once told me, never to start with emotions. I don’t necessarily agree since emotions are a very powerful tool. The only thing is that some actors have easier access to their feelings than others. I also agree with that we can’t just play the emotion since that is static and for a scene to come alive there need to be communication. Another problem with this is that the actor may become very present in themselves but not in the situation with the other actor/actors, so we need to look at emotions or feelings as a communicative tool. For example, in a scene where two actors are. One is in
love with the other and needs to tell the other. The other is angry with the other person and needs to tell the other. We can then, may be recall, this situation in our minds since we can have this experience but the importance lies in the communication of the emotion not just the emotion or feeling the emotion.

I will look at how I can give tasks to other actors in a workshop situation to try and find “a greater presence” when using text in this context. Can we explore the text further, when using the different tasks? I will describe four of the workshops that I held.

**Workshop 1**

We started by lying on the floor listening to the room. Notice how your body feels. Then using our voices to make a sound. Every time you breathe you change the tone/sound. Stop and feel your body again. How does your body feel? Has it changed from before? Just notice it, don’t make any changes.

Then start to walk around the room feeling how the body feels.

Using inspiration from Michael Chekov technique who tried to teach his students moments of truth on stage using their imagination. I used a simplified version of his method. So that the actors would have something similar to work with. Some actors were more mobile than others and interpreted the instructions differently but they all started to move towards something as a group. Starting with Clay. How does the body move if it is to move through clay. Then swapping to water, then air and lastly fire. Then for a while moving in between the four elements, changing the body.

Break and reflecting on how the body feels now after the exercise and what they experienced with the exercise.

Reading a short scene from Anton Chekhov’s play *Three sisters*. Reading the short excerpt so many times until all the actors felt like they almost knew the text and so that all the actors have read all the lines and been able to taste the words. Not learning all the words though.

Dropping the text and focusing on improvising a scene, the scene that we read.

Using the four different elements from the Michael Chekov technique; clay, air, water and fire. This means not only moving as one of the elements but using it to make a character and interpreting it freely, using ones imagination. Also adding another improvisational technique which is, one stand, one lay down and one sit. Always these three instructions and to swap
between them. I didn’t give any instruction as, to how often to swop but when they felt like it. I also gave the instruction to play the scene as a farce since I was told by Anton Chekov’s grandchild that he had written his plays for this genre when I met her in London a long time ago.

We did the scene so many times so that all the actors got to do the scene twice and had enough time to explore.

I felt presence from the actors and so did they. I believe by adding several tasks, it made the actors too busy to feel self-conscious. This was the first time they had met in this constellation and worked with this scene. They were so busy taking each other in, when to swop from sitting, lying and standing, that they really had to see and listen to one another. Also when being given a physical embodied task, they had to somehow make quick decisions to how to use that in their character. Also everyone have a preconception of what playing farce is, so it made it more fun and easier to play.

Some reflections from the actors; “Time flew so fast”, “I don’t remember anything I did, apart from that I had so much fun, “it was like I was in a bubble and just living the scene”, “I feel so energised, before I was tired and now I have so much energy” and “I felt energised and now I feel so tired and want to sleep”.

**Workshop 2**

We started by lying on the floor. Listening to the room. Think where you are. What time is it, is it day night, placing yourself in universe. How does it feel? How does your body feel? What sounds do you hear? Listening to the room. Imagine how you would describe the sounds you hear. Stop thinking and continue listening. Now you will start making sounds with your voice. Take a few deep breaths and on the fourth breath to make a sound/tone. Every time you need a breath you change your tone. Now when making sounds you start to listen at the same time and the next time you take a breath you try and make the same sound/tone as the others. This will end with everyone making a similar sound.

Feel how your body feels. Has your body changed? If so how? Just reflect, don’t change anything.

Get up in your own time and start to walk around. Feel your body how it feels when you walk. Start walking on the outside of the foot. Inside of the foot. On your toes. On your heals. Walking with your knees together. Move your pelvis in different ways. Bend you back. Push
your chest forward. Look up, look down, and look in to the ground. Close your eyes (just for a short while so that the actors don’t hurt themselves), Start walking faster, faster, faster, as fast as you can. Then start slowing down, slower, slower and then walk as slow as you can.

All these different states of being are to be tried for a longer period of time. It depends on how the actors try and how I experience their trials. I really want them to get in to it before swapping to another instruction.

Now start moving through clay, then water, air and lastly fire. (The fire doesn’t hurt, it’s like you radiate fire). Swapping between these.

Walk “normal” as you do and feel your body. Has something changed, if so what?

Break and talk about the different exercises. Reflecting on this.

Most actors had difficulty with clay (so did Åse in our rehearsal). None of the actors in the first session felt this though. Can it be because it gives to much resistance or that we imagine it giving us too much resistance? Another actor thought we used our bodies to much and wanted to start with the text.

Reading and excerpt from Waiting for Godot. A part where three actors are needed. We read the scene so many times that all the actors have read all the lines and tasted the words. Not learning all the words. Just knowing the scene.

Leave the text and start an improvisation around the text.

Three on stage. Same instructions as last time. Give the actors elements from the M.Chekov method; clay, water, air or fire. Also the instruction that one needs to stand, one lay down and one sit. This time however they needed to find a reason for swopping from sitting, standing or lying.

I experienced more resistance in this workshop but also a greater presence. Why? Could it be that there was much more pauses, they were looking for what to play. All the actors was waiting for the others to make a move and may be the listening to each other was heightened.

The actors also felt more resistance that it was harder to get in to it. Could it be the choice of text? This time I didn’t give the actors a comic instruction as in the former session.

For next workshop, find a more realistic text where the actors have easier access to the characters. Do the same workshop twice to see if there is a difference. It is hard to find actors
to join in these workshops several times because they are doing it in their spare time. So I have had to make do with different actors trying the tasks which is the results that are given.

**Workshop 3**

Today I introduced some of Laban technique. I used the spatial elements of heavy, light, direct and indirect and mixed them when using the body. So we started on the floor walking around feeling how our bodies feel today. Not changing anything just reflecting. Then walk as you have a goal, then without a goal, then a heavy body, light body, walk in the same pace as everybody else. Walk with sudden lunges, walk as if you are deep in batter with your feet, as if you are light in your head. Then try opposites; light in the head but heavy in the body, heavy in your head but light in the body. Heavy body walking goal less, light in the body goal less, light in the body with a goal, heavy in the body but with a goal.

We also started moving as a group. The task is for the actors to do a mirroring task but as a group. One cannot move without the others moving so here the actors really needed to listen with not only their ears but with their bodies.

Break and reflection-time.

We started reading a text. A shorter text that we will later use as a base for improvisation. An excerpt from a Swedish contemporary play with short sentences which left room for a lot of imagination.

Giving the actors different instructions to shift in between and also trying to find out what the other actors instructions are. So they didn’t know each other’s instructions.

I here used the task that all the actors sat in a row. Two actors started on stage, having been given the instruction of fast or slow or direct or indirect. Then another actor swapped with one of the actors adding another quality. We kept on doing this for an hour so that everyone got to explore different qualities.

When reflecting upon what we had worked with, the actors themselves noticed that they straight away worked more as a group, really listening to what the other actor was doing on stage. Moving together but not in an obvious way more like a feeling that they were working together, to a text they never had read before or worked with before. I noticed that all the actors were present and together even the ones sitting in a row watching the others. It is like we were one organism moving together.
Workshop 4

Walking around the room feeling how our bodies feel today. Not judging the body just feeling. Now start walking to my instructions, however you would interpret them. The instructions are; In, out, up, down, slow, fast, hard, soft, bendy, straight, heavy, light, pull, push, in one space, movable, open, closed, tensed and relaxed. These are all instructions from Laban techniques that we tried in the last session but now I changed the instructions so that the actors could interpret the movement however they liked using their own imagination. Some actors were more mobile and explored with their bodies more whilst I could see, that some actors really do the instruction inwards.

In this workshop I also did some tasks where I wanted the actors to move together, I started with two and two then four and four and then all eight together. One could not move without the other and they really had to move together. I was harsher this time telling them to listen to each other’s bodies and noticing what their own body was doing. I wanted them to be aware.

We then started reading a text. A longer text that we will later use as a base for improvisation. A Swedish contemporary play. This play had a lot of text but it was an ensemble play so I thought it could work. We then left the text and started improvising a scene. This time, since it was a longer text not all the actors got to read all the lines but since the play had a realistic set up, I thought we would easily get in to it.

There were two actors on stage to start off with, then two joined. They got to play the scene for a while then I started swapping the actors so one would leave and another one take its place with a different instruction than the once in the beginning had so the scene would change. I continued this until everyone had got to play the different characters with different characteristics. The characteristics that were given were; In, out, up, down, slow, fast, hard, soft, bendy, straight, heavy, light, pull, push, in one space, movable, open, closed, tensed and relaxed. These could be interoperated in any way the actors liked.

I must say that everyone felt presence. We had now met a few times so people felt more safe with each other but they had also started to form a group, even though I haven’t been able to have the same actors for all the workshops, so many of the participants have changed. I have learned, what to do with the actors in order for them to trust me and each other. I always have time for discussions and reflections.
The reflections for today was; can it be that boundaries sets us free and create greater presence? Does boundaries make it easier to play? Again they noticed that they really listened to each other, could it be the mirroring exercise we did in the beginning. They also felt more in their bodies. They felt that they were more together in the scene even though I was swopping actors frequently in the scene. They felt that it was so easy to adapt to a new person entering whilst one left. They still kept the flow.

**Some kind of Conclusion**

Having my own experience in having learnt many different methods, having read many books on acting methods and running workshops using different methods, I have come to the conclusion that presence is a major component in acting. But how we get there may vary. Having rehearsed with Åse Nelson and run several workshops with actors, using tasks to try and enhance presence, I have found that playing is a key component to presence. “Summing up the formal characteristics of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as not being “not serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. […]It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space. (Huizinga, 1985, p. 13). As we reflected upon when we were present, time and space stopped exciting and our characters and the relationship between them was all that existed. As it does when we play. “When a player enters into play-space, he or she knows that it is also “play-time”. It is outside of the ordinary world, separate and distinct. Time has no bearing on play, it is “time-less, having no past or future. Play is always here and now endeavour […] a player emerging from his absorption in play is like a person walking from a dream, unaware of the time that has passed.”(Izzo, 1997, p. 13) Playfulness however is completely intertwined with several other components and we cannot have one without the other. We also need communication, trust, boundaries, resistance and concentration, to name a few, they are equally important and if you lack one you cannot reach the “greater presence” in a rehearsal or workshop context. I have found that however many words I use to describe this process and what happens when we use different tasks, I will never be able to describe what we in the room feel/felt. Presence is here and now and once the presence is gone, it is gone. But by using different tasks, we can recreate it together. I would like to continue these explorations to find more clues as to how I can create an acting method to teach, where presence is at the core of it.
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**Lectures**

Nyroos G, Skådespelarhantverket och dess hemligheter , TeaterAlliansen, föreläsning/intervju 19/12-2023 kl. 19.00

**Link to my exposition on Research Catalogue:**

[Research Catalogue - an international database for artistic research](https://example.com)

External supervisor on Research Catalogue; Shauheen Daneshfar