

Acting, Archetype, and Neuroscience

Over the past ten years, I have developed a method of training actors which incorporates myth, archetype, and current neuroscientific research into acting pedagogy and rehearsal practices. This overtly physical approach to text is based in action theory reflecting Stanislavski's psychophysical action as well as theory as diverse as that of Jerzy Grotowski, Declan Donnellan, and Ann Bogart. While there has been some interesting writing concerning the uses of mirror neurons and memory science for the stage, there are to my knowledge no specific exercises other than mine that utilize this research in a concrete fashion. The method I have formulated has been named 'Superscenes' by my students. This series of exercises synthesize embodied action with text using the concepts of action perception as understood by mirror neuron theory in both actor and audience. Superscenes incorporate new discoveries in memory using the learning of text through 'dropping in' the lines as the actors move. While Superscenes look like a cross between wrestling and dancing, they release the actor's primal brain and raise the stakes while remaining physically safe.

Aristotle tells us that a drama is an action of sufficient gravity for the stage. Action is revealed through the conflicts of its characters whether verbal or physical. Heightened action itself is a result of emotion which in this context is not psychology or feeling; it is a physiological state. With the advent of the fMRI machine neuroscience is identifying the visceral effects of action on both actors and audiences. Using extreme physicality that underlies language can resurrect the meaning buried under it.

Archetypes and the stories attached to them are emanations of human biology lurking in our primitive brains to assist us in negotiating a chaotic world. This wiring is universal and moves past culture, sociology, and psychology into dream and metaphor. Biology insists on balance and the lack of power on the part of mere beings can be overcome by placing power in the dream-like gods and heroes who are human enough not only to be understood, but also irrational enough to explain most of nature's mysteries. In the past shamans and priests were responsible for negotiating these interchanges. As history progressed, the split between the duties of the priest and those of the myth carriers separated, and performers took over the storytelling for the culture.

There are a finite number of stories, an even smaller number of relationships to create the structure necessary to a drama. These stories were told eons ago; the skeletons of their heroes and gods remain buried in them. These bones contain the DNA of human endeavor.

Because humans remain wired in the same way as their ancestors, we must link contemporary performers with their former magical healing narratives while creating works that are not only accessible but which have depth and beauty. For audiences, such a focus can aid in the reunion with a shared humanity regardless of the historical setting of the drama.