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To cite this article: Antje Diedrich & Frances Barbe (2023): Beyond the stomp: the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis as an Australian variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2022.2152860](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2152860)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2152860>



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Published online: 27 Jan 2023.



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Beyond the stomp: the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis as an Australian variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training

Antje Diedrich  and Frances Barbe 

This article provides a brief overview of the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP), an Australian variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT) developed by John Nobbs in collaboration with Jacqui Carroll from the mid-1990s onwards. After a brief introduction to SMAT and the context in which NSP evolved from it, the article outlines NSP's key differences in exercise practice and design, particularly in the use of signature physical and vocal tools, and the increased use of structured improvisation within NSP formats. It goes on to examine two concepts specific to NSP – ‘feeling’ and ‘opposites and paradox’ – and outlines how these enable advanced engagement with the training, especially the cultivation of a heightened awareness of self and the performance environment. The article concludes (with reference to Crothers 2021, 36) by suggesting that NSP adds softness to and is a more playful version of SMAT. By providing room for invention and creativity, NSP embeds creative application of SMAT's principles within the training itself, rather than seeing it as part of a separate rehearsal process.

Keywords: Nobbs Suzuki Praxis, Suzuki Method of Actor Training, intercultural performer training, actor training

Subject classification codes: Fields of Research (FoR) codes: 19 creative arts, 04 performing arts

Introduction

Research into the transmission of actor training is a newly emerging field recently pioneered by Jonathan Pitches and Stefan Aquilina in relation to the work of Stanislavsky and its international dissemination. With reference to cultural transmission theory as a critical framework both authors consider performer training techniques as ‘cultures’ and therefore as

fluid, adaptive, evolving and responsive to the practitioner's previous knowledge and given local circumstance. Pitches borrows the term 'living culture' from David Oswell, and Aquilina emphasises how processes of transmission of actor training techniques 'give rise to unexpected interpretations, adaptations, and applications of a source technique' (Pitches 2017, 16–20; Aquilina 2019, 5–9). In a similar vein Ben Spatz suggests that the practice of embodied technique may bring forth 'a network of fractally branching pathways,' sometimes creating 'a lineage or family tree of related practices undertaken by different groups or individuals (Spatz 2015, 44).' These related practices constitute a shared field of knowledge in that technique, with differences, variations and new technique developing in different contexts.

Taking inspiration from these ideas, this article aims to provide a brief introduction to the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP), an Australian variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT). NSP is considered as a 'branching pathway' or 'living culture' giving rise to unexpected interpretations and adaptations within the field of SMAT technique. NSP has been developed from the mid-1990s onwards by John Nobbs in collaboration with Jacqui Carroll, co-artistic directors of Ozfrank Theatre Film in Brisbane, Australia.

The article considers how aspects of SMAT as source technique have been maintained and transformed through sustained practice of and embodied research into the training. For brevity's sake, we cannot offer a comprehensive overview of all phenomena that comprise NSP. Therefore, after a brief introduction to both SMAT and NSP, we focus on NSP exercise design and on two practice-enabling concepts specific to NSP – 'feeling' and 'opposites and paradox' – to consider whether and how NSP expands SMAT as a field of knowledge.

The authors acknowledge the complex intercultural issues at work when Australian artists such as Nobbs and Carroll train and work with a Japanese director like Tadashi Suzuki and then transpose elements of his practice into an Australian context. These have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Gilbert and Lo 2001, 80–84), and a full analysis of NSP in relation to cross-cultural and intercultural theories is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to stress that The Suzuki Company of Toga's (SCOT's) work has been part of a globalized theatre culture of world-wide touring, international co-productions and multi-lingual performances with multi-national casts. Within this culture Suzuki has promoted the international dissemination of SMAT through summer training programmes in Japan and workshops abroad and has himself reflected on the modifications that will inevitably occur when SMAT is transposed to another culture:

I think the mark of a truly lasting art form, whether it's a cultural phenomenon or a training method such as the Suzuki method, is that it can survive in altered form in another culture and still maintain its integrity. In this day and age of international understanding and global communication, it would be strange if something survived exactly as it was in the original culture – rigidly in the secondary culture. (Suzuki in Gener 2002, 118)

NSP emerged from Nobbs and Carroll's continued study of and participation in SCOT's training and rehearsals in Japan at the invitation of Suzuki (see further details below), and their sustained practice of and inquiry into SMAT in Brisbane. NSP goes beyond mere replication of SMAT, and it is this 'beyond' that is the focus of this article.

The article draws in part on observational research and interviews conducted during *Beyond the Stomp: The Nobbs Suzuki Praxis Symposium* at Charles Sturt University in Wagga, Wagga, Australia, in April 2019 (referred to hereafter as the *2019 NSP Symposium*). The discussion is also informed by the authors' personal, embodied knowledge of the training over many years.

The Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT)

SMAT was developed by Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and his company the Waseda Little Theatre, later renamed Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT), from 1972 onwards (Brandon 1978, 31). Suzuki was interested in reconfiguring the physical sensibilities and expressive potential of Japanese classical theatre (*noh* and *kabuki*) into a contemporary format and instilling it into performance adaptations of largely Western classic texts. The training has been well documented in a number of doctoral theses, journal articles and two monographs on Suzuki, which shows that it has been changing and evolving over time (e.g. Brandon 1978; Carruthers 2004; Allain 2009, 95–135). Suzuki has recently solidified his training into six disciplines that form the core repertoire of SMAT for training novices (see Table 1), with other exercises being available to and practiced by advanced trainees (Suzuki 2012).

SMAT integrates movement and voice (i.e. actors are training body and voice simultaneously), and consists of exercises using fairly codified patterns of movement repeated in each training session, with improvisatory elements built into some exercises. The training exercises are underpinned by foundational practical principles, most notably:

Table 1. Suzuki Method of Actor Training (SMAT): six core disciplines for beginners.

Discipline	Also referred to by these names in NSP and this article
1 Concentrate on the invisible body	• Stamp and <i>Shakuhachi</i>
2 Move through the space at the same speed and level, generating a high degree of intensity	• Slow-Motion Walk (<i>Tenteketen</i>)
3 Maintain a stable centre of gravity, uninfluenced by lower body movement	
• Part 1	• Basic No.1 (<i>Ashi o hōru</i> or Side Stamp)
• Part 2	• Basic No.2 (<i>Fumikae</i>)
• Part 3	• Basic No.4
4 See the body in stillness as a sculpture	
• Part 1	• Standing Statues
• Part 2	• Sitting Statues
5 Make a body capable of moving in many different ways	• Walks
6 Project energy at your focus	—

(Suzuki 2012, 132–144. Exercise names are from Carruthers 2004, 78–95 and Allain 2009, 102–112)

- an emphasis on starting and stopping movement in the centre of the body (*hara*) to render the whole body expressive;
- the use of imagined opposing forces when moving (*hippari-ai*), and the associated suppression, release and renewed suppression of movement (*tame*), leading to a state of energised stillness and 'extra-daily' energy;
- the segmentation of the body into upper and lower half, with the upper half remaining calm and soft, and the hips absorbing any unsteadiness caused by the movement of the legs and feet;
- the cultivation of a precise and practical understanding of the management of time and space (*ma*);
- the use of full speaking voice whilst holding challenging physical positions;
- the relationship of the feet to the ground explored through different ways of walking, including stamping; and
- the frontal-facing nature of the exercises with the trainee holding a concentrated and steady visual gaze whilst performing in front of an imaginary audience (Carruthers 2004).

Suzuki describes one of the main purposes of the training as being the cultivation of the actor's 'invisible body' – which consists of 'energy production', 'breath calibration' and 'control of the centre of gravity' – all phenomena that cannot be observed with the naked eye. He suggests that SMAT exercises challenge, and thus facilitate, the experience and strengthening of the invisible body, eventually leading to a stronger and more agile body, greater vocal range and capacity, and a growing awareness of the audience. This allows actors, after reaching a certain level of vocal and physical facility, to express a distinct perspective on the text with clarity and exactitude (Suzuki 2012, 132f; Suzuki 2015, 57–60).

In Suzuki's view actors need to be able to 'cozen' the audience; cozening refers to a fusion or coalescence between actors and spectators that is generated by actors' energetic transformation beyond quotidian reality, their use of language and space, and their hyperawareness of the shifting sensations generated in the moment of performance. Cozening results in the creation of a shared fictional space (Suzuki 2015, 5).

When Suzuki speaks of his actors becoming 'fictional on stage,' he refers to their experience of going through a heightened vocal and movement score, and their ability to attend to the inner sensations this spontaneously generates in the moment of performance:

As I like to say, 'the actor is someone who plays with the sensation of being onstage.' In the act of speaking, he savors the diverse sensations catalyzed in his body through the formation of words. [...] Stage actors exist in the moment via physical phenomena. The degree to which an actor possesses a spontaneous reality and rich inner state driven by these phenomena determines if and how he moves his audience. ... Indeed, what makes acting difficult is that even an exact trace of a style's outer form will not reproduce the physical sensibilities that lie within it. (Suzuki 2015, 46f)

Although it develops physical and vocal strength and control, and body consciousness, the training is primarily about the 'feeling of the particular form' (Brandon 1978, 32, 35). It is a means for the actor to discover 'a self-awareness of the interior body' and become 'conscious of the many layers of sensitivity within his own body' (Suzuki 2015, 71); it allows actors 'to cultivate flexibility and sensitivity in identifying and playing with the myriad of sensations of being onstage' (Suzuki 2015, 60).

It is interesting to note that the precise meaning of the terms 'physical sensibilities', 'feeling of the particular form', 'self-awareness of the interior body' and 'layers of sensitivity within his own body' are quite open to interpretation and could refer to a range of experiences. Emphasis is clearly placed on a heightened state of awareness of, and sensitivity to, the experience of physical sensations and feelings, as well as imaginative and emotional responses in the moment of speaking and acting.

The Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP)

John Nobbs and Jacqui Carroll encountered SMAT in 1991 when Nobbs was selected for a two-week workshop with Suzuki at the Playbox Theatre Company (now Malthouse Theatre) in Melbourne. Playbox had invited Suzuki to direct a production of *The Chronicle of Macbeth* with Australian actors, and at the end of the workshop, which Carroll observed, Nobbs was cast in the role of Banquo's Ghost. Nobbs and Carroll each felt an immediate affinity with the training. Both had distinguished careers in the Australian dance world, Nobbs as a modern dancer and Carroll as a dancer and choreographer in ballet and modern dance. They lived in Brisbane where Carroll had been choreographer in residence at Queensland Ballet since 1982. SMAT offered them the opportunity to reconfigure their kinaesthetic dance knowledge in the realm of theatre (Nobbs 2012, 52f; Carroll 1998, 6–8). After *The Chronicle of Macbeth* was presented at the 1992 Adelaide Festival and toured to Melbourne, Hobart and Tokyo, Nobbs and Carroll set up bi-weekly training sessions in Brisbane (in June 1992) to allow for continued engagement with the training. Their first show was *The Romance of Orpheus*, produced under the company name *Frank Productions* in December 1993 at The Princess Theatre, Brisbane.

Nobbs attended masterclasses with Suzuki at the Saratoga International Theatre Institute's (SITI's) inaugural training programme in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1992 and returned in 1993, and was then invited to perform the role of The Reverend Father in Suzuki's production of *Dionysus* in 1994 and 1995, touring to Athens, Vicenza (Italy) and Toronto. Nobbs and Carroll maintained their close connection with SMAT and Suzuki's work through regular visits to Toga, Suzuki and SCOT's mountain base in Japan's Toyama prefecture, and also to Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre, where Suzuki was artistic director from 1997 to 2007. During that time, Nobbs was invited to perform with Suzuki's companies on several occasions. In addition, work by Nobbs and Carroll's company *Frank Productions* was presented by Suzuki in both Toga and Shizuoka international festivals (Nobbs 2006, 196f). SMAT was

therefore primarily transmitted to Nobbs and Carroll through participation in and observation of training and rehearsals with Suzuki and SCOT.

Frank Productions changed its name to *Frank: The Austral-Asian Performance Ensemble* in 1997, *Frank Theatre* in 2002, *Ozfrank Theatre* in 2008, and finally to *Ozfrank Theatre Film* in 2010 (Nobbs and Carroll 2019b), reflecting their expansion from live theatre into theatre and film projects. Throughout this time they have actively propagated ‘a culture that is built around the training’ (Nobbs 2006, 160), running weekly training sessions as well as annual masterclasses, and recruiting actors for their productions and films from those who commit to and engage with the training long term. In addition, they have run workshops all over Australia and abroad, including in Croatia, the UK, Switzerland, Denmark, Poland, the Netherlands, the US, Japan, Nepal, Malaysia and Mongolia (Nobbs and Carroll 2019b). Nobbs and Carroll’s open training sessions were instrumental in kick-starting and proliferating SMAT among local theatre artists and companies and in contributing to the sustained engagement with Japanese performance that characterises much of Brisbane’s avant-garde theatre of the 1990s and beyond (Neideck, Kelly 2021, 454–458).

Nobbs and Carroll are not the only Australian practitioners to have embedded SMAT in their artistic practice. From the mid-1980s onward a number of Australian practitioners and experimental performance companies – such as Sydney Front, Sidetrack Performance Group, Not Yet It’s Difficult and Zen Zen Zo – embedded SMAT or elements of SMAT in their training processes (De Miranda 2008; Gilbert and Lo 2001; Phippen 1998; Taylor 2010). However, Nobbs and Carroll’s long-term dedication to the training, married with their experience as dancers and choreographers, mean that they have evolved a highly distinctive approach to practicing SMAT.

Nobbs is credited as the creator of NSP, which he developed in close collaboration with Carroll and Ozfrank company members (Crothers 2021, 33). Nobbs (2010, 52) dates the start of his own version of the training to 1995, when he developed an exercise based on the Screamin’ Jay Hawkins song ‘I Put a Spell on You’. Nobbs and Carroll initially named the training the Frank Suzuki Performance Aesthetics, but then changed the name to Frank Suzuki Actor Know How, before finally settling on the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP). All three names acknowledge the source whilst also setting the training apart (Nobbs and Carroll 2019b).

NSP in its current form consists of many of Suzuki’s disciplines (exercises) as well as newly devised exercises, often created in response to specific pieces of music. We will refer here to SMAT disciplines by their ‘old’ names, as Nobbs and Carroll still use these in training. SMAT’s revised nomenclature is outlined in the ‘discipline’ column of Table 1.

Nobbs mentions several drivers in the development of his own adaptations of SMAT disciplines. First, after training for four or five years and acquiring maximum physical and vocal strength, Nobbs felt that he and other Ozfrank company members ‘had hit a type of wall’ and could not get any stronger. Nobbs turned his attention to helping performers to become more sensitive, self-aware and creative. He expanded the training

by bringing in new movement patterns, vocal applications and more freedom in interpreting his instructions (2010, 52). Second, Nobbs and Carrol were trying to 'demystify' the training, to avoid it being considered as only applicable in a narrow range of Japanese theatre aesthetics. For example, they started using music that reflected their own culture and geographical location, such as Australian surf music (Nobbs 2006, 94). Third, Nobbs and Carroll were interested in exercises that allowed the majority of participants the experience of a physical and energetic transformation in an immediate and palpable way. They dropped those of Suzuki's disciplines that were unattainable for some trainees in terms of body facility, and those that required long-term engagement to acquire the necessary muscular strength (Nobbs 2019b). Last but not least, both Nobbs and Carroll felt that SMAT served Suzuki's aesthetics well, but that actors applying the training outside of the context of Suzuki's company and directorial aesthetics 'would require extended exercises that allowed for the interpolation of Stanislavskian and other western modalities' and created 'improvisatory modes that would widen the scope for western actors' (Nobbs 2018). The importance of this as a defining feature of NSP is explored in depth in a master's thesis by Chelsea Crothers (2021), supervised by one of the authors, Dr Frances Barbe.

NSP exercise practice: Formats and tools

Nobbs distinguishes between so-called 'time-space formats' and 'bridging tools' in both SMAT and NSP, here abbreviated to 'formats' and 'tools' (Nobbs 2012, 59). Format refers to the outline structure of an exercise in terms of physical and vocal actions, and the way trainees travel through and engage with space and time. Tools are elements that can be transferred from one exercise format to another.

NSP exercise formats

Many NSP exercises are largely improvisatory experiences framed within an existing format. This much stronger emphasis on improvisation distinguishes NSP formats from those of SMAT. All were created in response to specific pieces of Western classical or pop music and make highly effective use of either the structure of the music, the quality of the sound or the quality of the singer's voice to inspire the performers' improvisations. Therefore, the music is not incidental but rather directly inspires the exercise design and performers in the moment of training. For a list of key NSP exercises see [Table 2](#).

Nobbs frames most NSP exercises as variants of the SMAT Slow-Motion Walk (*Tenteketen*) exercise. However, some NSP formats have evolved quite far from the original Slow-Motion Walk in terms of structure, movement language and intent. We have therefore separated them out in [Table 2](#). Generally speaking, trainees proceed in a slow walk or sliding motion, either facing the audience or sideways, and are free to improvise with their arms and body position, provided they keep the feet grounded, work with an awareness of their centre and 'feel' what they

Table 2. Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP) key exercises.**NSP Variations on SMAT Discipline 1 Stamp and *Shakuhachi* Exercise**

- Stamp to usual, rhythmic music followed by the 2nd improvisational part to various other music (classical or pop music, e.g. Handel's *Largo from Xerxes*, Verdi's *La Traviata Prelude*, Nick Cave's *Red Right Hand* and others).
- Stamp to a faster piece of Australian pop music, *Stomping at Maroubra* by Little Pattie, followed by reflective improvisation to surf music song *Pipeline* by The Chantays.

NSP Variations on SMAT Discipline 2 Slow-Motion Walk (*Tenteketen*)

Where the original SMAT Discipline is still visible:

- Pretzel
- Watcher and Walker
- Peppermint Man (named after the song of the same name by Dick Dale and the Del Tones which accompanies the exercise)

Where the evolution moves further away from the SMAT original so as to appear to be a new, original format with altered intent, focus or scope:

- Shakin' All Over (named after the song by Johnny Kidd & the Pirates which accompanies the exercise)
- Hangin' Five (named after the song of the same name by The Delltones which accompanies the exercise)
- Rose Marie (named after the song of the same name by Slim Whitman which accompanies the exercise)
- I Put a Spell on You (named after the song of the same name by Screaming Jay Hawkins which accompanies the exercise)
- Crimson and Clover (named after the song of the same name by Tommy James & The Shondells which accompanies the exercise)
- Minder Blinder
- Bang Bang (named after the song of the same name recorded by Cher which accompanies the exercise)
- I Wanna Live (named after the song by Iggy Pop) into Twilight Time (named after the song by The Platters which accompanies the exercise)

NSP Walks (from SMAT Discipline 5)

NSP focuses on these four particular walks from the SMAT repertoire and tends to exclude the practice of other walks:

- Stomping (*Ashibumi*)
- Side Slide (*Yokoashi*): in NSP sometimes referred to as 'Scallop'
- Tiptoe (*Tsumasaki*): in NSP referred to as 'High Stops'
- Side Cross (*Kōsa*): in NSP referred to as 'Sawtooth'

These walks are practised with various NSP 'tools' which give them an expanded NSP focus.

NSP practices the following SMAT Disciplines relatively unchanged

- SMAT Discipline 3 Basic No. 2 and Basic No. 2 to music (known as 'Marches')
- SMAT Discipline 4 - Standing Statues and Sitting Statues
- Statues to music (Voodoo): NSP has evolved variations with head and voice
- Moving Statues (from Suzuki's production of *Dionysus*)

(Nobbs and Carroll 2019a).

are doing. (In one NSP format, Peppermint Man, the slow walk is combined with a gentle bouncing of the knees.) At certain points in the music they may be asked to speak or sing, or create a 'statue' (an improvised physical form created on command), shake their body or the stick or arrive at a particular spot in the space.

Physical improvisations are oriented out towards the audience and done with an awareness of the audience watching the action. Many of the NSP exercise formats are performed in a relatively slow and deliberate tempo interlaced with faster movement sequences, sudden changes of position and moments of held stillness. For example in NSP format Bang Bang, trainees stand in a row at the back of the space, two short sticks in hand. They move forward in a slow-motion walk improvising with the position of their arms whilst speaking the song lyrics. On the words 'bang bang' they either bang the sticks together or on the floor. At one point in the song they lift their arms over their heads and shake their arms and body. Further descriptions, images and video extracts of some key NSP formats are provided in our TDPT blog post Nobbs Suzuki Praxis: Example Training Formats to accompany this article.

Trainees usually improvise on their own, although in some cases they are asked to improvise in physical contact with one or several people, or with deliberate awareness of being in response to the other trainees, the space and the music. Occasionally, Nobbs might interpolate a theme or image to frame the improvisations. When we did Pretzel, a group version of the Slow-Motion Walk on Good Friday during the 2019 NSP *Symposium* masterclass, he gave us religious imagery, such as 'you are the Pope on St Peter's Square' or 'you are the pieta', as we transformed into a new shape. Other exercises work with specific imagery. For example Hangin' Five requires performers to cross the space and improvise on themes of water, waves, surfing, sharks and so on. For Nobbs (2006, 96) it is essential that these kinds of tasks are poetic distillations and abstractions of the images he offers, rather than literal representations, and that they present trainees with challenges to which they can only respond through the body.

The sense of improvisatory freedom in NSP removes what might be seen as the 'safety net' of the prescribed SMAT discipline, and therefore encourages trainees to be physically and vocally inventive in the moment of practice. At the 2019 NSP *Symposium*, Kate Lee (2019a, 2019b) explained how she thought that the NSP training fostered creativity and how she used her own adaptations of NSP exercises to energise and prepare students for devising sessions, resulting in them being willing to take more creative risks and engage in more expansive movements. Many of the NSP practitioners interviewed thought that NSP – albeit rigorous, disciplined and demanding – also cultivated a sense of pleasure, playfulness and fun (Crothers 2019; Neideck 2019; Barbe 2019).

NSP tools

Objects

The most widely utilised tool in NSP training is the use of various objects. Initially this was sticks, inspired by their use in SMAT in the 1990s, but eventually expanded to all sorts of objects, including 'hand held mirrors, umbrellas, badminton racquets, brooms, feather dusters, teddy bears' (Nobbs 2018). Some NSP exercise formats use specific objects, such as teddy bears in Rose Marie and hand-held mirrors in Red Right Hand. However, most of the time trainees work with sticks of varying sizes: they are held in free-form (improvised) arm positions during almost all exercises.

Nobbs (2012, 60; 2006, 38) considers the use of sticks and other objects to be a tool that helps to develop a trainee's sensitivity and capability; they are a self-monitoring device which helps trainees to 'read' their body. For example, heavy chest breathing will result in the stick moving instead of staying still, and so the stick amplifies the effect of the breath in the body, helping trainees to identify and address such habits or tensions. Often sticks are used in partner work with both trainees holding on to the same stick as a way of reading their partner's position. Sticks also extend the actors' body in space, increasing the 'sculptural potential' of their body. This assists them in measuring the dimensions of

their body in space more precisely, for example, by touching the end of the stick to the floor while doing a certain activity such as Stamping and *Shakuhachi* or Slow-Motion Walk (Nobbs and Carroll 2019a).

One of the most striking objects used in the training is the hand-held mirror. It is held at a position and angle that allows trainees to look at themselves – their own reflection becoming their point of focus – without blocking the audience’s view of their faces. To Nobbs (2006, 77) the real benefit of this tool in a training exercise is for trainees to watch themselves while they are doing something, to see themselves as the audience sees them, to accept the way they look and to become more aware of their maintenance of ‘self’.

Closed eyes

Another tool is closing the eyes during training. This forces trainees to more intensely sense their body, their feet on the floor and the surrounding environment; they find balance and groundedness as they can no longer rely on vision. Often trainees with their eyes closed are asked to speak and move at the same time. For example, they may be given the instruction to ‘put the stick on the floor at the end of the speech’, requiring them to approximate the distance between stick and floor in relation to the length of the speech, enhancing their precise management of time and space.

Partners and ensembles

Nobbs and Carroll also introduced partner and ensemble work to the existing SMAT disciplines and their NSP variants, using light forms of physical touch as another tool. For example, walks such as Stamping (*Ashibumi*), Tiptoe (*Tsumasaki*) or Basic Number Two to Music (Marches) are practiced in pairs, with trainees’ raised forearms touching lightly. Often one of the partners works with their eyes closed, requiring them to sense the other partner and ‘read’ what they are doing.

An additional example is the previously mentioned Pretzel, an ensemble variant of SMAT’s Slow-Motion Walk (*Tenteketen*) in which the group stands in a line at the back of the stage with their arms lightly touching. They move forward in a slow walk and on a signal in the music morph into a new position in which their arms and bodies slightly intertwine. They then return to the back of the stage whilst sustaining the newly created shape. As well as practicing the Slow-Motion Walk, in the Pretzel variant trainees must negotiate the relationship with all ensemble members to maintain the line, sense a connection through their centres, and maintain and enhance the sense of fiction created through the shape. In addition, Pretzel helps trainees with monitoring the movement of the centre, which is supposed to move in a straight horizontal line without swaying from side to side. Any swaying will be felt acutely, as the distance between partners decreases and the pressure on their arm increases.

Vocal tools

Voice training in SMAT usually consists of trainees speaking speeches at 'full voice' (i.e. the loudest and most energised voice possible) whilst holding the challenging physical positions of exercises such as Standing Statues or Sitting Statues, so that trainees can find a powerful, physically supported voice. Speaking is seen as a release of vocal energy from the centre of the body, with the intensity increasing towards the end of each spoken line (Carruthers 2004, 89f). Nobbs and Carroll ask trainees to speak *both* in stillness *and* whilst moving in any of the SMAT or NSP disciplines. In addition to full voice they also regularly practice 'whisper', 'super-quiet voice', and 'quiet voice'. In a sense these three are an application of the concept of *tame*, the internal suppression and release of energy: trainees speak with the intensity of full voice, but suppress energy to arrive at an intense, full-bodied quiet tone. Finally, trainees experiment with different types of voices in specific NSP exercises, such as Rose Marie where trainees must speak as the teddy, or Hangin' Five where they may be asked to speak as the shark.

Swiping

Another interesting tool is 'swiping', used in Red Right Hand, and inspired by the paintings of British artist Francis Bacon. At certain points in the music trainees swipe their hand across their face to create a distorted, grotesque facial mask, which is then maintained and used to inform physicality and voice (Nobbs 2010, 87f; Nobbs and Carrol 2019a).

NSP practice-enabling concepts: Feeling, and opposites and paradox

In *Acting Re-Considered* Phillip Zarrilli suggests that all languages of acting are highly metaphorical and cannot fully represent the practice they are referring to. These languages are therefore always inadequate and provisional, and need to be carefully reconsidered for each context of their use. Rather than deploring this as a shortcoming, Zarrilli suggests celebrating the freedom of not having to find a 'universal' acting language:

We can spend our energy on the continuing challenge of searching for languages of acting which best allow one to actualize one particular paradigm of performance in a particular context for a particular purpose. (Zarrilli 2002, 17)

Accordingly, Nobbs crafted his personalised language, metaphors and practice-enabling concepts through the practice and teaching of SMAT and NSP. Although Nobbs (2006, 120) initially learnt in workshops with Suzuki with an interpreter present, he found himself without a translator during training and rehearsals for *Dionysus* in 1994. He therefore had to 'work it all out myself, empirically and intuitively'. Similarly, when Nobbs and Carroll observed training and rehearsals of SCOT in Toga or The Shizuoka Performing Arts Company (SPAC) in Shizuoka over the years, they tried to

work out what was going on. As transmission of the training predominantly occurred through direct practice and observation with little or no verbal explanations, the insights transmitted during NSP training and articulated in Nobbs' books are his own – albeit created in dialogue with Suzuki's own model of practice and explanations, and co-produced with Carroll and their trainee actors. In the following, we examine this more closely in relation to NSP's emphasis on 'feeling' and 'opposites and paradox'.

Feeling

Nobbs (2006, 134f.) suggests that the training provides a tool for the actor to become self-defined on stage, 'working towards knowing exactly what your entire body is doing at any one point in time and space.' However, Nobbs emphasises that this sense of self *also* includes all relationships the actor has to manage – with the space, fellow performers, music, the text, and the audience: "self-definition" also implies a tremendous sensitivity to that which lies outside "self". The term 'self-definition', sometimes also referred to as self-knowledge or simply knowledge, therefore refers to two layers of activity in the moment of training. The first is the actual 'doing', the trainees' ability to perform physical and vocal formats with clarity and precision. The second layer is their heightened awareness of the physical sensations of the 'doing' and their awareness of the performance environment. Nobbs and Carroll's emphasis on 'that which lies outside "self"' is reflected in their exercise design: through the use of objects as extensions of the body into the space, through the precise use of music, and through partner and group work within SMAT and NSP formats.

There is also a strong emphasis on receptivity in the verbal guidance Nobbs and Carroll give during training. On the one hand they encourage trainees to be open and responsive to the performance environment, and on the other to create a feedback loop of 'doing' the practice whilst also 'listening back' to it, to experience its physical and psychological reverberations. Nobbs and Carroll often use 'feeling' as a shortcut term for accessing this process of a fully embodied experiencing; that is, you are doing the action while simultaneously experiencing what you have done. This was evident during the 2019 NSP Symposium masterclass. Carroll frequently urged trainees to 'feel the body! Feel it!' and to sensitise themselves to the music's physical and psychological reverberations: 'Feel the sound in your body ... Feel! Feel the sound in your body!' Nobbs tried to help trainees overcome a difficulty by adding 'feeling' into their activity: 'Don't try and balance! Feel the floor!' (Nobbs and Carroll 2019). Nobbs explains this practice-enabling function of 'feeling' in the process of learning the SMAT discipline Standing Statues:

Over time I have realized there are four distinct stages in the mastering of statues, and by extension four distinct effects they have on the audience. They are:

- a. BE STILL: Can you be still?
- b. FEEL: Can you feel yourself in the statue?

- c. EXPRESS: Is the statue a portrait of your poetic, imaginative impulse?
- d. RESPOND: Can the statue then trigger in you a poetic/imaginative response? (Nobbs 2012, 67f)

Indeed, this mirrors our own and others' experience of learning the training. Initial preoccupations with learning the external form and maintaining a good degree of physical control – over the position of the centre, the starting and stopping of movements, increasing the speed and the ensuing stillness, and the coordination of arms and legs – later shifts towards greater focus on internal processes such as controlling the breathing or allowing imaginative impulses to inform the repetition of the form.

NSP's emphasis on 'feeling' provides a stepping stone from external ways of working to internal, experiential, and imaginatively responsive ways of being in the training. To enable this process further, Nobbs and Carrol demand of trainees an attitude of interest and investment in what they are doing, to 'feel' and own the experience at any moment in time so that the physical and vocal experience can inform their inner life and imagination. Carroll explained this during the 2019 NSP Symposium masterclass in relation to the SMAT Slow-Motion Walk (*Tenteketen*):

So, there's your task: moving across this room! Now start to walk! There's such a story going on in you. You're so loaded with this story – we haven't told it yet ... And you get this chance to turn and the story is reloaded, and you suddenly got to this new thing, and this thing happens and you react to it and think: "This new story I have inside!" Carry that new story with you! And then you get to the other side and you turn and you have another story inside, another fiction, and you carry that fiction with you. [...] It starts with your imaginative centre, it starts with your entire psychic world bubbling up inside you. But at no point is this an arduous task I have to complete. I have to cross this room; she told me to Look at what's going to happen this time. I don't know what's going to happen. My God! I'm interested. ... And I'm going to carry that interest, that juice, with me. (Nobbs and Carroll 2019a)

The notion of trainees' concrete physical experiences creating an inner life or fiction mirrors that of Suzuki. However, Nobbs has conceptualised this explicitly as a process of internal *and* external sensing, feeling and experiencing (which may trigger physical sensations, emotions, images, and even narratives) with Carroll layering an attitude of interest and investment into this process. In NSP 'feeling' becomes a potent shortcut to accessing the physical sensibilities Suzuki regards as the core of his training, even when trainees are still grappling with the challenges of the external form.

Opposites and paradox

Opposites

One of the specific ideas Nobbs (2006, 16, 38) has developed around the training is the notion of working with 'opposites'. This came into being during training when he suddenly had the realisation that he was not only

holding the stick, but he was also holding *onto* the stick, or the stick was holding him. Put into practice, the effect is startling, as the relationship between stick and trainee generates an interesting dual quality: a trainee may be moving a stick, but it also appears as though the stick is moving by itself, floating through space; the action cannot be decoded as one or the other. This notion of working with ‘opposites’ has also been applied to other areas of the training, such as voice, with the trainee being active and passive at the same time: ‘I’m not only speaking, but my voice “speaks” me ...’ (38). Nobbs suggests that the

idea of thinking of an action and invoking its opposite at the same time infuses in the chosen position, action or speech an empowering energy and balance. This dualistic potential involves the actor in a cyclical process of *statement – response – statement*. A position ceases to be a *dead* pose and is transformed into a *live* force which is both self-referencing for the actor and compelling for the observer (154).

Imbuing an action with its opposite propels trainees into the process of listening and responding while ‘doing’ as outlined previously, and according to Nobbs offers the potential for actors to gain ‘greater sensitivity and expressiveness’ (38).

Nobbs’ notion of the ‘invocation of the opposite’ (153) is present in SMAT in the concepts of *hippari ai* (imagining two forces pulling in opposite directions whilst moving) and *tame* (the suppression and release of energy) that create an ‘extra-daily’ or abundant sense of energy. However, if too strongly applied on a muscular level this can result in muscular tightness in legs and hips. Nobbs and Carroll’s approach advocates a synthesis of strength and softness in the body, facilitated by NSP exercises such as Peppermint Man, where trainees engage in the Slow-Motion Walk (*Tenteketen*), whilst bouncing their knees to the rhythm of the music and improvising freestyle with their arms.

Paradox

The notion of ‘paradox’ is another proposition prevalent in Nobbs’ thinking. It was initially inspired by the paradoxical demand on actors to be both themselves and the character; and by Albert Einstein’s wave-particle duality in which light is theorised as not *either-or*, but *both* wave *and* particle (2012, 64–66). Building on these ideas, Nobbs’ NSP exercise designs and instructions encourage trainees to embrace ‘paradox’, to attempt to respond to or perform seemingly contradictory actions or qualities at the same time, as a means of shifting their engagement with the training from ‘thinking’ to ‘feeling’ (2019a, 238). He explained this during the 2019 NSP *Symposium* masterclass in relation to NSP’s Peppermint Man exercise format:

Once again it’s like two stories going on. You’ve got the demand story, which is the bounce, which is in the song, so half of you has got to listen to that. And then there is this other thing, which is your own thing [the improvisation] you bring to it ... The conscious mind cannot deal with

paradox. It says it is either black or it is white. ... But in terms of the unconscious mind, that can deal with paradox, because the unconscious mind is about feeling. ... [It's] about feeling the space between your bounce and the story. You can't think your way through. You either think bounce or you think story. But you can feel both. ... It's about bypassing that critical function of the brain that gets between us and experiencing. (Nobbs and Carroll 2019a)

So, we can see that Nobbs' notion of the 'invocation of the opposite' (2006, 153) and his paradoxical demands are intended to trigger intuitive physical and imaginative responses, and therefore exercise the very internal sensibilities the training aims to cultivate.

Conclusion

John Nobbs and Jacqui Carroll evolved NSP from SMAT through a long-term process of practical interrogation, alongside sustained observation of and participation in SCOT's training, rehearsals and performances. They adapted the training in response to Ozfrank's practice context: the challenges performers faced in their initial introduction to the training and the unfolding, more subtle and nuanced challenges arising from long-term engagement with the training. Another key factor in the development of NSP was the perceived need to demystify the training from being seen as useful only within a Japanese theatre aesthetic, such as that of SCOT.

NSP training culture bears the hallmarks of 'depth' (the sedimentation of technique in the body through sustained long-term practice), and 'breadth' (the emergence of new technique through research) that Spatz (2015, 44, 60–61) considers integral to practice based research in embodied technique. NSP maintains SMAT's foundational practical principles but develops distinct technical elements and verbal concepts, and a different focus and emphasis in its training culture. Nobbs and Carroll dropped some of the Suzuki disciplines that required particular physical facility or flexibility. They favour a focus on those disciplines that are accessible regardless of body facility and muscular strength, and that more readily engender a transformative quality in trainees. NSP includes the use of a range of tools that can be transferred from one exercise format to another, such as the use of objects, working with eyes closed and different vocal applications. These facilitate awareness of the performance environment beyond the performer's self, increase the complexity of the task at hand, and enable 'feeling' over 'thinking'. NSP exercise formats distinguish themselves from SMAT's core exercises through improvisatory frameworks that allow for self-directed and creative engagement with SMAT's principles. NSP is also imbued with a sense of playfulness through the use of Western classical and pop music (including iconic Australian music), improvisation on specific themes in response to song lyrics, and the use of quirky objects such as teddy bears, badminton rackets, and mirrors.

In the process of developing NSP, Nobbs forged a personalised language, concepts and philosophy around the training. While these are akin to and consistent with Suzuki's own explanations, they use different terminology and place different practical emphasis. This was discussed in relation to NSP's emphasis on 'feeling' and 'opposites and paradox'. The instruction to feel in the moment of practice provides a stepping stone into internal territory with a heightened awareness of physical sensations, and emotional and imaginative responses to the 'doing'. The training culture overall is imbued with a strong sensory, almost sensual dimension further enhanced by Nobbs and Carroll's use of side coaching in the moment of training, and their demand that trainees cultivate an attitude of interest and investment. Additionally, Nobbs' concept of working with 'opposites and paradox' triggers imaginative responses to encourage personalised, creative interpretations. These, as well the use of bouncing and shaking foster a softening approach to muscular engagement and encourage heightened sensitivity in the actor. Overall, NSP is a playful, yet still rigorous and demanding version of SMAT that places less emphasis on strong muscularity and provides room for invention and creativity.

Crothers suggests that NSP emerged from Nobbs and Carroll's observations of SMAT training and SCOT rehearsals. They realised that only the vocal and structured improvisation demands placed on SCOT actors in rehearsals developed their full performance capabilities. Nobbs and Carroll therefore sought to combine 'what Suzuki does with his actors during SMAT training, SCOT advanced exercises and SCOT rehearsals into "one dynamic whole"' (Crothers 2021, 36). The exercise formats and concepts of NSP make the range of experiences offered by long-term engagement with SMAT more readily accessible to trainees of all levels and embed creative applications of SMAT's principles within the training itself.

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