

**Ten Days in Tarbena:** an evolutionary approach to moving through  
silence and sound to speech in Ruth Zaporah's *Action Theater*  
training.

**Robert Vesty**

Middlesex University

**Keywords:** silent movement, sensation, speech, post-kinetic,  
evolutionary, Action Theater, Feldenkrais

**Abstract:** In this article the author draws on their participation in a  
ten-day training in *Action Theater* led by its creator Ruth Zaporah in  
Tarbena, Spain, June 2014. This interdisciplinary improvisation form  
utilises silent movement, sound and movement, and speech to create  
improvisatory performance. It is argued here that Zaporah's  
established pedagogical form takes improvisers through a process of  
dealing with language which can be viewed in evolutionary terms.  
Moving through silent movement and the vocalisation of sounds  
allows for a focus on sensation which gives rise to a greater awareness  
of what Zaporah refers to as 'feeling states'. The content of  
improvisatory performance depends on staying in touch with feeling  
states such that it complicates issues to do with feeling and emotion in  
ways that become particularly challenging when an improviser is  
compelled to use speech or what Zaporah refers to as 'physical

narrative'. The author draws on Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenology to propose that we view *Action Theater's* use of speech as 'post-kinetic' and thereby prioritise its somatic rather than semantic ground.

## Introduction

It is a Sunday morning in June 2014. We are in Tarbena – a village located a little inland, in the mountains of Valencia, Spain. It is around 25 degrees Celsius and I can smell jasmine and hear exotic sounding birds which sing incessantly. Twenty or so people have gathered from across the world to participate in a ten-day improvisation training in *Action Theater* led by its creator Ruth Zaporah. We are in the Casa de Cultura - a building at the top of the village - in a large asymmetrical room. It has a municipal feel; good light, a white polystyrene ceiling, and a hard-tiled floor. Here we will work from 10am to 2pm each day. I arrive to people milling, chatting, warming-up – some are lying down on mats. People are wearing loose clothes, some wear trainers, some are barefoot. We gather to sit in a circle and introduce ourselves. Zaporah asks who is ‘coming at’ this improvisation practice from a ‘movement/dance background’ and who from an ‘acting/theatre background’. I put my hand up both times. For the hours and days after I will engage in solo, duet and ensemble improvisation practice. It will see us variously making movement, and making sounds which are at times reminiscent of a children’s playground. Eventually we will be vocalising words, strings of words, and ultimately speech. This will become the basis of our improvised performance.

The aim of this essay is to draw on this instance of *Action Theater* training and expand on how, as an interdisciplinary

### 10 Action Theater Exercises

Throughout this essay I share a small sample of tasks taken from the daily 4 - hour training in Tarbena. My aim is to give the reader an impression of the practice. These tasks were interspersed with discussion, further instruction, clarification and demonstration. The daily sessions were organised so that participants were responsible for their own preparation, followed by a gathering in a circle to talk/reflect on the previous day’s work, a series of exercises, a 20-minute rest-break, followed by more practice which typically ended with a sharing of work (set up as improviser(s)/watchers)<sup>1</sup>.

improvisation performance practice, it asks performers to feel their way through three modes of expression - silent movement, vocal sound and movement, and speech and movement. *Action Theater* training encourages a performer to pay attention to a tactile-kinaesthetic awareness so that they can achieve what Zaporah calls an ‘embodied presence’. For Zaporah, this relies on a performer being equipped to remain in-touch with their experience by paying attention to ‘feeling states’ - the term Zaporah uses to describe the experience of sensation, mood and emotion in the act of improvising. Because *Action Theater* is structured, pedagogically, to reflect this journey from silence to speech, I look at silent movement in this essay as a strategy for developing sensory awareness in *Action Theater* and as a scaffold for developing sound and speech. I argue that the journey from silence to speech embedded and codified by Zaporah can be viewed in evolutionary terms. There are two ways in which I maintain this evolutionary theme. One is by reflecting on the studio practice of *Action Theater* training itself, the other is by drawing on Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s *The Primacy of Movement* (2011). Through a phenomenological approach, she considers the way in which the whole animate form must be understood in its evolutionary context if we are to begin to understand the development of human perception and how this is mirrored through learning in infancy and beyond.

1 – Ensemble walking to a pulse. Sharp shifts in direction. Add breath/pant. Can pause. Can walk half/double time. Can copy.

I also briefly touch on how the Feldenkrais Method (FM), a somatic education method, can be seen as a useful companion approach to *Action Theater* insofar as it invites the participant to re-enter a kind of pseudo-early-developmental state in order to affect and develop experiential knowledge.

My analysis of any evolutionary dimension to *Action Theater* is also inspired by a working assumption that for many improvisers, including myself, moving from a silent mode of movement expression to one where speech is used, can be inhibitive. It can produce feelings of fear. I need to feel-my-way, or get-a-feel-for-using, vocal sound and speech. An *Action Theater* performer's experience of flow<sup>2</sup> can be interrupted by using words because their moment-by-moment experience can become too semantically charged and I develop this idea in more detail below.

Throughout the essay I draw on data I collected while participating in this specific training in Tarbena –data that remains within my bodily experience and memory, alongside other objects such as journal notes, and interview transcripts. I also refer to other published material, particularly Zaporah's (2014) *Improvisation on the Edge: Notes from On and Off Stage*. In reflecting upon this material I speak from the perspectives of participant and observer, improviser

and researcher which manifest in multiple registers, mostly, and unabashedly, in the first person.

### **Action Theater - a short overview**

*Action Theater* is both an established training and performance form honed by Zaporah over forty years through self-practice and collaboration<sup>3</sup>. It codifies silent movement, sound and movement, and speech or what Zaporah refers to as ‘physical narrative’ in a pedagogy that ultimately aims towards a less codified, and more open form of improvised performance. *Action Theater* produces an interdisciplinary performance aesthetic in that it appears to fuse dance and theatre and is sometimes described in terms that occupy space between these disciplines, although Zaporah appears to more readily refer to the practice as physical-theatre improvisation<sup>4</sup>.

Given the context in which Zaporah’s work developed however it could be said that *Action Theater* represents an offer from the discipline of dance to the discipline of improvisational theatre. Zaporah’s early background was in ballet and contemporary dance, but in 1973 she was invited to teach movement to a group of actors in Berkeley, California. Through this fertile period for improvisational performance in the US often characterised with reference to key figures in post-modern US dance<sup>5</sup>, Zaporah developed both her teaching and performance work out of a ‘desire to speak, (and) an urge

to break free of the soundless gestures of dance’ (Morrow, 2011) such that she formed collaborations with theatre artists.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1970s Zaporah has developed her work as a performer and teacher running trainings at home (Santa Fe, New Mexico) and abroad each year. She has been able to trademark the practice and ally it with an accredited teacher-training programme, which she runs informally as a system whereby students qualify as teachers by building up studio-hours of practice over time with an accredited teacher; some of which must be spent with Zaporah herself. As it stands, there are twenty-eight teachers worldwide who are legally qualified to teach the form<sup>7</sup>, and outside Tarbena, my experience of *Action Theater* has also been informed over the past five years by two of these teachers, Kate Hilder (UK) and Sten Rudstrøm (Germany) whose workshops I have participated in.

2 – Solo then duet.  
Sustain a slow, slow,  
slow (and smooth)  
movement. Add  
sharp, sudden  
interruptions.  
Replace slow with  
pause.

### **Moving through Silent Movement**

To understand the processes of *Action Theater* and to view them in the evolutionary way I am proposing, we need to pay attention to the way in which the form draws on sensation as a stimulus for action. But what does action mean in an *Action Theater* context?

According to Zaporah,

All activity, no matter what its formal content, is experienced as equal and as part of a non-stop continuum. Silence is this auspicious sound. Stillness is as delicious as action. No preferences. All action is experienced, as a manifestation within a spacious silence (2014: 41).

*Action Theater* encourages a performer, first and foremost, to develop a capacity to pay attention to sensation in order to be able to differentiate the quality and texture of the present moment through silent movement. And, to cultivate a view of action which can manifest as stillness or silence. Both at the beginning of the training, and at the beginning of each day, Zaporah’s pedagogy gives time to processes, which enable this by placing some emphasis on bodily enquiry. For example, in Tarbena, participants were invited by Zaporah to gather up to 30-minutes before each session to do their own preparation where she proposed that participants pursue any ‘warm-up’ task or exercise in a mode of curiosity and liveness. In my case, this would likely see me lying on the floor to pay attention to the contact my body was making in relation to it at that moment; attempting to draw qualitative distinctions through the movement. Inflected by my experience of FM, I made small movement enquiries, perhaps of the pelvis, or vertebrae, all the time attempting to enact a mode of curiosity. Perhaps I would be wondering how I might notice more or less tension in some parts of myself at that moment, or how I

3 – Duet. A sounds,  
B moves in  
response. Then B  
moves, A sounds in  
response. Swap.



might begin to differentiate the quality of feeling one part of myself might have compared to another. My emphasis here was not on answers, or at least not at arriving at conclusions, rather to merely notice what I notice, or feel how I feel – a way to get in touch with sensation as a ground through which to become aware of the ‘feeling states’ which the improvisatory content will later be rooted in.

For Zaporah, a ‘feeling state’ is processual and therefore ever changing. The focus on silent movement in *Action Theater* practice is thus a useful and necessary exploration aimed at nurturing a quality of attention, which can emphasise its processual nature. Using the continuous form, *attending*, honours this processual and qualitative nature of attention. Noting the etymology of the verb *to attend* as deriving from the French *attendre*, (*to stretch*) the notion of expanding or stretching attention takes on its temporality as one that is experienced qualitatively. In this way, a feeling state is concerned with sensory perception and how a performer might move through the world, or how the world might move through them, in order to sense its changeability moment by moment – feeling its quality of altered temporality. Thus, by engaging in silent movement I can begin to cultivate a practice of attending, through sense making and making-sense; what we might call a heightened kinaesthesia. In Tarbena, Zaporah asked us to begin moving slowly, locating attention in one part of the body such as elbow, the back of the neck, or forehead. The

instruction was given to encourage a frame of movement through which we could immerse. In this mode, it began to feel as if the movement was emerging – its direction, texture, and quality had a feeling that it was being discovered, or listened to. Eventually, a performer in *Action Theater* must develop their own self-movement so that they can remain ready to react to other stimuli in the space, while keeping intact a heightened kinaesthesia, which then goes on to inform the content of an improvised performance.

Movement exploration, in *Action Theater*, is perception-based groundwork that later vocalisation is built upon. This developmental approach can be further illuminated if we turn to Sheets-Johnstone, for who the primacy of movement is fundamental to the function of perception:

The dynamics essential to our progressive sense-makings of ourselves and of the world are intrinsic to and inherent in our primal animation and in our being the particular animate forms we are (2011: 453).

Sheets-Johnstone's thesis is aimed at repositioning movement as the primary mode through which an organism evolves its powers of perception and that this stretches back through the evolutionary journey of all animate form. For a human being, for kinaesthesia to

4 – Solo. Sound & movement together. 50% still. Add changes in direction of eyes. Add high & low tension.

develop it must be practiced at some point through movement in  
silence:

To be mindful of movement asks us first of all to be silent,  
and, in our silence, to witness the phenomenon of movement –  
around self-movement and the movement of all that is animate  
or animated in our surrounding world (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011:  
xix).

Similarly *Action Theater* training develops in a performer a skill in  
heightened kinaesthesia. By going slow, and being in silence, I get to  
practise, time and again, the simple process of relaxing my attention  
into the moment as it emerges. Yet in its simplicity there is a seeming  
paradox and according to Zaporah, although, ‘To relax our attention  
into the present moment is extraordinarily simple...it demands a  
lifetime of practice (1995: xx)’. The updating of this skill is a  
continuous process; and not one simply acquired. Indeed this kind of  
silent enquiry was the predominant mode of practice for the first few  
days in Tarbena.

The conception of a heightened kinaesthesia as a kind of skill  
in *Action Theater*, can be seen as having some synergy with so-called  
*enactive* theories of perception expounded by some working in the  
field of cognitive studies. For example, in *Varieties of Presence*, Alva

Noë argues that the world is always present in the way that it is always available, but that we ‘achieve’ presence through a complex and skilful utilisation of ourselves as an organism (p. 12). Noë’s case is predicated on the basis that ‘the perceiver’s movements produce changes in the character of the standing motorsensory relation’ (2012: 22), so that perceptual consciousness is movement-dependent:

perception as a movement from here to there, from this place to that. We ourselves (whole persons) undertake our perceptual consciousness of the world in, with, and in relation to the places where we find ourselves (2012: 5).

Although Sheets-Johnstone appears to take exception at enactivism’s emphasis on action above experience (2011: 477), I suggest that in an improvisatory moment in *Action Theater* practice there is no such debate – action and experience are placed on a continuum and bear equal footing. Indeed, they happen at the same time but are differentiated by the degree of their expressivity. In one improvisatory moment practised in an ensemble I recall lying face-down on the floor for many seconds, maybe more than a minute, inspecting flecks of colour in the detail of the tiles, while all around me bigger and louder things were no doubt happening in the composition. My experience of movement was through a relative stillness but must still be construed as action. For Zaporah, the experience of an embodied presence, in

this instance, cannot be differentiated from action except by degree of its expressivity.

Through this, a theme emerges in *Action Theater* practice which is about resisting dualistic ways of thinking about perception as internal/external, better/worse, from here to there etc. It's a theme which Sheets-Johnstone also illuminates because she invites us to think less about beginning with sensory perception in order to arrive at deeper understandings of the motor end of movement, but rather to think of working backwards by thinking of movement as the primary form of differentiating environment in order to perceive. Doing this re-replaces the kinetic in a field of perception and puts it central to the way we get to know the world around us – what she calls an 'epistemological gateway' (2011: xxi). In this way Sheets-Johnstone elevates not just movement but the human being as an animate form by pointing to its immanence. Likewise, in *Action Theater* practice, Zaporah's insistence that I embody a 'feeling state' also calls on me to consider movement as *already* a part (neither inside or outside) of myself; *already* interlaced in my evolution as human being/animate form. A democratizing of the embodied experience again upsets the duality of thinking through the notion of exteriority and interiority – that an object exists outside of a body experiencing it, but that a body experiencing it can only experience it through itself.

If what is available to an *Action Theater* performer is felt for, it may not be very helpful to think of the object of that feeling being merely or solely outside of myself. One clear and literal example of how this idea can be said to have manifested as practice in Tarbena was through one *Action Theater* exercise that asked participants to move and sound as phenomena such as rock, electricity, silk or snow. Zaporah's instruction was not that we represent what these phenomena might look like, rather that we embody the feeling of them. In this way, I was compelled to quite literally make a connection to certain environmental phenomena through imagination.

In Tarbena, the role of imagination was often discussed. At one point Zaporah spoke about imagination as a fictive world and its relation to the so-called real world, saying:

We're stepping inside a new world in an improvisation – an imaginal world. Real life is the hard world (Zaporah in Vesty 2014, Journal Notes).

On the face of it, it could appear that Zaporah's imaginal world is another place, which exists somehow separately. But this notion troubles another apparent duality – the imaginal/real - that might be better thought of or practiced as somehow continuous. Just as a view of *mind*ing may no longer accept a body through which it happens as

separate from a brain it collaborates with, (hence the proliferation in some quarters of the term *bodymind*), it may be just as useful to think of the imaginal world (of atmospheres, colours, fictions, characters etc.) as simply coextensive of the more or less mundane real of the hard floor in the Casa de Cultura. While I might readily speak of the real as immediate and concrete, my sensing, as an improvising performer in *Action Theater* through this environment serves as a crucial window through which to access, integrate, and in turn express, a more vibrant kind of life which, in practice, resists a real/imaginal duality. In this way I see these supposed two-worlds integrated explicitly through *Action Theater* practice.

I want briefly to take a small, but relevant, detour which may add further insight to this slipperiness between the real and imaginal. In Tarbena, I taught three group FM lessons<sup>7</sup> (known as Awareness Through Movement or ATM lessons) to participants (including Zaporah) over the course of the twelve days – two before the training session and one on a rest-day. The method's focus on small, slow, repetitive movement offers a structure through which to develop awareness, and its relation to spontaneity means it offers one modality through which to notice habitual patterns of movement. It is, I believe, complementary to *Action Theater* practice in many ways. For example, FM focuses on spontaneity and the need to cultivate awareness of ourselves in the moment; it also invites us to remember

5 – Duet. Sit forward on chair. Neutral position, legs planted, hands on knees. A sounds until B interrupts. Sound contrasts (shifts), or develops (transforms).

and somehow revisit some of our earliest infant-like movement explorations. But particularly germane here is FM's use and understanding of imagination and how it can be conceived as action which again resists an imaginal/real dichotomy. For example, in one ATM, I asked students lying on their backs to imagine their closed eyes moving left and right. The arc of the lesson invited students to eventually imagine this movement extending to a roll sideways and to imagine, gradually, arriving in a sitting position. By the end of the lesson, students were likely to be rolling to one side and back repeatedly so that the exploration of the eyes' movement began to be integrated in movement that is functional. In an ATM the use of imagination in this way is well established. The movement that is performed in imagination is therefore done for 'real', and the imagined movement is conceived as a rehearsal for the real which has a direct and tangible impact on a person's ability to perform that action in a smooth and easy way. As I have said, this idea of the imaginary being embodied can suggest that the imaginal world exists someplace-else and needs somehow to be brought in to a person's experience of their sensory apparatus, yet by making explicit the link between imaginary and real movement, it integrates the experience of these modes as concrete action because it endows the act of imagining *as* movement, even if that movement is conceived as interior action. Through this lens, the imaginary becomes concretely integrated in action because the act of imagination is viewed as another form of

6 – A speaks 'STOP' or 'WALK' with particular quality/rhythm/texture, B/others either stop or walk embodying quality etc. "Walk how I say walk, and stop how I say stop".



animation. Only by lingering in silent, (and slow), movement a while,  
am I able to feel my way towards this mode of action as embodied  
presence.

The notion of feeling-around or getting-a-feel-for-things suggests a gentle and gradual practice, as I have suggested above, but in *Action Theater* its processual nature is also made explicit. While *feeling* as a term has multiple registers, identities and meanings, Zaporah's use of the term 'feeling state' has a specificity which was emphasised in Tarbena time and again. Zaporah told us, 'I do not use the word emotion; I use feeling state, inner state, sensory awareness' (Zaporah in Vesty 2014, Journal Notes). By focusing on feeling state, Zaporah invites a performer to live through transformation – for flux to be enacted. Thus here, feeling state serves as a carrier term – a container where some of us in the training might well have also placed notions of sensation, mood or emotion. Feeling state emerges as a key term for Zaporah's communication of what it means to be engaged in improvisation. She says that 'to touch the world we go through it' (Zaporah in Vesty 2014, Journal Notes). I understand touch here not just in its haptic sense but as a heightened kinaesthesia where a feeling of perception is experienced as a kind of fully-fleshed and vibrant kind of life – Zaporah's imaginal world.

7 - Duet. A moves a phrase to a rhythm leading with different body parts. B repeats phrase with same rhythm but different body part.

Thus *Action Theater* practice encourages performers to root their improvisatory work in sensory ground in a holistic way, through an emphasis on the body in kinesis. In *Action Theater* there is a clear pattern to the processes at work so that sessions allow a performer time to engage in the kind of slow, attentive movement which is likely to encourage a deepening of a performer's ability to perceive what is available to them in the improvisatory moment.

### **Moving through Movement and Sound**

Despite my emphasis above on silent movement, in *Action Theater* the practice moves an improviser quickly into making vocal sound.

Zaporah tells us,

In classes we often make only sounds and avoid words for a while. The voice calls forward states that are nameless, preverbal, and that draw from our animal nature and lift spirits to lofty planes (2014: 99).

*Action Theater* can be a noisy business – a lively playground of maybe twenty people making vocalisations that are variously quiet, loud, low, high, percussive, guttural, flitty, breathy, or bold. Using voice can feel like crossing a threshold that involves social permission, and a practice in daring. It can produce feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and doubt. The moment before the silence is punctured, when the idea of making sound feels like a big step, can feel like an intrusion on space. It can feel like I am expending too much energy ushering in this sound. But then sound comes. At this early stage in sound making, my palette of sounds can feel limited. I desire more range. As my practice develops it feels as if the sounds-make-me and before long, I begin to feel like these sounds take me by surprise.

8 - Ensemble. 4 stand with backs to watchers. 1 turns with an impulsive sound, which develops into words/narrative continues until interrupted by another. Only 1 person facing forward at a time. Play with length of time between interruptions.

The process of arriving at the voice, in practice, is incremental because Zaporah's pedagogy scaffolds the learning so that to touch sound happens through a gradual process of playing with breath. One exercise asked us to be in movement half the time, and stillness half the time. After a while we were invited to add breath to the moving part such that the breath could encounter its different qualities; it was not yet sound, but through playing with intensity, and the shape of our mouths, the channel through which the breath passed could take on a tone or texture which began to bring a particular feeling state into clearer view. Eventually the breath was given voice. For me, the

familiarity I had found in the short time with breath made audible,  
allowed me to move into sound with a feeling of ease.

The use of voice in *Action Theater*, for my purposes, serves as a useful site for enquiry into what happens with a feeling or perception when this faculty is more fully activated in the sensory apparatus, and I want to extend Zaporah's assertion that this mode draws on human beings' animal nature. To speak of an evolutionary quality to this improvisatory work, especially in my presentation of the gradual movement from silence to sound as embedded in its pedagogy presents something of a paradox because there is also a regressive quality to the processes at work. I have suggested that the sound emanating from the Casa de Cultura might have reminded some of a children's playground and in allowing an unfettered voice to give expression to my experience, there were certainly times when I felt as if I was getting in touch with a more child-like and playful experience of myself. Brian Massumi's, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (2014) sheds useful light on the way some animals engage in play and given Zaporah's invocation of *animality* above it seems pertinent to draw on this. Massumi's aim is to articulate how ludic gestures might help us think about engaging with concepts, and especially how they might be conversational. For Massumi, this requires,

9 – Duet. A sits. B stands behind. B touches A, who sounds with words in response (physical narrative). Quality of sound matches quality of touch e.g. Touch low on back = low pitch sound; firmer touch = higher volume; staccato touch = staccato sound. No touch, no sound.

replacing the human on the animal continuum [...] in a way that does not erase what is different about the human, but respects that difference while bringing it to new expression on the continuum: immanent to animality (2014: 3).

Massumi goes on to draw on Gregory Bateson's ideas to do with ludic gestures signalling their belonging to the arena of play, in such a way that play's mimicry of reality enacts a gap which is paradoxical. The example Massumi gives is that 'In play, you don't bite, you nip. The difference between biting and nipping is what opens the analogical gap between combat and play (2014: 5)', allowing for a conditional reality which is, crucially, a site of learning through communication with another, and that this is in some ways conversational.

It is useful to think of the practice of making vocal sound in *Action Theater* similarly - as *vital play*; and, in line with Massumi, to think of it on an animal continuum. For Massumi 'When we humans say "this is play", we are assuming our animality' and that 'Animal play creates the conditions for language' (2014: 8). This thinking is particularly useful because it prepares a way of conceiving of spoken language in the form of speech in such a way that it can be cleaved from any understanding of it as simple semantic meaning making. Instead, it invites me to consider the gestural quality of making vocal sound as action; and that this in turn helps explain how *Action Theater*

10 – Duet. A speaks an image in one sentence. B adds with another. A adds another. B begins with a new image with contrasting feeling/atmosphere/mood. Back and forth, on and on.

practice follows a similar pattern, which also prepares an evolutionary ground for thinking of speech-making as ludic sound gestures.

Crucially, the use of sound in *Action Theater* exists on a movement continuum. Sound becomes another gateway for what can appear to be a more playful mode of attention - one that might access, more readily at least, Zaporah's allusion to animality. At the same time it further resists the kind of thinking that separates body and voice, or movement and sound as activities. It is worth stating the obvious: that vocal sound is already movement given that the use of voice activates complex movements of breath, mouth, tongue, muscular tension etc., which are all deeply corporeal. There is often a perception that the activity of sound-making is closer in relation to speech-making than movement. I suggest the *Action Theater* pedagogy challenges that idea explicitly and necessarily but in doing so presents its performer with a very particular challenge.

[INSERT VESTY fig. 1 here]

### **Moving through Physical Narrative**

Moving through silent movement and again through the vocalisation of sound brings us eventually to the practice of words in *Action Theater*. According to Zaporah, 'language carries a heavier weight than movement or vocalization' (2014: 78) and this can represent a

clear challenge for an *Action Theater* performer, and in Tarbena this domain of physical narrative was certainly a more difficult skill to accomplish. This difficulty implicates the question of how we grapple with markers of language as semantic and this is particularly pertinent to questions around feeling and emotion which become central themes in this section. But first, it is necessary to offer a little detail about how language features in *Action Theater*.

Advertising a recent (2015) workshop in London, entitled ‘*Ta(l)king Your Head Off!*’, *Action Theater* teacher, Rudstrøm invited participants to enter the ‘explosive, colorful, absurdity of experiential speech’ telling us:

Once you discover that language is a visceral experience, that words are not purely mental constructs but actual body experiences, your improvisations crank up. You are no longer limited by what you think you should say or believe should be said. You are being led by the experience. Each word, each vowel and consonant, on the tongue, in the mouth, teeth, air leads the improvisation. Awareness of the sensations becomes the driving force for language not thought. Thought and imagination are assistants on the path of language, not the directors.<sup>9</sup>

In a typical *Action Theater* training, words are strung together with a kind of physical muscularity which emphasizes the sound, shape and feel for them as much as it attends to any normative ideas about linear narratives or ‘life-like’ meaning-making. In this way, there is a certain physiology of word, and although this may well add up to create full-blown narratives, the emphasis remains, for a performer, less on creating tidy stories, and more on investing and committing to moving through words.

Sheets-Johnstone draws attention to research which highlights the sensory way in which sound is perceived; that ‘gestures producing phonemes are co-articulated in complex ways such that speech perception cannot be explained by general auditory principles (2011: 322). The gestural quality of speech for Sheets-Johnstone undergirds the progression of her argument for speech being an animate practice. Crucially here, the use of speech is a marker of perception, simply changed by degree and not as a higher-order of consciousness. This would appear to be in line with Zaporah’s call that we see *all* experience in the improvisatory moment, regardless of whether it is encountered in silent, sound or speech modes, as having equal value.

This evolutionary way of thinking about speech is supported further when Sheets-Johnstone suggests ‘that rather than speak of the period before language as the *pre-linguistic*, we should speak of the



advent of language as the *post-kinetic* (2011: xxxi). This reprioritizing of the kinetic in linguistic processes aligns with the pathway to physical narrative in *Action Theater* practice which has been practiced too through movement. Yet, it is important to draw attention to the way speech in *Action Theater* practice, appears to have the potential to disrupt an experience of kinetic flow. A central concern in *Action Theater* remains: how can I maintain a state of *embodied presence* when using language? This experience chimes with Sheets-Johnstone when she says that ‘What moves and changes is always in excess of the word – or words – that tries to name it’ (2011: 434); and that in turn, words can all too easily enter the domain of ideas and a habit for wanting to make those ideas make sense in some literal or consciously logical way. Certainly, for me, in *Action Theater* practice, the gateway, or transitional space between sound and word can appear more expansive and insecure than between silent movement and sound. Yet Zaporah’s teaching, and the *Action Theater* form, takes account of this fear implicitly, by scaffolding the learning. The pedagogy allows for gradual transitions. Even the term physical narrative itself appears to facilitate this because of its suggestion of the shape, feel, size and quality of a word. A word’s movement in this practice can be elongated, de-formed, and shrunk. Narratives in turn emerge not out of a will to create story, though stories can, and often do emerge, but out of a will to stay in touch with the somatic ground of sensation of words or strings of words. In this way, physical

narrative is explained through its dynamic action as process, severed from any insistence on representation. *Action Theater* practice therefore trains a performer to displace the need to make clear sense of a narrative in literal ways or for words to have any obviously literal link to the movement that is happening. I could say perhaps that my *Action Theater* practice demands I shift to being somatically rather than semantically hooked into words.

However, any semantic dominance in the way that we use language cannot be easily dismissed. Indeed, I suggest that this challenge to the semantic dominance of language forms a key tension in *Action Theater* practice. A semantically bound reflection on feeling is discouraged during the improvisatory moment in *Action Theater* practice because it refers to experience which is no longer relevant - the moment has passed. It is remarkable that in a watcher/performer set-up, there is a decided lack of explicit reflection on the quality of the improvised material in *Action Theater* after the performance of it is over. To enter into a critique or to engage in value judgements about what the improvised material might have meant, signified or evoked, or indeed how good/bad the improvisation was, appears to be resisted in the practice because once again it shifts a performer (and a watcher) into a use of words which are more likely to operate in an overly semantic rather than somatic domain. It is as if any attempt to describe what emerges from a feeling state, either inside or outside of the

improvised content, is regarded as a futile and no longer relevant gesture. Words, somehow, are not good enough.

Zaporah expands this territory:

Suppose we could climb in between perception and identification. Suppose we could romp around in that no-man's land of the unnamed, unknown terrain. Suppose within that romp our imagination could reassemble the world into a fresh existence (2014: 71).

Zaporah may well be advocating here a re-connection with a pre-noetic state not unlike that Sheets-Johnstone suggests when she talks about thinking through movement rather than using words that might reduce experience because of a post-kinetic conditioning:

The actual dynamic kinetic event is not reducible to a word or even to a series of words. We all have knowledge of just such physical events just as we all have non-linguistic concepts of their dynamics. We have this knowledge in these concepts because we have all been nurtured by an original capacity to think of movement, a capacity that does not diminish with age but merely becomes submerged or hidden by the capacity and practice of thinking in words (2011: 434).

In *Action Theater*, an improviser must practice an appreciation of words, first as containers of knowledge that may not always be explicable and second as working in tandem with movement and its capacity to also speak.

As I mentioned above, Zaporah's insistence on attending to a feeling state as the ground for language invites questions to do with the place emotion has in this conception of feeling. For Zaporah, if a feeling state is over-identified with and named it loses its potency. The concept of emotion remains such a contested term for Zaporah because it presumes identification with a fixed idea of feeling. This problem of identifying the content was tackled in Tarbena time and again. Zaporah insisted that an experience be accepted for what it was, and not named. In *Action Theater* the act of naming experience, fixes it. Thus, because the training encourages a performer to pay attention to a tactile-kinaesthetic awareness so that they can achieve Zaporah's notion of *embodied presence*, it would appear to challenge any habitual tendencies towards fixing a feeling by adding semantic markers or naming it as an emotion. The experience of physical narrative is bound by an imperative to accept and commit to the feeling state such that it can give rise to new or unfamiliar experience.

Further distinctions have been made between feeling and emotion in the field of neuroscience. In *The Feeling of What Happens* (2000) Antonio Damasio suggests,

Feeling an emotion is a simple matter. It consists of having mental images arising from the neural patterns, which represent the changes in body and brain that make up an emotion. But knowing that we have that feeling, “feeling” that feeling, occurs only after we build the second-order representations (2000: 169).

This more tacit conception of knowing feeling is perhaps closer to Zaporah’s position. Through the *Action Theater* form she similarly rejects any focus on second-order identification with emotion and asks us to stay connected to our feeling states, not simply because the aesthetics of the practice appear to resist the explicit composition of emotional landscapes but because the practice as improvisation, as process, absolutely demands us as improvisers to be located in our experiential, embodied, animate self which cannot be reduced to representations of emotion.

*Action Theater* practice can appear, however, fraught with representations of emotion. In Tarbena, Zaporah cited psychologist Paul Ekman’s (1992) studies in emotion where he identifies several

basic, but apparently universal emotions found to be expressed through facial expression - a reduction of emotion, at least in their exteriority, to either *fear, anger, disgust, joy, sadness or surprise*. In *Action Theater* practice this identification of feeling as emotion cannot account for the nuance exacted by the fluidity of an ever-changing improvisatory landscape despite the practice's quite explicit utilisation of facial expression. For me, once a mental process of naming a feeling state as emotion is ushered in, I can feel an experience of disruption in the flow of physical narrative. It can promote a feeling of rupture or hesitation that interrupts the flow of experience where an improvisatory frame does not move out of an emotional landscape that I have identified it as. This process runs the risk of ossifying an idea of what is being experienced, rather than the experience itself being embodied as the kinetic and ever-changing moment-by-moment dynamic that it is. For Zaporah in *Action Theater* practice, the eyes and face keep a constant track of the inner feeling state as it emerges, and aims to resist solidifying emotions fixed on the face or in the eyes. In this way, *Action Theater* practice demands that I think of physical narrative corporeally, kinetically, playfully, animally... without identifying the improvised content as emotionally represented. What this presents to the improviser is a challenge to remain aware of an ever-changing feeling state from which the physical narrative springs.

## Summary

Zaporah's *Action Theater* training attempts to place *all* experience, regardless of whether it is felt through silence, vocalisation or verbalisation, on an equal footing. This democratising feature of the practice may seem at odds with my schematisation of these three modes in my analysis above, yet it is through this schematisation that, for me, *Action Theater's* evolutionary quality becomes explicit and its pedagogical structure and challenge becomes clear. While *Action Theater* remains formal in its structure, there is a way in which the modes of working – silent movement, movement and sound, physical narrative – are integrated in a far less delineated way than my analysis might suggest, but by presenting the development of the form in this way, my aim is to have shown that it is possible to see how central to the practice this evolutionary way of thinking through movement is. *Action Theater* practice challenges ideas about silent movement being merely pre-verbal and invites a reconsideration of speech as a post-kinetic endeavour, dependent on moving through silent movement, so that we can ultimately feel the movement of words first as sounds, and that as the practice evolves, we can be empowered as *Action Theater* improvisers to feel a fuller-fleshed perceptivity as an embodied presence. Physical narratives produced through *Action Theater* are revealed in turn as having a fuller affective potential which ultimately invites us to think of words as being somatically, rather than semantically, charged.

## Endnotes

1. Readers can readily access much more detailed explanations of *Action Theater* exercises. See in particular *Action Theater: the manual* (Zaporah: 1998)
2. In Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's conception of it see Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal performance*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
3. Although relatively little has been published on *Action Theater*, there are much fuller descriptions of what *Action Theater* is; how it looks, its form, and pedagogy etc. to refer to. Zaporah has published a handbook *Action Theater: the improvisation of presence* (1995), which details a notional twenty-day training; each day including a selection of exercises or forms with a commentary from Zaporah; her self-published *Action Theater: the manual* (1998), an exercise-per-page handbook for the more 'experienced improviser'; and the recent prose work *Improvisation on the Edge: notes from on and off stage* (2014). Susanna Morrow's PhD thesis (2006) and



her later article *Psyche meets Soma* (2011) aim to establish Action Theater pedagogy as ‘a vital and unique contribution to the field of improvisational training’ (Morrow 2011, 99-113). More recently Kent de Spain’s *Landscape of the Now: A topography of movement improvisation* (2014) counts Zaporah among Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Lisa Nelson, Deborah Hay, Nancy Stark Smith, Barbara Dilley, and Anna Halprin in its collection of interviews around which he thematises an analysis. A film by de Spain *A Moving Presence* (2010) explores Zaporah’s pedagogy with footage of an intensive training in her studio in Santa Fe. See also (De Spain 1995, Zaporah, Albright et al. 2003).

4. *Action Theater* has been described as ‘body-based improvisational theater’ (Zaporah, 1995: xx); ‘movement improvisation’ (De Spain, 2014) and as ‘a physical theatre improvisation pedagogy’ (Morrow, 2006: iii) – all terms, which might sit happily under dance or theatre rubrics.
  
5. By honouring the influence of dance on the development of her practice Zaporah credits a time and place (1960s/1970s West Coast, US) in the development of twentieth-century dance, which many readers will already be familiar. Zaporah tells us, ‘*Most of everything, I have today in the way of*

*improvisational “chops” comes from the years between 1969-1976 spent evolving out of Yvonne Rainer’s “Continuous Project Altered Daily” into The Grand Union, that great circus of improvisational performance. Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Nancy Lewis, Douglas Dunn, myself, and others from time to time began the extraordinary saga of making it up as we went along, over and over again’ (Zaporah, 1995: xvi).*

6. See Morrow 2006 who traces in some detail how Zaporah, like many of her contemporaries, was ‘helped along by her collaborations with theater artists, principally Bob Ernst of the Jerzy Grotowski influenced Blake Street Hawkeyes and secondarily Ken Jenkins, a Joe Chaikin trained director and actor (Morrow, 2006: 133)’. This interdisciplinarity continues to be reflected in the demography of the participant drawn to the practice today. Of the twenty participants in Tarbena, although several were dance or theatre artists, just as many were from backgrounds in other disciplines such as law and finance, for example.
7. See <http://www.actiontheater.com/teachers.htm> - information last accessed 18 February 2015

8. I am a practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method (FM) certified  
by the UK Feldenkrais Guild
  
9. Email from Sten Rudstrøm received 13 February 2015

### **Reference List**

Damasio, A.R., (2000). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

De Spain, K., (2014). *Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation*. Oxford University Press.

Ekman, P., (1992). An argument for basic emotions. *Cognition & emotion*, 6 (3-4), pp. 169-200.

Massumi, B., (2014). *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*. Duke University Press.

Morrow, S., (2011). Psyche meets Soma: accessing creativity through Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 2(1), pp. 99-113.

Morrow, S.R., (2006). *Action Theater: Divine play for the stage*. ProQuest.

Noë, A., (2012). *Varieties of presence*. Harvard University Press.

Sheets-Johnstone, M., (2011). *The primacy of movement*. John  
Benjamins Publishing Company.

Zaporah, R., (1995). *Action theater: the improvisation of presence*.  
North Atlantic Books.

Zaporah, R., Eckert, R. and Roshi, J.S., (2014). *Improvisation on the  
Edge: Notes from on and Off Stage*. North Atlantic Books.

### **Further Reading**

Bateson, G., (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in  
anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. University of  
Chicago Press.

Batson, G. and Wilson, M.A., (2014). *Body and Mind in Motion:  
Dance and Neuroscience in Conversation*.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., (1996). *Flow and the psychology of discovery  
and invention*. New York: Harper Collins.

Feldenkrais, M., (1972). *Awareness through movement (Vol. 1977)*.  
New York: Harper & Row.

Sheets-Johnstone, M., (2011). *The primacy of movement*. John  
Benjamins Publishing Company.

Zaporah, R., Eckert, R. and Roshi, J.S., (2014). *Improvisation on the  
Edge: Notes from on and Off Stage*. North Atlantic Books.