



Akira Matsui, Julia Varley and Augusto Omolu, ISTA 14, Wroclaw, Poland, 2005 - Photo: Francesco Galli

Julia Varley

Score and Sub-score

A useful but wrong word

Abstract: Julia Varley reacts to the questions addressed to her by the French scholar Patrice Pavis during a lecture which was held in 1992 for the 7th session of ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) in Brecon and Cardiff. Reflecting on her work as an actress, Varley interrogates crucial aspects such as the observation of other's work, professionalism, theatre craft, acting techniques, mental process. Furthermore, Varley addresses the notion of "sub-score", beyond "sub-text", discussed by ISTA participants and scientific staff. Originally published in New Theatre Quarterly 11, 42, 1995: 166-74.

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An aura of mystery and respect, which irritates me at times, is fashioned around an actress's way of thinking. This *terra incognita* becomes a mirage that blinds those who observe it. I sense that occasionally my presence in a performance fills with magic and that this happens quite independently of the constant level of professionalism I demand of myself. It is a magic that I cannot control. It is this kind of magic that causes the mirages.

In theatre anthropology the word "sub-text" has been replaced by "sub-score", a more appropriate term for the not necessarily text based forms of theatre in which an actress builds her stage presence with a kind of vocal and physical behaviour called a "score". The term "sub-score" includes all the mental and psychic processes on which an actress bases her work. Mixed in this concept are personal techniques, elements of support that keep the score alive, starting points for creating material, the actress's thoughts before and during the performance, a character's motives, the inner world, emotions, energy, memories, sensations, and everything that cannot be conceptualised.

In my work as an actress there are places where I do not care to venture with too conscious an eye. I want to preserve the possibility of letting myself be guided by forces which I do not control, as I know that they collaborate with my creative process. Only in this way do I feel that the magic - which illuminates the unique moment when my necessity as an actress meets with my experience - can be released. But there are also ways of working with the sub-score that are deliberate, looked for and led by the practice of the craft. If as an actress I manage to absorb the methods and rules, exercises and training, and turn them into a personal technique, I also locate a pragmatic strategy which helps me achieve results.



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Eugenio Barba uses the image of a “blind horse” when he describes the part of himself that conducts his creative work on a performance. To try and understand the way that the “blind horse” thinks is not useful, but it is important to know *how* to let the horse work. This presupposes a personal technique that does not need to be analysed, but that can allow space for a gallop. The subscore is for me this personal technique, this disposition to follow or determine the mental processes that will support my actions.

The subscore is not restricted to a conscious mental process based on images. The course which a subscore follows can be linked to physical sensations, abstractions, information processed in different ways by the brain and remembered/forgotten by a memory which I place in my cells rather than in my thoughts. As an actress I choose the way which best suits my professional and personal curiosity and the needs of the role at that moment. The subscore is for me an invisible physical/mental process which accompanies, both in a fixed and fluctuating way, the actions which the spectator sees.

The paper song

At Brecon, in Wales, during the 7th session of ISTA in 1992, my ‘paper song’ prompted a discussion. When I was asked to create a sequence of actions on the basis of the title “the book”, my first concern was not to repeat myself.

On that occasion, in the big sports hall where we worked in Brecon, I did not have anything with me except my notebook. So I translated “book” into “paper”. I ripped a piece of paper out of my notebook and reacted to whatever I could make it do, using the sounds it produced, the shapes it took, the resistance I felt while tearing it, the direction in which I threw it or made it fly. The torn, folded, crumpled, flapped, gnawed paper, and the way I used the paper to blow through, dry, cut, became the points of reference for creating a sequence of physical actions. I simply responded to the stimuli I received from the paper/book.

It was difficult for some observers to accept and hear my ‘paper song’. That I worked in such a way, with a process that did not resort to the deep emotions of a first love or a dying father, caused animated discussion. Once again I had to listen to the assertion that, as an actress, in order to provoke emotions I should experience them and that communication with the spectator depends on the depth of my feelings. It is true that to create dynamic material, the information I start from should be important and dense, but this for me means rich in details.

It was interesting to note how the critical observers saw *results* which did not function for them instead of material in the first phase of a *process* which still needs to be elaborated by me as actress and later by the director. The noise of a piece of paper tearing could reawaken the deep echoes of a lived experience: a letter arriving too late, the possession order demanding the furniture belonging to my home when my father could not pay his taxes, my first drawing, a poem by Montale... Why should I have to be able to consciously recognise and describe these deep echoes of experience that

had been transformed into actions through my technique as an actress? Why is it so difficult to understand that the body remembers and that an action contains so much more information than consciousness can master?

I was reading an article on the 1992 war in former Yugoslavia. In the text I found the word “omission”, which had recently been used in a letter I had received from a person who is not fond of me. Two unpleasant experiences were linked. I can recognise this association now, but I would not be able to point out the numerous connections that are part of my fund of knowledge. Yet it is precisely these short circuits of experience that are essential in imparting a certain quality of colour, rhythm and intensity to my actions. It is not necessary for my mind to be aware of these passages separately, but for my actress’s integral body/mind to use its particular intelligence in actions which already contain them. During the work process, as an actress, I am not interested in an introspective journey of self-knowledge. I prefer to protect the incomprehensible way of thinking of the cells and to concentrate on how to open up spaces for that thinking to flow. I would rather deflect the attention away from my person, without explaining what I feel to myself, so that I can dedicate myself to the steps which are necessary for the work and in order that what I produce is able to speak to me.

Thought

The idea that an actress has to be totally present in the action, at one with what she is doing, gives a picture of a body/mind in which thought is indissolubly bound to action; as if I ought not think of anything else. Nevertheless, during a performance, while present in my action and totally concentrated, I discover the simultaneous presence of other thoughts: technical observations, practical considerations, new interpretations of the performance. I can think: “Why hasn’t the light come on?”, “T’s zip is broken, I’ll let him know in the next scene”, “I’ve forgotten to put the shawl in its place”, “We are slowing down the rhythm”, “The tone is too high”. I can think: “I’ve got a stomach-ache”, “What a nice old man in the third row”, “The restaurant is closed tonight”, “We have to strike the set afterwards”. I can think: “Those are the coins which paid Judas” (while looking at Tage Larsen, who as the Great Inquisitor in *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, throws away the bracelet of coin charms and rubs his hands), “This is the sound of a rocking chair on which an old person in a home waits for a relative to visit” (while, as Doña Musica, sitting on the stool during *Kaosmos* I grumble and wait for the Man from the Country after having just said “And there he stayed for days and years”), “Ah! But I am addressing Death, not a person. . .” (while as the girl dressed in white in *The Castle of Holstebro* I recite a poem by Sappho with my arms stretched out towards Mr Peanut, the character with a skull head).

Do all these thoughts have any influence on the spectators? I think that I can be *occupied* by different thoughts without these detracting from my presence on stage, but I cannot be *preoccupied* by them. The thoughts must not be at the centre of my attention, nor should they determine the accent of the whole picture. Most importantly, I should not think about the score and thus create a separation within me as an actress, so that

I remember, decide and perform the action, instead of being action. When my mind flows with the action, concentrated and free to venture in different directions, ready to discover, to comment and take decisions, I know that I have managed to build a situation in which I fight against the danger of becoming a robot that only follows its established course. My thoughts are free even if deeply rooted and present in the action.

I am ready to react to anything that happens; I am present through the precision of the score that I have incorporated not absent in a schematic structure that hides the surroundings from me. The body is intelligent, ready, not mechanical, after it has liberated itself from the difficulty of remembering.

So those exciting moments of enlightenment, when two elements suddenly meet and I think I have grasped something, can occur as flashes during the performance. To achieve this state of being for me it is necessary that the score has been memorised so completely that it can be forgotten, that continuous repetition has turned upside down the freshness of the first time and now returns it, and that the restriction of the fixed components has been transformed into a well of as yet unknown visions. To achieve this state of being I work obsessively on details during rehearsals and until I have played the performance at least thirty times.

As an actress I pass through various phases, and each phase has particularities that keep the work alive and interesting for me. At first it is the difficulty of remembering, the emotion and fear of encountering the spectators. Then it is the difficulty of adapting to new venues on tour. Next, when the certitude of repetition is achieved, I confront new tasks in performance or choose a parallel activity during the day that might act as a stimulus. In every performance I discover unexpected perspectives, new stories, relationships and meanings, details hidden in the actions that have been repeated in the same way for years.

The sub-score of creation

I should take a step back to focus on the sub-score at the stage when the first material is created and then elaborated. This is the only way to understand how the sub-score in performance embraces all the information from the distinct phases of the process in an indissoluble and coherent texture that forgets and remembers, and goes forwards and backwards in time.

During my first year of work at Odin Teatret training, improvisations and performance belonged to separate worlds for me. Only after Eugenio Barba's long and patient work on one of my improvisations, during which he adjusted each movement a few centimetres, did I realise that the 'I' who was learning to be present on stage, to mould her energy and make her actions 'real' through the training exercises, was the same 'I' who needed to shape my inner images in an improvisation and adapt them to the conditions imposed by the performance.

During the early years, I wanted to be expressive and I created material with conceptual images and linear stories. The resulting material, even though it made sense to me, often failed to surprise me or function in the process of building a performance. Today I

know that the pragmatic rules and pre-expressive principles - the work on presence, on how to be credible for the spectator independently from what is represented - determine both what I say in an improvisation and the meanings that the spectator will take from the performance.

In rehearsal, elaborating a sequence of actions, the strong or soft quality of energy, fast or slow rhythm, extrovert or introvert characteristics, different directions in space, kinds of balance, the chosen framework, will all weave into variations and oppositions which make the stage behaviour organic. Following these principles, in an improvisation or a composition, a character's way of being, the meanings or feelings, are not pre-conceived, but something which can surprise me. I discover that *I am told*, when I abandon the perspective of the person who *wants* to tell.

As an actress I lean on the sub-score first to create material, then to keep it alive, and later still to feel alive. To create a character, embody a text or a choreography, resolve a technical demand, the issue is always *how* to translate the task, theme, imaginary person, word or concept into a tangible form of behaviour that will give a sensation of fullness and life.

The sub-score becomes the personal strategy I choose to create references to which I can react. I can decide to analyse a character's traits to influence the way it walks or to walk in a certain way to build a character's traits, but the creation of rooted material always entails a process that branches out into details. To generalise does not help me. At the end of the process there will no longer be a 'psychological', 'physical' or 'distanced' actress, but a character which, if believable to the spectator, contains all the contiguous and contradictory aspects of a human being.

I have followed many different procedures and the logic of the sub-score used at the moment of creation has changed a lot over the years. With *The Million*, the material was built from a dance in which a couple never let go of each other's hands, the discipline of European ballroom dancing, marching rhythms, from the real fear I felt, and from wanting to show off a beautiful Mexican dress. *The Castle of Holstebro* was born by letting Mr Peanut - the stilt character which already existed in the street performances - speak in a work demonstration.

I have made improvisations in which, after being given a theme, I begin by letting my mind become immersed in a flow of associations. I then start to move following clear images and sensations, with a commitment to continue without stopping until I have finished. I have built sequences of actions from verbs in a text, from ways of sitting on a chair, from the opposition between head and eyes, from walking across stepping stones in a river, from the impudence of youth, from ten ways of holding a handbag or infinite ways of using a handkerchief. I have created characters starting from the opposite of their known characteristics and I have let divergent material create nameless roles. To improvise without a theme I have substituted the flow of music or the dynamism of certain paintings, the intonation of a song or the rhythm of a text for sequences of images and associations. The pleasure of dancing, the sensuality of energy that vibrates and breathes, or the beauty of a movement that finds its strongest expression can become references which help me find and fix the score during the phase of creation.

Chaotic order

But still the question remains: listening to that music, thinking of that theme, looking at that painting, why is the consequence this particular action and not that? Different factors decide: received information, the principles which vitalise my stage presence, and chance. In the same way that the colour red is troubling and blue gives a sense of tranquillity, a musical phrase determines a certain kind of movement, the dynamism of a painting makes me follow certain lines in space, the implicit knowledge of a theme provokes certain associations that I manifest through actions which for me are linked to the point of departure.

The actions are induced by a logic that can only be personal, which transforms and translates at the same time as reacting to the information received. But even when the starting point is detailed and precise, and even when the principles of stage presence are respected, there are still thousands of actions which could result. At this point it is chance that decides, I say to myself, following the same chaotic order that rules the universe, the order that makes a hurricane depend on a butterfly's wing beat.

I do not dispute chance. After the action is chosen and I have done it for the first time, I try to be faithful to it. I find it again, look after and repeat it until the time comes to change it during the process of elaborating a character or performance. This moment only arrives when I have incorporated both the original material and its motivation - the score and its subscore. During rehearsals the material can be cut, reduced, transformed, manipulated until it is almost unrecognisable. But the final result will contain all the previous information and every phase, enriching the texture of impulses and intentions. The original motives, the new meanings which emerge, the actions which no longer exist, the contradictory information and the logic which belongs to different stories: all this experience is part of the final result and is remembered/forgotten by the action.

The sub-score of repetition

Once the score is created and fixed, my problem is to keep it alive and appealing. As an actress I am and, at the same time, I represent. Improvising around details that don't change the score but enrich the references I lean on, I find it useful to jump between these two levels: to be possessed by the action and to comment upon it. Identifying and creating distance are points of view and ways of proceeding that converge in the action and are necessary to one another. I work with the consciousness of having and of being a character.

In *Talabot*, for example, in the divorce scene during which I had to destroy a nest, the interrupted rhythm with which I spoke the text, the tiredness caused by the previous scene, the tickle in my throat provoked by inhaling the thyme that covered my face, resulted in feeling like someone who first tries to control tears and then lets herself go, giving in to depression. When repeating this scene I tried to keep it alive by controlling the breath that had been broken by the rhythm of the text, the itching thyme and by in-



Julia Varley as Kirsten Hasstrup in the divorce scene, *Talabot* - Photo: Jan Rüssz

terpreting the destruction of the nest with a greater or lesser hand pressure. To underline the desolation I could let out all my breath in the pause in which the text changed from information to comment or reproduce in one word the moaning tone with which some Norwegian children speak. I could cry, let myself cry and sing the crying.

I find it difficult to believe these motivations as I write them down. The written words, like rational thought, are too slow for the time available to me as an actress when I am on stage. In that situation which I don't know quite how to reproduce on paper, these inner references travel at a higher speed than that of the scene, they co-exist and come into being by themselves. The sub-score that keeps the fixed score alive is a jungle of motives, sensations and opinions which precede thought.

Repetition can have a negative influence on the ability to keep the score alive when the performance is presented regularly for two, three, four or even ten years. To help prevent this deterioration I have either given myself new tasks or created processes that are independent from the performance. For example, the change of language when we play in different countries gives me an obstacle to overcome. I can oppose the established features of a character with tiny, new aspects, render the obvious expressions slightly ambiguous, give value to each syllable rather than only to the words of the text, look for any remaining dead moments in the performance and introduce some postures or miniscule movements. I can let the presence of the spectators and of other characters influence my perception of the scenes more or I can enrich the general symphony of the performance by introducing small sounds.

Independently of the performance, at other times during the day, I can dedicate myself to other activities which have a complementary kind of energy. This revives my motivation and resolution to continue playing.

The sub-score of performance

It is my precision as an actress that allows the spectators to endow an action with meaning and awakens reactions, sensations and emotions in them. When it is the body/mind that thinks, this same precision fills the score with meaning and affectivity for me as well. Precision provokes different reactions in the spectator and in me. While I am on stage, precision also triggers reactions in me which are not always the same.

Precision - giving life to a gesture that can only be so, an action which contains all its intentions - is the only real foundation on which I can always lean, even though I know that sometimes the aura that reverberates from it will be full of magic and at other times only of professionalism. Precision is my actress's 'intelligence' which doesn't know if the intention or the action comes first: it is the score which has become sub-score and vice versa. I attain precision when the question of whether it is determined by an inner motivation or by an exterior physical movement is redundant, when these terms are no longer relevant and the technique has become stage life.

After the years in which I had to learn to be visible on stage came the years in which I worked on veiling technique. Then I only wanted to be a dance of energy and my ideal was a butterfly. I had thought of entitling this chapter "Sub-score: Under the Skin of the Action". Then, reading a book on biology, I remembered that in modern science one no longer thinks in terms of inside or outside, over or under, but that everything is matter in borderless communication, a continuous flow and interchange. So all I can say is: sub-score, another useful but wrong word.■



Julia Varley in *Doña Musica's Butterflies* - Photo: Jan Rűsz