

Reflection, Lore and Acting - The practitioner's approach

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As *artistic research* or *practice based research* are more or less established as terms some kind of border is also established against *academic* or *traditional* theatre science. From a Swedish perspective, we still know little about the future artistic research in relation to both practice and an academic tradition. The thought of there existing something that can be called artistic research can be provocative to the artist as well as to the traditional academic. The apprehensions and the possibilities have been revealed in the discussion which, since 2004, has been conducted in the Swedish Research Council's Yearbook on artistic research.

The theatre practitioner's point of view regarding her own practice has usually been visible through interviews, observation and other ways of documentation. What if the practitioner herself tells the story? Below I will focus on how artistic research can broaden the field of theatre research. In my discussion I will mainly discuss the actor's relation to artistic research. I am not an actor myself, but it is that aspect of theatre work I have come closest to during my own research and while tutoring Master students at the Malmö Theatre Academy.

There is a knowledge that is mainly accessible from the actor's perspective: it could be about the process of physicalization, or about the connections between private life and the role. This is often an unarticulated knowledge which is considered to have its indirect value in actors meeting with the audience. But there is a value in articulating this knowledge so that it can be discussed, scrutinized and evaluated on another level than in the actors's meeting with the audience. Here, the actor can bring about a discussion on forming knowledge in the theatre and on the responsibility for the story narrated.

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The Swedish actor Ann Petrén, for example, examines in her Master's thesis at the Malmö Theatre Academy how her own knowledge can be articulated². The starting point was that Petrén, after portraying a young girl with Down's Syndrome, was often invited to give lectures about the situation of people with disabilities. Petrén asked herself what unique knowledge she had about disabilities, She is not an expert in this field, and doctors, parents and people with disabilities themselves should know more about this than she does. During her work with her Master's, Petrén learned that the work on creating a character, the embodiment of the role, carries a unique knowledge. This knowledge was not foremost a knowledge on acting, it was not portraying a character. Instead it touched the practitioner's deliberations, responsibilities and the moment of uncertainty of one's own sets of values in the work. This perspective requires the practitioner's knowledge.

Ann Petrén submitted her Master's thesis in the form of a written essay and a sequence of films clips from theatre performances where she took part. In one sequence the viewer gets to follow how Petrén changes into the characters clothes and how she transforms into the role's patterns of behaviour. By also reporting her bodily practice, her written essay could be additionally illuminated and seen with transparency. In this way she openly shows the limits of which her subjective actors-perspective carries. But she also openly reports the practical knowledge that is the foundation of her Master's. The written text would not exist if was not for the practice that it originates in. Also in other Master's theses from the Malmö Theatre Academy the combination of practical work and reflecting text is used. The act of writing down experiences that are usually described as bodily gives understanding to a previously described unarticulated knowledge. This phenomenon is also well known in pedagogical research³.

In connection with this discussion, it is of importance to ask whose voices are heard, what is the field of communication, and what is the pragmatic use of the research? The research's pragmatic quality is often linked to the ability to communicate within the field of which the scientific work itself is treating. Here, a work such as Ann Petrén's fills an important function: the road between

² Ann Petrén, *På spaning efter den tid som är* (mag. upps.) Lunds universitet, Teaterhögskolan i Malmö, 2006.

³ Olga Dysthe, *Det flerstämmiga klassrummet. Att skriva och samtala för att lära*, (Transl. Björn Nilsson) Studentlitteratur, Lund, 1996, pp. 89, 92.

this thesis and the practically working actor is short. As a well known and acknowledged actor is Sweden, Petré's Master's thesis has given a legitimacy to a reflecting outlook on own practice.

One of the starting points for this article is my own Ph.D. thesis, which was completed on April 2007. My thesis *The Actor in Action - Strategies for Body and Mind* looks into the actors work with the characters physical action⁴. It is the first doctoral thesis on theatre in Sweden within the framework of the new artistic research. The thesis' practical basis is my many years of work experience at the Malmö Theatre Academy, where I mainly taught movement. I will below give a short overview of the aim of my thesis.

In my research, I examine how actors in training solve the problem of embodying the role - how they, from their ideas, feelings, thoughts and knowledge create the physical actions of the role. My discussion has its basis in how the training in acrobatics can form a sort of cognitive model for the strategies needed by the actor to perform on stage. In the acrobatic vault, the actor needs devotion, awareness and control. This also signifies the demands on the actor's work with the physical action. The line of work analyzed - and promoted - by this research is the interaction between the actor's thoughts and powers of imagination, and how these thoughts become visible and embodied in action. Or, in other words, the main concern for my research is the actor's cognitive strategies. In my discussion, I give the term *action* a broad definition: the term includes all forms of deliberate activity, the spoken word as well as the physical actions performed by the actor.

My methodical grasp of the entirety of my research can be summarized in the approach of *the reflecting practitioner*. The term has its origin with the American philosopher and city planner Donald A. Schön, in his discussion of how the competent practitioner thinks in terms of practical action, and how she formulates her knowledge and intuitive understanding⁵. Based on this description of the practitioner's knowledge, Schön discusses how a traditional split between research and practice can be bridged with the notion of the *reflective researcher*. Schön claims that the practitioner takes on this function when situations of insecurity, unique circumstances or conflicts in the activity appear. I assume this is what signifies a lot of theatrical practice: when an ensemble examines how to treat material or how an older play will serve a new function, these situations arise.

⁴ Kent Sjöström, *Skådespelaren i handling – strategier för tanke och kropp*, Carlssons, Stockholm, 2007.

⁵ Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic, New York, 1983.



These situations are not about interplay between research and practice, but instead, these situations become situations of research in practice. My instruction takes its starting point in a similar approach, but, in my research, I also took the step to stading outside of this practical work, to reflect on my own practice and that of others from this perspective.

The accounts of the students and my depiction of the work is the most reliable empirical part of my research. The empiricism, however, is not limited to the experiences of the students and my interpretation of these. It is also present in my research as a whole: when I refer to my own experiences of practice these are also parts of the empiricism of the research.

When I evaluate previous research within the field of my research, I form an image of the reflecting practitioner Schön describes. In the thesis I mainly refer to actors, directors and pedagogues that in one way or another have communicated their knowledge, among others Konstantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov and Bertolt Brecht. I place my own teaching in relation to these previous acting methods and the traditions found in their training.

Without stating that these historical working experiences can be characterized as research in a traditonal sense, they describe a wide field of experience which, to a large extent, is the most important point of reference for my research.

The theories I have related to, come from fields which offer inspiring aspects of the actor's art of action, for instance sport psychology, linguistics and sociology. This is due to the fact that the work of an actor is a work based on physical relations and stances in a situation.

Practice based research is in many matters a research based on the presumption of man as acting and intentional cerature.

My research can be seen as an example of practice-based research that is well established in traditional academia. As design researcher, Ylva Gislén, stresses, practice based research is of course not unknown in traditional academia⁶. But my research can also be seen as giving an insider's point of view from within the artistic field - the work with students and my own work with scenic situations are not completed works of art, they are definitely parts of an artistic practice.

⁶ Ylva Gislén, "Handling som konstkapande. En konstkapskritisk reflexion over konstnären och designern som forskare" en *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, n° 1-2, 2007, p. 35.

These circumstances distinguish my thesis from the traditionally academic one: it is written from the perspective of the artistically active practitioner.

One aspiration in artistic research could be to open up towards untreated and unknown perspectives of the practitioners work. In the same way, there could be a striving towards research being anchored to artistic practice and that the results are in some sense made fit for use. The results should be able to be discussed during creative practice. This is, in my opinion, more important than the process of research resulting in some kind of artistic performance.

Theory as lore

If we see the artistic field as a practical one and the traditional academic field as a theoretical one, the discussion about artistic research will lack a lot of nuances. A more creative standpoint is to see them as two areas wherein we can examine different layers of theoretical and practical approaches. Here, I will not discuss all the practical approaches that, besides theory, constitute the knowledge of the academic researcher; instead I will try to discuss the more or less hidden connections to theory in the field of acting.

What constitutes the practical method of the actor? And what is the role of theory from an actor's point of view? To describe the body of knowledge, experiences, traditions, theories, methods and approaches constituting the actor's practice, I would like to use the term *lore*. My use of this term is inspired by Stephen M. North, professor in composition, and the way Sharon M. Carnicke, theatre researcher, uses the same term in her discussion about the Stanislavski tradition and heritage in the United States and the Soviet Union⁷.

If one scrutilizes the pracitioner's knowledge, one would not, at first, find a book of rules or methodical agendas. It is instead an experience-based knowledge, which is characterized by a pragmatic logic: the crucial question is about *what works*. Almost anything can be a part of a practitioner's lore: gossip and traditions, as well as scientifically coherent theories. North uses a suggestive metaphor for this sometimes messy knowledge: *The House of Lore*. This house, writes

⁷ Sharon M. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Harwood Academic, London, 1998; Stephen M. North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition. Portrait of an Emerging Field*, Boynton/Cook, Portsmouth, 1987.

North, is built of all kinds of materials, from canvas to metal, with dunegons and spires, and yet all areas are connected: “Each generation of Practitioners inherits this pile from the one before, is ushered around some of what there is, and then, in its turn, adds on its own touches”⁸. This metaphor works well as a description of an actor’s knowledge. Anecdotes and reading of literature, criticism as well as advice from a colleague, and rituals before a performance, are all parts of the actor’s House of Lore. This knowledge is anti-hierarchical and pragmatic, and often builds on bodily and oral traditions. The over all rule for judging a problem ahead is a pragmatic one: What is in it for the body? Theories and methods might get a value if they work for the actor’s bodily understanding and physical actions. If they are hindering the practical work, they are seen as intellectual exercises that are hostile to the physical involvement. But traditions can also serve as an alibi for conservatism and for old solutions to new problems. North discusses how “Practice is largely a matter of routine. Most of the time, then, Practitioners operate within the bounds of lore’s known: They approach the matter of what to do by reducing the infinite number of potentially new situations into familiar terms, then handling them with familiar strategies”⁹. There is apparently also a need for scrutinizing a practitioner’s oral and bodily knowledge, mainly built on traditions and routine. But as these traditions are often a part of personal behaviour, and seen as natural and organic, it makes them problematic to discuss and criticize. Nevertheless, it is of major importance to do so.

An actor who questions and wants to discuss the director’s instructions could be called a theoretical or intellectual. These are words that actors are sensitive to, as they are loaded with associations of fear and resistance to the practical work. But to what extent is acting dependent on a theoretical approach? An actor can act without coherent theories and even without articulated methods. So - are there theories in the field of acting? Somewhat contradicting the discussion above, I would like to illuminate some often invisible and unarticulated aspects of actors work.

There are, as theatre researcher Joseph R. Roach has discussed, connections between the history of science and acting practices¹⁰. Different methods of acting are always dealing with the

⁸ North, op. cit., p. 27

⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁰ Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion. Studies in the Science of Acting*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1993.

mind/body-problem and that is a field of interest for physiology and psychology, and for rapidly growing field: cognitive science. Although most actors would claim that they are not dependent on different theories for their work, they always build their work on presumptions. These may be about man's relation to society, ethical standards for the work or the relation between action and cognition. These presumptions are often unarticulated or even beyond awareness, but that does not mean that they are non-existent: by this I mean that there are theories underlying the actor's work. They may be visible in the practical work, heard in judgement about the work, and even formulated if confronted with the right questions.

Acting is often considered practical; acting is about doing, not about thinking. I would like to challenge this traditional dichotomy. As the director Robert Cohen puts it, actors should not be asked *not to think, only to do*, but rather to examine what to think about¹¹. As actors are human beings, they tend to think and reflect. In this discussion Cohen refers to theories about cybernetic and cognitive dissonance, theories that both explain why a certain acting method works, but also give tools for a strengthening of the acting practice. Other examples of theoretical approaches are when Konstantin Stanislavski tries to connect to the psychology of his time, when Vsevolod Meyerhold uses the reflexology of Pavlov, and when Bertolt Brecht tries to physicalize the dialectic process found in Marxism.

In some cases practical acting methods precede a formulated theory: both Stanislavski and the Soviet actor and pedagogue Michael Chekhov describe a work based on visualization or *imagery*, a technique later to be examined and developed in the field of sports' psychology. But theatre practitioners have had a loaded relation to science, in the same way as today. Stanislavski connected a lot of his practical work to science, often in the name of *the organic nature of mankind*. But in some of his writings, Stanislavski stresses that he does not have any scientific pretensions¹². Another approach is easily exemplified by Bertolt Brecht. When he writes that he is dependent on science, he know that, "This may make many people seriously doubt my artistic ability"¹³.

¹¹ Robert Cohen, *Acting Power. An Introduction to Acting*, Mayfield, Palo Alto, 1978, p. 12.

¹² Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work. A Student's Diary*, (Transl. and ed. by Jean Benedetti), Routledge, London, 2008, p. xxiv.

¹³ Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Learning", in Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds., *Brecht Sourcebook*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 27.

Theory might be helpful for understanding a traditional practical approach in the work, One example from my own thesis is the cognitive language philosophy of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson¹⁴. With help from their linguistic and philosophical discussion of how language is based on and built up through bodily references, what they call *the embodied mind*; it is possible to strengthen the practical work of the actor. This linguistic theory gives a specific insight in how bodily behaviour is dependent on verbal formulations and is therefore of use for the actor, and even the director, in their work. Another example is sociology, a science that studies human relations, and therefore could be of interest for the actor.

The theories related above are mainly to be found in the field of social science and they have proven to be of use when acting should be scrutinized. Here, acting differs from a text orientated approach; the understanding and interpretation of the dramatic text is manifested in physical actions. From my own experience, I can say that as far as acting is concerned, the helpful theoretical approaches often come from cognitive science, sociology and psychology.

By bringing into light the theory that lies immanently in the actors work, it is possible to examine the processes of acting and to relativize these time-wise and ideologically. The actor's work can be seen both as process based on knowledge and as a creator of knowledge. If this examination is done by the actor herself in the role of a reflecting researcher, not only the practice changes, the research can, with its base in the practical work, alter existing theories or generate new theory.

Method

The question about method is often seen as crucial in the discussion about artistis research.

The opinion that a work of art, on its own, can never be considered research is often heard. I would like to briefly share my point of view on this matter.

Artistic work, even if it is called avant-garde or experiemntal, is not necessarily, in my opinion, artistic research. On the other hand, even traditional and basic theatre work, as well as

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesb. The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic, New York, 1999.

experimental theatre and the training of actors could be the basis of artistic research, if combined with a reflective approach. Research involves a methodical way of communicating your train of thoughts, knowledge as a process rather than as an opinion or final conclusion. The research shows this process is dependent on reflection: a methodical, reliable and valid work, which is possible for someone not directly involved to evaluate and scrutinize. I also mean that this methodical transparency is possible when researching one's own practice.

Artistic research, with its openly communicated subjectivity, is an easy target for those who claim objectivity as a necessary part of scientific methodology. To stand critically against the requirement of objectivity can easily be interpreted as relativism.

With Donna Haraway's discussion on *Situated Knowledge* as a starting point, Ylva Gislén brings forward how the opposite of objectivity is not relativism, but "partial, localizable and critical knowledges"¹⁵. Gislén discusses the demands of objectivity in the scientific community, and finds that the same oppositions that traditionally have been cultivated between male and female abilities are found in the tensions between academic and artistic research. This can regarding qualities such as emotional, intuitive and bias in relation to rational and objective. In asserting objectivity lies a claiming of power¹⁶. To summarize Gislén's statements in the discussion on artistic and academic research, she argues that it could be fruitful to critically evaluate the component that is taken for granted, which is research and science itself¹⁷.

In qualitative research it is expected that the researcher's subjective perspective is communicated in a way that allows one's statements to be critically examined - this in order to create transparency. Here is a reason to take sceptical stand. The term transparency and it is used holds an assumption that a person - the researcher - can report her motives and background and in that way make it possible to scrutinize her conclusions. Here lies a belief that with a clearly communicated subjectivity, the research is in a sense made more objective. I doubt the possibility of making one's position that evident - even if done in the form of a novel.

¹⁵ Gislén, op. cit., p. 47. (My transl.)

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 45-46. In her discussion Gislén quotes Sandra Harding.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

In the discussion of transparent subjectivism it should, in my opinion, be brought to light how positions, interests and intentions are active agents in own's one research.

Power and rationality

Actor's work are of course scrutinized in public. Their work is discussed, criticized and judged in public. The actor's level of knowledge and work results are discussed in an arena where it is not considered common sense to object to the judgements given. This is a part of the actors' - and of course of other artists' as well - working conditions. This fact is quite underestimated when it comes to a discussion about the actor's relations to theatre research, research about themselves and their field.

For the actor it is not customary to publicly express opinions on her artistic work other than in interviews and possibly also in a biography. The actor does not own the written discourse. To express yourself in text can be seen as switching sides: to step into the critic's field, to scrutinize instead of being scrutinized. It is a process that includes a changing of roles, even a break from the role as an artist that has been conquered with a great deal of effort. What does this artist's role look like? Gerturd Sandqvist, professor at Malmö Theatre Academy, stresses how a society that sees itself as rational tends to want to see the artist as a romantic genius and as an image of the irrational: "Through this idea of the genius, which I mean still exists, a genius can be extremely extolled and an authority without comparison, but can never be a part of society. The genius will always be an outsider. And I believe that modern society wants their artists outside the system. Certain groups of people have been placed outside of the system or society - artists, primitive people and women. And I think that there are still strong forces that will maintain this order.¹⁸"

An example of this way of looking at the artistic task is found when musicologist and researcher, Henrik Karlsson, describes art and research: "Artwork of all genres, when it is as its best, touches upon matters and dimensions that science, with its strict terminology, cannot explain sufficiently - unconceivable, unbelivable, unspeakable - the eternal and existential questions of

¹⁸ Gertrud Sandqvist, "Drömmen om konstnären", in *Vad ska vi ha konstnärer till? Ett seminarium om konstnärliga utbildningar och kulturinstitutioner*. Visby den 17-18 maj 1999, Stiftelsen framtidens kultur, Förnyelse av kulturinstitutioner, 1999, pp. 12-13. (My transl.)

mankind. When this happens, in magical moments, time freezes for a short while or time becomes space, in a concentration everyone can sense”¹⁹. Karlsson, who is chairman of the group of experts who have scrutinize Swedish artistic research, further describes the artist as a researcher: “It is a great challenge to be a researching artist, both ethically and intellectually, to take a bearing in these bottomless depths in a peculiar dual role: at the same time be both subject and object; as creator free and unleashed, as observer critical, methodical and analyzing.”²⁰

Both of these comments show how the discussion on artistic research is acted out as a dispute about rationality. This discussion is not new; it is a part of the discussion on the artist’s role and ultimately touches upon the discussion of attitudes toward art. To place the actor, and art on the whole, in a non-rational field has a purpose that which is outside art then appears to be rational, reflected and logically stringent, Medical science, economy, psychology or other traditionally scientific fields can then be seen as though free from troubling subjectivity, rational and therefore above the game of coincidences.

But the non-rational also owns a kind of legitimacy, especially as a part of a romantically coloured view on art, Theatre, and specially the art of acting, is seen as a non-rational discourse, where rationality is made invisible. Rationality is not the quality associated with the actors’ knowledge. The actors’ creativity has traditionally been assigned to an irrational sphere, even if their voices of course have been heard in that discussion. But, according to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, even the artist has an interest in art being looked upon in a non-rational sphere. When the sociologist want to scrutinize the artist’s role, she challenges the artistic society’s self image, with its belief in the unique gift and the belief in the autonomic creator. This is a privileged position. The sociologist wants to understand, explain and give meaning which leads to, in Bourdieu’s opinion, scandal. To de-mystify art is considered blasphemous²¹.

¹⁹ Henrik Karlsson, “En blå naivitet?” – om konstnärlig och praktikbaserad forskning” in *Konst, kunskap, insikt, texter om forskning och utvecklingsarbete på det konstnärliga området*, Årsbok, 2004 för Konstnärligt FoU, Vetenskaprådet, 2004, p. 143. (My transl.)

²⁰ Ibid. (My transl.)

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Kultur och kritik. Anföranden av Pierre Bourdieu*, (transl. Johan Stiernä), Daidalos, Göteborg, 1991, p. 225.

When the artist steps into the role of a researcher, she risks the legitimacy she owns within non-rational arena. She risks being identified as a dilettante: if the practitioner claims to be a researcher, she risks a kind of subordination in relation to the academic research community, the subordination that also exists in society at large between the *brain* and the *hand*. In a discussion on artistic research it is necessary to include this perspective of power.

There are good reasons for the artist to avoid that which is seen as a rational discussion. On the one hand, she risks artistic legitimacy, - if it is taken to a non-rational arena - and on the other hand, she risks being a second-rate academic. It seems to me that a conservative or restricting approach to art as well as to the academic can embrace each other. Both art and academia will feel safer without the idea of artistic research. But I would also like to bring forward that one way out of this dilemma can be the position found in the reflecting practitioner. The actor is an expert in her field: that this expert gets the opportunity to speak about and articulate her knowledge is not a problem, but can bring a perspective to theatre research which I, for my part, have missed. This way of reasoning can also be used in other professions within theatre and other fields of art.

There are of course methodical challenges that have to be handled, and it is of main importance for the artistic researcher not to meet with ignorance. Artistic research would probably share a lot of methodical approaches that are to be found in current academia - the challenges facing the artistic researcher are not necessarily unique. The academic approach possesses tools for practice based research and so called tacit knowledge, and these will prove themselves to be helpful.