THE EXTRAORDINARY BODY?

Training and creation in the work of Zen Zen Zo physical theatre

Brisbane-based physical theatre company Zen Zen Zo claims to be at the forefront of actor training and contemporary performance in Australia, having developed its own style of training and performance forged from the Suzuki Method of Actor Training, the Viewpoints and Butoh. In this paper, I propose that training seeks to create what I call the ‘extraordinary body’ of the performer, one that is physically dynamic and engaging. Further, I argue that this body is a philosophical construct underpinned by the company’s appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival theories, giving rise to a body that is transgressive and unsettling.

What then becomes of this extraordinary body as it is placed in the process of creating work for the stage? By examining how the extraordinary body works in Zen Zen Zo’s use of the Composition method, I question the assumptions placed on this body, suggesting that is ultimately a limited entity.

Keywords: Zen Zen Zo—Suzuki Method of Actor Training—the Viewpoints—Butoh—‘extraordinary (EO) body’—Composition

As a drama and performance undergraduate, I often found myself inclined towards physically-based methods of actor training and performance. Motivated by my interest, I decided to pursue a research masters at the University of Queensland, where I examined the training methods and performances of Brisbane-based physical theatre company, Zen Zen Zo. I based my research on a participant-observer approach, supplementing it with observation notes of the training process, which included detailed descriptions of particular exercises, comments made by teachers and participants, as well as
personal reflections based on my own embodied experience in the training. Much of my investigation looked into how the company had developed its own style of training and performance forged from other established modes of actor training and performance practice: specifically, the Suzuki Method of actor training (SMAT), the Viewpoints, and Butoh. I sought to address the following questions: what does training ultimately aim to achieve?; and how is it related to creating work for performance?

My research thus led me to consider the concept of an ‘extraordinary (EO) body’, one that is (re)constructed by training and then put to work during the process of creation, of which the Composition method developed by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau plays a significant part. In this paper, I interrogate the qualities of this particular EO body that Zen Zen Zo’s actor training creates, and subsequently examine the role that the EO body plays in the creative process and the assumptions placed on the body, thereby revealing both its power as well as its limitations.

**Training ideologies and the creation of an EO body**

The importance placed on an ongoing system of actor training has been a key focus of many notable 20th-century practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Jacques Copeau, renowned for forging actor training techniques that foreground the actor’s body; it is this sort of intensive physical preparation for performance that has become what Alison Hodge describes as being ‘central to theatrical innovation in the twentieth century’ (2010: xviii). Indeed, actor training methods continue to be developed well into the 21st century, forming a critical component of many contemporary theatre companies like Zen Zen Zo.

Before I proceed with my examination, a brief history of Zen Zen Zo is necessary. Founded in 1992 by co-Artistic Directors Lynne Bradley and Simon Woods, the company’s earlier work had mainly been forged from Bradley’s experience with Butoh training in Japan, and Zen Zen Zo is credited with having staged Brisbane’s inaugural Butoh performance. Since then, the company has widened its training repertoire beyond Butoh to include SMAT and the Viewpoints. The co-Artistic Directors are claimed to be the premier teachers of the Viewpoints in Australia, while Woods is one of the country’s leading instructors of SMAT (Zen Zen Zo n.d.).

With Zen Zen Zo’s three-fold approach to actor training, each method brings a different key focus to the training and performance aesthetic. Through emphasis on the feet, SMAT aims to reinstate the body’s ‘physical and sensory facilities that have become weakened and desensitised’ (Allain 2002: 122); the Viewpoints training offers actors a shared language by naming the principles of time and space, providing performers with ‘points of awareness’ (Bogart & Landau 2005: 8) when working; and the company’s take on Butoh creates a performance aesthetic that embraces extreme states of expression, and focuses on image work by engaging performers with their senses. I do acknowledge the complexities and diversities of Butoh practitioners whose work take a very different approach to Zen Zen Zo. I am, however, paying particular attention to how the company has developed its own brand of Butoh, one that is highly theatrical. This description can perhaps be paralleled to Bradley’s principal Butoh teacher, Maro Akiji, whose own work often features ‘circus-style entertainment … and focus[es] on the grotesqueries of the world’ (Baird 2007: 48). It is through the amalgamation of these three distinct methods that Zen Zen Zo has made training relevant to their aesthetic needs, carving a recognisable aesthetic that feeds into the work it creates.
Like other psychophysical approaches to performing, Zen Zen Zo’s training methods aim to cultivate the performer’s body-mind, thereby suggesting that the performer’s body is deficient in one way or another, and needs to be remade/reformed. What is deemed wrong with the untrained or insufficiently trained body and how does training seek to address that? Based on my experience within Zen Zen Zo’s training, I observed two main ‘problems’: the first is that bodies tend to want to remain in a state of comfort; and second, performers bring with them individual bodily habits that are deemed unnecessary in performance.

In order to combat these problems, training is often rigorous, and one is expected to enter fully with a sense of sacrifice and commitment. In training, especially in SMAT, participants’ bodies are constantly put under duress, which then becomes a form not only of physical training, but of mental and attitudinal training as well. Borrowing from martial arts, the notion of irimi is imposed: participants are instructed to ‘choose death’, that is, to enter the problem straight on. Put in a state of discomfort, the body has to fight to stay ‘alive’, and it is this sense of the ‘fight’ that makes the body a watchable one in performance. I recall a personal experience during Stomping Ground where participants were engaged in the ‘Stamp and Shakuhachi’, an exercise requiring us to stomp around the room vigorously for about three minutes. Initially I had felt that I was finally ‘getting’ the SMAT; stomping seemed to be getting easier, and I had assumed that it was because I was improving in the training. Woods approached me and told me to ‘connect with the ground more, drive the energy into the ground’, demonstrating that it is obvious whenever a performer loses the ‘fight’ on stage; the sense of dynamism is lost. Ongoing training is thus founded on the belief that one never ‘perfects’ it; instead, one needs constantly to go deeper into the training, to continually discover where one’s obstacles lie and meet them head on.

Not only does training aim to foster a body that is dynamic and engaging because it possesses a sense of ‘fight’, it also aims to reveal individual habits and tensions that are considered unnecessary for a performer. Training constantly reinforces Bogart’s notion of a ‘violence of articulation’ (2001: 48), where all that is extraneous has to be eradicated. Acknowledging a body’s individual habits reflects the idea that the body is a sociopolitical construct; attempting to redress these habits suggests that the politicised body must first encounter a process of deconstruction and negation, in order to attain ‘neutrality’.

But the concept of the neutral body in itself raises certain questions: is there only one kind of neutral body? What does a neutral body look like? It is important to consider that the neutral body is not merely a physical construct, but a psychological one as well, and that it is perhaps from this state of neutrality that the body can be ‘transformed’. It appears that the body in training needs first to enter a state of neutrality, and then be put into a state of discomfort; but what does this process ultimately seek to achieve? The informing ideologies of training need to reinforce the type of theatre Zen Zen Zo wants to create; if the company’s vision is to create ‘theatrical experiences that are visually stunning and physically extreme’ (Zen Zen Zo n.d.), then the body needs to meet these demands.

It is precisely for these reasons stated that the concept of the extraordinary body is useful. The term ‘extraordinary’ is often used to refer to something exceptional or remarkable. Hyphenating the word reveals it as ‘extra-ordinary’, signalling that it goes beyond what is ordinary or common. The
extraordinary/extra-ordinary body of the performer is thus one that transcends the everyday. It is a body that is not in a state of comfort, but enters the struggle and acquires a sense of power and presence in performance. Being extraordinary also suggests a stripping of one’s individual habits, so that actors can become mutable to convey a broader variety of roles not dictated by their tics. This issue implies that in order to attain the EO body, one must first ‘forget’ or ‘kill’ his or her individual body in order to reach a state of transcendence.

‘Killing’ the individual or cultural body is a common metaphor in Butoh, and it is here that I must emphasise the importance that Butoh plays in Zen Zen Zo’s own ideology and aesthetic; it informs all the work that the company creates. In Butoh, the ‘empty shell’ or the ‘dead body’ is often the starting point for metamorphosis to occur (Roquet 2003: 43; Hornblow 2006: 35; Moore 1991). If ‘extraordinary’ is understood in the sense of transcending the everyday, then the Butoh body without a doubt is an EO body: it aims to break the limits of expression, often reaching physically extreme states. In order to reach such heightened states of expression in Butoh, Kurihara Nanako argues that performers need to become fully aware of their physiological senses, thereby developing the ability to:

manipulate their own bodies physically and psychologically. As a result, butoh dancers can transform themselves into everything from a wet rug to a sky and can even embody the universe, theoretically speaking. (Nanako 2000: 16)

Thus far, what I have suggested as the EO body seems to run parallel with Barba’s own notion of the extra-daily body of the performer, one that is able to ‘dilate [its] presence and consequently also dilate the spectator’s perception … [the actor’s] body is the centre of a network of physical tensions and resistances, unreal but effective’ (Barba & Savarese 1991: 81). I propose, however, that the term I am employing is an extension of Barba’s concept: the EO body that Zen Zen Zo aims to create is not only a physical construct, one achieved through a physically challenged and ‘fighting’ body, but a philosophical one as well. Zen Zen Zo claims that their Butoh philosophy is very much influenced by the founders’ appropriation of the carnival theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, and as such, embraces the idea of ‘celebrat[ing] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’ (Bakhtin 1984: 10).

Carnivalisation posits that social hierarchy becomes inverted, and Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘grotesque body’ is a site on which this inversion occurs (Dentith 1995: 83). The idea of the grotesque is common to both carnival and Butoh, and for the company, the grotesque body needs to be extraordinary because it carries strong implications about the way in which one views the world, and how it attempts to shift prevailing truth. By considering the philosophy of Zen Zen Zo’s Butoh and Bakhtin’s carnival theories, we can add another aspect to the EO body: in its grotesquerie, the EO body is unsettling; it seeks to reveal on stage what has hitherto been denied or suppressed in daily life; it aims to turn the world and institutions on its head (Bradley, personal communication). Of course, my highlighting of the connection between Butoh and Bakhtin is not to suggest that this is the philosophy adopted by all Butoh artists; I merely acknowledge that this connection is made explicitly by Zen Zen Zo, and as such, informs my theorisation of the EO body.

So, based on my explication of the EO body, it can be understood as possessing the following qualities:
It is dynamic and powerful.
It is captivating and engaging.
It possesses transcendent qualities.
It is articulately expressive.
It is transgressive and unsettling.

Training is essential in laying the groundwork for performance and, according to Bradley, the quality of the preparation affects the level of performance, which is why even during training, actors are expected to be in ‘performance mode’. Not only does training seek to create the EO body which prepares actors for the physical demands of performance, it also provides a shared language and a common aesthetic among performers, thereby contributing to the high level of ensemble work that the company focuses on. This belief speaks strongly to the idea of pre-expressivity that Eugenio Barba and Judy Barba proclaim. They state that actors ‘should appear credible on a sensorial level and be present on a pre-expressive one. The granite foundations are their quality of credibility, their ability to stimulate the attention of the spectator and to be rooted in the body-mind of the actor’ (Barba & Barba 2000: 62).

If training aims to create the EO body, how is this body put into action during the creation process? From my interrogation into the creation process, I contend that while pressure is constantly put on the EO body to develop physically and visually rich material while devising, it is insufficient to rely solely on the body to create work that is meaningful and able to communicate articulately to an audience.

The EO Body in Composition work

The creation process, for Zen Zen Zo, is informed largely by the Composition method developed by Bogart and Landau; it is employed as a means to create short pieces of work that can eventually be shaped for a performance. On the surface, Composition appears to be simply a way to create art through improvisation, and perhaps many practitioners follow this style of working without applying the formal term ‘Composition’ to their work. Composition as developed by Bogart and Landau, however, is a specific method, ‘a structure for working from our impulses and intuition’ (Bogart & Landau 2005: 12).

Composition work forms only one component of Zen Zen Zo’s three-stage creation process, and it is my intention in this section to investigate how the EO body is put to work during this period of time. By interrogating how the EO body works during the creation process, I raise concerns about Bogart and Landau’s notion of ‘working from our impulses and intuition’. Does this method of working necessarily create what Bogart claims to be ‘viscerally dynamic moments in the theatre’ (cited Drukman 1998: 32)? Even if it does, can these moments communicate on a deeper level to an audience, or does communication remain largely on a visceral level? My examination reveals that relying on the EO body to excite an audience is insufficient if art is intended to ultimately challenge and transform. This idea of transforming the audience becomes significant when that Bradley states how ‘all work [created] comes from looking at the shadow space, the underbelly, and exploring the rich territory and celebrating it’ (personal communication). If such is the case, then all work must do more than merely create a somatic response in the spectator, even if this ability is highly
characteristic of physical theatre.

Through my investigation of the EO body in the earlier section, I suggested that the concept of ‘struggle’ is necessary to create performers who are powerful and captivating. Similarly, the Composition method requires the body to work under ‘Exquisite Pressure’, a term proposed by Bogart and Landau (2005: 138) and embraced by Zen Zen Zo. With this method, the performer is expected to work with a sense of abandonment and spontaneity, privileging the somatic impulse over the intellect. Inherent in this concept is Bogart’s belief that ‘the realm of the intuitive … is the true domain of creativity’ (cited Herrington 2000: 158). The assumption behind this claim lies in the idea that it is the EO body, unhindered by the intellect, that possesses the potential for creativity, and from which ‘wonderful work emerges’ (Bogart & Landau 2005: 138). Such ‘wonderful work’ as the kind I have just described seems to be accorded praise purely on aesthetic terms, but an aesthetically pleasing performance is not necessarily an engaging one.

Much of the emphasis on the body in Zen Zen Zo’s creative process seems to be centred on the concept of creating ‘moments of aesthetic arrest’, another term borrowed from Bogart (2001: 63). A common practice after participants had presented their Composition pieces during Stomping Ground and Winter Stomp was for the entire group to share which segments they had found particularly memorable. One particular Composition piece from Stomping Ground that made an impact on many participants was when an actor climbed up onto a pillar in the training space, about four feet above the audience who were seated on the floor. Unexpectedly, he leapt off the pillar and into the audience space, but the spectators had been cued to close their eyes seconds before the actor landed on the floor. The final image of the actor suspended in mid-air was both confronting and beautiful; confronting because we became momentarily threatened by the possible invasion of our space and also by the suspense of not knowing where and how the actor was going to land, and beautiful because the actual landing was withheld from us, leaving us with the image of the suspended body. Bogart and Landau posit that ‘one’s own body and memory can be the most meaningful barometer in the artistic process’ (2005: 182), suggesting that the somatic connection between artist and spectator is the most immediate. I do not deny that this method of work can create theatre with a ‘striking visual and physical language’ (Bradley 2003: n.p.), but the issue with constantly focusing on discovering these aesthetically arresting moments is that it could produce predictable aesthetic choices over time. If the body constantly remembers these dynamic moments, then it might also try to reproduce them, regardless of how they may serve to create meaning in a performance.

Considering that the EO body, despite its capacity to be physically powerful and engaging, is insufficient to create art that is able to ‘transform’ an audience implies that critical analysis toward the work is important in order to achieve such a claim. The use of visual metaphors plays heavily on Zen Zen Zo’s work, and through the course of Winter Stomp, participants were encouraged to consider how to tell stories using the visual metaphors created by the body in time and space. These visual metaphors employed for purely aesthetic purposes, however, lead to what Bradley admonishes as ‘empty art’ that lacks intellectual engagement (personal communication). The importance of critical reflection becomes an essential stage in the company’s creative process: participants are required to ‘step outside’ the work in order to analyse it and refine it, sharpening the focus of the material that has grown out of impulse.
The analytical process is important in the creation of the work so as to ensure that a meta-narrative, or overarching theme, is present throughout the performance. Distilling the meta-narrative of the story ensures that there is a clear message to be communicated to the audience; the EO body then becomes a vehicle on which to carry this message. Not only is it important to reflect on what one wants to say in the performance, it is just as important to consider how one wants to impact the audience, and these two concerns play a key role in Zen Zen Zo’s creative development phase of the creation process. Returning to the idea of impacting the audience, I observed that much of the work that had emerged from the Compositions created during Winter Stomp reflected the sort of heightened states of expression commonly found in Butoh. The use of extremities certainly worked to evoke strong physical reactions from the other participants, but I question if the Butoh aesthetic remained at a superficial level of its outer form. The expressions of the grotesque body, of bodily contortions and disjointedness, had a visceral effect on spectators and were physically unsettling, but I suggest that unless the performers’ grotesqueries engage with the deeper philosophical underpinnings that Zen Zen Zo claims to have, the EO body of the performer fails to become transgressive. The body, as a result of intensive psychophysical training, can therefore possess all the physical qualities necessary to make it ‘extraordinary’ in those terms, but without the informing philosophical ideologies, it cannot effectively challenge nor transform an audience.

Although working from impulse can generate visually rich material for use in performance, it cannot fully claim to be able to transform an audience if it does not engage with the audience on an intellectual and philosophical level. The way in which Zen Zen Zo works often places the body in a privileged position; work starts with the body. This method of working may imply that the body, unhindered by the intellect, is the principal creator, but if this were the case it would perpetuate the idea of a Cartesian, dualistic formation, further polarising the mind and the body. We must heed Barba’s admonition about placing neither seduction or intellect above the other. He astutely claims that ‘seduction alone or comprehension alone cannot endure for very long without one another: the seduction would be brief, the comprehension would lack interest’ (1985: 369).

Instead, he argues that ‘the dilation of the physical body is in fact no use if not accompanied by a dilation of the mental body’ (Barba & Savarese 1991: 58; emphasis in original), and that ‘a way of moving in space is a manifestation of a way of thinking ... The performer can start from the physical or the mental, it doesn’t matter which, provided that in the transition from one to other, a unity is constructed’ (Barba & Savarese 1991: 55). The notion of cultivating the performer’s mental body in training is extended in Zen Zen Zo’s creation process through what it calls ‘offline dramaturgical work’, a period of critical evaluation to ensure that clarity of meaning is conveyed throughout the performance. The interesting and dynamic stage pictures that have emerged from the body’s creative impulse are later put through a process of critical engagement and clarification, suggesting that the process of creation is one that needs to engage both the EO body and the (extraordinary) mind in dialogue with each other.

**Concluding thoughts**

The physical body is the meeting place of worlds. Spiritual, social, political, emotional, intellectual worlds are all interpreted through this physical body ... It is visible evidence of work to move from conception to production. Our bodies are both art elements and tools
that communicate intuitively. (Mitchell et al 2002: 243)

It is important to remember that training is a way in which Zen Zen Zo develops the necessary skills for performance. Training is an inherent part of the creative process, leading to the creation of what I propose as the EO body; this body must serve the aesthetic needs of the company. But while training works to create performers with extraordinary bodies that are dynamic, captivating and articulate, there is a danger that the work created relies excessively on this notion of the body. As I have discussed in the section on the EO body in the creation process, much of the work generated from the Composition method stems from engaging with impulse over intellect. The underlying assumption behind this style of working is that when the EO body is put into action in the creative process, it is capable of producing visually dynamic work on stage.

As Mitchell et al signal a body that needs to house different ‘worlds’, so do I state that the EO body is a limited entity. Theatre cannot be simply a collection of ‘aesthetically arresting’ moments, no matter how visually and physically engaging they may be. If Zen Zen Zo’s aesthetic is premised on its take on the Butoh philosophy and carnival theories, then the work created likewise has to engage with those contentions if it seeks to transform its audience. An EO body cannot merely serve to evoke a somatic response in the spectator; it must also stimulate the spectator’s intellectual—and by extension, spiritual, social, political and emotional—engagement.

End notes

1. Most of my observations and personal communication with Bradley come from my participation in Zen Zen Zo’s Stomping Ground 2010 and Winter Stomp 2010, three-week and one-week training intensives respectively. In Stomping Ground, participants trained in all three methods, whereas in the latter only the Viewpoints and Butoh were taught, with afternoon sessions dedicated mainly to Composition work.

2. Bradley is currently the training centre director, having handed over the role of Artistic Director to Michael Futcher and Helen Howard. Woods is now producer for the Queensland Performing Arts Centre.

3. The three stages of Zen Zen Zo’s creation process are (i) Conceptual Development (Preparation phase), (ii) Creative Development (Incubation phase), and (iii) Rehearsals (Illumination and Verification phase). I wrote about these phases at length in my thesis, detailing the work as part of my creative journal during Winter Stomp.

4. Zen Zen Zo claims that its artistic vision is to produce work that excites, challenges, and transforms its audience. See http://www.zenzenzo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=41

5. For Barba, ‘dilation’ is what contributes to the performer’s scenic presence. Dilation refers to the ability of an actor to manipulate his or her mental and physical energy in order to use it most effectively on stage.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalie Lazaroo

Natalie Lazaroo is undertaking her PhD candidature at Griffith University (Brisbane), having recently received her master of philosophy in drama from the University of Queensland. She originally comes from Singapore, having done her honours degree at the Nanyang Technological University. Her research interest includes physical theatre, Asian theatre forms, and feminist theories.