

AN EMBODIED ACTOR TRAINING: THE LESSAC MODEL

ABSTRACT

This research study aims at identifying the value of Lessac model to the student actors of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. It also intends to establish the validity of the Lessac model as an ideal actor training technique since it has to do with a self-awareness process. The research work also hopes to reveal the need to incorporate the model into the University of Ibadan, Theatre Arts Department's curriculum/ system.

Hurt describes Lessac as a developer of voice, speech and movement. He terms his model as the Kinesensic training. Hurt adds that Lessac's work relies on what he calls "the feeling process" and it is based on recognition and consequent control of physical behavior patterns naturally produced when the body as a whole is functioning most effectively. (Hurt, 2014: 2)

The researcher intends to give an overview of Lessac's work and also compare it with another actor training technique in order to prove that the Kinesensic awareness is a more rounded embodied actor training technique.

Having placed side by side Lessac's model with one other actor training technique, this research study will however delineate the importance of Lessac's work on the student actors of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Acting is “a fundamental human activity”. (Felner, 2013: 158). You can see this when you watch children at play. Whether it is playing doctor or soldier, people have a basic need to express themselves through impersonation and fantasy. Felner further explained that this daily role-play, however, is quite different from the imaginative, vital transformation required to act in the theatre. Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1953:4) tells us that acting is an imitation of life and that imitation is a necessary and pleasurable human activity and a source of knowledge about the world ourselves. Action therefore is a special form of behavior. It transcends the everyday role-playing and consists of universal qualities that make good acting. “These qualities are: Energy, control, focus, purpose, dynamics, enlargement, transformation. These qualities aid the actor to create believable and artistic characters on stage and are shared by all actors all over the world” (Felner, 2013: 158).

An actor therefore, is one who engages in acting. An actor is one who portrays a character in a performance. The actor performs “in the flesh” in the medium of the theatre, and/ or in the modern mediums such as films, radio and television. (Felner, 2013: 160). Wilson explains that the word actor was gotten from a Greek word *hypokrites*, which literally means “one who interprets”. (2006: 32). Wilson goes further to say that the actor’s interpretation of their role pertains to the role played, whether based on a real person or a fictional character. Interpretations occur even when the actor is playing themselves as in forms of experimental performance, or more commonly; to act is to create, character in performance. (Wilson, 2006: 32). The actor uses his body as a medium to communicate and entertain. The actor undergoes various types of trainings to prepare the body and shape the mind to be able to recreate characters, emotions, cultures, and language of any given role in a play. These training include voice training, speech training, body training etc.

Just like gold passes through fire in order to become beautiful, so also, the actor have to undergo certain types of training in order for him to be shaped, flexible and versatile and for his performance to be worth seeing. Chekov (1953: 1-2) opines that, there are certain actors who have a full and vast understanding of a script and a role but are unable to convey the richness within them to the audience. He says that physical exercises are needed to overcome this.

Actor training can be described as the use of various exercises done to improve the body, the voice and the mind before acting. This is done in order to help the actor remain flexible and open. The training of an actor starts with the various exercises for each of the actor's tool i.e. body, voice and mind through relaxation, concentration, imagination and observation (Felner, 2013: 113).

Overtime, actor training has differed from performance tradition of acting and the written tradition of acting.

In performance traditions, the plays are usually improvised and tell the stories of gods and heroes and also make use of stock characters. The actor training here is rigorous and starts from childhood placing concentration on the student's body, due to the physical demands of the performance". (Felner, 2013: 178).

It also focuses on gestures and movements of the actor e.g. kathakali and Chinese opera.

"Written tradition however, is more rounded than the performance tradition. The actors are trained both physically and psychologically. Since the actors here are not stock characters, it tries to not only remodel the actor's body and posture but also and vocal quality e.g. Shakespeare's actor training". (Felner, 2013: 178).

The voice is a powerful tool an actor cannot do without. Over the century, quality of voice has been considered the actor's most important attribute (from Greek till date). Until recently, most actors training were dedicated to the art of oratory. In recent times though, the emphasis have shifted to a more rounded concept of acting technique and voice training has changed from just vocal work to releasing expressive power. "A voice capable of communicating thought and feelings remains a necessary asset for all actors". (Hurt, 2014: 12). Each voice is personal to an individual. There is no objective standard on how the voice should sound. The only rule is that

your voice must or should reflect freely all you think in order to become an effective tool for the actor. Berry describes the voice as

the means by which in everyday life, you communicate with other people, and though, of course, how you present yourself- your posture, movement, dress, and involuntary gesture- gives an impression of your personality, it is through the speaking voice that you convey your precise thoughts and feelings”.

(Berry, 1992: 16)

Berry's definition of voice explains that the voice must be accurate to the person. There are many barriers to full vocal ability. This range from upbringing, peer group, society, life tension, physical fitness and posture, sickness and diseases, family's belief and so on. An actor must strip away the barriers to free emotional expression to release full vocal power.

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, “speech is the power of expressing or communicating thoughts by speaking”. Speech is a learned system of communication, it is acquired. According to Turner (1993: 10), speech comes as a result of ‘much laborious experiment’ which is easily dismissed and forgotten as soon as the movements of the lips become habitual.

The voice is the foundation of speech; without a good foundation, you cannot have a good structure or building. The voice is what you are going to graft your speech upon”. (Benson, Speech and rhetorical arts note, 2014/2015 session).

Voice is simply human sound. Speech is when these sounds are put into a meaningful pattern or a type of code (language). The use of speech as a form of communication in performances is not complete without the listeners which are in this case the audience. Speech in the theatre comes in form of dialogue, and dialogue is a written form that gives an illusion to the listener, making him or her see that what is being said is not just an imitation of life, but it is life itself.

An actor's body and performance becomes flexible when he rids his body of any blocks that might prevent the free flow of feeling and reaction to impulses as generated by his mind.

Physical exercises are needed for the actor's body so as to be of optimum value to him; only then can he be more refined, flexible and, most vital of all sensitive

and responsive to the subtleties which constitute the creative artist's inner life (Chekov, 1953: 3).

Before every rehearsal or performance, all actors perform a warm- up to relieve tension that could block emotional flow, to loosen the limber, and to get centered and focused. There is no single way to warm up. Actors construct warm- ups that suit the roles they are playing. Usually, student actors of the department of theatre arts, university of Ibadan, warm- up together as a way of getting the energy flowing among the actors before they are on stage. "An acting warm- up is unlike that of an athletic event. Actor, like athletes, must ready the body to give its all" (Babalola, Acting note 2014/ 2015 session).

An embodied actor training is a term used to describe an actor training technique that incorporates all the various aspects of actor training i.e. body training, voice training etc. into a compact form as introduced by different scholars and professionals in the field" (Babalola, Acting note 2015/ 2016 session).

Over the years in the history of acting, different acting coaches have introduced various embodied actor training technique, with each of them either incorporating ideas from the previous ones or just simply discovering theirs to suit the different acting styles of their time.

Classical acting is a term for a philosophy of acting that integrates the expression of the body, voice, imagination, personalizing, improvisation, external stimuli, and script analysis. It is based on the theories of some classical actors and directors including Konstantin Stanislavsky (https://tribecafilminstitute.org/blog/detail/what_it_means_to_be_method).

The idea of an embodied actor training technique was conceived by Konstantin Stanislavsky in the early twentieth century and he calls his method Stanislavsky's system. In this system, actors draw upon their own feelings and experiences to convey the "truth" of the character they are portraying. The actor puts himself in the mindset of the character finding things in common in order to give a more genuine portrayal of the character. Another popular embodied actor training technique is Lee Strasberg's 'Method acting'. "This method is based upon the idea that in order to develop an emotional and cognitive understanding of their roles, actors should use their own experiences to identify personally with the characters". It is based on aspects on Stanislavsky's

system. Other acting techniques are also based off Stanislavsky's ideas, such as those of Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. (https://tribecafilminstitute.org/blog/detail/what_it_means_to_be_method). Another embodied actor training model is the Lessac's model. It is a 21st century actor training technique that was introduced by Arthur Lessac. This is a neuro- physical process, it is a sensing, feeling and tasting process and it is a process that doesn't have a set rule (Benson, speech and rhetorical arts note, 2014/ 2015 session).

Arthur Lessac was born in 1909 in Palestine after which he moved down to America with his parents who later got divorced and left him an orphan. Lessac began singing professionally and teaching in 1928 after graduating from high school in New York City. Lessac went on to attend Eastman school of music in Rochester from 1932- 1935. Lessac got his way into the theatre in 1937 and in 1941 he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Voice- Speech Clinical Therapy from New York University. He went further to open the National Academy of Vocal Arts (NAVA) in 1944. In 1951, Lessac began to teach at the Stella Adler School of Theatre before he began his twenty year career teaching sermonic at the Jewish theological seminary in the same year. Lessac earned his Masters of Arts degree in Voice- Speech Clinical Therapy from New York University in 1952. Lessac taught his voice, speech and movement work till his death in 2011 at the age of 101.5 years. (Hurt, 2014: 3-4).

Hurt describes Lessac model as a vocal technique that teaches actors, singers, human communicators how to understand their body, voice, speech, emotions and how to process performances (Hurt, 2014: 1). She goes on to say that Lessac gave a distinctive word called KINESENSIC.

Kinesensic is better described as the neuro- physical sensing process. KINE means movement and motion, ESENS means basic meaning, nature and recognition, SENS means for spirit, inner energy and involvement, Sic means the familiar occurrences i.e. kine+ esens+ sens+ sic= movement+ marrow+ feeling+ original. It means learning to sense (feel innate movement) motion of the body, and then gathering the information from that feeling process and using it for optimal body functions (Benson, speech and rhetorical arts note, 2014/ 2015 session).

Lessac Kinesensic training is a comprehensive and creative approach to developing the voice and the body in a holistic way, resulting in greater flexibility and power and improved expressiveness and communication.

Kinesensic identifies simple but potent natural behaviors of the body (“familiar events”) which became powerful, organic instructions for creating desired improvements in vocal or physical function, resulting in a more healthful enjoyable life. Kinesensic encourages and honours individual personality while providing clear, concrete instruction that applies anyone and everyone. Originally known only by theatre professionals, Kinesensics has now become recognized as applicable to many endeavors in life from voice and speech therapy to sports, fitness, and singing training (Benson, Speech and rhetorical arts note, 2014/ 2015 session).

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Over time, the student actors of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan have been introduced to various actors training methods, beginning with the Stanislavsky’s system to Chekov’s system and so on but they possess flyspeck knowledge of the Lessac’s model and its efficacy for a better performance situation.

This research however, intends to broaden the knowledge of the student actors on the concept of Lessac’s training in order to help them discover the synergy in their body, mind and speech for effective acting.

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research work will aim at

- Helping actors discover the way the body through voice and speech operate.
- Exploring the organs of speech to communicate without losing the message.
- Teaching actors how to exercise fluidity and flexibility through the Lessac model.
- Comparing Lessac’s Kinesensic training with one other actor training method.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The researcher will focus on how Lessac's Kinesensic training would help the student actors of Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan to sense, feel and process performance.

The researcher would also compare Lessac Kinesensic awareness with another actor training technique in order to reveal the advantage of Lessac's Kinesensic over other actor training methods.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The need for an embodied actor training is of great importance in the development of an actor. Lessac's kinesensic training however, teaches actors to employ the natural feeling process using the voice, the body and speech instead of just imitating an imagined standard. Therefore, an actor needs to be trained with an embodied actor training technique that puts into consideration all aspects of the actor's tools for acting.

1.6 LIMITATIONS

Student actors in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan have never been introduced to Lessac's model. Since it is new training technique, different from whatever they have been taught, it might not be easy for them to adjust. This might pose a problem, as some actors would find it difficult to loosen themselves and listen to their bodies. They might also find it difficult to move from their comfortable natural zone to their natural zone thereby, making it impossible for them to get the full benefit of the technique; because for an actor to achieve the full benefits of Lessac's Kinesensic awareness, he or she has to totally surrender themselves to it.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will guide the researcher's work:

1. What is the relevance of Lessac's training model to the student actors of the Department of Theatre Arts University of Ibadan?
2. Why is an embodied actor training necessary for student actors in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan?

3. Why is Lessac's Kinesensic feeling process an essential part of an embodied actor training for the University of Ibadan student actors?