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**PHYSIOLOGICAL PERFORMING EXERCISES BY JAN FABRE: AN
ADDITIONAL TRAINING METHOD FOR CONTEMPORARY PERFORMERS**

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years, Jan Fabre¹ has produced a considerable body of stage work² as a multidisciplinary artist. Working within a broad artistic spectrum, he has explored the conventions of theatre, opera, visual arts and dance via such works as *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), *Das Glas im Kopf wird vom Glas* (1990) and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (with the Forsythe Company, 1990). Alongside Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers, Alain Platel, Wim Vandekeybus, Jan Decorte, Ivo Van Hove and Guy Cassiers, Jan Fabre has been one of the creative minds of the so-called Flemish Wave in the performing arts: a generation of directors, choreographers, actors and dancers who, beginning in the 1980s, have developed a highly individual artistic language on stage, breaking through the ‘purist’ boundaries of theatre, dance, visual arts and performance art. In a special issue of *Théâtre-Public* devoted to the Flemish Wave, Josette Féral and Christian Biet describe these artists as “free and insolent, their practices operate against the current dominant forms of theatre” (Biet and Féral 2014).

Fabre’s place within the Flemish Wave is notably typified by his two elements. Firstly, the search for a performative language that takes as its main instrument the body and its physical sensory apparatus, thereby exploring what he has termed ‘physiological performing’. Secondly the –A second red thread running through this innovative and versatile oeuvre is Fabre’s constant search-quest to test the conventional limits of and merge different disciplines (Lehmann 2006). Fabre’s collaborators differ from “traditional monodisciplinary actors”, in that they must be able to combine elements of dance, theatre, performance art, visual arts and music theatre during their performances (Van den Dries 2006). For example, in *The sound of one hand clapping* Fabre makes actors dance and dancers act. The boundaries between acting and dancing collide in this and other works, with both parties intersecting under the heading of ‘performer’.

¹ Born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1958.

² As a multidisciplinary artist Fabre has not only produced a considerable and significant oeuvre in the fields of performing arts, but also in the visual arts. In this article however we will focus on his stage works.

From his search to merge different art disciplines in his stage work and to find strategies for his performers to deal with the physical reality of the body on stage, Fabre has developed a practice-based method through which to train his (often changing) company of performers. In this article, we want to underscore how this physiological training method can be a relevant and enriching addendum for the training of contemporary performers of different disciplines and various educational backgrounds. In what follows, we will elaborate on Fabre's notion of physiological performing and illustrate how it can improve the stage performance of both actors and dancers. We will underpin this claim by going in depth into the specificity of Fabre's training method and illustrate a selection of exercises by means of the underlying *performative principles*. We conclude by formulating some arguments by which to pinpoint the relevance of Fabre's training method within the broad field of contemporary performance training.

From act to acting: rewriting the paradox of acting

Key to Fabre's physiological performance and, consequentially to his training method is the transition between 'act and acting'. The first notion 'act' refers to Fabre's radically refuted theatrical conventions. Greatly indebted by the performance art of the 1970's, Fabre – who started his career as a performance artist (1976-1981) – was especially interested in working with and from "the harsh reality" of his own body (van den Dries 2004). Through self-inflicted injuries, pain and exhaustion, he sought to foreground the *physical* and *visceral* reality of the body.³ These performance roots are discernible in his early theatre work. For example, in his ~~the~~ 8-hour piece *This is theatre as it was to be expected and foreseen* (1982) Fabre implemented the principle of *real time/real action* (Van den Dries and Crombez 2010). The actors, rather than playing characters, carried out instructions and neutral tasks such as dressing and undressing, running in place, jumping and falling down. By expanding the timeframe – through endless repetition, acceleration or slow motion – these tasks came to impart severe physical impact on the actors. Their bodies reacted as they would have had they not been on stage: they became exhausted, sweaty and sometimes even emotionally drained. Another aspect that Fabre took from performance art was the element of *risk taking* (Hrvatín 1994): the actors exercised physical violence upon each other; there was not just real danger on stage, but also real pain. Through both these elements the audience experienced what Emil Hrvatín termed a "shock of the real" (Hrvatín 1994). The spectator was here confronted not with a character but rather with a physical body, stripped from its theatricality.

Met opmerkingen [JR1]: Is dit juist? Ik zou persoonlijk zeggen Fabre's refucion of theatrical conventions

³ By 'physicality' we mean the use of the *complete* body – in contrast to gestures and mannerisms alone – to communicate. The body refers in the first place to itself, before it supports imposed any external meanings or messages (for example spoken words). The materiality of the body is emphasized. The second term, '*viscerality*' can be defined on two levels. On the one hand, there is the *psychological* interpretation that understands viscerality as the irrational, illogical and instinctive emersion of strong emotions. The *physical* interpretation, on the other hand, addresses viscerality as relating to the viscera or internal organs of the body. In this context, we can apprehend 'viscerality' as a combination of both, as well as an *expanded notion of physicality*. As will be seen, Fabre strives for an integration of both terms, a *visceral physicality*. According to Fabre, the complete body exists of a collision of both body and mind, both inside and outside. Thus, for Fabre, *physicality* implicates not just movements (the use of joints, skeleton and muscles) but also the *visceral* notion of the internal anatomy of blood circulation, excrements and organs (this latter notion operates more within a metaphorical sense). The result is an Artaudian 'cruelty' towards the bodies of the performers and the audience alike. This sometimes aggressive confrontation with a hyper-realistic and non-idealised body creates an immediacy of experience with the audience. The spectators undergo intense emotions, often of shock and revulsion.

~~On the other hand,~~ The second notion 'acting' refers to a thorough awareness of the 'theatricality', or illusive side of performing arts⁴ – here not understood as a specific artistic discipline but as the assemble of theatre, dance, opera etc.– ~~This is~~ 'theatricality', is ~~also~~ an essential part of Fabre's performative idiom. As he is not only a theatre director but also a visual artist who has been strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp, Fabre deals quite consciously with the medium of theatre and dance, often referring to art history as in for example his solo for Els Deceukelier *Etant Donnés* (2000) and *Angel of Death* (2003), the first being an homage to Marcel Duchamp and the second to Andy Warhol. ~~In~~ Fabre's stage work ~~consciously plays out the fact that,~~ the *act* of performing, executed as neutrally as possible, is always already a form of *acting*, for it occurs on stage and is thus always embedded in a highly artificial mise-en-scene that frames the performative action in a certain aesthetic, semiotic and temporal context.

Hence, one could say that Fabre's performative language is situated in the ancient paradox of acting, which can already be traced back to the writings of Aristotle (1997 [335 b.c.]), Diderot (2010 [1883]) and Stanislavsky (2013 [1937]). This paradox situates the art of acting **between doing and pretending, between reality and theatrical/emotional effect**. Fabre reformulates and updates this ancient paradox through the introduction of a 'performance ~~quality~~ performing'. ~~within a theatrical context, by which he rethinks the dialectic relationship between 'performing' and 'acting~~ In Fabre's ~~this~~ physiological ~~performance performing~~ the performers are consciously playing with ~~this—the~~ duality ~~between performance and theatricality~~ as they shift from **act to acting**, and back.

⁴ By 'performing arts', we refer to the amalgam of art disciplines (theatre, opera, dance) that are intended to be performed for a live audience. 'Performance art' as a historical art form, on the other hand, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and is just one segment of this framework.

Controlled excess: training physiological performing

As mentioned in the introduction, Fabre created a set of exercises to train his performers in ‘**physiological performing**’. The key in this method, forming the **bridge** between performance and theatre, is physicality. In contrast to the today still dominant acting method of psychological realism, used in most acting schools throughout Europe – in Fabre’s physiological performing, an action does not depart from an emotional and thus psychologically constituted impulse; rather, it stems from a **physical impulse**⁵. Every action is founded in and motivated by a physical necessity or cause, be it real or imagined. Such a source could be the physicality just as well as the ‘pain’ caused by walking on imaginary burning coals (van den Dries 2004). Likewise, emotions are interpreted from a physiological instead of a psychological perspective. The same approach accounts for actors dealing with a text. Fabre makes his performers recite their texts, while synchronously they are carrying out repetitive physical acts. This way the words are affected by their changing physical state and all ‘prescribed’ psychological meaning is filtered out of the performance. An extreme physicality and viscerality of the body thus becomes more important than the performer’s technique. Through Fabre’s practice-based training, performers learn to understand and manage these physical impulses. Through challenging their physical and mental concentration and pushing the limits of exhaustion, pain and dizziness, they learn how to control these bodily sensations and play with them on stage. These physical conditions are then used as creative impulses for the performance, as the performers abolish the boundaries between *reality* and *representation*, *act* and *acting*.

Fabre’s physiological performing thus departs from a physical impuls. This impuls however is very different from that which is deployed in dance. ~~That way, in Fabre’s stage work, a new set of performance qualities comes into play that transcends the realms of theatre and dance alike.~~ Whereas in classical ballet ~~or psychologist realist acting for example~~ but also in

⁵ Impulse can be defined as incentive to produce movement, as a small amount of energy travels from one area to another. An impulse as motivation for physical activity can be *psychological or physiological*. Within Fabre’s exercises impulses need to be physical and thus come from the body. Through an enhanced awareness, his performers can respond to external impulses (as for example an action of the audience or a fellow performer). These stimuli can also emerge from imagination, but this imagination mustn’t be steered by emotion. Fabre rather wants his performer to imagine physical processes or sensations, as for example physical pain, pleasure, and so on.

Met opmerkingen [JR2]: Gaat het hier over een overruggen, of over een scherp stellen van de paradox?

contemporary dance, performers need to maintain control of the ‘form’ (be it virtuous, ~~or improvised~~ movements ~~or a believable character~~), regardless of the physical difficulties that come into play, Fabre asks his performers to consciously allow their movements and scenic presence to be influenced by their physical state. In *Das Glas im Kopf wird vom Glas* (1990), for example, a corps de ballet dances in iron armors, which greatly influence their movements. For Fabre, the struggle between the performers and their costumes becomes part of the dance. This reaction to factors such as *real time/real action* and *risk-taking elements* is for many dancers a new experience, as classical trained dancer Annabelle Chambon, part of the Jan Fabre Teaching Group, underscores in an interview (De Somviele 2014). “I was always taught that dance is a matter of virtuous form and technique. In contrast, the exercises of Fabre have learned me how to feed my brain and to move my body from that sensation in a much more meaningful way.” ~~The same approach accounts for actors dealing with a text. Fabre makes his performers recite their texts, while synchronously they are carrying out repetitive physical acts. This way the words are affected by their changing physical state and all ‘prescribed’ psychological meaning is filtered out of the performance. An extreme physicality and viscerality of the body thus becomes more important than the performer’s technique.~~

That way, in Fabre’s stage work, a new set of performance qualities comes into play that transcends the realms of theatre and dance alike. Fabre’s method exists of exercises in **physical and mental excess**: it is a learning to lose control and to draw input from the ‘unforeseen’, immanent to a real stage situation. Fabre often refers on this matter to Artaud’s theatrical concept of ‘**personal cruelty**’ (Artaud 1994). His performers should know their physical and mental boundaries, and dare to move beyond these restrictions and limitations. However, Fabre never wants his performers to loose themselves completely into ecstasy: **that is reserved for the audience...** Fabre trains his performers to push their physical and mental limits, to flirt with the trance of pain, dizziness and tiredness, but teaches them skills to withdraw and restore their strength and concentration on the ‘flip-side’ of trance.⁶ By heightening the awareness of body, space and time, the exercises help to develop different techniques of ‘self-controlled loss of control’, which makes sure the performers “don’t get lost in the ecstasy” (van den Dries 2004).

⁶ See (Roussel et al. 2014) for a description of the control of movement of Fabres performers.

Met opmerkingen [3]: Voor bibliografie:
Oorspronkelijk datum van publicatie: 1938

Met opmerkingen [JR4]: Ik zou dit weglaten. Het wordt niet uitgewerkt en daardoor klinkt het zeer vaag.

Furthermore, the exercises train the performers in responsiveness and flexibility of body and mind. To increase and hone their awareness and consciousness of the body, the performer becomes skilled in concentration and balance, for example via the beginning position of the *angel feet*, as will be described shortly. Fabre strives for the coalescence of both body and mind to create a **mutual exchange**, a principle he calls '**moving from the inside to the outside**'. By 'inside' Fabre refers to both the *mind* (the thinking processes, imagination, but never psychology) as well as the 'inside' of the *body* (the awareness and active deployment of organs, muscles, blood circulation, intestines, etc.). An example is his instruction to "move like snakes are going through your body" (Cassiers 2014). Performers not only imagine the movements of snakes (the typical ventral scales), but also their precise impact on every aspect of the body: what happens if the snake moves through their stomach, around their liver or lungs, within their brains? This (mostly imaginary) anatomical research prevents the movements from becoming solely a psychological imitation or representation of form.

Fabre's method is thus not a formalistic technique dealing with the creation of forms or shapes or characters; instead, it offers skills for mental and physical transformation. To act 'from the inside, from within' performers must learn how to incorporate *their physical state* and especially their *imagination* which allows them to be creative performers on stage. "Through the use of imagination as motivation, you can push the boundaries of transformation much further", states Ivana Jozic, a dancer, performer and teacher of the exercises (Cassiers 2014). Fabre speaks on this matter about **thinking bodies and moving minds**: the ongoing dialogue between body and mind becomes the motor for the performative language. Always commencing from a physical impulse, the performers can integrate their physical state and/or use their imagination as aligned impetus, as theatre, dance and anatomical research meet.

A body on the alert: Fabre's performative principles

To illustrate the benefits that Fabre's method, as outlined above, offer for performance training, we will expand more concretely on several of his exercises⁷. These practice-based exercises, founded on several years of observation and interpreting the possibilities of the human body, should be considered as 'models' to be used as inspiration to perform. To unravel the linkages between Fabre's pedagogy and unique performance language, we will elucidate certain of his exercises by addressing the underlying performative principles that lead to Fabre's physiological performing. These principles are not exclusive to one or two exercises; they resonate throughout the entire framework of in total 22 exercises.

The basic conditions

The first fundamental condition of Fabre's method concerns *the breathing pattern*. Influenced by eastern yoga techniques, he places great importance on abdominal breathing.⁸ As generally known, breathing is one of the processes of the human body to deliver oxygen to the tissues and to remove carbon dioxide. Conscious control of breathing is commonly used in many forms of meditation, in order to obtain a slower breathing pattern, a reduced heart rate and relaxation of body and mind (Brown and Gerbarg 2009). Also in Fabre's exercises, abdominal breathing functions as a control mechanism, guiding and reinforcing the various physical transformations the performers will be asked to explore.

Yet it is remarkable that Fabre does not rely on the 'classic' abdominal breathing, commonly used in contemporary performance (and especially in dance), which follows the sequence of inhaling, holding still and exhaling. Fabre has inverted the latter steps: now, the performers inhale and exhale, but then hold their breath (in three equal parts). This may sound quite unnatural, but in fact it corresponds to a practice-based hypothesis that Fabre has developed over the years and which is backed up by the experiences of performers of his ensemble: it is

⁷ Throughout the 20st century, other theatre pedagogues have developed methodologies to enhance the (use of) physicality to rethink the actor training of their times. Fabre's set of exercises is a collection of invented exercises, effective scenes from his oeuvre and exercises he borrowed from other such acting methods, for example those of Grotowski, Meyerhold and Artaud.

⁸ Also modern choreographers such as Martha Graham (Freedman 1998) have underscored the importance of abdominal breathing. At its turn, it was incorporated into the field of contemporary dance (Franklin 2004).

a way to slow down the respiratory process and minimize the intake of oxygen, as Ivana Jozic points out (Cassiers 2014). After a challenging physical exercise, the performers are accustomed to breathing in too heavily, which can lead to hyperventilation. But in pausing after the exhalation, the performers experience a deeper concentration and stamina (endurance). They also re-establish their body center more easily.

The second fundamental condition of Fabre's training method is the position of '*angel feet*', in which one's feet are placed next to each other, with no space in between. This position is inspired by the work of choreographer George Balanchine and resembles the 6th position in ballet (Taper 1996). For Fabre, all movement begins with positioning of the feet, with the proper balance and connection between mind and body. The performer must invest energy to maintain natural balance and stability during the angel feet position, thereby not 'hanging' in his skeleton. Meanwhile, the performer is also asked to keep his spine straight. This physical task requires enormous mental concentration for the performer not to fall.

Spacing

In the *tiger exercise* 'spacing' plays a crucial role. In the anticipating exercise (*the cat*), the performer must 'transform' into a cat, a reprocessing of the famous Grotowski exercise, although this earlier version was intended solely to stretch the muscles (Grotowski 2002). From there, one must slowly morph from the flexibility of a cat into the force of a tiger planning its attack. The emphasis is on the mounting tension, on searching for a point of culmination that is followed by the jump or the claw. According to Fabre, tigers are the world's finest fighters – they are dangerous (not being domesticated) and always alert for possible threats. Hence, the main goal of this exercise is creating a spatial awareness. In the *tiger exercise*, the performers must define their 'territory', conquer it purely on the basis of their presence and scan it in anticipation of danger. Fabre calls this principle 'eating space': 'Have eyes on your back' he will instruct, 'an attack can come from the front, side or back'. Often Fabre also asks the performers to say the name of the person on their left or right. The performer's focus should thus be directed not just towards potential attackers but also towards the three dimensions of the space around him, exploring its limits vertically and horizontally. Fabre emphasizes here the body's architectural consciousness of space and the correlation between space and movement. By inducing stress – the idea that the performer is under attack – Fabre forces his performers to remain focused on the surrounding territory. The tiger exercise thereby creates both a constant physical alertness of the nervous system and an

anticipating mental alertness, as the performer must be ready to react immediately when the impulse to attack is given.

Anatomical awareness

The transition from the tiger to *the lizard*, in which the performer's 'anatomical awareness' is at stake, is short and abrupt. The emphasis is now on the horizontal movement. The eyes and the weight of the body are positioned low to the ground; the spine and neck become prominent and the tongue is much more articulated. In contrast with the electrifying dynamics of the tiger exercise, the focus is now on the 'freeze'. The body is immobile and extremely patient, yet this does not mean that it is not moving on the inside: the internal tension is suppressed but it should be kept alive at all times. This exercise is symptomatic of the performative 'double-bind' (referred to earlier as the paradox between act and acting, between presentation and representation, inside and outside) that Fabre imposes upon his performers. They should always be aware of their actions' performance quality and theatrical effect (which is directed outwards), but must also create an anatomical awareness of the transitions taking place inside their bodies. The performers must observe and analyze how the transition from, for example, a warm-blooded animal (the tiger) to a cold-blooded animal (the lizard) affects their movements; they should be aware of which muscles are being activated, so as to thereby gain insight as much into the lizard's anatomy as into their own. As an epilogue to the exercise, the performers are asked to catch prey (flies) and visualize the digestion process on the outside, from the mouth to the anus. Because the lizard moves very sparingly, restoring its energy for the moment of attacking the prey, it is also an exercise in physical economy and effectiveness: no energy can be wasted on Fabre's stage and all movements must have a goal, be it finding food, attacking something or escaping from a dangerous situation, just as the lizard would do.

Transformation

As outlined before, Fabre asks his performers to transform between different states of being, not from a psychological perspective but from a purely physiological one. The sequence of and transitions between the different exercises are therefore extremely important. Most of the metamorphoses are conducted in a gradual manner. Fabre is interested in the bodily energy that is released (or stored inside the body) in these 'in between phases' where the transformation becomes tangible: he is seeking the energy that has not yet been channeled into a theatrical, static image (the embodiment of an animal, for example) but which is instead

working its way through the body. Fabre's performers are always in a state of permanent transformation, molding their bodies into a new form or image. They become hybrid and fluid creatures. "In my performances is it not about the image, but about the *construction* of this image", Fabre has explained (van den Dries 2004). Put differently: The theme of Fabre's performance is always "the action, the process. It is not about what the body *is*, but what it *does*", as Emil Hrvatin outlined (Hrvatin 1994). A good example is found in the *insect exercise*. In the transition from the lizard to the insect, the performers are asked to transform into the prey they have just eaten (a fly or a spider for example). While the insect is being digested inside the body, the performer has to slowly embody it. 'You become what you eat', Fabre says. The choice of what kind of insect the performer wishes to become must be very precise. This helps to properly articulate the muscles and imagination.

Concentration

In the *cleaning exercise*, the performer is to obsessively clean the floor with different segments of his body. The performer uses obvious body parts (arms, legs, etc.) as well as ones not usually employed in cleaning activities (nose, elbows, heels, bottom, etc.). But the more he cleans, the more dirt appears and the more there is to clean. The performer must be extremely concentrated on this Sisyphean task: his movements must be swift and detailed, creating different dynamics, rhythms and speeds, moving from fast movements to slow ones, from big to small. Fabre also asks the performer to depict and articulate an imaginary space to clean (this correlates to the principle of 'spacing', noted earlier). The performer translates his movements from the floor to the atmosphere, from horizontal to vertical. He also determines the material (tapestry, wood, tiles, stone, iron, etc.) of the objects he is cleaning and the subsequent effect they have on his body and skin. According to Fabre, all actions require a degree of intensity, which here is forged through high concentration and physical investment of the *cleaning exercise*. The performer has to find his own freedom by expressing his personality through disciplined, functional movements. For Fabre, physical as well as mental absorption creates the best condition for intimacy on stage. The cleaning exercise is also a means of training and analyzing all parts of the body, by composing and recomposing it (cleaning with the nose or heel, for example, afterwards with the whole body), again using the body as an instrument rather than as a psychological agent.

Reflexes

As Fabre puts great importance on training the physical impulses of his performers, also their reflexes should be honed to the maximum degree. In the *rice paper/fire exercise*, which shares features with Japanese Butoh and martial arts practices such as Kendo (which is part of the regular training program of Fabre's company), the performers must switch instantly between extreme physical states. First, the performer has to imagine that he is walking on rice paper. Fabre wishes the performers to minimize any noise they make, by raising their center of gravity as high as possible such that they move almost weightlessly through space. Breathing is again a crucial strategy, aiming at making the body lighter. When Fabre claps his hands, the rice paper image immediately changes into one of a sea of leaping flames from which the actors try to escape. Each time their feet touch the ground, they experience a flash of pain, which impacts the entire body and travels along the nerves. Meanwhile, Fabre mercilessly accelerates the pacing: rice paper becomes fire, which then becomes rice paper, again and again, faster and faster. Pain is a fertile concept in Fabre's work, for it is an inescapable physical stimulus for the body. Here, pain is used as a physical reflex mechanism that triggers an action-reaction series, without any physical or mental detours. In other of Fabre's exercises, it will be, for example, the temperature that suddenly (and repeatedly) changes, from warm to freezing cold, or just as in the reptile and tiger exercise the performers have to switch sharply between standstill and attacking, between active and passive tension. Fabre's ambition is to strengthen the body, turning it into an antenna or a hypersensitive membrane that responds to every slight change. In a metaphoric way, Fabre, referring to what Artaud called "an athlete of the heart" (Artaud 1994). This principle also comes up in the *five emotion exercise*, another exercise in which the performers have to express something – in this case, five extreme emotions – from a physiological point of view, changing intention every ten seconds as if this was a natural reflex. In the latter exercise, the transformation and reflex principles come to a true apotheosis.

Duration

As discussed in the introduction, Fabre's training should be situated on the nexus of a physiological and a theatrical poetics. *The dying princess* – also known as the Sisyphus exercise – offers a good example of how these two qualities thoroughly affect each other. This (almost choreographed) movement sequence was first introduced in the production *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984). Five heroes stand in a row; five princesses leap into their arms and die. The heroes stride forward, carefully carrying the princesses to the front of the stage. As they walk back to the rear of the stage the princesses return to life and again

jump into the arms of their heroes. The cycle then commences again. Repetition is a key aspect of Fabre's training method and poetics.⁹ He is interested in how physical actions are affected through the wear and tear of time and in the quality of 'realness' that thus erupts (what we introduced as the principle from 'act to acting and back'). In this case, the principle of duration and transformation are deeply connected. As the sequence continues, the performers' fatigue becomes increasingly intense. The women turn into millstones around the necks of their heroes, whose proud and elegant robustness slowly deteriorates into a wearying action of dragging and pulling. The princesses are no longer carefully placed upon the ground; they are simply dropped. This is physiological acting in the true sense of the word: real physical impact (arousal, pain, exhaustion) is used as acting material that fundamentally rewrites the theatrical content and forces the public into a visceral act of spectatorship.

Correspondence between inside and outside

As in the lizard exercise, in the *old man exercise* Fabre is articulating the correspondence from the inside (understood as both the imagination as well as the anatomical processes inside the body) to the outside (the image of the body as it is perceived by the audience within a theatrical framework). The performers are asked to transform into an elderly man with Parkinson's disease. Fabre wants them to mentally prepare by conjuring an inner tremor. Once the whole inner being is filled with this quaking, the body can begin to vibrate. Of course, due to the high physical investment of the exercise there is risk of autosuggestion and self-loss, but the main goal is to be in control at all times. Slowly, the performers have to move from the back of the stage to the front, as if walking through an imaginary apartment (occasionally grasping imaginary furniture), conquering the space millimetre by millimetre. This process can easily take 20 minutes. It is highly important to connect this movement with the proper inner impulse. Often Fabre touches the limbs of his performers, to make sure that it is the nervous system that is trembling, not the external body parts. "If you feel that you're faking, start again" he will say. Again, there is a sense of internal conflict for the performer, as he has to deviate from all too evident and familiar pathways. Every part of the body has to vibrate, from the tips of the hair to the toenails. The body's expression (motor skills, movement) is at stake, as well as the circulatory system, the respiratory system and the heart variability. From that 'holistic' perspective on movement, Fabre also puts much emphasis on

⁹ Fabre has a predilection for long performances. *Theatre as it was to be expected and foreseen* (1982) and *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984) had durations of four and eight hours, respectively. His newest production, *Mount Olympus* (2015), will be a 24-hour marathon.

the use of the voice in each exercise. It is a muscle that must also be trained. In the animal exercises, the performers often start from the voice to embody a cat or tiger. The same accounts for the series of text exercises, in which Fabre lets his performers speak out a text while undressing, running or throwing cups towards each other they have to catch. The physical impulses that infect the movement, also have an effect on the voice which can be played out.

Re-flexing performance training: towards a conclusion

To conclude, one could say that Jan Fabre has a highly unique vision of performing, one founded upon a critical rethinking of the performative paradox between act and acting, between the ‘visceral/physical body’ and its mise-en-scene. A central characteristic of his vision is that performers should put their whole body – and its physical impulses – into play. The word ‘play’ is quintessential in this idea. Performers should be able to play out, and thus control, these impulses. Fabre wishes his performers to *be* in ecstasy, yet at the same time wants them to be aware of their state of being, to know their boundaries and to be able to step out of this ecstasy. Fabre’s method helps the performers to find this balance. It enables them not only to recognize what is happening with the body, but to also use this knowledge as a creative force to produce movement and affect in the specific context of the stage. It affords the performers tools to channel and contextualize their physical impulses, thus transforming them from blind impetuses into articulate and defined movement material.

The exercises discussed here contribute to this performative language. Each in its own way enables and deepens the possibility to use physical impulses in a creative way and to establish versatile dialogue between these bodily impulses and the imagination that instigates, feeds, and shapes these impulses. For example: The *insect exercise* helps performers recognize certain bodily impulses; the *tiger exercise* and the *rice paper/fire exercise* each deal with the relation between the body and the surrounding space (creating an awareness of the position of that body in relation to the space and the other performance); and the *old man exercise* and the *dying princess exercise* each enable the performer to create a ‘dialogue’ between the physical impulse and the mental imagination.

In relation to the field of performing arts, this training method can create new awareness in the interaction with the body. Dance for example is traditionally understood as a body-centered medium, but it often excludes any bodily impulses and reflexes that might influence its controlled movements. Through Fabre’s exercises, dancers, choreographers, performers and actors can experience what happens when they allow these impulses and reflexes, when they do not suppress these impetuses but use them as a creative force. In the past these exercises have enabled performers to insert new performative elements into their artistic practice and to enlarge their artistic vocabulary. In the future Fabre and his company

Troubleyn/Jan Fabre hope to open up their body of knowledge and enable a future generation of choreographers and dancers to do the same. For this reason, they¹⁰ devote specific scientific and qualitative research into the exercises and try to map, parameterize and notate the exercises. This will result in a pedagogical handbook that will offer performers from various kind the possibility to explore the method and use it to re-flex their own practices.

¹⁰ In collaboration with the Department of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Sciences (REVAKI), Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences University of Antwerp), Department of Radiology (University Hospital Antwerp), Department of Translational Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (University of Antwerp), Pain in Motion Research Group, Belgium, Research Center for Visual Poetics (University of Antwerp) and Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp.

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