

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Performance Research**

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/75343>

---

**Published paper:**

Pitches, JD (2009) *Spinal Snaps: tracing a backstory of European actor training*.  
Performance Research, 14 (2). 85 - 95 . ISSN 1352-8165

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528160903319604>

---

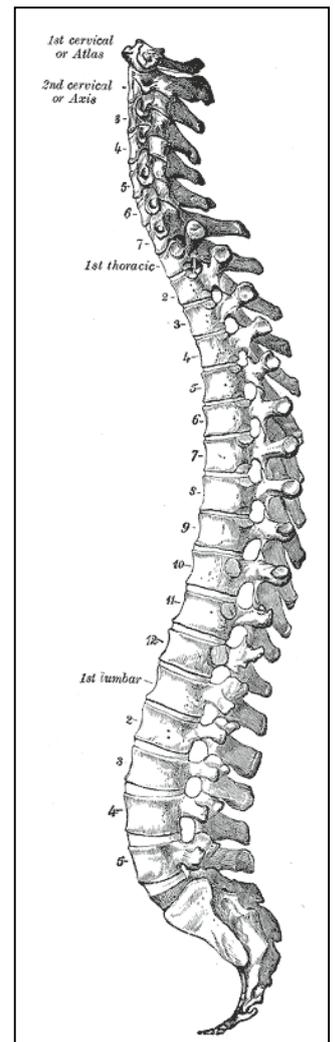
## Spinal Snaps: Tracing a Back-story of European Actor Training

Jonathan Pitches, Professor of Theatre and Performance,  
School of PCI, University of Leeds

### Preliminaries

Cervix (C1-C7), thorax (T1-T12), lumbar (L1-L5), sacrum (S1-S5) and coccyx (Co1-4): the spine is the 'power centre of the body', one 'long limb' connecting head to pelvis (Tufnell and Crickmay 1993: 9-10). As you descend the vertebral column the spine becomes thicker and weightier, before it (literally) tails off and loses flexibility; the final two sections comprise fused vertebrae located deep in the centre of the body. Each of these five spinal segments has a character and function of its own, evoked in no small way by their Latin names and on whose etymology I will draw freely to justify my range of perspectives here.

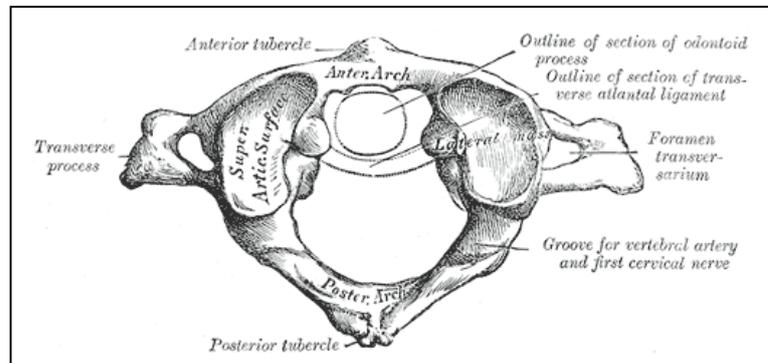
The aim in this essay is to use varying understandings of the spine to help examine specific examples of European and Russian performer training. But to do this it is necessary to place these understandings in associative collision with other sources: ones which draw on the domestic, the documentary and the dramaturgical. What follows, is a set of contrasting registers and responses to the spine in performance: snapshots, drawing structurally on the physiology of the spine itself. Given that one of the many connotations of the spine that needs questioning from a training perspective is its neat linearity, this is not a strictly predictable journey. Instead the questions of training raised here are arranged rather as an archeologist might come across a set of bones in the dirt - in fragments, which may or may not be assembled into a meaningful whole. It is a speculative attempt to 'give voice' to the spine.



## Introduction: C1-7: The Cervical Spine

***The topmost vertebra (C1) is called the Atlas and joins the head to the spine***

***Atlas: from Greek Mythology: a Titan whose name probably means 'he who carries' or 'he who endures'. Charged with holding the sky up in perpetuity.***



In their second co-authored book on performance, improvisation and imagination, *A Widening Field* (2004), Chris Crickmay and Miranda Tufnell set their readers a challenge:

Let the pelvis listen to the head through the spine...let the head hear the pelvis. In your mind's eye, travel the pathway of the spine

Let the legs and arms...open as branches...from its length  
Open the soles of the feet...sense the ground  
Open the crown of the head...let in air...light

Let the whole body open and move from the length of the spine  
***Write and make to give the spine a voice.***

(Tufnell and Crickmay 2004: 209, my emphasis)

This *written* article can only address half of Tufnell and Crickmay's tantalizing final invitation, although it is worth noting that their constant coupling of the terms 'making' and 'writing', their almost seamless manoeuvring between the page and the studio, is part of a strategy to collapse these traditionally separate activities into one fluid continuum of performance practices – a provocation to find enduring and tangible meeting points between earthbound modes of making and the limitless horizon of the imagination, a kind of Atlantan project in microcosm.

Their purpose in *The Widening Field* is clear: to provoke the reader's imagination and to encourage its use as a defamiliarising tool when working with the body. In their writings the mind's eye is constantly invoked to open up the body and scan it from impossible perspectives, it is used mentally to 'unfuse' the fused vertebra of the sacrum, to spread outwards the wings of the ilium, or, even more radically, to 'imagine you have no bones' at all (2004: 195). Yet these invitations to engage imaginatively in a deconstruction of the body are rooted in a deep and enduring interest in anatomy, osteology and the spine; Tufnell is a cranio-sacral therapist as well as a dancer, for instance, and this duality is reflected in a constant interplay in their work between the entropic forces of creativity and imagination and the more measured and objective descriptions drawn from science.

To capture a flavour of this interplay and to evoke the complexities associated with the word, here is a selective overview of the currency of the spine in performer training, organized into four types of understanding: i) psycho-physical, ii) genealogical, iii) dramaturgical and iv) osteological.

### *The psycho-physical*

Given its centrality in the daily functioning of the body and its connectedness to the entire gestural resource-pack of the performer (neck, back, shoulders, abdomen, hips), the spine is understandably a key discussion point for performer trainers. These articulations have taken many different forms: for Eugenio Barba, artistic director and founder of Denmark's *Odin Teatret*, the spine is 'energy's helm', offering a benchmark for the anthropological analysis of 'all extra-daily body techniques' (1991: 232). Since founding the company in 1964, Barba's intercultural theatre ensemble has viewed training as a fundamental voyage of personal discovery; training regimes are devised by each performer and maintained daily, so that the meaning of the work in his words 'belongs to them alone' (244). The common reference point is the actor's spinal column, which Barba describes as a 'yardstick' with which to measure the actor's work, one which can then be applied to 'all other physical, psychological and social oppositions' (244). The spine is not simply the centre of energy, then, but an auto-didactic tool of analysis.

The Polish ensemble, Gardzienice, whose director Włodzimierz Staniewski shares with Barba a common inspiration in the figure of Grotowski, also prioritises the spine in its training. Known colloquially in Polish as ‘the cross’, the spine in Staniewski’s book is the psycho-physical source of a performer’s energy and serves as a fundamental meeting point between actors, developing what he sees as a prerequisite for performance training, mutuality:

We know that the work of the spine releases physical and mental energy...The attitude (posture) of the cross when the solar plexus is exposed, is an attitude of questioning, inviting, it’s a challenge, readiness, and the beginning and end of action. The importance of the cross for dialogue in partnership, for cooperation of one actor with another is unquestionable.

(in Hodge 2000: 234)

Grotowski, too, spoke of *la croix* in his 1989 essay, ‘Tu es le fils de Quelqu’un’. Like Staniewski, Grotowski thought of the spine, or the ‘sacrum-pelvis complex’ as he defined it (Grotowski 1997: 297), as the source of the performer’s creative energy. ‘That’s where the impulses begin [la croix]’ (Slowiak and Cuesta 2007: 124), Grotowski argued and justified this by paralleling the actors’ work with African, Mexican and Bengali hunters in the bush. All, he maintained, adopt a ‘primal position’ (Grotowski 1997: 297), where the spine is inclined and the knees slightly bent, a position of ultimate efficiency and responsiveness which is held in place by the sacrum-pelvis complex. Developing a physical understanding of this primal position thus became a key part of Grotowski’s later training methods, and specifically through the exercise of the Motions<sup>1</sup>.

### *The dramaturgical*

Beyond these body-based understandings, there are dramaturgical interpretations of the spine, related to the actor’s treatment of text and character. Taking their cue from Stanislavsky, Richard Boleslavsky and, later, Lee Strasberg and other Group Theatre

---

<sup>1</sup> “There are three cycles of stretches...Each cycle is one specific stretch/position executed four times, once toward each of the cardinal directions...Separating each cycle is a stretch called nadir/zenith, a quick stretch down followed by a quick one up” (Thomas Richards in Slowiak and Cuesta 2007: 126).

members, developed the notion of the 'spine of the role' in their work with actors in America from the mid 1930s. Boleslavsky had worked with Stanislavsky at a pivotal moment in the development of the latter's psycho-technique from 1906-1920, and had then exported this early version of the System to the States, colouring it with his own imagination but not departing from the script in the way Michael Chekhov or Vsevolod Meyerhold did. Tracing the usage of the term 'spine' to indicate the through-line a character takes in the play or alternatively the 'overall meaning' of the play itself, reveals a fascinating transmission of ideas crossing over a number of Russian and American schools. Boleslavsky used the term in his laboratory in New York in the mid 1930s, Michael Chekhov was still using it at Dartington in Devon in 1937 as I will detail later, although it is not a word which features prominently in his published books. Harold Clurman from the Group Theatre in the US, also a trainee of Boleslavsky's, refers to the spine of the character or play in his book *On Directing* (1972: 78-9), Elia Kazan in his explication of *Streetcar* (Jones 1986: 140-41) and Strasberg in his unpublished lecture series on Stanislavsky delivered to students in 1958<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, whilst Strasberg and Stella Adler famously fell out over their interpretations of Stanislavsky's system after their respective visits to Moscow in 1934, terminologically, at least, the spine represented a point of connection for the two: it is placed significantly as the point of 'transaction' between 'complete internal' and 'complete external' work in her sketch of the System made that same year<sup>3</sup>.

Four years later, with the publication in Russia of *An Actor's Work on Himself* in 1938, the Stanislavskian root of all of these spinal metaphors was revealed in glaring pictorial terms for in the preface to his *magnum opus* Stanislavsky pictured his whole system as two creative 'lungs', bisected by a spine complete with individual vertebrae. His point was at once literal and symbolic: a play, like a spine, is made up of individual actions or vertebrae, which through the industry of the performer are linked seamlessly together in the backbone of the part. Or, more symbolically, the creative energy of the artwork is fed by the balanced *inspiration* of those oxygenating lungs: *voplosenie* (scenic embodiment) and *perezhivanie* (internal experience).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Bobbie Ellermann for giving me sight of these fascinating records of Strasberg in action.

<sup>3</sup> For a reprint of the diagram see Pitches 2006: 119.

<sup>4</sup> Stanislavsky's diagram is reprinted in Carnicke: 1998: 99.

### *The genealogical*

At a further level of abstraction, it is possible to read the backbone as a metaphor for the process of transmission itself - the spine as a model of a training lineage - as the Moscow-based director Kama Ginkas does: 'I wasted enormous amounts of energy battling with the schooling I received', he stated in 1998, 'but your schooling sits deeply in you. It's genetics. It's your backbone' (Ginkas 1998: 10).

Ginkas's sentiments expose a particular Russian (and continental European) view of training as 'family inheritance' and the training ground as a family 'home'. Eugenio Barba refers to his family tree in many publications - with his grandfathers identified as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold<sup>5</sup>; Anatoly Vasiliev, formerly of the Moscow School of Dramatic Art, now working in Lyon, describes himself as 'the student of the student of Stanislavsky' and his contemporary and director of the Maly Drama Theatre, Lev Dodin, locates his place in the same lineage via Stanislavsky's student, Boris Zon, and his training at GITIS. In the parallel French tradition of training, Etienne Decroux and Jacques Lecoq have recently been described by Leabhart and Chamberlain as, 'starting from the same artistic parent, Jacques Copeau and uncle, Gordon Craig' (2008: 11).

It is Grotowski, however, who perhaps best embodies questions of lineage, going to calculated lengths to ensure his own family line remained 'pure':

It is a terrible business, because there is, on the one hand, the danger of freezing the thing, of putting it in a refrigerator in order to keep it impeccable, and on the other hand, if one does not freeze it, there is the danger of dilution caused by facility [...] The burning question is: Who today, is going to assure the continuity of the research? Very subtle, very delicate and very difficult.

(Schechner and Wolford 1997: 471)

---

<sup>5</sup> See Barba's 2003 essay, 'Grandfathers, Orphans, and the Family Saga of European Theatre', for one salient example.

As is well known, he answered this question by placing Thomas Richards as the legal executor of all of his papers and effective inheritor of the Grotowski tradition. The neat linearity of this (Schechner calls it Grotowski's need for 'control') is part and parcel of the mode of transmission, a function of orature, as opposed to literature, or, more specifically of direct, physical delivery, to return to the Latin root of the word tradition<sup>6</sup>.

### *The osteological*

An osteological view of the spine in performance brings together the longview of a tradition with the instant snapshot afforded us by new technologies – in this case the MRI. The advent of Magnetic Resonance Imaging, has allowed remarkably detailed readings of the spine to be made based on multi-perspectival recreations of the vertebral column. MRI scans let you observe the spine from any angle, in two dimensions or three, anterior or posterior, paralleling in digital form the *imaginary* surveys of Tufnell and Crickmay - 'see the view from the tip of your spine [down]' (1993: 7), they advise in *Body Space Image*. The images produced by MRIs offer a monochrome window onto an often colourful past, a past which, from an osteologist's point of view, is inscribed on one's bone structure as clearly as the rings of a tree trunk or the sediment patterns in an Alaskan ice core reveal their individual histories:

Bone holds our deepest and oldest memories, it reacts to joy or shock, breathes and fails to breathe...Bone carries the imprint of all that we do, and of where we have been. Throughout our lives our bones subtly change and record the directions we have taken.

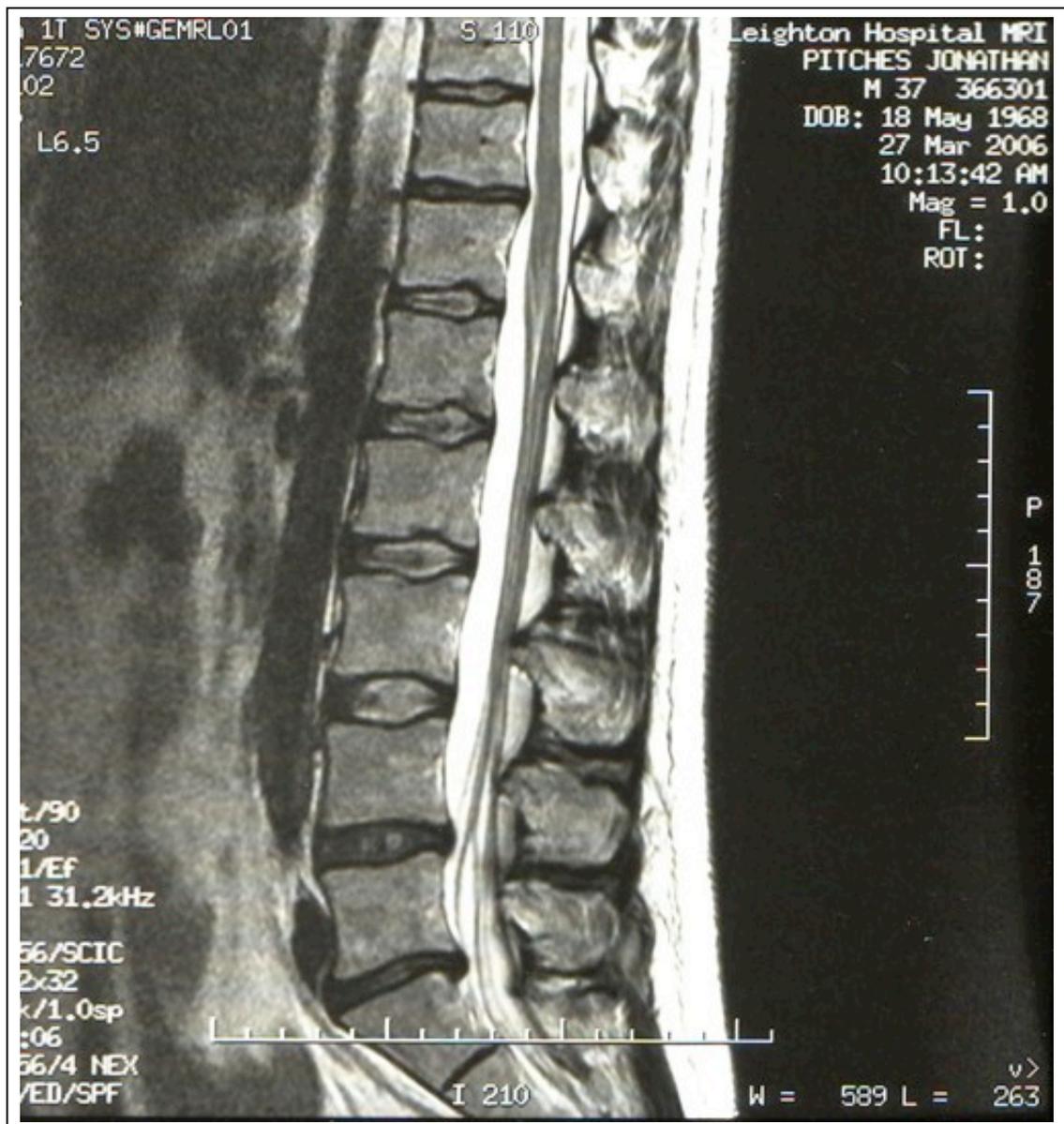
(Tufnell and Crickmay 2004: 199)

But this statement of osteological certainty begs questions: what use might be made of the relatively new archeological resource of the MRI in the distant future? How might these hitherto unseen markings be drawn on in the examination of recent histories, now that mortification and exhumation are no longer precursors to becoming intimate with the insides of humankind?

---

<sup>6</sup> Tradition: from *tradere*: to give up, transmit (Collins).

And what of the traces even bone forensics can't uncover? Where does the corporeal archive of the body's past fail us? At what point are other forms of mediation necessary, those which recognize that all lineages even those of a vertebral nature are subject to hidden and unmarked forces, reproducible only through the performative capacity of the imagination?





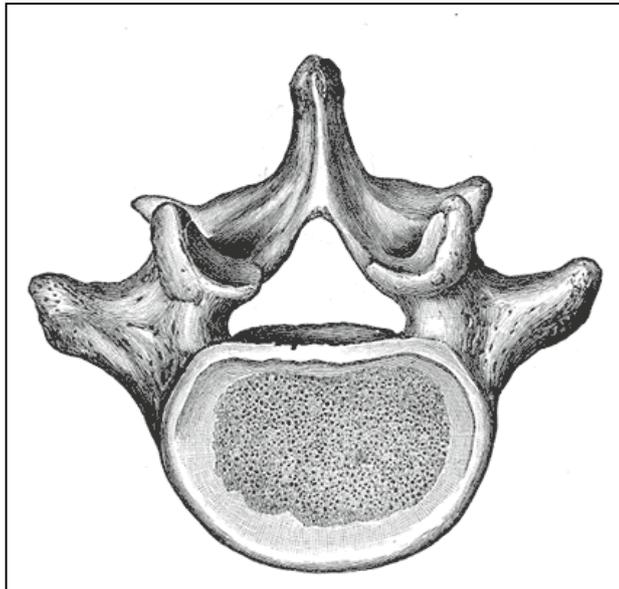
recurred in September 2005 and worsened steadily...He managed to carry on and his symptoms settled down to the point that he was able to do quite a lot of walking in the Lake District and mountain climbing in December. He had a further recurrence in January 2006 with back pain and right leg pain from the buttock with severe cramps in the right calf and a numb right foot...He went off work in February 2006... He continues to have severe right leg pain, paraesthesiae in the right leg with a numb right foot which is pretty much constant. There is no bladder or bowel dysfunction...The MRI of his lumbar spine from the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2006 was available for scrutiny. The scan shows focal pathology from Lumbar 4 to Sacrum1...At Lumbar 5/Sacrum 1 there is loss of signal with advanced disc resorption and marked loss of height. There is also retrolisthesis which is quite noticeable and not mild as reported by the radiologist...In addition there is a large disc prolapse which is postero-lateral to the right...with impingement of the right S1 and S2 roots and the disc protrusion is extruded behind the sacral body. The spinal canal is wide and capacious which obviously explains the absence of major neurological physical signs.

*It's tempting to ask what else Mr Krishnan can tell from this scan that he is keeping quiet. Vestiges of the many trips and falls occasioned by beach shingle? Traces of the days and months spent in the distorted shapes of biomechanics? Markings of the many times one's children have been tossed onto ill-prepared shoulders? What are the joys and shocks of the last forty years and how are they recorded?*

## L1-5: The Lumbar Region

*Of, near, or relating to the part of the body between  
the lowest ribs and the hipbones*

*From Latin Lumbus: Ioin.*



### **Borth Bench**

I've never been one for religious ceremonies – my brief flirtation with Catholicism in the early 1970s made sure of that. Yet for over a decade I have been making a pilgrimage of sorts - to the holiday resort of Borth, near Aberystwyth in West Wales, or, more specifically, to the bench-outside-the-Family-Shopper-supermarket-on-the-front-at-Borth, although there remains some dispute about which bench it is, exactly.

We are, in truth, a small sect. We began with just four pilgrims but in recent years our numbers have swollen to six and may rise still further in the future. But the modesty of our congregation does not limit the zealotry with which we pursue our aims – year in, year out, we travel hundreds of miles to observe a simple ritual: to gather briefly in a designated, (if disputed) space, facing the sea on the prom. Here, we pose for the 'annual photograph', collectively, if momentarily, suspended in thrall to the self-timing device of a digital camera. Then we disperse.



1997.JPG



1998.JPG



1999.JPG



2000.JPG



2001.JPG



2002.JPG



2003.JPG

Inevitably, there are a host of unspoken understandings which inform this ritual: the camera always rests on the breakwater wall, demanding a sprightly return to the bench from its operator; the order on the bench must religiously be observed and sub-pairings maintained (although the last five years have seen some significant promotions from lap to bench). And it must always feel that we have just one shot at getting 'that picture' in any one year, even though we might visit the same beach three or four other times in as many days and in any case will be staying in the neighbouring village of Tre-Taliesin, just 15 minutes away across the flood plain; there is an urgency and necessity to get the job done, and equally a strange sense of deflation once the photo has been taken, as if, in some way, the main purpose of our annual holiday has been achieved in that fleeting moment of a shutter-click.

In recent years, as I have watched the montage created by this tradition grow steadily on the wall, I have begun to think of our ritual and the art objects which have been produced from its observance, as a new sub-genre – as a kind of *domestic* durational performance. Clearly, we are not walking from one or the other end of the Great Wall of China to meet, spiritually and personally in the middle, as Marina Abramovic and Ulay did, nor are we spending a year on the streets, or the same time physically bound to another artist like Tching Hsieh and Linda Montano; endurance is not, at least explicitly, part of the package. But central to this modest ritual on the beach in Wales are similar overarching concerns: the need to find appropriate means to mark and map the passing of time, to establish firm and unyielding ground rules which draw attention to the 'timeliness' of time, to make known the limitations and simplifications



2004.jpg



2005.jpg



2006.jpg



2007.JPG



2008.JPG



2009.JPG

of constructed narratives.

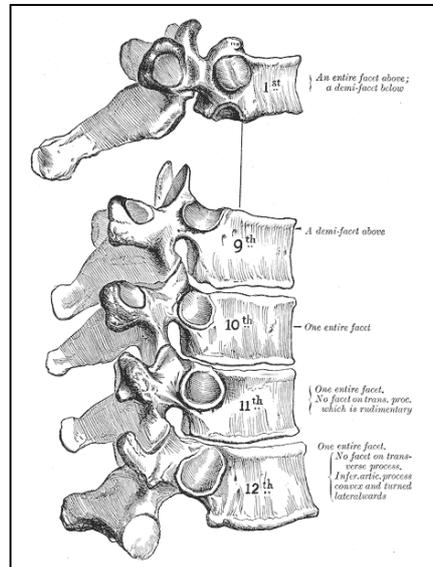
Here, the visual telescoping of a decade of human development, made briefly present by our yearly punctuation marks, draws explicit attention to what is so obviously missing and untraceable in the story. And yet, as a personal visual history, these photos record by inference the backbone of my life-story. In these twelve years, I have moved from newly-wed to parent, from the Midlands to West Yorkshire, from lecturer to professor. Within a few miles of this site I have met (and often re-met) academics and practitioners who shaped my thinking and determined my future trajectory: Eugenio Barba, Ted Braun, Robert Leach, Mel Gordon, Simon Murray and Richard Gough. Here, for a few precious years, the CPR Past Masters conferences were held with almost the same frequency as our more modest gatherings on the bench. A beachstone's throw away from Borth, I practiced Meyerhold's biomechanics with one of his pupils' pupils, Alexei Levinsky, enjoyed the tireless play of my children on the sand dunes of Ynyslas and (almost at the same time) witnessed the unfathomable pain of close relatives. These are some of the variegated backstories to this piece.

What distinguishes this performance from Abramovic or Hsieh is its open-endedness. Unlike *Night Sea Crossing* (1981) or Hsieh's various *One Year Performances* (1978-86) I have no idea when the piece will finish and, more to the point, who might be seated on the bench when it does. In my wildest fantasies, my two sons become as motivated as I am to continue the tradition, bringing with them every August to Borth, their children and their grandchildren but the 2009 photo (no. 13 in the series) could just as easily be the last. It is this contingency which situates this work in the domain of performance, that our collective art work is subject to all the vagaries of life, that whilst it is still being performed, it is forever under the shadow of 'circumstance', that it both captures and at the same time illustrates the impossibility of capturing our (and my) story.

It is, perhaps, important to remember this inbuilt contingency when analysing other more elevated traditions – the performative backbones which are so often constructed by practitioners and critics (including myself) to trace the 'Grandfathers of Modern actor training'. What are the backstories, and who's missing from the bench?

## T1-12: Thoracic Spine (Meyerhold, Decroux and Michael Chekhov)

***Thorax: the part of the mammalian body between the neck and the abdomen;***



***also: its cavity in which the heart and lungs lie.***

Coming from two separate but related traditions of performer training, Meyerhold's biomechanics and Decroux's Corporeal Mime define a particular approach to the performer's spine based on the compartmentalizing of action and the near-scientific analysis of the body itself. Meyerhold located the centre point of the actor in the sternum or breast-bone; it is around this point the actor literally 'groups' their actions and gestures to give them a sense of centre (located near the top of the thoracic spine) and to ensure a conscious balance between left and right. This action of 'grouping' – or *groupirovka* as master practitioner, Gennady Bogdanov, terms it – is explained by one of his actors:

Gennady asks actors to be aware of *groupirovka* at all times, it is perhaps best illustrated, in training, during the biomechanic run and to its most extreme level in the étude, 'The Dagger'. During this étude the victim moves from a completely open position leaning back with his/her arms outstretched, they then group around the sternum before opening up again and falling to the floor.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Terence Mann, formerly an actor with *Talia Theatre*, from an email conversation with the author (2/4/09).

Biomechanical actors are trained to develop their spatial awareness by imagining that this centre is a constant reference point, in relation to all the other shifting parameters provided by the performance space – the walls, the floor, other performers: ‘imagine lines spreading from your sternum outwards, in all directions’, Bodganov preaches in his classes, ‘lengthening and shortening as you move around the space, and at all times ensuring your momentary awareness of place’.

Etienne Decroux, one of Jacques Copeaux’s students at the Vieux Colombier in Paris, took anatomical analysis to an even more exacting level, again concentrating on the spine or ‘trunk’. This he classified as: ‘the head plus neck plus chest plus waist plus pelvis’ (Leabhart 2007: 116). Anne Dennis describes this spinal chain as: a ‘principle source of corporeal expression’ in which ‘emotion is reflected through breath’ and where ‘it is precisely the vertebrae that permit this emotion to become visible’ (1995: 62). Decroux’s ‘Inclinations on a Lateral Plane’ evidence the level of precision and segmentation in Corporeal Mime - it is just as important to know when you are *not* moving part of your body as when you are - and illustrate, too, the uses of his specific spinal taxonomy: head, hammer, bust, torso, trunk.<sup>8</sup> These Inclinations can be developed and made more complex by adding physical contradictions or by transforming the vertical ‘bar’ which mentally bisects the actor into a curve or chain. In either case, the body becomes a ‘keyboard’ as Decroux put it, played using a detailed and sophisticated manipulation of the spine. Decroux sought to expose that keyboard and celebrate the physicality of the performer by covering the face (which he thought simply ‘sweats reality’) and revealing the body:

The nude body expressing what one receives generally from words and from the gaze, transports us to another world...Face re-presents and the body creates.

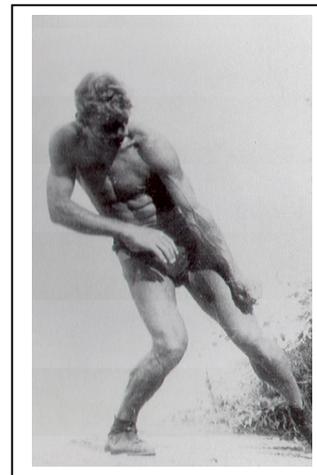
(Chamberlain and Leabhart 2008: 41)

Meyerhold's biomechanical training has a similar tradition of blank-faced performers and near-nude practitioners. From the earliest snippets of training films from the 1920s to the more recent videos of Bogdanov demonstrating études, an exposed

---

<sup>8</sup> For details of these exercises see Leabhart 2007: 116-124.

and well-developed muscular torso has been a focal point.<sup>9</sup> This, combined with a collective interest in the historic performance traditions of *commedia dell'arte* and Japanese *Noh*, suggests that Meyerhold's and Decroux's training methodologies occupy considerable common ground. But it is arguably in their devising of études (or actors' technical studies) where the two systems meet most significantly. With no personal experience of Decroux's system, my analysis here is inevitably read through the lens of biomechanics but such a perspective reveals some striking spinal synergies. There are clear similarities in purpose between Decroux's exercises and the range of études devised by Meyerhold: each take workaday actions and extend them, both to estrange the activities themselves and to develop physically demanding and formally exacting tasks. There are degrees of abstraction here which might differentiate Decroux from Meyerhold - Meyerhold did not experiment with pure physical form, for example, and, unlike Decroux, the simple narrative retained a degree of importance and visibility for him.<sup>10</sup> But a comparison of Decroux's Extensor (interpreted by Thomas Leabhart)<sup>11</sup> and Meyerhold's Shooting the Bow (here performed by his collaborator Nikolai Kustov) nevertheless reveals a number of common imperatives.



---

<sup>9</sup> For examples of études from the 1920s to the 1990s see Bogdanov, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> It is for that reason that Decroux has been likened to postdramatic understandings of the body; such an observation would never be possible with Meyerhold. See Chamberlain and Leabhart, 2008: 12.

<sup>11</sup> I am very grateful to Prof. Thomas Leabhart for providing me with video documents of this exercise. Leabhart notes: 'Decroux also spoke of a center "like a sun shining between the shoulder blades" but the most important center for him (and fixed point or fulcrum around which the lever of his counterweights operated) was the point a few inches below the navel'. Email conversation (30/3/09).

Both exercises constitute short and repeatable crystallisations of an action (stretching a body-building apparatus and a bow, respectively); both defamiliarise this action through the use of an extended gestural vocabulary, rhythmic contrast and play; both have an 'inner music' informing the actor's work (Leabhart sings to himself as he performs the Extensor); and both actively and consistently put out of balance, what has previously been in balance or centred by virtue of the performer's training. Both forms, then, exploit a heightened consciousness of the spine first to stabilise and then to destabilise the actor at work, recognizing that it is this creative tension which leads to visually arresting performance, or to that much debated term 'presence'.

These two examples illustrate a distinctly rationalized, even atomized, approach to the spine and more generally to creative play, an approach which reaches its apotheosis in Decroux's 1960 article 'Bodily Presence':

The body is in fact remarkable and impossible to pulverize. It's a pity. The advantage would be clear if, without killing this body, one managed to reduce it to powder or to carve it up into tiny cubes. These parts, too small to interest the eye, too uniform as well, would be arranged as one wished; then one would reveal to the world the arrangement of these specks concealed from the world's view.

(Chamberlain and Leabhart 2008: 53)

Michael Chekhov's interpretation of the spine is characteristically different, emphasising the non-rational and intuitive, the imaginary rather than the material body. Just a year before the publication of Stanislavsky's great spinal model, Chekhov was appropriating his teacher's terminology in his classes at his new Studio in Dartington. But even then, as his Technique was coming into focus and 16 years before it was first published, his emphasis was more synthetic than atomistic. In his unpublished lesson from January 1937, entitled 'The Spine or Main Line, The Whole', Chekhov conflated the linear, dramaturgical function of the 'spine of the role' with what he called the Fourth Brother - or the feeling of the whole. In this transcript of the class from the archive at Dartington, Chekhov is keen to distance himself from what he sees as the dry, analytical thinking associated with the former:

The whole method I am trying to give you is directed towards escaping this bad way of intellectualizing about the play, which kills the possibility to be in the aura of the play. The intellect is not able to enter into the aura of the play. It kills it.

Betraying his anthroposophical leanings, Chekhov focuses on a play's hidden aura - a Rudolf Steiner-inspired alternative to his better-known feeling of *the Whole*. He then goes on to detail how one goes about entering into the aura of the play: imagine, before you approach the play in detail, you are sitting in the theatre *after* the curtain has come down on a performance of it, sitting in a mood of openness to the impressions received throughout the piece. 'Revisit' in your mind each act as it might have been performed to you and allow a refined sense of the totality of the piece to enter your thoughts. Only then, Chekhov argues, in this imaginative space of prediction, in this site of creative augury:

There is this beautiful moment when you can catch with your whole being the result of the play.<sup>12</sup>

Later, in *On the Technique of Acting*, Chekhov described this process as 'the past and the future, being experienced acutely as the present' (1991: 133). Perhaps, in Chekhov's holistic re-definition of the spine there is a prefiguring of what Tufnell and Crickmay mean: the spine as 'one long limb' not as a set of separately articulated vertebrae...

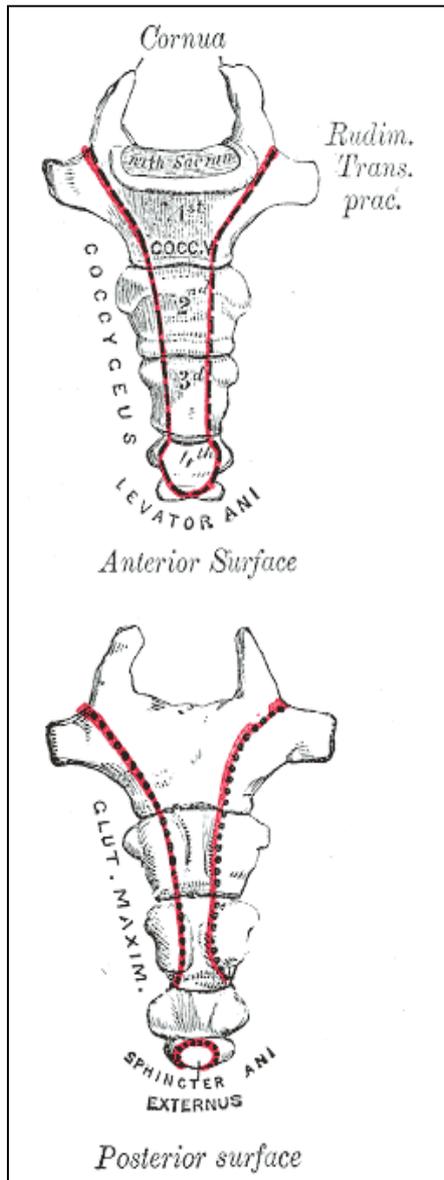
---

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to The Dartington Hall Trust Archive for giving me permission to quote from the Michael Chekhov collection. Catalogue Ref. MC/S1/21/E.

## Co1-4: Coccyx: Tailpiece

***The small triangular bone at the end of the spinal column  
in man and some apes, representing a vestigial tail.***

***From Gk: Kokkux or Cuckoo, from the likeness of the bone to a cuckoo's beak.***



The snapshot by definition breaks up an observable fact and detaches it from its natural home. This process of 'pulverising' (to use Decroux's rather frightening metaphor) can be helpful as an analytical tool but it runs counter to the function of the spine itself: as a connecting point for the whole of the body. In physical terms the spine is a living representation of this tension between atomism and holism, comprising thirty-three separately labeled components (or vertebrae) but linked from atlas to coccyx and suffused in spino-cerebral fluid flowing continuously between head and tail – 'a constant tide of connection' (Tufnell and Crickmay: 1993: 3).

Whilst in medical terms the coccyx is a redundant evolutionary hangover from our primate past - a tail for which we no longer have a use - in performance terms it is an ideal place of conclusion. For it is precisely this quality of *vestigiality* (a hint, a mark, a trace?) which is so central to the phenomenon of training and its inherent contradictions.

Training undoubtedly makes its mark on the trainee but this mark remains largely hidden until the act of performance. Indeed, in *indirect*<sup>13</sup> traditions of acting, the training base of the performer is often not even in evidence then – at least not explicitly. Within a given tradition, training often functions as a shared language of *unspoken* understandings: a bond between director and performer, if both have the same training roots, and between performers themselves, particularly if there is an element of risk in the work. That hidden understanding, from a spectator's perspective, provides the basis for what often looks like an uncanny 'togetherness' in a cast of performers, a quality of *mutuality* that is as tangible as it is difficult to describe. Training is, in effect, the backstory to any performance.

One antidote for this loss of visibility is for a practitioner to claim highly visible roots to their training - to delineate definable histories. Whilst this is increasingly difficult in a western context of multiple and simultaneous training, there are still many good reasons for protecting the spine of 'deep training': training which is longitudinal, developmental and confined to a specific set of practices. The most obvious symbol of this (justifiable) protectionism is the model of training transmission as 'family inheritance' and the training laboratory as a 'home'. This 'undiluted' (to use Grotowski's term) but potentially parochial model allows for a level of quality assurance in training processes and militates against dilettantism, though it brings with it all the fractious politics of the family power dynamic. And whilst the grandfather-father-son model of direct training still remains popular in some practitioners' rhetoric, in truth it is as utopian as my wish to see my grandchildren's children holidaying in Borth in the late 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

A more enduring symbol identified in this article is the injury and its place in training. I have tried, here, to set permanent injury within a context of natural osteological developments and changes in the physical form – to the spine specifically. But injury operates at another level too, as an enforced objectifier or defamiliarising agent. It is no coincidence that both Moshe Feldenkrais and F.M. Alexander were inspired to develop training systems by their own limitations (from a knee injury and respiratory problems respectively) for these restrictions forced them to think outside of their own

---

<sup>13</sup> Ian Watson (2000: 1-2) draws a distinction between 'direct training' where the trainee learns a specific repertory from a master and 'indirect training', which focuses on generic skills to be applied to a range of contexts.

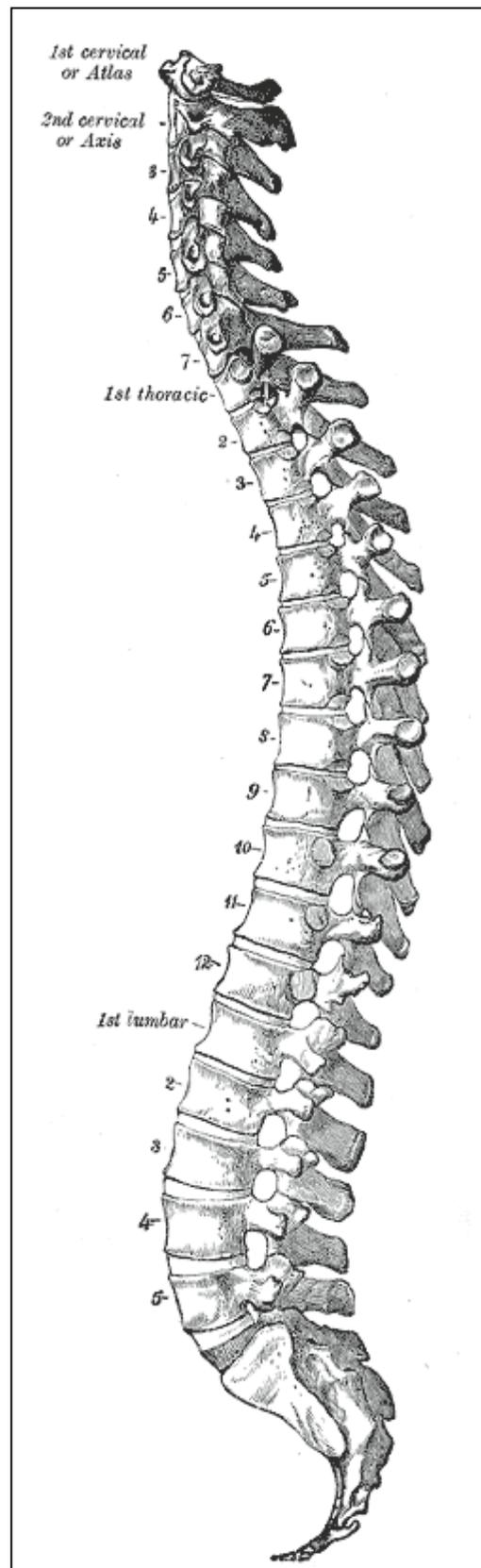
habituated behaviours and posture. Thus, in specific circumstances, it is possible to make discoveries from sometimes shocking changes to one's physical capacity, to make gains from any initial loss. Meyerhold, Chekhov and Decroux were not of course motivated by the same causes as Feldenkrais and Alexander but they shared with them the belief that training is a route to new understandings of the self and of one's own functionality.

All three practitioners featured in the Thoracic section of this article view the spine as a tool for analysis, even though that tool might have been used in varying ways: from Decroux's often starkly anatomical approach to the imaginative projection of Chekhov. Advances in technology - which even now extend way beyond Magnetic Resonance Imagery, to Paraspinal Thermal Imaging, for instance - have extended this idea of the spine as an index of balance, health and connectivity. And at the same time they intensify the image of the spine as our personal archive, steadily accumulating and recording the shocks of life as we progress towards our end.

If there is an overarching discovery to be made from this layered survey of spinal understandings, it is to respect the interstices between vertebrae, the resonances, half-truths, metaphors and etymologies which define the spine itself, whilst retaining a healthy suspicion of any claims to undisputed verticality.

## Afterwords (or 33 spinal snaps)

Spine as tradition  
Spine as archive  
Spine as keystone  
Spine as lineage  
Spine as pain site  
Spine as benchmark  
Spine as fragment  
Spine as limb  
Spine as complex  
Spine as witness  
Spine as window  
Spine in 2D  
Spine in 3D  
Spine as ice core  
Spine as trunk  
Spine as backbone  
Spine as absence  
Spine in curves  
Spine as chain  
Spine as trap  
Spine as role  
Spine as pathway  
Spine as connector  
Spine as divider  
Spine as bone  
Spine as fluid  
Spine as support  
Spine as deluder  
Spine as communicator  
Spine as axis  
Spine as cross  
Spine as long-view  
Spine as snap



## References

- Barba, Eugenio (2003) 'Grandfathers, Orphans, and the Family Saga of European Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2, May, 108-117.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Savarese, Nicola (1991) *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer*, London: Routledge.
- Bogdanov, Gennady (1997) *Meyerhold's Theater and Biomechanics*, Berlin: Mime Centrum (Video).
- Carnicke, Sharon (1998) *Stanislavsky in Focus*, London: Harwood Academic.
- Chamberlain, Franc and Leabhart, Thomas (eds) (2008) *The Decroux Sourcebook*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Chekhov, Michael (1991) *On the Technique of Acting*, New York: HarperCollins
- Clurman, Harold (1972) *On Directing*, New York: Macmillan.
- Dennis, Anne (1995) *The Articulate Body: the Physical Training of the Actor*, New York: Drama Books.
- Ginkas, Kama (1998) 'Russian Theatre is not a Time Killer: John Freedman Interviews Kama Ginkas', in *Theatre Forum* No. 12, Winter/Spring, 4-13.
- Hodge, Alison, ed. (2000) *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, London: Routledge.
- Jones, David Richard (1986) *Great Directors at Work: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, Brook*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leabhart, Thomas (2007) *Etienne Decroux*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Pitches, Jonathan (2006) *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Schechner, Richard and Welford, Lisa (eds) (1997) *The Grotowski Source Book*, London: Routledge.
- Slowiak James and Cuesta, Jairo (2007), *Jerzy Grotowski*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris (2004) *A Widening Field: Journeys in Body and Imagination*, Hampshire: Dance Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_, (1993) *Body Space Image*, Hampshire: Dance Books.
- Watson, Ian (2000), *Performer Training: Developments Across Cultures*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic.