

Method of Physical Action (MPA) in TAO Dance Theater

Dianhuai Shen^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Dance, Taipei National University of the Arts, Guandu District, Beitou, Taipei City, Taiwan, China*

a. 522401201@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: TAO Dance Theater is one of the contemporary dance companies with significant influence in the world. Its individualized and pure physicality prompts viewers to reevaluate and redefine aesthetics. This paper aims to investigate TAO Dance's "Method of Physical Action" which resembles Polish theatre master Grotowski's concept of "art as a vehicle." In other words, TAO Dance Theater achieves a suitable execution of self-constructed performance procedures, penetrating conscious and emotional manipulation under the influence of society and culture. It breaks away from the constraints of everyday life experiences and mainstream dance training, as well as prevailing objectification through visual preconceptions, ultimately achieving the best state of natural externalization through physical action.

Keywords: Method of Physical Action (MPA), TAO Dance Theater, subtraction

1. Introduction

Founded in March 2008 by contemporary dancers Tao Ye, Duan Ni, and Wang Hao, TAO Dance Theater has emerged as a prominent force in the global dance scene over the past thirteen years. Through the creation of multiple dance works, such as "Weight x 3" (2008), "2" (2011), "4" (2012), "5" (2013), "6" (2013), "7" (2014), "8" (2015), "9" (2017), "12" (2019), and "10" (2020), the company has garnered attention for its distinct style, embracing Eastern philosophical ideas and exploring the aesthetics of the human body. With a minimalist approach, TAO Dance Theater has captured the interest of the global dance community. The company has not only performed in prestigious events such as the Vienna Festival in Austria, the Fall for Dance Festival in New York, and the National Center for the Performing Arts Dance Festival in China but has also collaborated with renowned cross-disciplinary fashion brands like Y3 by designer Yohji Yamamoto, IWC Schaffhausen, and the prestigious fashion magazine "VOGUE." Furthermore, the academic community has also taken a keen interest in TAO Dance Theater, with Time Out magazine in New York praising it as one of the "World's Top Ten Dance Performances." According to the London Evening Standard, "Tao Ye's works contain profound concepts, yet they are astonishingly simple. He is indeed an outstanding rising star in the international dance world." Renowned contemporary Chinese dance master Lin Huaimin admires Tao Ye's creations, stating, "Tao Ye's works are the dance of the 21st century, admirable and thought-provoking. I dream of creating such works but know that I cannot achieve it [1]."

What exactly is the captivating allure of TAO Dance Theater that has captured the audience's attention? How is their performance so exceptional that it resonates across the world of dance? These are the questions that researchers are currently exploring. This paper aims to delve into this subject by reviewing literature related to TAO Dance Theater, including works such as "Tao Ye's Creative Path and Aesthetic Pursuit" by Qing Qing [2], "Contemporary Dance Art Traits and Cultural Connotations of TAO Dance Theater" by Zhang Yanjie [3], "Metaphysical Body: An Aesthetic Exploration of TAO Dance Theater" by Jiang Shudong [4], "TAO Dance Theater: A Decade of Potential Energy" by Gao Yan and Fan Xi [5], and "Art Riding for a Decade: The Unadorned Body Theater of TAO Dance Theater" by Mu Yu [6].

The aforementioned studies by scholars revolve around the subjectivity of the body, exploring the reconstruction of aesthetic power through the deconstruction and construction of bodily concepts. However, there is a disparity in their approaches: some scholars borrow from traditional Chinese philosophy to investigate TAO Dance Theater's aesthetics, while others apply semiotic perspectives to examine its aesthetic construction. Few scholars have delved into the transformation of the company's performance states. Therefore, the researchers' objective is to base their study on the performance research (art as a vehicle) of Polish theatre practitioner Grotowski, utilizing his theoretical framework to explore the execution of TAO Dance Theater's optimal performance state through bodily transformation. The purpose of this research is to provide performers with diverse methods and approaches to enhance their artistic expression.

2. Self-penetration through Tracing Origins

To clarify the core concept of "art as a vehicle" research, we must begin with Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), a heavyweight figure who profoundly impacted the European and American theater world in the mid-20th century. With his innovative approach to "poor theater" and the remarkable achievements of his work "Akropolis," Grotowski stood alongside masters of the previous century such as Stanislavski, Brecht, Artaud, and Meyerhold. Notably, the renowned contemporary performance scholar Richard Schechner, who was only two years younger than Grotowski, regarded him as a fatherly figure. What astonished the European and American arts and culture community was that after Grotowski's creation and direction of the play "Apocalypsis cum Figuris" in 1969, he never again staged any works. He transitioned from the "aesthetics of the sign" in theater to the study of the "aesthetics of transformation" in performance. This transformation led him from the realms of "theatrical performance," "participatory performance," and "tracing performance" to the final stage of his career: the study of the "art as a vehicle" (art of vehicle).

Today, the "Method of Physical Actions" (MPA) that we employ originated from the creative ideas of the Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski and was later developed by Grotowski. Due to the complexity and obscurity of Grotowski's research literature, it has posed challenges to his followers. However, Professor Zhong Mingde, the Dean of the Drama Department at Taipei National University of the Arts and a doctoral student under Richard Schechner at New York University, had the fortune to meet Grotowski during his time in New York. After moving to Taiwan, he devoted himself to researching Grotowski's theories for many years and has published several relevant monographs internationally, using methods such as sexual practices, Tai Chi, meditation, and Daoist practices to interpret and explain Grotowski's "art as a vehicle" concept.

In summary, Professor Zhong believes that the core concept of "art as a vehicle" is the performer's transformation from a state of everyday consciousness/energy to a state of non-daily consciousness/energy. The transformation path involves the performer moving from their secularized "I1" to their inner "essence," developing into an "I-I" state, and then the merging of the "I" (the physical body) with the "I" (the essence). This process gives birth to a certain "I-I" state, where the

knowledge becomes a kind of embodied practice where the body disappears, and the essence emerges (I2) [7].

In simpler terms, the transformation from the everyday to the non-daily involves the performer breaking free from the constraints of conventional thoughts and emotions, using the execution of the performer's body to seek the natural expression of their inner humanity, releasing their essence in an unadorned state. This essence is the next stage of body-mind unity, and it comes close to a certain state that can only be intuited but not verbally conveyed. By comparison, TAO Dance Theater's founder, Tao Ye, shares a similar perspective on the body. His pursuit of body execution embodies the transformation from the everyday to non-daily consciousness. For example, in his article "Ten Years with This Thought" [8], Tao Ye reflects on the following points related to the body of the dancer:

1. Tao Ye questions the traditional curriculum taught in the military, believing that the soul of modern dance does not lie solely in the expression of objects. The process of dance embodies multiple potential motivations, and the richness and exploratory nature of modern dance reside in the rhythm of the body.

2. Tao Ye leaves the military to seek the "true self" of the body and travels to the United States to exchange and learn at the Martha Graham Dance Company.

3. Tao Ye believes that modern dance should start from individualization rather than being limited by collectivization.

4. Tao Ye believes that dance constructs not only a narrative body or a story-oriented expression. Dancers should demand the boundlessness of the body.

From these reflections and analyses of Tao Ye's body perspective, researchers believe that, in the words of Eugenio Barba, Grotowski's successor and founder of Odin Teatret, "a certain living body (body-in-life) is not just a living body but also expands the actor's presence and the spectator's perception." In other words, the body serves as the carrier of dance; without a living body, there is no dance. The charm of dance lies in "breaking" the boundaries of aesthetics, inundating the audience's present moment with the infinite variations of the body. And what are the methods and approaches to "breaking"? Perhaps the study of Grotowski's "art as a vehicle" can offer an explanation.

Tao Ye's departure from the military's bodily training signifies a detachment from the homogenized body experience within the cultural structure of aesthetics and the emotional expressions of social performance. This detachment involves moving away from the secularized "I1" of Grotowski and initiating the body's actions. Through the organic combination of spinal movements and joint movements, Tao Ye constructs a relationship between 0 and 1 within the body, removing the inertia of daily bodily habits, and exploring the "true self" he never forgets. This "true self" is perhaps what Grotowski calls the "essence." With the body drawing closer to the essence/true self, it awakens the body's essence (body) (I2). What is this "essence (body)"? For Grotowski, the "essence (body)" is the ultimate goal of an actor's self-cultivation. To further explain with Zhuangzi's perspective on the body, this "essence (body)" (I2) may be the externalization of one's natural "nature" in the present moment. Just as described in Zhuangzi's "Autumn Floods," the River God says, "What is Heaven? What is Man? Cows and horses have four legs; that is Heaven. They lose the cow's head and put on the bridle, which is Man. Therefore, there is nothing that can destroy a person's Heaven, nor anything that can benefit them by destroying their life." In other words, cows and horses have four legs, representing what I call Heaven (nature, innate). Once you put a bridle on a horse's head or a nose rope on a cow, that is what I call Man. Therefore, do not destroy your Heaven (essence/body) because of Man (externalization). For example, TAO Dance Theater's trilogy of linear works, "6," "7," and "8," marks the beginning of the exploration of the dancers' spinal movements. In the free space of the stage, the dancers not only abandon the character's portrayal and narrative or emotional clues, as well as disguising the sexual objectification through clothing but also suspend the

predetermined thematic cognition of the audience, focusing the audience's aesthetic power on the living body. Through a minimalist and repetitive operation in "pure dance," the movements of the spine from the cervical to the sacral region are integrated and differentiated with the joint movements of the hip, knee, and ankle, achieving multiple possibilities of spinal movement within the constraints of joint dynamics. This series of works not only breaks the limitations of the mundane world and challenges traditional aesthetics but also, through breaking the fetters of inertia, uncovers the inner essence/true self, leading to the other shore of Tao Ye: the essence (body). This also aligns with the core concept of Grotowski's "poor theater": the "Method of Physical Actions" (MPA) aims to liberate from the limitations of the secular world. It breaks the reasonable constraints of the new mammalian brain (knowledge) and the old mammalian brain (emotions) and triggers the reptilian brain (the flow of bodily actions) to approach the state of essence. In other words, "actors must undergo self-penetration, self-exposure, or self-sacrifice to become divine actors [1]."

3. Simplicity, the Art of Subtraction

In his essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch," American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) emphasized that if kitsch art represents a form of addition, where various eye-catching elements are added to the medium and technique of art, often imitating previous new or avant-garde art and following an academic route, aiming to please the audience through realism, rich social and cultural connotations, readability, and dramatic appeal, then avant-garde art represents a form of subtraction. It subtracts non-essential elements, tracing back to the essence of artistic media and techniques. The creators are no longer concerned with the materials of social experiences; instead, they focus on the artistic media and processes, seeking the "absolute." [1] Contemporary Chinese-American dancer Zhang Xiaoxiong also emphasizes this idea, stating, "Eliminate all unnecessary elements, emphasize the rationality and necessity of everything that exists, and create a beauty of form that contains the ultimate requirements of details." By comparison, Grotowski's approach to bodily creation follows a similar path:

Our method is not a kind of deductive collection of various techniques; rather, everything here is focused on the ripening process of the performer. The signs of ripening are a certain extreme tension, total self-exposure, where some of the most intimate parts are laid bare, yet without any self-glorification or self-indulgence. The performer turns themselves into a gift 100%, a trance-like technique that integrates the emerging physical and mental power of the most intimate aspect of the performer's instinct. It flows out slowly in a certain translumination... "Our theater training is a method of subtraction (via negativa), not an accumulation of sets of techniques but the removal of obstacles [1]."

From the discussions of the three scholars above, we can understand that, within the scope of the body perspective of avant-garde art, what they pursue is a kind of "subtraction" from the inside out. This subtraction not only helps creators and performers return to "tracing origins," breaking free from the replicability of art and the rational constraints of the normal knowledge framework, but also hopes that performers can manifest the inner tension of their bodies through complete self-dedication. In the present performance process, they interpret the performer's living body, which is precisely what Grotowski calls the trance-like technique. What is astonishing is that Grotowski's technique of trance proposed in the second half of the last century is still alive and well today in TAO Dance Theater. As Tao Ye said, "The focus of TAO Dance Theater's interpretation is pure body, generating the possibility of the body through movement and refining it. What we need is an attempt to strip the flesh of the body, leaving only the beauty of the skeleton itself. This is the aesthetic direction we pursue." By comparison, whether it is TAO Dance Theater's naming of works from "2" to "12" without the confines of rational words, the minimalist matching of costumes in black, white, and gray, the elimination of sex objects using short hair as a benchmark, or the "Dao to simplicity" of pure

spinal movements in works like "6," "7," and "8," or the hidden facial expressions of TAO Dance Theater performers from start to finish, or the fact that the minimalistic movements in work "8" never leave the ground, all these bodily phenomena interpret the living body through the method of subtraction, focusing on a dynamic and lively body, breaking not only the long-standing aesthetic understanding and interpretation centered on choreography in China but also the cognitive forms with the theme of lyrical narration, fully presenting Grotowski's definition of the sacred actor in the poor theater. The sacredness Grotowski refers to is not interpreted from a religious perspective but through the actor's authentic physical actions, revealing a close encounter between the fully exposed body and the audience. In other words, from Grotowski's perspective, for the performer, we eliminate the resistance of their physiological organs to the psychological process, resulting in no time lag between internal pulsations and external reactions, reaching a state where pulsation is the realm of external reaction. In other words, when TAO Dance Theater subtracts the worldly body (I1), explores the inner essence through action (I-I), and merges external actions with internal pulsations, the body disappears, burns away, and the audience only sees a series of visible pulsations.

4. Knowledge as Embodied Practice

In his essay "Tian Dao," the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi emphasized two key sentences: "The mouth cannot speak, but numbers are stored within it" and "neither slow nor fast, it is obtained in the hand and responds in the mind." In other words, for a certain skillful technique, it cannot be fully explained in words; it exists only within the grasp of the one who masters the technique. It is about understanding through the physical practice of a certain technique, grasping its action through bodily experience, and progressively abstracting effective patterns of movement. Often, mastering a certain technique, action, or bodily experience is equivalent to acquiring reliable knowledge, which can be called "liquid knowledge." In other words, it is knowledge that can be understood but not transmitted in words, even beyond language. Grotowski often referred to this as "knowledge as embodied practice." Foucault stated, "Without purifying oneself, one cannot come into contact with the truth held in the hands of the gods." By comparison, TAO Dance Theater embodies such "liquid knowledge." Under the guidance of Tao Ye, the dancers construct their own system through bodily actions, leading them to the essence/self.

As Tao Ye said, "The core of dance creation is how to consult the body rather than control it. The artistic mission faced by dancers is to explore the body. In this process, many interesting parts are opened up, revealing an infinite world, which is the a priori of human beings. Art is the passage to that world, bringing imagination and ineffable emotions, surpassing the present moment and transcending emotions." Tao Ye's work transcends emotions and enters an infinite world. Perhaps "roundness" is one of the core elements in TAO Dance Theater's bodily training system. Their understanding of "roundness" is not limited to the symbolic image of a traditional Chinese meaning, nor is it focused on a referential "circle" symbol. Through the bodily construction relationship of "roundness," they explore the flow of the body's changes in the present space, seeking continuous flowing lines of the body. "Roundness" serves as a navigational mark for dancers to seek "liquid knowledge," finding patterns through the body's repetitive movements and seeking answers within the body's presence, leading to the essence.

For example, Tao Ye's work "Weight X 3" is a good example, as the name contains a double meaning. It not only conveys the idea of bodily "weight" but also points to the "repetition" in their training system. The bodily "weight" is executed and completed through the "repetition," emphasizing the existence, value, and significance of "weight" through repetition. "Weight" and "repetition" are integrated into one. "Weight X 3" (2008) is not only Tao Ye's debut work, but it also marks the beginning of TAO Dance Theater's bodily repetitive training system guided by continuous fluidity in "roundness." In this way, "weight" and "repetition" become the execution method of TAO Dance

Theater, exploring multiple possibilities of bodily language through tangible physical strength. This also verifies Tao Ye's words: "Dance is not sought externally but born internally, returning to the body to seek answers."

For instance, in May 2021, TAO Dance Theater's students completed one hour of focused walking at the beach, called "Walking Weight." It can be said that this one-hour performance is a display of performance art at the beach, or it can be seen as an internal observation of bodily action. Through present bodily focus, they approach the essence of life and its infinite extension. The "walking" in this performance is no longer the pedestrian walking of everyday life, no longer a thought-led directive action. The master of the body, "I," re-recognizes the feet rubbing against the sandstone ground in the present moment, feeling the heel, sole, and the repetition and weight produced by the contact between the toes and the ground. Through internal observation, the body is placed in its most delicate state, experiencing the repetition and connection with the ground, a sensory experience beyond what language can depict. To use Grotowski's words, TAO Dance Theater's students, through daily walking, enter a non-ordinary state. In the process of slight energy transformation, "I" (the physical body) observes "I" (the essence). At this moment, the conscious act of walking transitions into an unconscious state, giving rise to a "I-I" (self-essence) through continuous internal observation while walking, approaching the appearance of the essence (self2).

5. Conclusion

"A person may have never worked with Grotowski, but as long as they can construct viable 'actions,' works, or rituals for themselves, they will eventually arrive at the essence (self) or the ultimate purpose of humanity." Perhaps TAO Dance Theater is a fitting case in point. Through the exploration presented in the three sections above, the researcher draws the following conclusions:

1. Under Tao Ye's guidance, TAO Dance Theater has never been directly influenced by Grotowski's thoughts and ideas on the "art of passage." Nevertheless, their bodily execution shares remarkable similarities with Grotowski. Both break away from the constraints of conventional knowledge, mainstream culture's conditioning, and the manipulation of socialized emotions. Through bodily awareness, they seek a unity of knowledge and action, pursuing the state of inner essence or true self.

2. TAO Dance Theater's approach is analogous to Grotowski's bodily action training, achieving a minimalist effect through subtraction. Their intention is not to adorn themselves with external cultural elements but to approach a natural state of purity through a lively and authentic embodiment. In doing so, they expand the actors' presence and the audience's perception.

3. Regarding TAO Dance Theater's "liquid knowledge," it is not easily described in just a few words. It can only be continuously accumulated and stored through bodily experience, measured and practiced time and again. Through the bodily action of "knowledge as embodied practice," guided by the concept of "roundness" and experienced through the perception of "weight," they explore boundless possibilities of the body through the inner self.

In conclusion, the TAO Dance Theater exemplifies the essence of "knowledge as embodied practice." By breaking away from conventional norms and integrating minimalist bodily execution, they explore the infinite potential of the body through continuous fluidity guided by the principle of "roundness" and perceived through the sense of "weight." Through the inner self, they pursue a state of boundless possibilities within the body.

References

- [1] Zhong, M. D. (2018). *MPA Sighs: Tribute to the Master Stanislavski*. Taipei: Shulin Publishing House.
- [2] Qing, Q. (2013). *The Creative Path and Aesthetic Pursuit of Tao Ye*. *Journal of Beijing Dance Academy*, (02), 15-18.

- [3] Zhang, Y. J. (2020). *Contemporary Dance Art Characteristics and Cultural Connotation of Tao Body Theater*. *Chinese Literary Criticism*, (02), 65-74. DOI:10.19324/j.cnki.zgwypl.2020.02.006.
- [4] Jiang, S. D. (2019). "Metaphysical" Body: An Exploration of the Aesthetics of Tao Body Theater. *Journal of Beijing Dance Academy*, (01), 61-65.
- [5] Gao, Y., & Fan, X. (2020). *Tao Body: Accumulating Strength for a Decade*. *Dance*, (06), 49-56.
- [6] Mu, Y. (2019). "Art Ride" for Ten Years: Tao Body Theater's Simple Body · Theater. *Art Review*, (01), 73-78. DOI:10.16364/j.cnki.cn11-4907/j.2019.01.010.
- [7] Zhong, M. D. (2018). *Penetrating the Essence of Three Bodies: Revisiting Grotowski's View of the Body*. *Drama Art*, (05), 4-26. DOI:10.13737/j.cnki.ta.2018.05.001.
- [8] Tao, Y. (2019). *Holding onto This Thought, Already a Decade*. *Art Review*, (01), 68-72. DOI:10.16364/j.cnki.cn11-4907/j.2019.01.009.