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## ENERGISING RASA THEORY: BREATH, EMPATHY, AND WELL-BEING IN CONTEMPORARY ACTOR TRAINING

### Annotation

*Breath has emerged as the preferred locus of performance energy over the last two decades, presenting a pragmatic approach to questions of contemporary actor training, post-Stanislavskian approaches (such as psychophysical approaches) and vitalisation of traditional performance practices (such as Kutiyattam and Kalaripayattu). In this paper, we elaborate outwards from this "rediscovery" of breath, to offer a methodological base from which to engage the concept of Rasa which occupies a pre-eminent position within Indian aesthetics. We argue that the constellation of bodily practices arising from within this field of knowledge, far from esoteric traditionalisms, inform the neuro-physiological basis for empathy. Practical engagement with these neuro-physiological processes widens understanding of the importance and role of well-being in contemporary actor training. We argue that a shift towards this well-being based approach within conservatories and performance training institutes, is a necessary adaptation to meet the challenges of a post-pandemic world.*

**Key words:** actor training, breath in performance, well-being, Rasa theory, theatre pedagogy, mirror neurons, empathy.

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## ҚУАТТАНДЫРАТЫН НӘСІЛ ТЕОРИЯСЫ: ҚАЗІРГІ АКТЕРЛІК ДАЙЫНДЫҚТАҒЫ ТЫНЫС АЛУ, ЭМПАТИЯ ЖӘНЕ ӘЛ-АУҚАТ

### Аннотация

Соңғы екі онжылдықта тыныс алу қазіргі заманғы актерлерді оқыту мәселелеріне, пост-станиславалық көзқарастарға (психофизикалық тәсілдер сияқты) және дәстүрлі орындаушылық тәжірибені жандандыруға (мысалы, Кутияттама және Каларипаятта) прагматикалық көзқарасты ұсына отырып, орындау энергиясының таңдаулы көзі болды. Бұл мақалада біз үнді эстетикасында ерекше орын алатын нәсіл тұжырымдамасын қолданудың әдіснамалық негізін ұсыну үшін тыныс алудың осы "қайта жаңаруын" дамытамыз. Эзотерикалық дәстүрліліктен алыс білімнің осы саласында пайда болатын дене тәжірибесінің жиынтығы эмпатияның нейрофизиологиялық негізін құрайды. Осы нейрофизиологиялық процестермен практикалық өзара әрекеттесу қазіргі актерлерді оқытуда әлауқаттың маңыздылығы мен рөлін түсінуді кеңейтеді. Консерваториялар мен біліктілікті арттыру институттарындағы әл-ауқатқа негізделген осы тәсілге көшу

пандемиядан кейінгі әлемнің мәселелерін шешуге қажетті бейімделу болып табылады.

**Түйінді сөздер:** актерді оқыту, спектакльдегі тыныс алу, әл-ауқат, нәсіл теориясы, театр педагогикасы, айна нейрондары, эмпатия.

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## ЗАРЯЖАЮЩАЯ ЭНЕРГИЕЙ ТЕОРИЯ РАСЫ: ДЫХАНИЕ, СОПЕРЕЖИВАНИЕ И БЛАГОПОЛУЧИЕ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ АКТЕРСКОЙ ПОДГОТОВКЕ

### Аннотация

За последние два десятилетия дыхание стало предпочтительным источником энергии исполнения, представляя прагматичный подход к вопросам современной подготовки актеров, пост-осмыслению подходов Станиславского (как, например, психофизические подходы) и оживления традиционных исполнительских практик (таких как Кутияттам и Каларипаятту). В этой статье мы развиваем это “повторное открытие” дыхания, чтобы предложить методологическую основу для использования концепции Расы, которая занимает выдающееся положение в индийской эстетике. Мы утверждаем, что совокупность телесных практик, возникающих в этой области знаний, далеких от эзотерического традиционализма, формирует нейрофизиологическую основу эмпатии. Практическое взаимодействие с этими нейрофизиологическими процессами расширяет понимание важности и роли благополучия в современном обучении актеров. Мы утверждаем, что переход к этому основанному на благополучии подходу в консерваториях и институтах повышения квалификации является необходимой адаптацией для решения проблем постпандемического мира.

**Ключевые слова:** обучение актера, дыхание в спектакле, благополучие, теория Расы, театральная педагогика, зеркальные нейроны, эмпатия.

**Introduction.** Contemporary actor training stands to benefit from recent advances in behavioural sciences and increasing global cross-disciplinarity of performance practices. This article is an invitation to think about actor training in a new way, aspiring towards an integrative and holistic learning experience with the actor’s well-being central to the project. It builds on the increasing popularity of integrating physical practices (for example yoga and tai chi) into actor training in the service of specific pedagogical aims.

The inclusion of these practices is necessarily reductive, since the practice is dislocated from its context and philosophy to serve some other instrumental aim – to increase physical flexibility or cultivate concentration for example. It then becomes a subset or functional aspect of a larger pedagogical structure, since it is invariably coupled with other practices or forms and decoupled from its epistemological roots. This predatory and extractive strategy invites critiques of cultural appropriation and the need to

address inequities of representation when it comes to Eastern and Western contributions to the field [1].

This article seeks to offer an alternative way of thinking about actor training by locating within the convergence of contemporary behavioural science and classical approaches – rooting both endeavours in the immersive and ongoing study of the human condition. This is neither an ahistorical strategy nor a return to an essentialised conception of human nature as unchanging. The invitation is to consider the experimental impulses embedded within various practices as potentially transformational, value-based and guided by the human capacity to imagine.

**Methodology.** These reflections arise out of a practice-led research process initiated in 2011 that began with the creative impulse to explore voice as a dramaturgical tool to generate material for performance. Voice is often considered a delivery system for the words to be spoken, or as a part of building character - so it is either instrumentalised for clear communication or arrives *post-facto* as an acting choice on how the character should speak.

In this creative process the “sound of the words” as uttered by the actor was foregrounded - the turn of phrase, proper nouns, and the mantra-like potential nascent in the utterance of a syllable released moment to moment through breath, was explored. The stage performance that emerged titled *Hidden in Plain Sight* first premiered in London in 2012, with public and festival stagings in India in 2013. Elaboration of the post-humanist themes of the performance in a case study, is the subject of a forthcoming publication.

An aspect of this exploration emerged from a profound dissatisfaction with the discursive construction of the body as *materiality* in the field of performance making. The counter-proposition was to explore the bodily potential for *musicality*, as experienced through utterance of sound, resonance and work with heightened physicality and the sonic properties of text. This led away from the blank *tabula rasa* of physical matter and space, towards *Rasa theory* and the exploration of performance energy!

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the theatrical performance was reimagined as a digital theatre hybrid and streamed as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where it won an Infallibles Award for the Best Show in 2021. The universal crisis of global health caused by the pandemic prompted a renewed search for meaning making in a digital format, and a new performative aesthetic emerged from an exploration of being isolated, with mental health, voyeurism and the feeling of claustrophobia, as subject material. A by-product of this creative process has also been a sustained engagement with actor training pedagogy. The insights gleaned on well-being in actor training, its wider implications for global health in a post-pandemic educational ecosystem, and social resilience are therefore immediately relevant.

**From the memory of emotion to the “rediscovery” of breath.** Imaginative capacity in modern actor training is linked to “memory-based”

approaches. These approaches were influenced by scientific movements in psychology that took shape with the work of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner among others. Their emphasis on forms of conditioning and the nature of the stimulus-response loops, revealed powerful insights into mammalian behaviour, for the time. It is no surprise then that Strasberg couches his definition of acting in fairly explicit “behaviourist” terms - “Acting is responding to imaginary stimuli”. Broadly, performance energy is to be invoked through some form of emotional recall, a “memory of emotion” based on past experience [2, p.152].

However, breath has emerged as the preferred locus of performance energy over the last two decades, presenting a pragmatic approach to philosophical and practical questions that have long dogged the field. These post-Stanislvskian approaches or *psychophysical* approaches root performance energy in the integration of breath and body, recognising that emotional states can arise independent of mining the subconscious mind [3; 4; 5]. The vitalisation of traditional performance practices such as *Kutiyattam* and *Kalaripayattu*, has also been informed by development of the patterns of breath associated with various emotional states or dynamic movements [5; 6; 7]. Post-Stanislvskian here also implies pre-Strasberg, that is, a hermeneutic approach to Stanislavsky’s work before the Anglo-American turn (and fetishism!) associated with *method acting*. This close reading of Stanislavsky might return the practitioner to focus on his engagement with yoga, breath and the flow of energy, release of unnecessary muscular tension in the service of expressivity, and connection to imaginative potential [11, p.64].

Contemporary actor training in some sense has returned to the sustainable vitality of performance practices, reorienting towards embodied perspectives. This trend, at least to some extent, took shape through the 1970s New Age movements that cross-pollinated Jungian psychology with spiritual practices linked to the vital energy potential implicit in the body. In some instances this involves grafting an emancipatory project onto a popular understanding of the *chakra system* to enable an increase in the actor’s emotional and physical range [8]. In other instances an eclectic assemblage of Reichian bioenergetics, yoga and shiatsu underpins the practice of voicework for performance and increased well-being [4]. These “intersections” West and East are charting new pathways into regulating the nervous system, incorporating elements of therapy and insights about stress resilience, for a holistic pedagogical framework for actors.

In the Western consciousness, the continental philosophical tradition and the field of phenomenology is often the point of entry into the study of affective response to an aesthetic experience, most notably in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his particular conception of embodied experience [3, pp.44-46]. However, there are alternative ingresses into the terrain of embodied consciousness and *Rasa theory* is one of them.



**Rasa theory: from pedagogy to practice.** Rasa occupies a pre-eminent position within Indian aesthetics, finding primary elaboration in the *Natya Shastra* of Bharata Muni, and further development and elaboration in the works of Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta among others [9]. Rasa theory has been applied to a variety of artistic fields, widening its application to the evaluation of poetry, literature and aesthetics in general, from its origins within the field of dramaturgy. Rasa theory's basic elaboration – a definition of *rasa* – in the sixth chapter of the *Natya Shastra* presents the actor-in-training with a robust proposition. “Rasa is the cumulative result of *vibhava* (stimulus), *anubhava* (involuntary reaction) and *vyabhicari bhava* (voluntary reaction)” according to the Rangacharya translation [10, p.55]. An alternative translation to these terms is: *vibhava* (determinants), *anubhava* (consequents) and *vyabhichari bhavas* (transitory states) [7].

The philosophical implications of this aphorism lead to the heart of the *rasa* theory and the resultant debates inflect the locus of *rasa* from actor to character to audience, from dramaturgy to literary criticism and to a rich historical tradition where Indian philosophical schools exerted their influence through infusion of their particular ideas – for example the Samkhya school's *guna* theory or the *samyoga* of the Mimamsa school. The density of this discourse meant that “explaining this compact statement remained for a full millennium and a half what it meant to explain aesthetic experience” [9, p.7].

However, the *explanation* of the aesthetic experience of *rasa* is of somewhat less significance to the contemporary performer than pragmatic application in the field of performance. A productive point of entry for actor training is therefore a curiosity towards the *performative* elements discernable in this material on *Rasa*, and a *dialogic relationship* to the underlying philosophical systems. One such source of performative elements is the Kutiyattam tradition which formalised between the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, with a variety of actor training manuals available for scholarly analysis, as well as contemporary performers developing the practice [6, p.30]. In many ways the training manual as a textual source is richer in its insights on the “how to” of performance than an elaborate intellectual history of *Rasa*!

At the level of practice, *Rasa* theory finds harmony and resonance with contemporary psychophysical systems that work with the actor's body and breath to create affective states. It is noteworthy that *Natya Shastra* begins its taxonomy with a caveat. This caveat is nested within a narrative frame, a conversation between the author of *Natya Shastra* - Bharata and a group of sages – who are cautioned when they seek a list of five foundational definitions. Bhartha concedes that “it is impossible... to know all about *natya* since there is no limit to *bhavas* and no end to the arts involved” [10, p.53]. While this can be dismissed as a form of rhetorical strategy to mark off the unknowable realm of possibility from the knowable subject matter that is about to be enumerated, this cautionary note is worth remembering when the affective domain is constrained for pedagogical ends – be it in the form of

five universal emotions, eight or nine *bhavas* or any mediating metaphor such as a wheel, spectrum or gradient. The energy generating “building blocks” of Rasa theory serve performance when they are observable and playable. Even the notorious *shanta rasa* – the ninth “inert” state of peace or serenity arising from equanimity and transcendence – has a dynamic and playable form.

In Rasa practise a series of breathing sequences are taught to actors in training. These are typically very young learners who are still learning muscle movement and control. For the purpose of training young actors, this selection of 8 or 9 states of being are the basic building blocks for study and mastery. However, it is really a practice of *open and voluntary* exploration of a sequence of breathing patterns. This sequence mimics a set of 8 or 9 universal human conditions – each a breath response to a physical or imaginary impulse that leads the practitioner to unfolding subtler aspects of being. This is a voluntary exploration, so *pleasure* is embedded in the practice of the sequence and the practice enables the actor to experience the vast landscape of consciousness and existence. This pleasure of the aesthetic experience has very little to do with the sensation of taste (gustation) which in some literal interpretations is derived from the act of savouring a work of art. In live performance, breath becomes an outward expression of the internal reality of the performer as it integrates with body, voice, language and human connection. This manifests as heightened presence. Pleasure, linked with expression of the heightened consciousness cultivated by the performer through physical action [11], is also where healing and well-being reside.

**Rasa, embodied simulation and empathy.** Theorists have tried to characterise the relationship between an aesthetic experience, and its effect on social behaviour [12,13]. In 1873 Robert Vischer characterised empathy arising from aesthetics through the German term *Einfühlung*, literally “feeling-in” [12, p.141, 13, p.198]. In the *Ten Dramatic Forms of Dhananjaya* written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the consciousness arising from an aesthetic experience was linked with *bliss*, so much so that the self-other distinction vanished [9, p.24].

The formulation of Rasa from within the aesthetic experience shares significant resonance with advances in the behavioural sciences linked to the discovery of somatic mirroring mechanisms, resulting from a specialised class of neurons: mirror neurons and canonical neurons. [13, p.199] These neurons, from their discovery in macaques, have been linked to a variety of phenomena in the field of human social cognition.

Their role in “embodied simulation” has been described as “a functional mechanism through which the actions, emotions or sensations we see, activate our own internal representations of the body states that are associated with these social stimuli, as if we were engaged in a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation” [13, p.198].

While this particular conception of embodied simulation has been elaborated in the context of viewing visual art, it is not hard to see how a

performer's breath is also mirrored by the audience observing the performer. Rasa, in its performative form as codification of breath and associated states of being, elaborates the neuro-physiological basis for empathy. In practice, Rasa is empathy.

**Conclusion.** The *trauma inherent in training* has a deep and lasting impact on the actor, her autonomy, and self-image of body and voice [14]. When actor training becomes about “fixing” the problems in an actor - her embodied experience is deprioritised. Bringing the focus back to a *felt experience* of the actor will help orient the training towards well-being.

This deserves greater importance in actor training pedagogy. The experience of an overwhelmed nervous system was felt across the world during the global pandemic. One of the strategies to regulate the nervous system was to bring the focus back to breathing. The practice of Rasa involves a process of voluntary entry into simulated states and a safe way of exiting them via breath. This becomes a means to initiate a charged state with a heightened sensory awareness for performance, while also having the tools to regulate the nervous system back to a place of ease. This is empowering and healing for the actor, and the larger educational ecosystem.

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