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Physiological performing exercises by Jan Fabre: an additional training method for contemporary performers

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Jan Fabre (Antwerp, 1958) is one of the creative minds of the so-called 'Flemish Wave' in the performing arts of the 1980s, a generation of directors, choreographers, actors and dancers who have developed a highly individual language on stage, breaking through the purist boundaries of theatre, opera, dance and performance art. 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, thereby exploring what he has termed *physiological performing*. From his desire to create a performative language that takes the body and its physical sensory apparatus as the main instrument, he has developed a practice-based method through which to train his company of performers. This article underscores how his physiological training method can be a relevant and enriching addendum to the training of contemporary actors, dancers and performers of various educational backgrounds. This claim is supported by going in depth into the specificity of Fabre's training method and analysing how it reformulates the classic paradox of acting (as described amongst others by Aristotle and Diderot) via the introduction of a 'performance art quality', or what Fabre calls the transition between act and acting. A selection of exercises is also illustrated by means of the underlying *performative principles*, such as 'spacing', 'anatomical awareness', 'transformation' and 'duration'. The article concludes by formulating some arguments in order to pinpoint the relevance of Fabre's training method within the broad field of contemporary performance training.

Keywords: exercise; actors training; physiological performing; physicality; pedagogy; Jan Fabre

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.

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 through 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, developed a unique artistic language on stage, breaking through the purist boundaries of theatre, dance, visual arts and performance art.

Although the term ‘Flemish Wave’ seems to suggest a coherent stream of innovation as well as solidarity among its members, these (often very) young artists operated on a solitary basis. Their aligned affinity, mainly attributed by the Dutch-speaking press, was based on their shared antagonism towards the established – and heavily subsidised – art institutions (Biet and Féral 2014). All working in the margins, they strived for an autonomous artistic poetics, as a reaction against the normative political theatre of the 1970s and standardised vocabulary of classical ballet, at that moment the only institutionalised dance form in Flanders. Next to this aspiration for an autonomous artistic language, there are other common features that – at least partially – connect the artists of the Flemish Wave, such as the growing influence of Grotowski’s poor theatre (i.e. in the work of Jan Fabre, Alain Platel and Wim Vandekeybus) and the dismantling and/or breaking down of the theatre text (i.e. in the work of Luk Perceval and Jan Decorte) (Sels 2005, Orozco and Boenisch 2010, Crombez 2014). With the support of festivals, such as Klapstuk (Leuven) and Kaaitheater (Brussels) and the emergence of the art centres devoted to contemporary dance, avant-garde theatre and new music, the artists from the Flemish Wave managed to establish themselves and build a solid and sustainable oeuvre (Laermans and Gielen 2000).

Fabre’s unique place within the Flemish Wave is typified by two elements. Firstly by the search for a performative language that uses the body and its physical and sensory apparatus as its main instrument, thereby exploring what he has termed ‘physiological performing’. Secondly by the constant quest to push the limits of convention, and engage in cross-disciplinary experiments (Lehmann 2006, pp. 86–87). 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. 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’.

To enable this merging of various art disciplines in his stage work and to find strategies for his performers to deal with the ‘harsh reality’ of the physical body, Fabre has developed a practice-based method through which to train his (often changing) company of performers (Van den Dries 2004, p. 5). In this article, we want to underscore how this physiological training

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 any external meanings or messages (for example spoken words). The materiality of the body is emphasised. 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 comprehend '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.

method can be an enriching addendum to the training of contemporary performers of different disciplines and 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 support this claim by an in-depth exploration 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 locate 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 consequently to his training method is the transition between 'act and acting'. The first notion, 'act', refers to Fabre's radical reconceptualisation of certain theatrical conventions through the use of performance art. The second notion, 'acting', indicates his specific reflexive use of the theatrical apparatus.

Fabre started his career as a performance artist (1976–1981). His early performances were deeply inspired by the happenings of the 1960s and 1970s and their critique of society, as well as a brutal deployment of the body as the main medium, the conflict between nature and culture and the meta-critical reflection on art (history) (Goldberg 1988). All these themes would become central topics in Fabre's performance work. In his *Money-performances* (1979–1980), for example, Fabre destroyed and burned money as a provocative comment on the commodification of art (De Brabandere 1998). In *Ilad of the Bic-art* (1981) Fabre challenged the canon of the (visual) arts by manipulating reproductions of the great masters. For the piece, Fabre locked himself up for three days in a gallery in Leiden (the Netherlands) and covered his clothing, the furniture and the walls with an average Bic pen. In *My Body, My Blood, My Landscape* (1978), finally, he cut himself with razors to make drawings and write texts with his own blood (Celant 2014).

This interest in performance art resonates in Fabre's early theatre work of the 1980s. Through the introduction of self-inflicted injuries, pain and exhaustion in the theatrical context, Fabre sought to explore the potential of the *physical* and *visceral* reality of the body in the theatre.³ For example, in the eight-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 2004, pp. 11–12, Van den Dries and Crombez 2010, pp. 427–429). The actors, rather than playing characters, carried out instructions and neutral tasks such as dressing and undressing, running in place, jumping and falling down (Hrvatín 1994a, p. 37). By expanding the timeframe – through endless repetition, acceleration or slow motion – these tasks came to have a severe physical impact on the actors. The bodies of the performers started to react as they would have had they not been on stage: they became exhausted, sweaty and sometimes even emotionally drained (see also Hrvatín 1994, p. 169). Another aspect that Fabre took from performance art was the element of *risk taking* (Hrvatín 1994b): the actors exercised physical violence upon each other; not only was there real danger on stage, but it also led to real pain. Through both these elements the audience experienced what Luk Van

den Dries (2004, p. 12) termed a 'shock of the real'. Here, the spectator was confronted not with a character but with a physical, visceral body, stripped of its theatricality.

The second notion, 'acting', refers to a thorough awareness of the 'theatricality', or the illusive side of performing arts⁴ – here not understood as a specific artistic discipline but as the assemblage of theatre, dance, opera, etc. This 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 his solo for Els Deceukelier in *Etant Donnés* (2000) and *Angel of Death* (2003), the first being an homage to Marcel Duchamp and the second to Andy Warhol (Fabre 2004). As such, Fabre always explicitly deals with the fact that his oeuvre is situated in a broader theatrical context. Fabre's stage work consciously plays out the fact that the *act* of performing, executed as neutrally as possible, is already a form of *acting*, for it occurs on stage and is thus embedded in a highly artificial *mise en scène* that frames the performative action in a certain aesthetic, semiotic and temporal context. In *The Power of Theatrical Madness*, for example, Fabre makes his performers recite the title, the place and date of the premieres of different canonical theatre pieces, thus spinning a web of (self-)reflexive references around the piece. Towards the end of the performance Fabre inscribes himself into this context, by making one of the performers declaim the title, date and place of his earlier performance *This is Theatre as it was to be Expected and Foreseen* (1982, Antwerp). Fabre here consciously lays bare his connection to the theatrical – and historical – context and makes his audience reflect on this context.⁵

One could say that Fabre's performative language is situated in the ancient paradox of acting, which situates the art of acting in between emotional empathy and technique. This paradox can already be traced back to the writings of Aristotle ([335 BC] 1986), but finds its most clear exposition in the work of Denis Diderot, whose influential *Paradoxe sur le comédien* ([1883] 2010) was the theoretical foundation for nineteenth-century Western acting methods. In this essay, Diderot denominates two approaches to acting based on either emotional identification or rational technique. For Diderot, the latter approach holds the promise of truthful acting, although that leads up to a paradox: believable acting is the result of an acting style in which the actor maintains a distance from the personages he is portraying, and who acts in a conscious manner, always keeping control over his emotions. Hence Diderot emphasised the craftsmanship of the actor, not his ability to engage emotionally with his character. This paradox thus situates the art of acting between doing and pretending, between reality and theatrical/emotional effect, between imitation and truthfulness. Fabre reformulates and updates this ancient paradox through the introduction of a physiological performance quality, inspired by performance art. In Fabre's work, the performers are consciously playing with the duality between performance (reality) and theatricality (staging) 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.

5. Here we can clearly also recognise a reference to Duchamp's conceptualisation of 'Naming Art', which is based on the idea that the nomination of something as art is tantamount to the actual making of art (Foster et al. 2004, p. 128). By positioning his early work in line with earlier 'canonical' work Fabre reflects on the idea of canon and on how something enters this canon.

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 to this method, forming the bridge between performance and theatre, is physicality. In contrast with the still dominant acting method of psychological realism – used in most acting schools across Europe – in Fabre's physiological performing, an action does not begin from an *emotional* and thus psychologically constituted impulse; rather, it stems from a *physical impulse* (Van den Dries 2004, pp. 4–5).⁶ 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 pushed to a certain limit as well as the 'pain' caused by walking on imaginary burning coals. This does not mean that there is no room for emotions in Fabre's stage work, but solely that they are interpreted from a physiological instead of a psychological perspective. Fabre suggests it is the body that acts upon the emotions, not the other way around, strongly believing in the psychology of the body: 'The body has its own memory of pain, joy and torture. And that memory should be addressed at any time', he says (Van den Dries 2004, p. 104). 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.

With the creation of these exercises Fabre inscribes himself in a long tradition of directors and pedagogues who have tried to cultivate the expression of the body in order to experiment with and change the theatrical apparatus. Ever since Aristotle made a distinction between the theatrical text and the theatrical enactment of that text, the theatrical performance (*opsis*) has been subdued to the narrative (*synopsis*) (Aristotle 1986, pp. 36–40). The performance was reduced to the communication of the text. Consequently the actor is nothing more than a medium, a tool to bring the text across.⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this hierarchy changed. The historical avant-garde began to experiment with theatre forms that abolished the primacy of dramatic text. In the arts, as well as in the sciences, the idea of the 'total body', as a complex, inextricable interaction between mind and body, gained ground (Schechner 2007, Decreus 2008). Inspired by the theories of the French psychologist Théodule Ribot, who claimed that every emotional impulse had a physical consequence, Stanislavski was the first to implement these ideas into his practice (Stanislavski and Van Omme 1991, p. 186). Stanislavski (1948, p. 70) devised a method that 'demands that an actor's whole nature be actively involved'. Consequently, the actor should 'give himself up, both mind and body' (Stanislavski 1948, p. 70). But whereas Stanislavski's physical exercises sought to create a mental and emotional affect, Fabre shifts the focus entirely to the body, not only in his training method, but also in terms of the reception of the audience. In this respect, Fabre's vision shows more affinity with the methodology of Jerzy Grotowski, for whom the body of the actor had to engage in a 'total act' (Grotowski 2002, p. 125), where he 'commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself, opens and gives himself, in an extreme, solemn gesture and does not hold back' (Grotowski 2002, p. 124). In the training methods of both Fabre and Grotowski the body of the actor has to observe and analyse itself in dealing with extreme physical situations, trying to lose control and connect with his

6. 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 must not be steered by emotion. Fabre rather wants his performer to imagine physical processes or sensations, as for example physical pain, pleasure, and so on.

7. 'The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place' (Aristotle 1986, p. 39).

inner impulses and instincts. The result is, as Grotowski (2002, p. 16) wrote, 'freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses'. Although the means are in both cases quite similar, the goal is different. Whereas Grotowski's exercises have to lead up to a 'holy actor', freed from his limitations and touching upon a state of spirituality (Grotowski 2002, p. 48), Fabre's performers have to be 'warriors'. His view on acting is a purely physiological one, searching for a physical reality on stage, whereas Grotowski (2002, p. 16) strived for a metaphysical ideal of a body that is in 'translumination'. For Fabre, this trance is not a goal in itself, but a way to heighten physical awareness and strengthen mental and physical endurance.

Fabre implements this strategy in the way he makes his performers approach text. They have to recite their texts, while synchronously 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 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. By 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*.

This physical impulse at the basis of Fabre's physiological performing is, however, very different from that which is deployed in ballet and in Pina Bausch's Tanztheater. The most important difference with classical but also contemporary ballet is the fact that ballet dancers need to maintain control of the form (be it virtuous, or improvised movements), regardless of the physical difficulties that come into play. The physical condition of the dancer should not be of any influence on the performer. Fabre, in contrast, 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 armour, which greatly influences their movements. For Fabre, the struggle between the performers and their costumes becomes part of the dance. The difference between Fabre's method and Pina Bausch's Tanztheater is less obvious as both seem to rethink the role of the performer by allowing for certain individual characteristics to break through the theatrical performance. Contrary to the 'traditional' role of the actor as medium (cf. *supra*), both Fabre and Bausch seem to deliberately search for moments where the singularity of the performer breaks through his theatrical persona and disturbs the communication. In spite of this remarkable congruency, there is however also a clear difference. In Fabre's method the singularity of the performer is connected to his physicality. Within the work of Pina Bausch, on the contrary, the singularity is connected to the psychological. Bausch is looking for movements with a personal history, 'tiny specks of reality' that bear a personal trace (Hoghe and Tree 1980, p. 64). Bausch's performances deal with 'the history

8. 'Mich interessiert nicht so sehr, wie sich Menschen bewegen, als was sie bewegt' (Pina Bausch in Schulze-Reuber 2005).

of the body' (Servos and Weigelt 1984, p. 25). They are a constant search for 'the seemingly personal or common movements', which 'refer to traces of life lived and unlived' (Hoghe and Tree 1980, p. 65). This interest in the personal is also reflected in a famous quote: 'I'm not so interested in how people move, but in what moves them'.⁸ For Fabre, on the contrary, the singularity lies not as much in the personal story, as in the physical reaction of the body; not in what moves the body, but in how the body reacts when it is intensively being moved. Fabre's method uses physical and mental excess so that the performer may learn how to lose control and draw input from the unforeseen and immanent to a real stage situation. Performers learn to understand and manage these physical impulses through challenging their physical and mental concentration.

Fabre often refers on this matter to Artaud's (1994, pp. 84–88) theatrical concept of 'personal cruelty'. In letters from 1932, Artaud (1994, p. 101) explains that 'this cruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed ...; it must be taken in a broad sense ... Cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination'. The accent on madness, repetition and discipline, the three themes that form the title of Emil Hrvatin's canonical work about Fabre (1994a), could be seen as a 'Fabrian' interpretation of this personal cruelty. His performers should know their physical and mental boundaries, and dare to move beyond these restrictions and limitations, looking for the moment where the desire off/for life hits self-destruction. This does not exclude real pain, as we have seen in the context of Fabre's connection with performance art. However, Fabre never wants his performers to lose themselves in ecstasy. He trains them to flirt with the trance of pain, dizziness and tiredness, but teaches them the skills to withdraw and restore their strength and concentration on the 'flip-side' of trance.⁹ By heightening the awareness of body, space and time, these exercises help develop different techniques of 'self-controlled loss of control'. Fabre strives for the coalescence of 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', given to performer Ivana Jozic as kinetic inspiration for a dance in her solo *Angel of Death* (2003) (Cassiers 2014). Not only did she imagine the movements of snakes (the typical ventral scales), but also their precise impact on every aspect of her body: what happens if the snake moves through her stomach, around her liver or lungs, or within her brain? 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

9. See Roussel et al. (2014) for a description of the control of movement of Fabre's performers.

the exercises (Cassiers 2014). 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 offers for performance training, we will expand more concretely on some of his exercises.¹⁰ 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. These models can be interpreted on three levels. (a) The exercises, or variations on them, serve as the literal basis for a scene: *the cleaning exercise* is for example used several times in *Prometheus Landscape II* (2011) and *Mount Olympus* (2015). The opposite is also possible, as scenes from Fabre's stage work become part of the training, such as *the dying princess exercise* that was originally a scene in *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984). (b) Sometimes exercises serve as preparation for a concrete scene. In *Mount Olympus* performers Antony Rizzi and Cédric Charron had to portray the mythological figures Tiresias and Philoctetes, for which they had to do the old man exercise over and over again. (c) In their most common/general usage, the exercises serve the training of certain performative principles, namely performance qualities or tools necessary for the challenges of Fabre's stage (such as an awareness of space and time, how to stimulate imagination, a specific way of breathing in order not to get lost in the ecstasy, etc.). To unravel the linkages between Fabre's pedagogy and unique performance language, we will elucidate certain exercises by addressing the underlying performative principles that lead to Fabre's physiological performance. These principles are not exclusive to one or two exercises; they resonate throughout the entire framework of 20 exercises, of which a selection is frequently used as a 90-minute training routine (the whole series can take up to 3–4 hours).

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.¹¹ As generally known, breathing is a process of the human body responsible for delivering oxygen to the tissues and removing 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 are 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 unnatural,

10. Throughout the twentieth century, other theatre pedagogues 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.

11. 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).



Figure 1 The *Tiger Exercise* during the creation of *Mount Olympus*, Lore Borremans, Antwerpen, 2015, Photo by Sam De Mol, Courtesy of Troubleyn/Jan Fabre.

but it corresponds with a practice-based hypothesis that Fabre developed over the years, and is backed up by the experiences of performers: it is a way to slow down the respiratory process and minimise the intake of oxygen (Cassiers 2014). After a challenging physical exercise, the performers are accustomed to breathing 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 centre of gravity 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 sixth position in ballet (Taper 1996). For Fabre, all movement begins with the positioning of the feet, to achieve proper balance and connection between mind and body. The performers must invest energy to maintain natural balance and stability during the angel feet position, thereby not 'hanging' in their skeletons. Meanwhile,



Figure 2 The *Lizard Exercise* during the creation of *Mount Olympus*, Pietro Quadrino, Antwerpen, 2015, Photo by Sam De Mol, Courtesy of Troubleyn/Jan Fabre.

the performers are also asked to keep their spines 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, pp. 186–187). 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, which 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 to possible threats (Figure 1). Hence, the main goal of this exercise is the creation of 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 performers' focus should thus be directed not just towards potential attackers but also towards the three dimensions of the space around them, exploring its limits vertically and horizontally. Fabre emphasises 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 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 more pronounced. 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 analyse 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 gain as much insight into the lizard's anatomy as into their own. As an epilogue to the exercise, the performers are asked to catch prey (flies) and visualise the digestion process on the outside, from the mouth to the anus (Figure 2). Because the lizard moves very sparingly, reserving 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. The movement material explored in the different animal exercises is often used by performers on stage, as can be seen in *Lichaampje, lichaampje aan de wand* (1996), where Wim Vandekeybus embodies a horse, not necessarily by representing its appearance, but rather by incorporating its kinetic quality and energy.

Transformation

As outlined before, Fabre asks his performers to transform between different states of being, not from a psychological perspective but from a purely



Figure 3 The *Insect Exercise* during the creation of *Mount Olympus*, Mélissa Guérin, Antwerpen, 2015, Photo by Sam De Mol, Courtesy of Troubleyn/Jan Fabre.

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 channelled 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 in a state of permanent transformation, moulding 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, p. 274). In other words, the theme of Fabre's performance is, as Emil Hrvatin (1994, p. 29) outlined, always 'the action, the process. It is not about what the body *is*, but what it *does*'. A good example is 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). While the insect is being digested inside the body, the performer has to slowly embody it. 'You become what

you eat', Fabre says (Figure 3). 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 performers are to clean the floor obsessively with different segments of their bodies. They use obvious body parts (arms, legs, etc.) as well as ones not usually employed in cleaning activities (nose, elbows, heels, bottom, etc.). But the more they clean, the more dirt appears and the more there is to clean. The performers must be extremely concentrated on this Sisyphean task: their 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 performers to depict and articulate an imaginary space to clean (this correlates to the principle of 'spacing', noted earlier). The performers translate their movements from the floor to the atmosphere, from horizontal to vertical. They also determine the material (tapestry, wood, tiles, stone, iron, etc.) of the objects they are cleaning and the subsequent effect these have on their bodies and skin. According to Fabre, all actions require a degree of intensity, which here is forged through the high concentration and physical investment of the *cleaning exercise*. The performers have to find their own freedom by expressing their personalities 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 analysing all parts of the body, by composing and recomposing it (cleaning with the nose or heel, for example, and then with the whole body), again using the body as an instrument rather than as a psychological agent.

Reflexes

As Fabre places great emphasis on training the physical impulses of his performers, their reflexes must be sharpened to the maximum degree as well. In the *rice paper/fire exercise*, the performers must switch instantly between extreme physical states. First, they have to imagine that they are walking on rice paper. Fabre asks the performers to minimise any noise they make, by raising their centre 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. In the extremely controlled, alert and refined way of moving, as well as the introspective concentration, we recognise resemblances with Japanese Butoh (Horton Fraleigh 1999) and martial arts practices such as Kendo¹² (which is part of the regular training programme of Fabre company). When Fabre claps his hands, the rice paper image immediately changes into 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 travels through the nerves and impacts on the entire body. 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 reflex

12. Kendo is a form of Japanese sword-fighting, which history can be traced back to the tradition of the Samurai.

mechanism that triggers an action–reaction series, without any physical or mental detours. In other exercises, it is 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 aim 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 seems to refer to what Artaud (1994, p. 133) called ‘an athlete of the heart’. 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 10 seconds as if this were a natural reflex. In the latter exercise, the transformation and reflex principles come to a true apotheosis, which can be seen for example in *Mount Olympus*. In a scene entitled ‘Five stages of grief’ the performers have to switch from expressions of denial to negotiation and despair in a split second.

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 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.¹³ 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

Similar to the *lizard exercise*, in the *old man exercise* Fabre articulates 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.

13. 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.



Figure 4 The *Cat Exercise* during the creation of *Mount Olympus*, Matteo Sedda, Antwerpen, 2015, Photo by Sam De Mol, Courtesy of Troubleyn/Jan Fabre.

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 performers, as they have 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 this 'holistic' perspective on movement, Fabre also emphasises the use of the voice in each exercise. It is a muscle that must be trained. In the animal exercises, the performers often start from the voice to embody a cat or tiger. The same is true 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 that can be played out (Figure 4).

Re-flexing performance training: towards a conclusion

To conclude, one could say that Jan Fabre has a 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 scène*. 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 to 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 find this balance. It enables them not only to recognise what is happening within the body, but also to use this knowledge as a creative force to produce movement and affect in the specific theatrical context. It affords the performers tools to contextualise and channel their physical impulses, thus transforming them from blind impetuses into articulate movement material.

The exercises discussed here contribute to this performative language. Each exercise enables and deepens the possibility of using physical impulses in a creative way, and of establishing a versatile dialogue between these bodily impulses and the imagination that instigates, feeds and shapes these impulses. For example, the *insect exercise* helps performers recognise certain bodily impulses; the *tiger exercise* and the *rice paper/fire exercise* each explore the relationship between the body and its surrounding space; and the *old man exercise* and the *dying princess exercise* each enable the performer to create a 'dialogue' between physical impulse and mental imagination.

Of course, this training method has also its 'shadow side'. The exercises are so physically demanding that only a small number of people are able to practise them, namely dancers who have already had intense physical training. Fabre expects his company to be athletes, 'warriors of beauty' (Hrvatina 1994, Van den Dries 2004, pp. 259–260), with a fit body, great health and thorough muscle strength. Although his company Troubleyn welcomes a variety of performers, the body types appearing on his stage are therefore not so diverse. You could even suggest that the ultimate Fabre performer does not exist (a tragic impossibility Fabre often thematises in his work). The exercises can furthermore be dangerous, as they play with physical and mental extremes. Fabre's method should consequently not be mistaken for a warm-up in the traditional sense. Performers should already be fit and alert before they start this training in order not to get injured – mentally or physically – along the way. Nevertheless, after 30 years of teaching and refining his

14. 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 Centre for Visual Poetics (University of Antwerp) and Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. See for an outline of the research project Van den Dries (2011).

exercises, Fabre is aware of these risks and is actively working to streamline his method. Hence he has engaged a team of university researchers¹⁴ to perform scientific and qualitative research on his practice-based exercises. Their efforts to map, scientifically as well as pedagogically, and notate these exercises will result in, among other things, a handbook offering performers from various backgrounds the possibility to explore the method and re-flex their own practice.

In relation to the field of performing arts and the still dominant paradigm of psychological realism, Fabre's training method can provide performers the tools to create a new awareness in their interaction with the body. Dancers, choreographers, performers and actors can experience what happens when they do not suppress their physical impulses and reflexes, using these instead as a creative force in their research and on stage. In the past these exercises have enabled performers to insert new performative elements into their artistic practice, to enlarge their artistic vocabulary and intensify their stage presence. In the future Fabre and his company Troubleyn/Jan Fabre hope to enhance their body of knowledge and empower a future generation of choreographers and dancers to do the same.

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