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VIDEO ARTICLE

The Lion and the Breath: Combining Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework Techniques Towards a New Cross-Cultural Methodology for Actor Training

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This research looks at the effects of *kalaripayattu* and Fitzmaurice Voicework techniques as a training methodology for the contemporary actor, redefining the fundamental principles that already exist within the two forms and placing its emphasis on the articulation of the imagination through their combination. Fitzmaurice Voicework was inspired by yoga, shiatsu, and bioenergetic psychotherapy, and its methods include releasing patterns of habitual holding within the viscera causing an autonomic response known as a tremor. Training in *Kalaripayattu*, an ancient South Indian martial art, is a preparatory tool for the body to develop a kinesthetic awareness: an organic ability to be in the optimal state of readiness. In the process of defining our research findings, we created a systematic methodology that consisted of four stages: 1) Studio training combining Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework; 2) Training with Kalaripayattu masters in Kerala, India; 3) Experimentation and exploration of the two forms of collaborative training; and 4) Analysis and dissemination of findings at a conference of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association London Conference. This systematic approach provided us with the framework to answer our research questions: 1) Can combining techniques from Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework lead to an effective new cross-cultural methodology for professional actor training? 2) What kinds of psychophysical and somatic affect can arise from the combination of these two forms?

Keywords: Kalaripayattu; Fitzmaurice Voicework; actor training; intercultural; embodied research

VIDEO ARTICLE

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STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[00:10]

The Lion and the Breath: Combining Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework techniques towards a new cross-cultural methodology for actor training.

Video article by Elizabeth de Roza and Budi Miller with Stephanie Loh and Chad O'Brien Videography and Editing by Nelson Yeo.

LASALLE College of the Arts 2018.

Elizabeth de Roza is a Lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts (Singapore), where she teaches movement using Kalaripayattu, directs the Intercultural productions and runs the Asian Theatre Project. She has been researching into the techniques of Kalaripayattu as a tool for actor-training since 1999 and continues her practice biannually at the CVN Kalari Sangham, Kerala, India. She is also the co-convenor of the Embodied Working Group (ERWG) at the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR).

Budi Miller is the Senior Lecturer Head of Acting at Victorian College of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne. He is the Regional Director of the Fitzmaurice Institute covering Southeast Asia, New Zealand and Australia. He has been a certified Associate Teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework since 2006.

Stephanie Loh is an actress based in Singapore. She is trained in both Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework for 5 years.

Chad O'Brien is an actor based in Australia. He is a certified Associate Teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework and trained in Kalaripayattu for 5 years.

Voice of Budi Miller:

The aim of the research is to explore how the embodiment of a new form of training in an actor, predominantly the concepts of Fitzmaurice Voicework within the framework of Kalaripayattu, to develop an integrated approach of body-voice actor's training.

Chad O'Brien

Voice of Elizabeth de Roza:

We are interested in cross-cultural approaches for actor's training. Looking at a subtle energy of a premediated animal state. So, we decided to use the South Indian martial arts form, Kalaripayattu.

[Miller:]

We believe the active, visceral, vocal, awareness of Fitzmaurice Voicework, paired with the intellectually vivid, physical vocabulary of Kalaripayattu will re-train the actor's body to the acute potential of communication. Through the form of this ancient martial art as a vehicle for transforming the body into this premediated, uncensored, animal-like state of consciousness, new performance practices are awakened. With Elizabeth's training in Kalaripayattu as a pre-rehearsal psychophysical methodology and my training in Fitzmaurice Voicework, we immediately found similarities.

Training at CVN Kalari Sangham, Kerala, India

(Training with N. Rajasekharan Nair)

[Miller:]

When I first began working at LASALLE about nine years ago, I observed a class that Elizabeth was teaching and she was teaching a Kalaripayattu class. You know, it was very exciting to me to watch the forms that she was working with and I immediately thought it would be a great way to collaborate those forms with the Fitzmaurice Voicework.

[de Roza:]

And I met Budi through a workshop that he did for three days on Fitzmaurice and it was dealing with this kind of vibration that was happening in the

pelvic area and so when Budi came to my class and we started talking about the possibility and questioning about the vibration that happens, and for me a lot of the work in Kalaripayattu deals with a very very low centre, where the centre of gravity is quite low to the ground and is being held up at the same time. And the curiosity was because every time when I do Kalari, it is done in silence, and we were just curious if we add a little sound there, if we add a little vibration there, what will happen? And that actually sparked our interest to collaborate.

[Miller:]

So, what was really great about looking at the low positioning of the Kalaripayattu forms and the extending of the body to sustain the posture, and the levity of the form was the little bit of energy that was moving through the body that was activating the breathing. So, we wanted to see what would happen if you allowed the awareness that happens in the Fitzmaurice Voicework awareness into the Kalaripayattu forms. What would happen if we brought those two worlds together?

[3:50]

Fitzmaurice Voicework (Deconstructing Work)

Stephanie Loh
Chad O'Brien

Catherine Fitzmaurice, "Possible Breakthroughs in Deconstructing." Interview with Budi Miller, New York, NY, July 7 2014:

Knowing that every breath is a decision to be alive. And every release of that breath is a communication that you are your environment. You're feeding a tree every time you breathe out and the trees are feeding you. And so

there is this constant interflow, interaction of you and the rest of the world so that they become like seamlessly united in a way. And knowing that in every single moment, being kind of self-aware without being self-conscious but as aware of what's out there. So that it's not a narcissistic awareness, it's a curious awareness like, "What is there? How is this affecting me? How am I breathing with this? Who is this person? Who am I within this interchange?" I think every time anybody tremors it's a breakthrough. Single surprised breath sometimes is enough to make people change their mind about possibilities.

So, you have destructuring only so that you're loosening up old patterns and models of behavioral habits, and then you can find this internal spine. In introducing the restructuring, you brought people to this beautiful state of chaos and openness, and then you suddenly hit them by saying, "okay, so let's find this muscle and that muscle, and let's do this to see what happens."

[O'Brien – from Shakespeare, *The Tempest*:]

You demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
Whereof the ewe not bites;
and you whose pastime
Is to make the midnight mushrumps,
that rejoice
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid
(Weak masters though ye be) I have bedimmed
The noontide sun...

I'll break my staff,

Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound
 I'll drown in my book.

[6:26]

Training in the basic animal poses of Kalaripayattu (Lion, Elephant, Horse, Cat)

Voice of Elizabeth de Roza:

Training in Kalaripayattu helps to develop body-space awareness. Continuous training creates and develops this intuitive performer who is responsive to his or her sensory environment. A vital attribute in creating a performer that is present and watchable.

There is a term in the language Malayalam, when translated, it means 'making the body all eyes'. Now, I would like to use this term to describe the intuitive body responding to the sensory environment. This state of being transforms the performer to attain a certain relationship to achieve power and a type of behaviour that can only be actualised through the body in practice. The actor achieves what we call 'dynamic stillness'. What is this dynamic stillness? And can this dynamic stillness be evoked when combining the two forms?

"Making the body all eyes" – from Phillip Zarrilli, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses and Practices of Power in Kalaripayattu, a South Indian Martial Art*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Stephanie Loh

Chad O'Brien

Finding tremors in the Kalaripayattu poses.

Voice of Budi Miller:

The Fitzmaurice Voicework is comprised of two elements, what we call 'destructuring' and 'restructuring'. The destructuring comes out of the work of Wilhelm Reich, Alexander Lowen, shiatsu, yoga, and reiki. The restructuring elements come out of an anatomical way of using the breath with a rib-breath, and engaging from the transversus, that's commonly known in bel canto singing. What we are working on with the Kalaripayattu research and the Fitzmaurice Voicework combination was looking at the destructuring elements and how the breath is affected when the autonomic nervous system is engaged because of the postures. And the restructuring components of how we can activate the sound while in these Kalaripayattu forms moving through a more anatomical way of expressing the voice.

Exploring sounds through the tremors in Kalaripayattu poses

[9:27]

Identifying the basic forms of Kalaripayattu in the research

Voice of Elizabeth de Roza:

My first encounter with Kalaripayattu was with Phillip Zarrilli's summer intensive workshop in South Wales. There I was introduced to the form of Kalaripayattu, but before we did, we did some yoga, and then we did *taiji*, and then we went into the form of Kalaripayattu itself. The difference is that here in this research, we are actually just focusing specifically on Kalaripayattu, which is focusing on the form. We're focusing on this basic elephant, lion form. And how that strong position, aided through the vibration and the breath work that happens in

Fitzmaurice Voicework – which tends to be slightly more adaptable and I would like to use the word fluid, or flexible – and together with this form, create this sound that the actor can use as part of their training, as part of their work, going beyond what we call a pre-rehearsal form, but using that to go into rehearsal. Using those two worlds to create for them a sense of presence.

Kalaripayattu may look relatively muscular. But what I like about it is the flow of its energy. It creates this agility in the body. It creates flow because it uses the spine. It takes its forms from animals. In the elephant, your feet are slightly wider than your hips. So, your whole body is supported. The essence of the elephant is its strength. A lot of Kalaripayattu movement is all about being grounded. Having the strength and agility that you will need. In the elephant, he looks very grounded and there is release in his upper body and shoulders because of the lengthened spine.

Now, in the lion, you will notice he is down. His back is flat. And his whole spine is extended. He is in a very compact position, but at the same time, he can move forward. So, there is a movement in the spine. It is strong. It is solid. With the movement of the body, there is this sense of grace. One of the physical forms that we are looking at is the body being compact, and at the same time, having a release.

Lion pose.

[de Roza:]

He does this in the lion position. There is an extension in the spine. When he pivots on the front leg, there is a slight movement that happens in his hips. The body is moving in and out while twisting. The movement is activated through the hips. This is what we mean in Kalaripayattu that the body is compacted forward, because at any moment, there will be a slight shift that happens. It is not stationary. The centre of gravity shifts in

the body. His imagination is activated. His breath is activated. He is right there.

He is ready to move. As he moves forward, he goes down and shifts the weight forward slightly, sending his energy down through the ground. So, when he goes right down into the base of his pelvic floor, there is a twist and opening of the hips and pelvic floor. There is a point of resonance that is akin to truth. When an actor has fully integrated awareness of both voice and body, and is therefore able to fully activate this body in performance.

[13:38]

Bringing Kalaripayattu and Fitzmaurice Voicework techniques together

Voice of Budi Miller:

As Chad goes into an elephant position, you can see in this Kalaripayattu form, he is experiencing a natural tremor in his pelvis, hip flexors and the opening of the pelvic floor. Because of his Fitzmaurice training, he knows how to allow the natural tremor to disrupt his pattern of breathing. While still attempting to sustain, maintain and investigate the Kalaripayattu physical form. His ribs resembled the gills of a fish.

As the muscles of the pelvic floor begin to unravel, it releases a vibration of dynamic energy from the pelvis, to the abdomen, to the neck, chest, and shoulder blades, into the head and out through his third eye, which is the point between his eyebrows. It creates a focus line to direct and charge his sound waves. This is a very dynamic position. He finds deep vibration at the base of the spine. The expression of the voice comes from this subconscious space, rather than commenting on the sound or pushing away from the physical challenge of position. There is power

found in the full surrendering to the body's expressive physical and vocal dialogue.

The curiosity of this collaboration came out of wanting to explore what would happen to the performer if he or she allowed the disruption of breath, movement and vocal noise to be a part of the martial world of Kalaripayattu. At the intersection of this world, he is offering tremor awareness. He still has the form but he is allowing the impulses of the tremor to be an active expression during the development of his creative exploration. And to be more interested in the in-breath than the expression of vocal sound. He has a lovely movement of his chest. It is full of free dynamic movement. This is a very active place.

And the form of Kalaripayattu encouraged movement in the most efficient areas of the respiratory system while still being strong and sturdy. He becomes very active.

[16:57]

The Discoveries

[Miller:]

Something very interesting happened in the research with Chad in the studio. He had a moment where he was moving through the forms of Kalaripayattu and really exploring the vocal possibilities that were coming out of it. And when he was finished, he was in this state of active agitation and he didn't know what to do with it. And at that moment, we said: "Go into text!"

[Miller, in the studio:]

What is that? What is that?

[O'Brien:]

It's all just, it's all just...

[Miller:]

Speak, text, there!

[O'Brien – from Shakespeare, *Hamlet*:]

Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed.

[O'Brien – from Shakespeare, *King Richard III*:]

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father; and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts,
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented. The better sort,

As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd
With scruples...

Reflections by Chad O'Brien on the methods

[O'Brien – from Shakespeare, *King Richard III*.]

Soft, I did but dream...

[O'Brien:]

I get caught in this world between the release in the gravity, which is part of the Fitzmaurice world, but my torso being so far from the floor. So, I need my muscles, but I can get that release and then from that release, how can I get back into the form? And when I first starting with Kalaripayattu and tremor work, I actually got some quite intense tremors that travelled up and down either side of my spine. Just in those muscles, and I can feel in the release and lengthening in my spine. And vocally, I think it comes from that grounding of Fitzmaurice work, where I have to keep this release so that I'm conscious of awareness for me. And now, I've learned how to play with the extreme sounds through the basic destructuring sequence. So now when I go into something like this, which is a little bit more intense, I think after five years of doing the work it's kind of like, whatever the sound is going to be, is what it's going to be.

[O'Brien – from Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova, "Falling Slowly":]

Take this sinking boat
And point it home
We've still got time
Raise your hopeful voice
You have a choice
You'll make it now

Falling slowly
Eyes that know me
And I can't react

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.