

ImpulseTraining: A Postmodern Training for Actors

ImpulseTraining is a new postmodern training for actors, developed by Margi Brown Ash over the last twelve years culminating in four postgraduate degrees. It is based on Social Constructionist philosophy and Creative Arts Therapy with 35 years of theatrical influences including Deborah Hay's Perceptual Practice. We are members of a theatrical industry that oftentimes insists on psychologizing characters, sometimes causing trauma to the artist without them even being aware, presenting instead as sadness and a sense of loss. We are part of an industry where the actor is the lowest rung on the ladder, where 'check outs' are a drink at the bar, rather than an hour of ritual to acknowledge the often profound emotional journey that the artist has endured throughout the performance.

Margi has developed this way of working as a response to, and a 'dreaming on,' of the significant changes that have occurred in the world of psychology: what is the self? Whereas in the past the self was seen as singular and bounded ("if I knew who I was I would get better, be less sad, less depressed" etc), postmodern philosophies refer to the self as relational, deeply connected and affected by social, political and cultural discourses. What if the self was a culmination of stories that continually changed depending on the surroundings? This gives back to the individual an enormous freedom to create multiple stories; to change stories that no longer work to stories that are more empowering and uplifting.

To embrace this profound shift, Margi has borrowed from postmodern therapies and created ImpulseTraining for the artist. It is not just a set of techniques, but rather a way of being and becoming in the rehearsal room: a process of empowerment with enormous creative potential. It is a process deeply embedded in postmodern research and a process sorely needed in our industry, an industry that embraces contemporary or postmodern performance, but primarily uses modernist techniques in the training of their artists.

Just as in psychology/counselling many have shifted from the modernist lens to this postmodern understanding of self, it is time, in the rehearsal room, to shift from using acting techniques that focus on the bounded character to focus on the relational character on the stage. By employing these postmodern principles, actors not only create rich and potent work, but at the same time develop resilience and belief in their own abilities.

The focus needs to be on the 'space between' or the relational space between the actors and the actors/audience, rather than the traditional focus of the interior world of the actor. If we take on board the collaborative therapy research that has emerged over the last ten to twenty years, we no longer have to 'psychologize' the characters we play. If we take the significant premise that we are socially constructed, then the actor can concentrate on the socialization of the character rather than delving into the psyche, and they can demonstrate/inhabit this relationship through the basic elements of theatre: space and time.

ImpulseTraining provides processes for the actor/artist to respond to each other, rather than invent. Ironically, we move away from being creative on the floor, and just respond. The word respond is deliberate, rather than react, because respond seems to be more collaborative, building on what has gone before, 'yes, and' rather than 'but'.

When the actors concentrate on this potent space between each other, the collaborative possibilities are enormous. They build on the offers of others; they notice very small changes and grow them; they are no longer forced to be creative, rather they are moving in the creative space. It is the air they breathe. Actors move closer to generosity and open heart, and these qualities then transfer to their audience.

For this to occur, the rehearsal room has to be a 'container' of Trust, and this requires addressing implicit and explicit issues such as power, intimacy, social and cultural discourses, the careful use of language and the multiplicity of selves and stories. Often these concepts are disregarded in the rehearsal room because "they take up too much time". However, when things are made explicit, when the Ensemble's group norms insist on transparency, the work on the floor is so much more economical and profound. A long 'check in' (the half hour or so before rehearsals begin is the time to talk about how things are going and to bring your life into the rehearsal room rather than leaving it at the door) invariably means a succinct and powerful rehearsal period. A long 'check out' ensures a reflective process that has been shown to deepen the experience.

When the Ensemble becomes aware of all of these things, Trust develops and only then can we embrace the possibility of Risk, an essential ingredient of Creativity. This work can, however, be dangerous. It can threaten the director and the teacher who wants to be the primary creator because it empowers the actor to take on the role of creator. This work can be dangerous because it cannot be controlled by anyone other than the artist themselves. It creates an access to the Muse (that which is greater than oneself) that is palpable. It is work that only the courageous embrace. The actor trained in this way is Risky, Brave, Compassionate, Loving, Generous. They do not understand the traditional idea of Ego. Rather they value relationship and 'the space between'. They are, in a word, the actor of 'Tomorrow'.

"*A Mouthful of Pins: Master of Arts Research*" is a deep exploration into these processes, and can be accessed on this website. The blog, "*My Shoes are Too Big*" (margi.brown.ash@blogspot) is a daily exploration into social constructionism and artistry, and is part of Margi's continuing journey into postmodern training for the actor/therapist. Margi's PhD focuses on the actor Margi also offers ImpulseTraining to the arts community as well as acting training for therapists and educators.

