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**Altered States: Truth and Torture in Stephen Sewell's *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America***

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## I. Abstract

Recent research into the neurobiology of psychological torture provides evidence for two major conclusions: psychological torture is as damaging as categorically-defined physical abuse and is, in fact, a physical process in and of itself, as victims suffer physiologically and neurologically; further, psychological torture inscribes into the neurological structure of both victims and perpetrators.

This paper will place these findings in dialogue with an analysis of a 2006 U.S. production of Stephen Sewell's *Myth, Propaganda, and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* – a play which stages both physical and psychological torture. Writing from inside the rehearsal and performance process, as the actor playing Eve, who bears witness to her husband's disintegration at the torturous hands of a mysterious "Man," I will place my dramaturgical research on the neurobiology of psychological torture into conversation with my creative process as an actor.

The cast of *Myth* worked with a Body Energy Center (BEC) approach to actor training, developed by Jade McCutcheon and used by practitioners in the U.S. and Australia. The BEC approach combines the language of Stanislavsky and Chekhov with research on the chakras and involves a three-part system that guides actors towards an increased awareness of breath, imagination and kinesthetic response. BEC training is particularly successful in helping actors find a merged psycho-physical relationship to text.

In the context of this approach to actor training, how do we analyze and appreciate systems of actor training applied to the staging and witnessing of torture? In light of the recent collaborations between performance practitioners and cognitive scientists that have revealed the function of mirror neuron systems as serving to produce the same neurological patterns in witnessing acts as those patterns that exist in performing acts, what are the ethical implications of training actors to perform torture? What are audience members experiencing in witnessing staged torture?

Theatrical representation is finite and leaves behind it, behind its actual presence, no trace, no object to carry off. It is neither a book nor a work, but an energy, and in this sense it is the only art of life.

-Jacques Derrida

[A]nd therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater or less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small – he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth… But we have not yet brought forward the heaviest count in our accusation – the power which poetry has of harming even the good (and there are very few who are not harmed)…

-Plato

The writing of and about theatrical representation and the conundrums that it presents asks the writer (and the reader) to employ imaginative forces in a particularly fascinating and confounding way. Derrida says it himself: to write about theatre is to write about energy, itself – traceless, objectless *energy*. And so to "capture" the essence, the presence that always *was* theatre is to delve backwards in the memory and retrieve an image, a phrase, an experience that has already happened. In this sense, I find that writing about theatre is as close as I can get to making theatre. The powers of memory and imagination that I must summon in order to create a performance onstage are not so different from the powers of memory and imagination that I must summon in order to bring forth, to breathe life into, the words that live on this page.

It is precisely this elemental in-between space, where I as the actor and I as the writer am asked to be the conduit through which Derrida's *energy* passes by virtue of memory and imagination. We do this work as actors, we do this work as writers in order to bring forward for the public what Levi-Strauss calls a "quantitative transposition" which "extends and diversifies our power" so that formidable ideas can be "grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance" (23). It is a public service that we perform (we hope). And because the work we do is so utterly public, so completely immediate and of the moment in a way that the other artefactual pursuits of the visual arts and sciences can never be, theatre has historically been subject to criticisms on a number of counts, founded in the fear that the energy that the actor summons might be dangerous, that the memories individual and cultural that the actor summons might be damaging.

When we return to Western theatre's oldest critic, Plato, we are reminded of how much his words resonate regarding the power of theatre, which can "awaken and strengthen and nourish" the feelings. Plato describes the power of good performance that genuinely connects with its audience. In this sense, Derrida and Plato are in agreement: theatrical representation *does* something – to the person who creates the representation; to the person who receives and interprets the representation. And while much of Plato's critique is deeply situated in value systems outside the scope of this particular paper, the element of his critique that is stunningly contemporary is his concern with the *aftermath of what theatre does*. What next, he asks. After audiences are brought to an emotional place, what happens to them and is this really *good* for society? For the purposes of my writing here, I will be examining this question from the inside the actor's process, asking: After actors are brought to an emotional place, what happens to *them* and how does this journey work within society? What is the social service that the actor performs?

## II. In Service of Society

Plato poses a number of significant questions in his critique of the artist:

> Tell us what State was ever better governed by your help?
> Any war carried on successfully?
> Any invention applicable to the arts or to human life?
> Any public service or teaching? (Book X)

Plato's characteristically blasphemous, deceiving artist is not only a poseur, an imposter, but a bloody time-waster, as well, lacking the skills to create even the most rudimentary functional objects, to contribute even the most basic public services, as Plato defines them. And yet at once, from his position in 372 B.C. E., the philosopher was able to identify what the artist did not contribute while providing warnings that would ultimately imbue the artist's work with its own dangerous potency:

> All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers… The poet awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. (Book X)

Within his articulation of art's inherent inferiority on moral and ethical grounds, Plato seemed almost more infuriated by the power within the artifice. Because, as he says, "no artificer makes the ideas themselves: how could he?"

Plato's critique, when re-examined in the context of contemporary neuroscience, reveals a startling confluence of foresight regarding the power of mimesis amidst his numerous dichotomous constructs that we tend to see today as miscalculations. Research into the function of mirror neurons supports Plato's observations about the influential power of theatre, as science has confirmed that humans learn best by example and through empathetic reasoning (Calvo Merino, et al.). Contemporary theories of cognition regarding emotional reasoning and the "feeling brain" help us better understand how theatre is capable of carrying out what Plato describes as the rousing of audiences to sympathize, weep, laugh, and lust as "transgressive" acts (Damasio). Resituated in this neurobiological light, we are able to see that the constitution of Plato's critique is actually the reason why theatre can be a powerful force for social change.

It is precisely this power that Jade McCutcheon is trying to harness with her Body Energy Center approach to actor training. Drawing on the metaphor of "holding up a mirror" to the audience, to tell the stories that need to be told for the purpose of reflection, McCutcheon endeavors to train actors that can effectively sacrifice their own personal comfort and strict attachments to "self" in order to take on roles and stories that serve a social function. By taking on altered states, McCutcheon contends that actors are able to perform a shamanic function "on behalf of the tribe." In this sense, McCutcheon does not always strictly delineate between an altered state as another "I" versus an altered state as

another "character."

Taking on a role, then, within the Body Energy Center approach, is essentially in line with opening a door into a great unknown that is a convergence between the imagination and experience of the actor – neither solely "character" nor strictly "self." McCutcheon writes:

> I studied hard to break off the pieces of dress self that prevented my actor's body self from representing another self in order to live that other self's life on stage. The boundaries and divisions between the 'I' of me and the 'I' of the character sometimes blurred as the 'I' of you observing became the 'I' of me watching myself performing. Are these different levels of consciousness? Different parts of the self? Do they remain beyond, behind or below my consciousness until I focus on them to light their way into consciousness? (McCutcheon *Explorations* 27)

For McCutcheon, the performative act – and particularly the observed quality of performance – is a gateway into a vast realm that is inherently destabilizing to foundational notions of self and self-in-society. Because the Body Energy Center technique prefaces a merging between self and character, it is uniquely positioned for a case study investigation into the nature of the trace that character leaves on the actor and its relationship to both the power and danger of theatrical representation.

Ultimately, even contemporary master of language Jacques Derrida is unable to fully account for theatrical representation, which most certainly *is* an energy, but an energy which is *not* finite, as it carries on in the form of neurobiological traces. In the following case study, I will detail the path that I took to create a role using McCutcheon's Body Energy Center approach. These descriptions will serve to illustrate the way in which the actor in this system develops a uniquely integrated relationship to her character. They will also provide the grounds on which I will base a concluding inquiry into the nature of actor training from a neurobiological perspective.

## III. Overview of the Body Energy Center Approach

The Body Energy Center method of training begins with the breath and the breath's relationship to the actor's imagination from the moment that actors walk into the rehearsal room. The foundational and, I would argue, fundamental component to the Body Energy Center training is the BEC breathing, in which actors spend approximately 40 minutes of guided imagistic exploration as they "breathe" through their seven BEC's. The BEC's are closely related to the chakras in terms of their location and emotional content, but are distinctly different in the sense that they serve a functional rather than overtly spiritual purpose (though the spiritual realm is certainly not closed in this system) and in the sense that McCutcheon has carefully adapted the language, philosophy and utility of the BEC's specifically for the purpose of training performers.

I cannot emphasize enough the critical role of breath as an active agent in this process. While arguably all performance training like all life practice must account for breath in some way, the Body Energy Center approach arms the actor with breath as a vehicle that links and integrates all other aspects and elements of rehearsal and performance. Before we do table work, we do the BEC breathing. Before we improvise relationships between characters, we do the BEC breathing. Before we imagine what our character looks like, talks like, we do the BEC breathing.

It is not just the order in which we train that is indicative of the significance of breath. Breath in this system serves a metaphorical significance in that we are always "breathing" in our character in our imaginative work. This imaginative work is then integrated into our cognitive and analytical experience of character in the journals that we keep, in which we fastidiously record all of our experiences during the breathing – all of the images, feelings and other information that comes up for us during the experience. In this way, we participate in the BEC breathing in order to access information about the character that we then build into an entire profile of the character. This is a very distinct feature of the BEC system, in that there is a convergence between imaginative research and dramaturgical research at the interstice of breath.

I began my investigation into the function of breath in the BEC system when I first studied with McCutcheon in 2005 in a graduate class at the University of California, Davis then called the "Actor as Shaman." The course provided training in chakra breathing and energy systems based on McCutcheon's theory of the "Receptive Other," which was developed as a means by which actors might train and deepen their own sensistivity to an

ensemble imagination that was part of a collective consciousness. In this way, McCutcheon wishes to establish a "language in the rehearsal room that will encourage actors to access the realms of intuition, spirit and imagination" (McCutcheon *Intuition* 204). My experience within this system indicates that the key into these realms of intuition and imagination is breath, as the Body Energy Center training always begins with and is informed by the chakra breathing. What I find, in reflecting on my early journals from the class, is that the BEC breathing serves to legitimate imaginative and intuitive information within the actor, by liberating the actor from her own analytical confines. Here are a few excerpts:

*My whole energy was directed towards moving to a person – so the person, the objective, became very important, not just as a strategy for success in the abstract sense, but as an object of love and attention – of energy directed toward them. It was pretty elating to perform the whole process. I felt like I was floating just a few feet above myself, even though I was still grounded and among the people. I was transcendent in this small way, while still vulnerable because of the constraints of the game and the limitations of my own body.*

…

*moments of transcendence*
*levitating between buildings*
*skipping between people*
*all sites of possibility*
*what a difference when I slow down for my predetermined direction*
*there is a heaviness*
*and each person becomes an icon, an image*
*rather than a story, a future*
*simply see them*
*when we are moving and breathing faster*

There is a sense in these passages of attaining what would be called an "altered state." The funny thing in just transposing these words is that my body very quickly remembers exactly what I'm describing, even though I'm using incredibly indirect language. But because I wrote the words in what could be described as a specifically generated "altered" state, in which I had become more "Receptive" to imaginative

information, the words can even now, years later, jog in my own physiology the same qualities of experience. In other words, BEC training that includes the act of breathing in the imaginative realm and then journaling in order to remember and process the experience makes evident the connection between "reasoning" and "feeling" that has always been a part of human thinking, but which is still so often denied. By giving permission to the actor to accept literally anything and everything that is generated in the imaginative process, BEC training helps the actor to establish a rich world in which the character can play.

Working with the BEC method in performance, I found that the BEC breathing in particular represented an opportunity to integrate my previous training in dance and puppetry with the task of acting. This I think has to do with the very physical and holistic nature of the BEC training. Because the BEC training experience starts with breath, and then travels into the imaginative, generative world of "journeying," in which participants travel on guided meditations to meet their character, and *then* moves into script analysis, the body and breath are given priority.[1] This priority is also a form of permission that allows the actor's mind to dream on the world of the script *first.* BEC training has a *different way in* to the dreaming process that begins with the breathing, then moves into the journeying/imagining and then on to the script analysis and application. By the end of our six week rehearsal process, I no longer needed to delineate between these three steps – the breathing took me on journeys, as the scene work also took me on journeys. The boundaries of the initial phases of training were no longer firmly in place. I was able to arrive at this point – of continuing to generate new embodied imaginative information about my character and the world of the play – because we entered into the process from a place of breath first.

In the following sections, I will chart in greater detail my creative process through the BEC training as I rehearsed to perform the character Eve in Stephen Sewell's *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*. This analysis I've

[1] When I write about the training experience, I am referring to the sequence of training that occurs in the rehearsal room. While we begin with the BEC breathing in rehearsal, actors have entered the rehearsal room having read and memorized the script and conducted substantial script analysis and dramaturgical work on their own. This script analysis and dramaturgical work is then *extended* and *deepened* when brought into the rehearsal room and partnered with the imaginative work generated by the BEC explorations.

divided into three parts that correspond with the chronology of rehearsal and then production. The first section looks at the firsts few weeks of rehearsal, where we are, as a company, learning the BEC breathing and journeying and creating our relationship to character. In the second section, I look at how I then made choices in regards to the script – how I applied the BEC's as tactics based on the journeys that I had gone on in conversation with traditional script analysis – and how this affected the "dancing" of the BEC's between myself and my scene partners. In the third section, I look at the mechanics of then sending the Body Energy Center work that we had built in rehearsal out to the audience as energetic states in performance.

The three sections correspond to the various phases of developing a character, or creating a role, moving along the continuum of what Stanislavsky defined as "circles of attention." In other words, as Stanislavsky advocated that actors cultivate an awareness of the energetic shifts between an internally-focused consciousness, a scene-partner-focused consciousness and an audience-inclusive consciousness, so does McCutcheon create a similar environment in which the actor moves from an internal imagination, to a partnered imagination and then to a dynamic imagined space with the audience. I raise this parallel point here because I wish to note that McCutcheon's Body Energy Center work, while innovative in its treatment and languaging of the function of breath in the service of imagination, is also part of a trajectory of actor training that is very much tied to Stanislavsky's foundational discoveries in training actors for performance in modern dramas. While McCutcheon's inventions are occurring within a postmodern timeframe, they are certainly still very much in conversation with the question of how actors go about pursuing truth onstage – a question approached from different angles by Stanislavsky, his student Michael Chekhov, his fan Lee Strasberg as well as Brecht and Grotowski.

Much of the differences between these techniques, as I see them, have to do with the function that truth serves onstage. For McCutcheon, the underlying spirit of her work is always influenced by the particular function that she sees theatrical performance serving – that of a social service. For this reason, it is important again to distinguish the Body Energy Center work in the sense that it aims to cultivate highly trained actors who can perform effectively *in order to* unlock boundaries between the actor and her imagination *so that* the actor can effectively tell stories that serve a social function. The actor in the BEC approach sheds her own personal boundaries in order to merge with a character so as to produce good art that is beneficial for society. This is an important distinction between other modernist

enterprises that let the sentence end with "good art." Even contemporary scholarship exploring the influence of yoga on Stanislavsky's System continues to reiterate that his borrowing of Yogic exercises was "in order to help actors transcend the limitations of the physical senses and tap into higher levels of creative consciousness" (White 73). In this sense, art itself "could provide a transcendent, spiritual experience for both artist and observer" (White 74). For Stanislavskt, art *is* the social function. For McCutcheon, art is the vehicle for an experience that has a social function.

## IV. Creating a Role with BEC Training: Breath and Imagination

Eve: Didn't Brecht say you could change with your last breath?
Talbot: My last breath?
Eve: You can change now, if you want. What do you want to change?
…
Eve: I want to say things that'll make people say, 'I never thought anyone else felt that way.' I want to say things that'll make people less afraid. I'm an idealist, too, Talbot; and so are you. We're both idealists because that's the only way you can live in a world like this.

-Act I, Scene 5 *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

In creating the role of Eve in Sewell's *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster*, I ultimately found that my imaginative work operated as a long, embodied journey back to the text. Eve, as written in the play, is a successful television and screen writer, married to an Australian university professor of political science. She is scripted to make an extraordinary journey in the play as her husband, Talbot, is harassed and tortured at the hands of a "Man" never seen by anyone else in the play. Eve loses faith in Talbot, and as the unbelievable occurs to him, it reveals that many of her deepest needs and desires have not been met in the context of their relationship. At the moment of her greatest professional success, she finds herself utterly alone and isolated, leading to a moment of recognition where she decides to fight for Talbot – but only after he has disappeared completely. When I reflect upon the way that I imagined Eve through the process of Body Energy Center breathing followed by BEC journeying, where I would travel on an imaginative meditation to meet Eve and collect information about her, it is fascinating that the truth of the text is actually ultimately revealed within and integrated with my imaginative work.

In preparation for our first rehearsals, all actors were asked to be off book. Although we did not begin scene work or script analysis until the second week of rehearsals, having our lines memorized served a critical function in terms of the core of our imagined work, which took place over several full-day rehearsals in the first week. In this first week, we were learning (or revisiting, in my case) the Body Energy Center method of training, with a focus on the BEC breathing and journeying. We were advised that this collection process was to take place completely unfettered – our job with the breathing and journeying was to allow anything and everything to emerge during these experiences, to not monitor or "correct" inappropriate or out of context imagery or feelings. Everything was to be useful to us, and to be considered as intentional, ultimately, as the words of the published text that we had memorized.

The early images that I produced during the breathing and journeys seemed to make no sense at all and I thought, despite Jade's reassurance, that I was failing to produce the "right" kind of information. Let me give you an example from day two:

*On my journey I met Eve as Snow White! Snow White?*
*Eve tells me that she is visiting her "family" in the forest – small bunnies, frogs, chickens, red hens. She (Eve) turns into a very large bunny, herself. With a fantastic white tail. And we hop along for a while. Then she (Eve) becomes a man-rabbit with beautiful ears and very long legs and very large feet. Very regal, like Cary Grant, if he was a rabbit. A very wise rabbit.*
*"Why are you Snow White?," I ask.*
*"Why are we in the woods with the dwarves, who are building a cottage house and animals, who are here in the clearing that you are sweeping?"*
*This is where Eve goes, to this place. She has a very well developed imaginary life that she cultivated very early on. This is all as real as anything else. She can easily go here or anywhere like or unlike it, but this place is where she's gone most often for as long as she can remember.*

The journey, alone, produced fabulous imagery that I can still conjure at the moment that I'm now writing and remembering. However, as an actor looking to deepen my relationship to character, I still struggled to give myself permission to include this kind of imaginative work, because I could not initially see how it related to Eve's objectives and obstacles in the

play.

It was through the journaling process that the journeys began to become increasingly clear. I was able to see patterns emerge in terms of images and stories of Eve and from there I was able to compose a vision of the character's energetic centers. For instance, many of my journeys to meet Eve found Eve either hard at work or relaxing in a world of absurdist fantasy. These images were accompanied by either a great deal of energy generated by her "mind" (middle of the forehead) Body Energy Center when at work or "crown" (extending from the top of the head into the cosmos above) BEC energy. When I say that these energies were physically observable, I mean that the combination of the character's body posture and tone of voice within the image suggested that these corresponding energetics were at play.

As these patterns repeated themselves and I could chart the journeys through my journaling, my imaginative work integrated with the analytical work that I had already carried out in my memorization and analysis of the script. In this way, ultimately my imaginative work supported and deepened my connection to the given circumstances in the script, as I now not only had the actual scripted words to draw on, but also a rich imaginative vocabulary that was already living within my body. My journaling of the experiences acted as a kind of synthesis between analysis and imagination. From day six of rehearsal:

*Ha ha ha! Eve's strategy: brain stuff is actually stupid and she can raise up and above and out of the general masses' preoccupation with a purely cognitive approach to life through her crown when confronted with the limitations of other people's thinking. What she means by this is not that her approach is necessarily better than others', but she definitely considers her approach as above the fray – she is consistently disappointed by the confines that the rest of the world imposes on itself by staying in a purely cognitive or logical place. Accordingly, she is perceived by others as, respectively, dry-witted or even "spiritual" at times or overly emotional but, in fact, she is never escaping reason…The pity in all of this is that most differences are linguistic – slight differentiations between the ways that each of us express ourselves. Eve believes that we can use words to help people see that we really want the same things. This is where some of her key phrases are born: "We found a way to live, Talbot" and then later "People can change. Everyone can change." These phrases are at the core of Eve's belief system. They represent her key internal conflict – the juxtaposition of profound dissatisfaction with her daily encounters with other human beings against her own massive optimism about the power of language – written and spoken language – to help broaden people's perspective. She is a self-proclaimed idealist. And the fact that Talbot limits his very definition of idealist – i.e. that he sees idealism only in terms of the narrow confines of political activism and academic writing – is deeply disappointing to her as a human being and as his wife. So she travels quite a bit in her imagined landscapes – not only imagining geographic locations, either. She includes theoretical thought as part of imagination, as well.*

This passage could easily appear to be just straightforward script analysis. And it is script analysis. However, it is a different avenue into the analytical process.

The differences between standard script analysis and the kind of imaginative script analysis that is part of the Body Energy Center training are significant. First of all, the process already integrates language and image, the breath and body. Because the passage above was written immediately following the BEC breathing and journeying, the analysis was the product of a conversation that I had with Eve, the character, as part of the imaginative work while on a journey. Thus, each sentence corresponds to a set of moving images and sounds that took place in a specific environment. In standard script analysis, the analytical writing lays down the "facts" as such and these facts or givens are then brought to life when actors use imagination to create the world of the characters onstage. In the BEC process, the world of the characters is under construction from day one and is never

limited to the material circumstances of the set design or the words on a page. As I copied the above passage from my journal at the time of this writing, I was immediately brought back to the apartment of Talbot and Eve, to the smell of their massive leather couches, to the curl of Eve's ginger hair and the way that her body disappeared into the couch as she described herself to me. These images are present and immediately accessible to me because I generated them from the imagined realm first and then tied them to the logic of the script. Hence, even the "deviations" of journeys like the experience of Eve as Snow White in the forest become incredibly useful in creating dynamic, living characters with all of the eccentricities of any human being.

Eve's journey in the play became inscribed in my breath and body through the dynamic play between Sewell's text and my creative license. This doesn't sound terribly different from most any other actor training technique, in which the actor is always striving to "create a world" and "living, breathing characters." With the BEC method, however, I have found that the imaginative work makes a deeper imprint faster than with standard script analysis. Further, the connection between the imaginative work and the specific Body Energy Centers gave me specific embodied tools with which to carve out my performance and my relationship to other characters. Over the course of several weeks, I came to see Eve repeatedly as a person with an overactive "mind," often directing her words and intention and actions by leading with the head. She would exhaust herself in this way, and her ambition and desire to create work from this center would sometimes lead her to "escape" herself, other people and unreasonable situations through her "crown" – traveling into the world of the absurd in order to save herself. Of critical significance in this process was also her Solar BEC, the seat of her drive and determination that lives in the base of the rib cage, which was in crisis. Because Eve could so rarely say directly what she wanted and needed, she would travel between the realm of the analytical Mind BEC and the absurdist Crown BEC. Ultimately, her Solar energy could only be restored when she determined to fight on behalf of Talbot in the last scene of the play.

## V. Deepening Relationship to Character with BEC Training: "Merging" and "Imaginative Recall"

Therapist: Is that why you feel so angry?
Eve: Angry? Do you think I feel angry?

Therapist: You sound angry.
Eve: Do I?
Therapist: Do you think it's my fault?
Eve: No.
Therapist: Do you think it's your husband's?
Eve: Do I sound angry?
Therapist: Yes.

-Act I, Scene 13 *Myth Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

Physicality and emotion are conscientiously integrated into the BEC training with breath and imagination. However, when working in a system where the imagination is given incredible license and authoring power in the development of character, I found it necessary to go back through and continue to chart and reassess decisions I had made, particularly as they related to the decisions that other actors had made about their characters.

When we first began to make the transition from the imaginative work of the BEC breathing and journeying into actual scene work, I felt a bit of trepidation. I didn't know how I would go about bringing this very rich (and even bizarre) series of stories and images and scenarios that I had come up with on the journeys into the work with the text. Part of this fear was related to some of my previous assumptions about working with text. In previous performance processes, my primary mechanism for imagining the world of the play was the language of the script, itself, and the corresponding dramaturgical evidence that I would gather related to the life and times of the playwright and the historical and cultural context of the play. In this way, the *imagined* work that I would do was always connected literally back to the *real* words of the play and the *real* images and facts that I had studied.

After breathing and journeying through the world of Sewell's *Myth*, I found that many new layers of possibility came into play with the BEC method. These new layers corresponded to a deeper relationship to my character and a denser connection to the world of the play. Even though in some ways, these relationships and connections were not based in textual "fact," my imaginative work was given equal weight to all of the other work that I was doing.

Several weeks into the rehearsal process, I returned to my script and actually

charted out various versions of the scenes using the Body Energy Centers as part of my strategies and tactics. While my actual onstage choices varied considerably by the time we got to performance, I found it necessary to actually script some initial "plays" in order to track the dynamic between Eve and other characters in her world in real time as opposed to her imagined time. For example, see the scene below as I charted it:

Therapist: Is that why you feel so angry? **Mind BEC (intent: control and direct)**
Eve: Angry? Do you think I feel angry? **Heart BEC (intent: passively receive)**
Therapist: You sound angry. **Mind BEC (intent: don't let her evade question)**
Eve: Do I? **Heart BEC (intent: destabilize interrogation by softening)**
Therapist: Do you think it's my fault? **Mind BEC (intent: make her uncomfortable)**
Eve: No. **Crown BEC (intent: escape unreasonable situation)**
Therapist: Do you think it's your husband's? **Mind BEC (intent: keep on course)**
Eve: Do I sound angry? **Crown BEC (intent: continue to escape further away)**
Therapist: Yes. **Mind BEC (intent: wrangle her back into conversation)**

My most developed work using the Body Energy Centers came in the scene with the Therapist, in which Eve reveals the real uncertainty she has about her relationship with Talbot and its connection to her uncertainty about human civilization. These revelations are complicated, however, by a Therapist who consistently undermines Eve's position. My scene partner and I played with these dynamics in order to reveal the vulnerability in each character and the tiny struggles for power that parallel the larger, more profound struggles between Talbot and his interrogator/torturer, the "Man."

In this scene, we decided to play with the idea of the psychology of confession. From my journeys, I had collected information from my character that indicated that the Therapist might be something of a fraud who was only asking questions of Eve because she was nosey and had no real interest or ability to help. For instance, in one recurring journey, the Therapist would regularly appear in the windows of my high-rise apartment and peer in without permission. The dynamic between the imagined journeys and the script analysis helped me make a choice that Eve actually knew that the Therapist wasn't terribly professional, but that she intended to keep seeing the Therapist because she found her sessions rewardingly dramatic and wanted to see what would happen. It might even be good fodder for her own writing. Eve wanted to test the extent to which she could manipulate the

"dialogue" in her "scenes" with the Therapist "from the inside" as a metatheatrical approach, given that Eve is a screen and television writer and, based on other evidence that I had collected in the journeys, is a bit of a creative oddball in her own private home.

Based on the tools that I had established for Eve within my imaginative journeying work, I continued to avoid using the Solar BEC energy to communicate with the Therapist in a straight-forward way. Instead, I played between attaching the cerebral, analytical energetic perspective of the Mind BEC and, when that failed and the Therapist tried to bulldoze Eve with unsettling questions, I would escape to the Crown BEC as a safety mechanism. As a character choice, I felt I was effectively evading the Therapist's demands for answers by taking her on a journey of my own into my crown imagery. Again, in these situations, the imagery from my journeying and breathing was particularly useful. When the conversation wasn't going my way and the therapist was grilling me in a way that I thought inappropriate, instead of simply leaving her office, I decided to stay and play a weird game with her, pretending to pay attention while conjuring images of Eve from a journey:

*She is baking cookies. Thousands of them. Everywhere. The whole place smells like cookies and there are stacks and stacks of them everywhere. Thousands of them in stacks and in baggies. She started with the idea of gifts for all the neighbors she doesn't know and then thought she could solve hunger problems with her cookies. She could pass them out. She's relatively naked now, sometimes wearing a tiny waist apron that's white with ruffles. But her body is covered in all the cookie-making materials: sugar, brown sugar, flour, eggs, milk – all over. She's totally comfortable like this…*

*She used to hide these episodes with foods and costumes from Talbot, they were her secrets and she was afraid of judgment but, most importantly, she was afraid of losing herself – which is her process – in the revelation to him of this private space. But it was making her paranoid. He knows now in bits and pieces and I think, while he may not understand, I may actually enjoy having a witness to this, it almost makes it better to have a tiny theatre of madness. Because, after all, it works…*

Notice in the narrative from the journaling, the voice shifts from "she" describing Eve to "I" – still describing Eve, but from the perspective of my own actor's body. This process is what McCutcheon calls "merging." Sometimes it is directly sought, as

McCutcheon will guide the journey in such a way as to ask you to "merge" with your character – so you are no longer your own body identity in the journey, observing the figure of your character. Instead, you are one body – your own and the character's at once. In this way, you are actually "trying on" the body of the character, inhabiting the character's limbs and movements.

This merging process further leads to the kind of instant "imaginative recall" that the BEC system cultivates, whereby the actor is able to access not only information and imagery about the character, but an *actual embodied state* that was created during the journeying process. Imaginative recall is a phrase that I am using to characterize the particular route that the BEC method takes to achieve a fundamental component to the process of many actors – that of creating truth or "authenticity" onstage. Lee Strasberg, leading actors to find this truth through a process of revisiting actual life experiences and emotions through memory, describes the route as "sense memory" and "emotional recall." Chekhov described his route, which involved using imagery to "rehearse for the actor," as "psychological gesture." Imaginative recall lives in both worlds at once – the realm of the "imagined" and the realm of the "real," as it asks the actor to revisit the actual life experience of journeying to meet a character – an imaginative process that occurs in real time and, necessarily, integrates an actor's known existing palate of experience into conversation with "new" imagined material.

Having worked in systems derived from the research done by Strasberg and Chekhov, I have found that working with the Body Energy Center approach invites the actor to merge various facets of experience – the "real" and the "imagined" as opposed to compartmentalizing them on a binary scale. This particular form of merging leads to a deep and emotional relationship to character that is based on the imagined world of the play script, rather than the real world of personal emotional experiences. For instance, imaginative recall allows me to feel the anxieties and loneliness of my character, as I remember journeying to meet her at an isolated park bench at dusk in Manhattan. Remembering this imagery and the feelings associated with conjuring this image, I am brought as an actor into an emotional state – but without trying to assign details of my own autobiography onto the character of Eve. In this way, when an actor in the BEC method travels back to retrieve the memories of a journey or an image, this process is incredibly emotional, as the actor has built a relationship with character through the journeying process. Thus, as the actor is asked to "merge" with her character, she is at once "merging"

the various facets of self that have been defined along the lines of consciousness (subconscious, unconscious) and cognition (analytical, intuitive). While the imagery that an actor produces during a journey is certainly tied to the idiosyncrasies of that person's consciousness, the endeavor with journeying and with imaginative recall onstage is not to merge autobiographical details of the actor with the character. Rather, by traveling into an altered state of relaxation and concentration during a journey, the actor is able to summon a rich, complex and deeply emotional and embodied connection to character without the detour into personal historical information.

By using the practice of merging with my character before going onstage and then using "imaginative recall" to resurrect the embodied state developed during a journey, I was ultimately able to play the scene with the Therapist in a way that generated even more material during performance. Over the course of the rehearsal and then performance, I came to see Eve's strategy to participate in the scene as a child as serving a larger metaphorical purpose in the arc of the play – exposing the danger of participating in larger political systems as a child.

## VI. Refining Performance with BEC Training: Vocal Placement and Intent

Talbot: A man is stalking me, Eve – a man is hunting me –
Eve: He's not.
Talbot: He is.
Eve: He's not, Talbot; he's in your head; he's you, your fears, your projections –
Talbot: He's not! He's real!
-Act II, Scene 18 *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

Eve: You're making it up – it's not true.
Talbot: It is true, I tell you! How did this happen?
Eve: You did it yourself! This doesn't happen, Talbot!
Talbot: I'm telling you it did!
Eve: I don't believe you!
-Act II, Scene 24 *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

As with body and emotion, in the BEC work, voice and intent are already integrated into the system. By working with energetics generated from the merging of self and character, the merging of breath and imagination, the freed voice is able to follow. Intent is always driven by the psycho-physical energetic shifts determined by Body Energy Center choices and in the best scenario, the voice is warm and the body is relaxed, so the voice can be dynamic and live in support of intentions. However, as performers go from rehearsal to performance, there is a marked difference in terms of communicating the life and world of the characters in a presentational manner that can be audible and perceptible for the audience. It is at this third stage that the imagery generated in the initial imaginative work and then developed in the rehearsal work with scene partners plays a critical role, as the imaginative work resides not only in the Body Energy Centers between scene partners, but extends out to include and "wash over" the audience. This is a tricky transition.

The transition to the performance space for me was both wonderful and hellish. In some ways, I found new information about my character now that she had an "official" place to inhabit. However, I lost a lot of the nuance of the rehearsal work now that I had to constantly present my imagined world to an audience that happened to be sitting at a sharply raked angle. For instance, in rehearsal in the early scenes with Talbot, there was a kind of softness and intimacy where I could speak at a volume that brought audience members into our domestic life in a realistic way. However, in the performance space, this volume actually excluded the audience almost entirely as there was a physical wall set piece that had been constructed between the stage and the audience.

Once again, I went back to my journals charting my imaginative work conjured during the BEC breathing and journeying. In order to maintain the focus and intent of my character development, but still communicate and connect with the audience, I began to use a consistent set of images that I would send out to the audience as Eve delivered text and energy from different centers. My repertoire included the following images, for example:

*Crown: Cosmic cirrus cloud connecting the top of my head to the tops of each audience member's head and up to the sky*
*Third Eye: Lightning rays of thought as problem-solving energy*
*Throat: The 360 degree set of windows in my high-rise apartment*
*Heart: Umbilical cords of connection out*
*Solar: Ball-point pens shooting out*

*Belly: Floating pages of writing*
*Root: Actual roots coming up through the stage floor*

In this way, I had this actual set of images at my disposal. I could use "imaginative recall" to bring them onstage, as I had already created them in the BEC breathing and journeying processes. Each set of images came forward at strategic moments in each scene, as I used them as tactics to get my needs met and to communicate my experience to the audience. For instance, when Talbot and Eve would argue, she would try to make connections with him on an emotional level, sending out thousands of umbilical cords with certain lines, imagining their pink surfaces wrapping around his chest and filling the auditorium with my desire to connect and convince from a place of compassion. When Talbot then chose to ignore or dismiss Eve, it felt as though he had taken an enormous machete knife to all of the cords, severing them and leaving Eve and her needs and desires to bleed to death.

The umbilical cord imagery is particularly connected to the script itself, as Eve says many times in the play that she wants a baby. Hence the imagery lives at the interface between the given circumstances of the play and my imaginative production – the umbilical cords are effective on their own, but even more so when attached to the larger themes of the play. Other imagery – like the sheets of paper floating from my womb symbolizing my creative product, or the ball point pens shooting from Eve's Solar BEC symbolizing her will to make marks, are closely linked with information about Eve as a writer, as a professional, that comes from the script. And while arguably the primary bits of information that generate the imagery are provided by Sewell, the Body Energy Center methodology, which front-loads the imagined work, allows for the imagined fact of my journeys to live in conversation with the facts of the play.

## VII. Embodied Dramaturgy: Ethics and Aesthetics

Talbot: If Faith is to replace Reason, what are we to have Faith in?
Man: America, Professor, that's enough. That's more than enough.
…
Talbot: What's going on?
Man: 'Know reality for what it is' – Marcus Aurelius, Professor – remember that?
Talbot: No – but why?

Man: Because now we can, Professor.
Talbot: But why? What danger am I? I'm no danger! You've destroyed me!
Man: You're not listening, Professor: because now we can.

-Act II, Scene 26 *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*

Now that I have outlined the BEC method in practice, it is particularly noteworthy to refer back again to the connections between BEC training and other actor training methodologies and also those elements which distinguish the Body Energy Center approach as a distinctly different avenue through which to access information. I have mentioned that McCutcheon's technique is different to that of Stanislavsky, Chekhov, Grotowski and Strasberg based on the function that art-making serves in each of these environments. My argument regarding these other pioneers of theatre is that their methodologies – each one quite different, of course – are firmly rooted in the Modernist traditions of "art for art's sake." In the manifesto-driven environments of the first half of the 20th Century, many theatre artists believed that finding the "right" aesthetic path would create the *art* that would, itself, *make the social change*. The experiments in actor training that emerged in this milieu positioned the actor in a particularly vulnerable position – one of making sometimes costly personal sacrifices in order to create good art, as art-making processes were understood to contain particular types of answers. What resulted - in some instances and iterations - was the emotional plunging advocated by Strasberg and the spiritual rising advocated by Grotowski. These processes led certain actors to arrive at what some might consider extreme states in order to make the kind of art that, itself, might influence society. Arguably, in both of these systems, actors were not always capable of regaining emotional stability on the other side of these psychological and physical explorations. For Grotowski and Strasberg, the value in these sacrificial explorations was self-evident, given that the ethics of practice were intertwined with the aesthetics, as art practice was positioned in the Modernist sensibility as something inherently good. To some extent, ethical concerns were aesthetic concerns – as in, it was good or bad ethically if it was good or bad for theatre-making.

In a different vein of this Modernist thinking existed Stanislavsky and Chekhov, who advocated for building a character in the service of creativity. This particular lineage of exploration, distinct from the methods of Grotowski and Strasberg, were still nonetheless promoted in the service of creative exploration. To reiterate Andrew White on Stanislavsky,

even as Stanislavsky was exploring Yoga, he was doing so from the perspective of what a Yogic consciousness might contribute to the creative process: "he adapts specific Yogic exercises in order to help actors transcend the limitations of the physical senses and tap into higher levels of creative consciousness" (73). Hence, the self-proclaimed "spiritual order of artists" (White 78) that Stanislavsky wished to create was still firmly rooted in the Modernist pursuit of the *truth* that would make a better society *through art*.

McCutcheon's thinking and practice are inextricably linked to these lineages, as the BEC technique mobilizes the language and lessons of Grotowski, Chekhov, Strasberg and Stanislavsky. Yet BEC training must be considered as operating quite apart from its ancestors, so to speak, because McCutcheon has intentionally revised the form and function of the actor's "sacrifice." Implicit within Strasberg's emotional plunging and Grotowski's spiritual rising is a mandate that an actor must sacrifice a part of her emotional or physical self in order to serve the character, the play-making and the social function of theatre art. Chekhov and Stanislavsky advocated for forms of psychological and creative transcendence that would serve the social function of the staged art. McCutcheon also understands actors as working on behalf of society. And yet the journey towards that sacrifice involves a merging of the actor's imagination with the character's imagination, a merging of the actor's breath with the character's breath. Thus, in McCutcheon's configuration, sacrifice does not necessarily involve separation or splitting. Rather, McCutcheon approaches the actor's body and consciousness in more holistic terms, guiding actors towards an increasingly expansive notion of the physicalities and imaginative states that they might take on. Experiments in actor training that mark the first half of the 20th Century are noteworthy for their inclination to separate and compartmentalize. McCutcheon's techniques trust that an actor's imagination is able to expand infinitely; the actor's sacrifice is not dependent on a cutting off but rather a radical inclusivity.

## VII. Contemplating the Form and Function of Torture in the World of the Play

But what about doing this work within the context of a play like Sewell's *Myth*, with content that is deeply informed by the form and function of torture? It was not until the end of our rehearsal and performance process that I realized that the play's structure is designed so that all characters were participating in different forms of torture throughout.

While the subtlety of the Therapist's relationship to Eve is markedly different than Talbot's relationship to the "Man," throughout the script, each character is responsible for, complicit in, or actively carrying out various acts of domination that at various moments could be defined as torture. Each character was trying to survive by drawing on the tools that define – in Sewell's world – American society.

Eve was firmly planted within a spider's web of dependency as all of her relationships in the play were founded on this dynamic as characters each took turns terrorizing each other. The dynamic between Talbot and the "Man," then is simply an insanely exaggerated manifestation of all of the smaller, subtler battles between the supporting characters and Talbot. In this way, Sewell has written a cogent account of what we understand of the form, function and impact of torture from a neurobiological and historical perspective.

Psychological Torture is defined as an intentional infliction of suffering without resorting to direct violence (World Medical Association). So, for instance, the act of cuffing and restraining a person is not torture, though the process of getting cuffed may be a form of torture, depending on how it is carried out. The physiological effects of an otherwise purely psychological act such as hooding a person may accumulate in various ways – as hooding disorients, inhibits breathing and can cause sleep deprivation, all of which bear physiological ramifications.

The United Nations delimits the parameters of torture as only those acts carried out with the consent of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. In this way, the UN categorizes torture as removed from the realm of domestic violence, hostage situations and other crimes. In the political realm, it seems that the rhetoric distinguishing heinous acts as torture or physical torture or psychological torture has more to do with charting what people can get away with than what truly protects societies of people.

Al McCoy, expert on the history of the CIA and the genealogy of the U.S. development and refinement of its own set of torture techniques posits that torture, itself, is a social institution. The torturer is just the last link in a long chain that is composed of the whole society. And once it starts, it rapidly accelerates into the element of the nonrational – once societal institutions condone torture techniques, they rapidly spin out of control at the ground level.

In fact, not only is torture applied irrationally, but most often, it is used for irrational purposes. McCoy claims that historical evidence illustrates that torture does not actually serve the purposes for which we assume it is being employed – getting information from detainees. Roman jurors in the 3rd Century A.D. found that torture could not produce "good" information as the strong would resist torture techniques and that the weak would say anything to end their own suffering. By contrast, in World War II American interrogators found that establishing empathy and then talking to Japanese soldiers would ultimately produce detailed, accurate information quickly.

Is torture really applied to get people to talk? It seems that the real objective is not to get information but to destroy people's psyche. In some cases, this is by design, but on a larger scale, the idea driving torture is to destroy the opposition, to generate a climate of threat that will serve a counter-terrorism purpose. At the end of the day, it reflects a deep societal fear of not being in control.

Who makes torture and what does it do to the culture that makes it? Who is tortured and what does it do to them? S. Megan Berthold, a psychologist and licensed social worker who studies and assists victim of torture in Los Angeles, contends that all who participate in systems of torture bear the effects of the act – those who experience it, those who receive it, and those who witness or are complicit in systems that sponsor torture. The corresponding psychosocial impact varies widely based on the background, characteristics, and post-torture circumstances with considerable fluctuation depending on cultural variations of "what is considered a normal reaction versus a disorder" (Berthold). Many factors ranging from "preparedness" and effective coping strategies to discrimination and impunity of the perpetrators all affect the way that torture can manifest in its victims in such disorders as acute stress, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and brief psychotic disorder. Even when these acute disorders are not present or identifiable, a range of other effects take place ranging from "alterations in attention or consciousness" and "alterations in self-perception" to "alterations in relations with others and systems of meaning" and "somatization," which is a term used to describe a number of physical ailments produced by psychological trauma.

What happens when an actor travels deeply into a world of torture? Does it have any cognitive impact if it is only words on a page or images from a journey? My body changed

while playing Eve, my psychology changed while playing Eve. And even today I have the experience of speaking as *myself* and finding Eve's words from Sewell's script creep into my daily life. Have I brought the character Eve and her feelings and her journeys into my own everyday life? Have I, in McCutcheon's own words broken off "pieces of the self" to "merge the boundaries of 'I'" (McCutcheon Explorations 31)? I am certain that my thinking has been changed irrevocably because of the experience. And while I would never want to argue that the experience within a play, even a deep, meaningful embodied experience within a play, could ever be compared to the kind of real psychological and physiological trauma endured by victims of torture, I would argue that there is no simple separation between actor and character if the journey is real.

McCutcheon is aware that "there have been concerns voiced regarding the safety and reliability" of the Body Energy Center method, particularly in the approaches of "Journeying" and "Merging" which often result in varying degrees of a trance state, because "it is assumed that a person in a trance is not aware, or in control of what they are doing" (McCutcheon *Intuition* 212). McCutcheon accounts for this concern by arguing that because actors are aware of what their character says and does, they have a framework for returning to their own bodies, devoid of the burdens of their character. "The method of receptive other establishes boundaries and permission, walking tracks and markers that enable the actor to recognize and remember the journey, returning with new and rich information about the character" (McCutcheon *Intuition* 213). That said, McCutcheon includes as part of the de-roleing process, advice and parameters for actors once they do leave the rehearsal space and return home. The actor who played the "Man" in *Myth* had to spend at least an hour sitting quietly by himself in his room after rehearsal and performance breathing through each Body Energy Center to return his body to neutral before he felt he could interact with anyone else.

Where does imagination end? If through "imaginative recall" and merging, actors in the Body Energy Center method are asked to build an expansive, believable and effective vocabulary of images that live in various energetic centers of the body, how can we imagine that these experiences ever completely go away? Ultimately, the actor as a "manufacturer of images…far removed from the truth," as Plato defines him, finds himself caught between worlds, between "I's", as McCutcheon would say, in his earnest pursuit to bring truth to the stage. The closer he moves towards believability, the greater his burden in the real world, as he carries the weight of the stories and lessons and sorrows – and joys – of all the

characters he has played. Are we arming our actors with more life skills, with the ghosts of characters telling stories over his shoulder like surrogate grandparents? Or do we at once cultivate an army of tortured souls? Plato's voice has long since been displaced as a clear and present danger to the cultural life of theatre. His words now about the danger of mimesis ring clearer as we contemplate the safety and stability of the actors who make the sacrifices on our behalf, finding ever new techniques to better access the truth at the interstices of breath, imagination and the playwright's words in order to tell the stories that need to be told, to hold the mirror up to the social ills for our reflection and contemplation.

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