

Moments in Motion

a case for PUSH Physical Theatre

(Work in Progress!)
By Jonathan Lowery

Introduction

Ten years ago, Darren and Heather Stevenson founded PUSH Physical Theatre as an extension of their personal and artistic relationship. Since that time, PUSH has continued to grow and has become a strong voice in the international movement of physical theatre. As he worked to launch his new company, Darren Stevenson wrote a founding document called “A Case for Physical Theatre” that detailed the Stevensons vision for their art form. In the intervening years, that philosophy has formed the core of a company that walks the fine line between innovation and accessibility in surprising ways.

In reflecting on the first decade of PUSH and the product of the gradual changes those years have brought, I hope to shed some light on the practical results of pursuing the philosophy physical theatre. A major component of what I hope to accomplish here is the presentation of the techniques that have come to define PUSH's physical training and the influences that shape the company's creativity and new work.

Philosophy in Practice – The Physicality of Technique

Darren noted in “A Case for Physical Theatre” that “...Physical Theatre is an art form created from borrowing [other art forms]... we attempt to create a true synergy between them in which the whole is greater than, and different from, the sum of the parts.” As is often the case with philosophy, one can imagine the possibilities of an art form comprised of the best aspects of every other art form. It is another thing entirely to find a way to apply that imaginative exercise to any specific exercise or training regimen. A major accomplishment of the past ten years has been the development of a practical system of implementing and combining technical training from a broad variety of art forms.

PUSH has come to the realization that technique is all about conditioning the intuitive reflexes of the body into certain channels. An expert ballet dancer executes the same technique as a young novice, simply at a higher level of precision, speed and form. This is not, strictly speaking, art. The realization that technique and creativity are two different concepts is key to understanding how PUSH pursues physical theatre. The art of physical theatre comes from philosophy. For PUSH, that is the philosophy espoused in “A Case...” Ballet follows a completely different philosophy. Mime – another. Modern dance – yet another. And on. What PUSH has done is to take the aspects of each technique that are of interest to us (for one reason or another) and combined those into studio sequences that develop the skills and intuitions that accompany each appropriated exercise.

Depending on the relative weight we ascribe to a given art form, we will work more

exercises from that art form into our training. A good example of this has been our appropriation of Hawkins Release Technique. After years of admiring the way Hawkins dancers could throw themselves into wild-looking movements and remain in complete control through their core musculature, the Stevensons decided to bring in their good friend Bill Wade of Inlet Dance Company to teach them this technique. For several years afterward, Bill's exact exercises were a part of every studio class for the company. When it was felt that the technique was sufficiently understood and physically absorbed by the company, the Hawkins exercises began to be modified and edited to complement or contrast with other studio exercises. Finally, the Hawkins work was fully integrated into the primary training sequences. Since it was felt that the Hawkins technique trained a set of highly desired movement traits more of the technique was incorporated into the sequences than other forms (Objective Mime, for example has a much more limited set of incorporated exercises).

[An aside - PUSH will never look like Bill Wade's Inlet Dance Company, and nor should it. Individual art forms can take entire lifetimes of devotion to master. However, PUSH performers will have movement qualities similar to the Inlet dancers that work alongside the qualities produced by our other techniques. This allows us a broader range of options when creating movements for new work.]

What this process provides is the ability to take an aspect of a given technique and intertwine it with a set of existing techniques to produce a wholly new "synergetic" technique. PUSH has implemented this process with many other techniques to varying degrees of integration. The process is also designed to integrate future exercises if it is determined that the company needs a new aspect of physical training.

The Limits of Physicality

With the creation of this system of technical integration, PUSH encountered an obvious problem: there is only so much technique any given performer can assimilate and master. This issue was partly solved by the integration process detailed above, but a significant question remained. How do we incorporate the many forms of creativity and stage presence created by the art forms we borrow? Is it worthwhile to look like a Hawkins dancer while refraining from performing anything overtly resembling a modern dance performance?

One answer we have discovered is to alternate studio exercises from the various forms we borrow from. On one day we will create abstract movement studies that allow us to exhibit our Hawkins training. Another day may find us creating mimetic illusions or developing our partnering exercises or even acting exercises. This brings us a moderate amount of success and provides an excellent opportunity to refresh the specifics of the given art forms. The major flaw in this method is, for PUSH, as singular as it is crucial: it is not synergetic.

Performing separate art forms is not the end PUSH strives for. We strive for a united art form, one that is its own animal, unique and inimitable by any other method. And so our answer to the question of incorporating the "styles" of our borrowed techniques is to, essentially, ignore them. Harsh as that seems, this makes plenty of sense to us. I mentioned earlier that technique trains the intuitive reactions of the body. It is our trust

that this training emerges as we explore our creative process. Rather than attempt to pursue a moment of 'dance' followed by a moment of 'mime' then 'dance' again, we allow these moments to emerge in an 'organic' or natural fashion as we improvise or experiment. Our creative process is thoroughly divorced from the technical roots of our techniques. This has allowed us to discover very satisfying moments of synergy that 'pop' as we put it. They are both surprising as well as natural progressions of movement. Each appropriated exercise informs the others so that mimetic movements can be *danced* and partnering can produce surprising illusions or interesting opportunities for acrobatic explosions of energy. The separation of technique and creativity becomes an essential tool for us as we forge our own path into the realm of physical theatre.

The Creative Impulse and Personal Synergy

Setting aside technique, we move into the other half of the equation: creativity. Under this topic I include both the concept of 'style' or the unique method of performance PUSH possesses as well as the 'process' of creating new work.

The process of creation is an interesting topic. This is the area that most engages the artistic temperament. How does one take an idea, a concept and transmit it to an audience? More importantly, how are the specifics worked out? Unlike technique, creativity cannot be easily defined or corralled into neat exercises or a step-by-step process. PUSH has come to answer this question with the application of an ensemble-based structure largely influenced by Ann Bogart's Viewpoints work. For the most part, new work is created through a series of directed improvisational exercises in which movements are discovered and then isolated and rehearsed. These movements are then composed into a whole work that completes the originating concept. Each performer is allowed a large amount of freedom to produce their own movements and also to influence which movements are selected to become part of the final work. In this way, PUSH benefits from the creativity of each performer and is able to find interesting combinations of abilities and sensibilities that enhance the depth of the finished work. In fact, one of the primary considerations in acquiring new performers is finding new mixes of performance backgrounds to provide yet more unique movements.

The PUSH process of creating work begets a unique style. For one, each work created by the company bears the unique style of the individual performers who created it. As the company has changed personnel over the years, so has the style changed from work to work. Even when new performers take over the roles of previous performers, they are allowed to alter the role to allow for personal style, physicality and unique abilities. This produces a living style that continually morphs to suit the company and seeks to press forward as new techniques and performers are added.

It is important to note that this process involves a great deal of trial-and-error. Maintaining a 'creative discipline' during the creation of new work is a must. The performers and choreographers must continually produce movements and creative elements that will never be seen in the finished product. Sometimes as little as 1% of studio work is selected to be a part of a finished work. This requires a strong working relationship between performers and the mental and emotional wherewithal to submit

one's personal preferences to the service of the work as it emerges.

Also a part of this living style is the continual search for new aspects of performance. Very often an idea for a new work will be nurtured for a long time until it encounters an interesting element that completes it. In many cases that new element is a newly encountered art form, and the new work becomes a proving ground for the art form and serves an entry point for PUSH to begin our process of incorporation of the technique that the new form supplies. It is not enough for PUSH to simply distill the aspects of different art forms into a wholly different form. We must attempt to - forgive the intended pun – push the limits of physical theatre into new shapes.

Darren warned in his initial argument for PUSH that “... the next great idea could be cut down tomorrow, choked by the tyranny of using only what we know.” PUSH would be a poor execution of that thought if it did not continually attempt to experiment and find new forms of expression.

Accessibility

It is important to note that a large part of PUSH's style is devoted to being an accessible form of performance. We believe in the same sentiment as that of Lloyd Newson of DV8 Physical Theatre: “...Most dance people need to be educated in the ways of normal living and learn what body movements mean to other people.” For PUSH, art without clear communication is a contradiction.

This is not to say that we do not perform abstract works or solely use linear narrative. We simply seek to find ways to make sure the audience has the ability to engage the work in whatever form we are presenting it. In the early years of PUSH's formation, the happy accident of fulfilling the requirements of a New York grant gave PUSH an invaluable tool to accomplish this. The grant required PUSH to hold a 'community forum' to gather public feedback about the new work the grant award was funding. To fulfill the request, PUSH held a 'work-in-progress' showing of the work and asked the attendees to speak out about what they liked and dis-liked. They were encouraged to ask questions about anything that confused them and suggest fixes or ideas that the work inspired in them. Armed with this information, PUSH returned to the studio to finish the work. The final work, although almost completely abstract, has been a crowd favorite ever since. Since that initial project, most of PUSH's new works have undergone a 'work-in-progress' stage where they are presented to audiences and invite viewers to respond to what they experienced. Recently, we have discovered that social media has become another useful tool in involving audiences in the creation of our work. Posting short video sections of studio movement studies allows audiences to influence the shape of new works by commenting and critiquing in a non-performance setting.

We have found that making our audiences a part of the creative process has allowed us to explore and experiment with greater freedom. We always have the lifeline back to what the audience is actually seeing and are not cut adrift in the wilderness of artistic expression.

Conclusions

I believe that what sets PUSH apart as a company is the ability to adapt and grow. Over the decade the company has existed, PUSH has morphed from a company primarily founded in a postmodern expression of corporeal mime into a company that truly defies categorization (much to our publicists' annoyance).

The trained eye is able to see the many influences that make up our work: the mime, the dancer, acrobat and actor. What they also notice is that we have become something that is none of these in whole part. As a company, we have taken to calling ourselves 'PUSHers' as we are becoming experts in our eclectic mix of techniques and sensibilities.

We hope that what we are doing is pioneering a way forward for the future of physical theatre. In the process, we are also trying to discover our own artistic voice. It is our supreme hope that we are a part of carrying the work of interpreting and expressing the human soul forward.

Is PUSH a final product? No, we are still growing, 'pushing' beyond what we are already capable of. What we are is company attempting to navigate the world of theatre in a way that is true to our understanding of art and seeks to further our ability to communicate in an authentic and true manner to our audiences.