

ARTICLES

The Acrobat-Body: The *Other* Body

Marcos Nery

Translated by Sunita Nigam

This short article aims to start a conversation around how, in the circus practices one engages with as a scholar and/or practitioner, spaces, objects, and the *body-as-object*, are *regulated, regulatory, and Othered*. I thus propose as a starting point a discussion of the “acrobat-body,” a concept that lies at the heart of my doctoral research, which I undertook jointly at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM) and the University of Sao Paulo (Brazil).

I begin by unpacking the concept of the “acrobat-body.” I arrived at the idea of the acrobat-body through the creative process I undertook during my doctoral dissertation, in which I was able to reflect on and experiment with the acrobat-body as an embodied practice.¹ In using the term “acrobat-body,” I do not mean only the “acrobatic body,” which is rooted in notions of strength, flexibility, agility, balance, daring, and risk that belong to the circus arts. The “acrobat-body” comes out of the notion of the acrobatic body but draws on the notions of the “interartistic”² and “*orchesality*.”³ The prefix *inter*, included in my understanding of the acrobat-body, allows me to signal the tensions between the artistic fields that interact in the interdisciplinary training of the performer.



Marcos Nery and Ivania Aubin-Malo in *Mythe-jeux de refus*. Photo by Helena Vallès.

Marcos Nery is a performer, a teacher, and a PhD candidate in research-creation at UQAM, where his research centres on the expressive movements of bodies on stage (*le corps scénique*). Having received interdisciplinary training in theatre and the circus arts, he has worked as a performer in a number of shows in Brazil and Canada. **Sunita Nigam** is a PhD candidate in performance studies at McGill University. Her dissertation is about the role of performance in urban placemaking in Mexico City, New York, and Montreal from the Mexico '68 Olympics to the contemporary burlesque revival.

With the concept of the acrobat-body, I seek a type of performing body (*corps scénique*) that has its own *modus operandi*, with the goal of experimenting with new expressive qualities through the artistic process. The acrobat-body uses movement to express its own poetics. In fact, it is the body's tendency toward expressive movement that links to the larger concepts of my doctoral research: the notion of the acrobatic body; the expressive biomechanical principles of Vsevolod Emilievitch Meyerhold; and Michel Bernard's notion of dancing corporality.

To help to grasp the concept of the “acrobat-body” as I develop it in my doctoral research, I begin with the notion of the acrobatic body. The acrobat is the individual who collapses the borders of her body with strength and agility, who dares to transcend the ordinary human condition. Its territory is also marked by risk; in addition, the acrobatic arts arise through changes in the equilibrium of the body, which stimulate the actions of the acrobat. According to Goudard (2005), the circus performer learns to master “through *figures* or *postures*, a disequilibrium in which [she] has deliberately placed herself” (146). The author affirms that the adaptation of the artist to instability and to disequilibrium suggests that circus depends upon an aesthetics of risk. In this context, training in the circus arts has the ultimate goal of creating an artistic work in which gestural virtuosity is a means of external expression of the psychic interior of the artist. This is a question of the transformation of technique into a medium of expression, which, according to Goudard (2005), “resides in the resolution of a situation of deliberately created disequilibrium by a motor project” (147).⁴ The latter is resolved by a prowess⁵ that affirms itself as a means of expression. In fact, circus arts are the instrument of prowess. In other words, the circus arts are modelled, borrowed, transformed, costumed, exercised, and produced with the aim of performing spectacular acts of virtuosity.

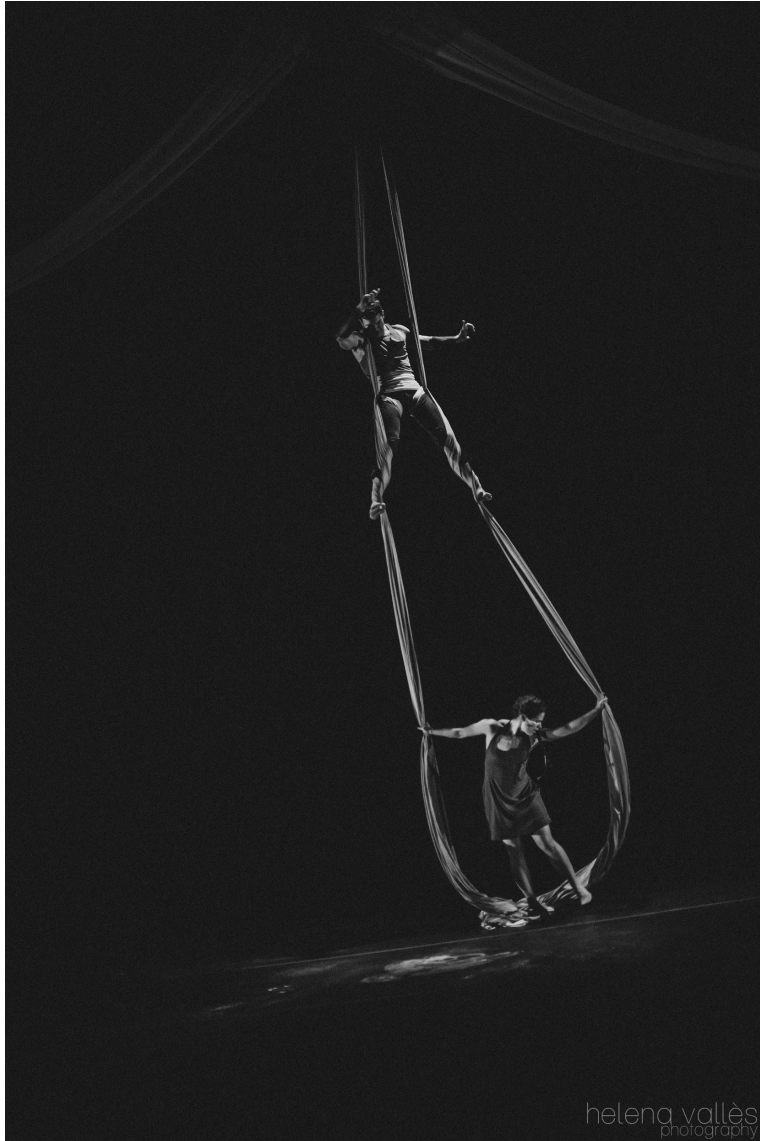
The acrobatic body, which serves as a fundamental pillar of the acrobat-body, cannot be dissociated from the notion of *znak otkaz* (In Russian: a sign of refusal). The *otkaz* can generally be understood as the inverse action of the one we wish to perform, and which further reveals the expressivity of our actions. It is one of the principles associated with the rhythmic movement phrases elaborated in the biomechanical research of the Russian director and pedagogue Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874–1940).⁶ Meyerhold's nonmimetic work, which privileges bodily postures of change, is related to the context of political-artistic resistance that emerged in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Meyerhold's biomechanics attribute to the actor a knowledge of her body as material and propose that the actor employ rigorous forms allowing for the imprecise, blurred, and aestheticized gestures that were being developed in dance studios in Moscow in his time. Meyerhold's actor undergoes rigorous training through an intense sport and physical culture practice, in which she must become mindful of each part of her body for maximum expressivity. The *otkaz* is an essential principle for Meyerhold. It allows for movement control and increases physical expressivity: “the actor who does not master the ‘sign of refusal’ is like one who does not know how to respond rapidly to being called by name, or to use a trampoline for jumping” (Chaves 2001, 162).



Marcos Nery and Ivanie Aubin-Malo in *Mythe-jeux de refus*. Photo by Helena Vallès.

The third and final notion that I add to the concept of the acrobat-body is Michel Bernard’s notion of “dancing corporeality.” The whole of Bernard’s research is like one long, minutely detailed essay that deconstructs the traditional idea of the “body” that is perceived to be “substantial and homogeneous, unitary and organic” (Bernard 2002, 523). The concept of corporeality is used to designate the “enmeshed material functioning of our sensory system” (Bernard 2001a, 87) which takes over during the creative act, since the creative act ensues from the work of a material and dynamic network which is unstable and comprised of interwoven and contrasting interferences of intensities. In this context, Bernard conceives the idea of a dancing corporeality governed by a dynamic of sensorial interweavings. In his definition of dancing corporeality, he proposes four essential variables: 1) a “dynamic of infinite metamorphosis”; 2) the “paradoxical and random game of construction and deconstruction . . . or . . . (un)weaving of temporality”; 3) a “stubborn defiance of terrestrial gravity”; and 4) an “auto-affective or auto-reflexive drive” (82).

These three notions articulate and interweave themselves while revealing the links, the relations, the connections, and at the same time, the gaps, the differences, and the heterogeneity between them. I thus emphasize the interartistic body. An interartistic approach allows me to bring together these three notions in my development of the “acrobat-body.” According to Lesage (2008), these practices “bring into play encounters, dialogues, and oppositional tensions between artistic languages marked by otherness, inside of an event that brings them together without confusing them” (22). The bringing together of different kinds of corporealities using an interartistic method allows for a diversification of the body “into infinity” (Bernard 2012, 533) and creates the conditions for intercorporeality—that is, for relations between different kinds of corporeality. The deterritorialization that occurs by bringing corporealities into interaction tends to dissolve their traditional limits and engenders expressive qualities particular to performance research. In this way, the languages of the circus, theatre, and dance weave through the body in search of expression.



Marcos Nery and Ivania Aubin-Malo in *Mythe-Jeux de refus*. Photo by Helena Vallès.

The notion of alterity then intersects with that of the interartistic and reveals the process of intercorporeality that is the condition of the acrobat-body. According to Todorov (1982), the sense of existing isn't possible without the Other and without the perspective of the Other, for "others are also me" (11). This allows for an understanding of the world from a distinct point of view that begins as much from difference as from myself. The concept of the body, here, develops from the process of intercorporealities that recognize the Other, that clothe themselves in the Other, and in this way, become the Other. Within this context, through the notion of alterity, the constitutive corporealities of the acrobat-body necessarily offer themselves up as "the result or the effect of a process of differentiation which operates not only in the totality of the living and material world, but more radically, in the temporality that inhabits and affects them" (Bernard 2001b, 8). Bernard (2001b) maintains that the nature of bodily expression presupposes the energetic constitution of a dynamic of refusal. It also involves a process of immanent differentiation awoken by an autoaffective drive that seeks to relive the presence of the object of desire in the self and, thus, to achieve a hurried and fictional satisfaction. In other words, "expressivity does not function except

through the radical alterity of a simulative process” (23) in which corporeality continually feeds itself through its own movement, through its acrobatic figures and its gestures.

The acrobat-body must therefore be understood as a condition of tension, “of vectors of constant change” (Laplatine and Nous 2008, 102), which can not be resolved, closed, or limited in a single artistic experience. The acrobat-body follows the flux of the dynamism of becoming, since “what we are proceeds directly from what our bodies can do” (Sennett 2010, 388). Through practice over time, the artist develops a set of competencies. The development of physical competencies also allows for the development of the work of reflection, analysis, and imagination, as “maturity requires time; we durably gain possession of a competency” (395). It is within these conditions that the acrobat-body can exist.

Notes

1. I completed a research-creation degree in the doctoral program in artistic creation at UQAM, where I had the opportunity to develop the creation process for *Mythe-jeux de refus* in 2016. This performance was narrated and danced by two performers. We moved through ten tableaux inspired by First Nations cultures in Brazil and Quebec. We sought to incarnate different points of view that intersected in games of duality and otherness in which the spirit world came together with the worlds of animals, beings, and things. *Mythe-jeux de refus* used an interartistic process in which aerial circus devices created connections between the earth and the sky. <https://vimeo.com/259771068>.

2. The term “interartistic” is used to denote the dynamic of convergence and confrontation between languages of the stage (*langages scéniques*). Lesage (2008) explains her preference for this term to “interdisciplinary.” She affirms that the notion of discipline, in the context of modernity, is associated with the idea of rules, norms, and borders that delimit an artistic field.

3. Michel Bernard, researcher in the fields of physical education and dance with a focus on philosophical and anthropological approaches to the body, borrows the word from the Greek *orkhēstikē*, “the arts which concern dance.”

4. “Motor project,” here, refers to the work achieved through bodily motion.

5. Prowess is a remarkable action, an exploit, a performance. According to Goudard (2005), “the sequence of figures allows for the realization of prowess and necessitates the development of specific language. A number is formed by the assemblage of exploits” (110).

6. The steps of the action cycle, according to Meyerhold, can be understood in terms of their expressive principles: *otkaz*, *possil*, *tormoz*, *totbka*. The *otkaz* is the sign of refusal and is a movement that manifests itself in its inverse image of the action, which prepares the actor for the execution of the action (*possil*). So as not to interrupt the action, the principle of *tormoz* (in English, brakes) allows for the direction and the precision of the action towards its completion. The final point of the action is called *totbka*.

References

- Bernard, Michel. 2001a. *De la création chorégraphique*. Paris: Centre National de la danse.
- Bernard, Michel. 2001b. “L’altérité originaire ou les mirages fondateurs de l’identité.” *Portée* 29 (2): 7–24. doi:10.7202/030622ar.
- Bernard, Michel. 2002. “De la corporéité fictionnaire.” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4 (222): 523–34.
- Chaves, Yedda Carvalho. 2001. *A Biomecânica como princípio constitutivo da arte do ator*. Master’s thesis, École de Communication et Arts de l’Université de São Paulo, São Paulo.

- Goudard, Philippe. 2005. *Arts du Cirque, arts du risque: instabilité et déséquilibre dans et hors la piste*. Lille: Diffusion ANRT.
- Laplantine, François, and Alexis Nouss. 2008. *Le métissage: un exposé pour comprendre: un essai pour réfléchir*. Paris: Téraèdre.
- Lesage, Marie-Christine. 2008. "L'interartistique: une dynamique de la complexité." *Revue d'études théâtrales: Théâtre et interdisciplinarité* no. 13, 11–26.
- Picon-Vallin, Beatrice. 2004. *Meyerhold* (Vol. 17). Paris: CNRS Éditions.
- Sennett, Richard. 2010. *Ce que sait la main: la culture de l'artisanat*. Translated by P. E. Dauzat. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Thais, Maria. 2009. *Na cena do Dr. Dapertutto: poética e pedagogia em V. E. Meyerhold: 1911 a 1916*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1982. *La conquête de l'Amérique*. Paris: Éditions du seuil.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2002. "O nativo relativo." *Manai* no. 8: 113–48.