

INCTP Preconference
Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities Conference
University of Messina, 2025
CoSPECS Department
Room 200 – Gound floor

Schedule

Monday May 26

1:30 Brief Welcome

1:45-2:15 Cristiana Minasi - Effective Action: Embodiment, Improvisation, Atmospheres

2:30-3:30 Hansel Tan - Making Sense from Sensation: Devising through Chekhov's Imaginary Centers

3:45-4:45 Richard J. Kemp - The Situational Self: Proprioception, Kinesthesia, and Character in Acting Practice

5:00-6:00 Joelle Ré Arp-Dunham - To Hold or Not to Hold: The Question of How a Script becomes Action in the Actor's Body

6:15-7:15 Dario Tomasello and Maria Rita Chierchia - The Agency of a Paper's Little Ball: A Performative Experiment

Tuesday May 27

9:15 Brief welcome

9:30-11:00 Marta Calbi, Luca Spadaro, Daniele Vagnozzi / Teatro & Scienza - Theatre & Science: Walking Emotions

11:15-12:15 Kristina Penna - Making-up two minds: testing the more-than-material tools of Scenography

12:15-1:30 Lunch

1:30-2:30 Amy Cook - Donmar Warehouse's *Henry IV* directed by Phillipa Lloyd: Scene screening and open discussion on intersections of cognitive science and performance

2:45-4:15 Martina Musilová - *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner*

4:30-5:30 Mark Pizzato - Creating "Sacred" Space as a Cognitive Theatrical Tool: Discussion and Experiment

5:45-6:45 John Lutterbie roundtable discussion and toast led by Amy Cook, Nicola Shaughnessy, Rhonda Blair, and Maiya Murphy - On the introduction to *Toward a General Theory of Acting* (2011).

Abstracts

Cristiana Minasi, University of Messina

EFFECTIVE ACTION: embodiment, improvisation, atmospheres: workshop between theatre and cognitive sciences

The workshop is born from the desire to explore the meeting point between contemporary theatre practice and some perspectives of cognitive sciences, focusing on the themes of embodiment, embodied perception, atmosphere, improvisation and, above all, effective action. The idea is to propose an experience that is not limited to the transmission of techniques, but that activates a process of listening, relating and becoming aware of the body as a mind in motion.

An opportunity to inhabit the scenic space as a perceptive and affective place, in the conscious presence of self and other, where gesture and speech are born of necessity and action finds its meaning in its ability to create resonance.

The work will be divided into two phases, theoretical and practical, which will be interwoven throughout the meeting.

In the first, theoretical part, we will reflect together on some key concepts from contemporary cognitive science, such as mirror neurons, the concept of affordance and that of rhythm. We will explore the idea of stage space not only as a physical container, but as a relational and perceptual field in which dynamics of shared attention, presence and exchange are activated.

We will discuss atmosphere as an emergent quality of the encounter between bodies (ensemble), space, objects, gazes and time, and improvisation as a form of thinking that identifies from structure the individual and exclusive expression of each human being. Stage action is approached in its most radical dimension: not as a representational gesture, but as a necessary act, bound to context, capable of transforming space and generating meaning.

After this theoretical introduction, we will move to a large room (in the foyer of Cospecc) for the second part of the workshop, which will be entirely dedicated to practice. Here we will bring the body and voice into play, experimenting with a series of individual and ensemble exercises aimed at developing presence, responsiveness and relationship to space and each other.

The workshop will be constructed as an experiential landscape in which each participant will be able to explore his or her organicity, i.e. the internal coherence between gesture, intention and perception, improvisational structures and ensemble atmospheres. We will work on effective action from personal materials: each participant will bring a photograph, an everyday object, an antique, a notebook and a memory (even invented) in a game that straddles present/past/future.

Several areas of research will be explored during the workshop: body awareness, the expressive use of the voice, the management of rhythm and pause, the construction of small repeatable actions, the dialogue between silence and sound, and the relationship with objects and materials. The focus will always be on the quality of listening, the ability to be in relationship, and the creation of a personal and collective atmosphere that supports and amplifies the presences on stage.

The workshop is open to anyone who wants to explore the stage as a place of perception and presence, regardless of previous experience: actors, dancers, performers, researchers, teachers, students, enthusiasts. Physical presence on site is required, with comfortable clothes and shoes.

In a time dominated by distraction and fragmentation of attention, this workshop is proposed as a space of suspension and intensification, where action is not simply something that is done, but something that happens: a living, rooted, fully embodied event.

Effective action, indeed.

Hansel Tan, Villanova University

Making Sense from Sensation: Devising through Chekhov's Imaginary Centers

While Michael Chekhov's psychophysical approaches to acting have typically been applied to realizing scripted material, this workshop seeks to expand his concept of Imaginary Centers to devise original performance material, mediated by sensation as a primary tool. Construing Imaginary Centers as form of enactive metaphor, we will experience how embodying metaphors alters the Body Image, leading to a transposed Body Schema primed for creative feeling. Together, we will explore the principles of Centers, investigate abstraction, and invite sensations (both real and imagined) to generate novel text and partnered scenes in a series of investigatory exercises that moves through a variety of cognitive operations. No previous Chekhov experience necessary: all are welcome to participate – come ready to move!

Richard J. Kemp, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The Situational Self: Proprioception, Kinesthesia and Character in Acting Practice

I propose a practical workshop for a group of 12 to 15 people, comprised of practitioners and researchers from theatre and other discipline. (No prior experience of acting is required). In the paradigm of "Embodied Learning" (Schilhab and Groth, 2024), participants will use actor training games and exercises to explore the phenomenal experience of transition from everyday self to character. These exercises are framed by concepts arising from Cognitive Neuroscience to explore how a heightened awareness of proprioceptive and kinesthetic stimuli aids in the development of character, can stimulate emotion and prompt the imagination to create mini-narratives in fictional situations.

A foundational principle of Embodied Cognition is that humans are always "situated" - inextricably enmeshed with their environment. Physical, social and cultural environments all offer affordances and constraints which, combined with biology, genetics and experience form an everyday sense of self. This concept meshes with a widespread notion in existing actor training, that developing a character has similarities with the way that we adjust our behaviors according to the immediate social context, or situation, within which we find ourselves. Over time, a range of repeated behaviors and actions generate a proprioceptive schema that is associated with our everyday sense of self and "normal" behavior, the proprioceptive sense of self (Gallagher, 2005) .

This sense of self can be intentionally disrupted, modified or altered through proprioceptive senses generated as a result of our own actions (Tsakiris, 2010). An actor's conscious choice of actions not only communicates character to audiences, but can also generate a proprioceptive sense of character that imaginatively extends into fictional situations. In a playful and relaxed way, participants will explore this phenomenon within the conceptual frameworks of Embodied Simulation, Pre-reflective Intentionality and Inter-subjective meaning making.

Exercises will be conducted barefoot and participants are asked to wear clothing in which they can move freely and easily.

Gallagher, Sean, (2005) *How the Body Shapes The Mind* Oxford ; New York : Clarendon Press

Schilhab, T. and Camilla Groth, Ed.s (2024) *Embodied Learning and Teaching Using the 4E Cognition Approach*. Abingdon; New York : Routledge

Tsakiris, M. (2010). My body in the brain: A neurocognitive model of body-ownership. *Neuropsychologia*, 48(3), 703–702.

Joelle Ré Arp-Dunham, Kansas State University

To Hold or Not to Hold: The Question of How a Script becomes Action in the Actor's Body

Centering the conference theme of “Cognitive Tools in Action”, this participatory workshop will explore the connections between cognition and performance by experimenting with two approaches to acting a scripted scene. In traditional Western acting approaches actors usually either come into the process with lines memorized (especially with screen acting) or just barely familiar with a script (perhaps reading it a few times). The latter approach is often favored over the former for theatrical productions as it lends itself to more flexibility with interpretation. In recent years, however, a third option — Active Analysis — has emerged.

Developed by renowned acting teacher Constantine Stanislavsky and amplified by his protege Maria Knebel, Active Analysis requires actors to read the script, then leave the physical script behind and explore improvisations based on the text. These improvisations are then refined with multiple iterations.

Each of these approaches requires different cognitive processes and leads to somewhat different outcomes. This workshop will allow participants to explore both a traditional approach to a scene and then Active Analysis, emphasizing the phenomenological experiences of each. Framing questions that focus on distributed network models (as defined by Michael W. Cole) will precede and discussion will follow each exploration. I hypothesize that Active Analysis will promote more cognitive flexibility than the more traditional approach, allowing for more immediate and deeper engagement in task employment. This deeper (and quicker) engagement can then lead to the strong action at the core of Western performance.

Dario Tomasello and Maria Rita Chierchia, University of Messina
The Agency of a Paper's Little Ball: A Performative Experiment

The brief experiment we intend to propose concerns an exercise where two groups of performers lined up facing each other. In the center, between the two ranks, a paper ball hides a message in the form of an order. The order concerns an action to be performed in pairs (e.g., “I want to find shelter” etc.). A piece of music signals, at the moment of its interruption, the action’s start. Two performers take turns moving, reaching for the ball. The first to reach it blocks the other. After a very quick reading, the first one performs the action and, when finished, it is the other’s turn. The game continues until all students have done their work. After that, the class is invited to critically discuss the undertaken work.

In this case, the Gell’s notion of agency goes beyond the art object to focus on the object as the aim of an artistical and performative process. At best, if the group has done adequate preparatory training and, more importantly, is already close-knit, the sequences, developed during the exercise, reveal considerable dramaturgical potential. Besides that, in our experience at high school’s workshop, this exercise can facilitate the production of creative imagery.

In this context we can recover how theater works both into the actor and audience’s perspective and we can also provide a new interpretative key for what concerns the interweaving of ritual, play and theater, as Richard Schechner defined it in his paradigm.

Then following what Bruce McConachie argues «this combination of imagination and pretend play may be said to constitute performance. Evident mostly clearly in dramatic performance, it is also foundational to sports, musical, and ritual activities. A higher-order form of play, performing can be understood as a “species” of the larger “genus” of general mammalian playing».

REFERENCES

- Austin J. L., *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, 1962.
- Csikszentmihalyi M., *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York, 1990.
- Fauconnier G. and Turner M., *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexity*, New York, 2000
- Gallagher S., *The Narrative Alternative to Theory of Mind*, in R. Menary (ed.), *Radical Enactivism. Focus on the Philosophy of Daniel D. Hutto*, Amsterdam, 2006.
- Gallagher S., *How Body Shapes the Mind*, Oxford, 2006
- Gallagher S., *Embodied and Enactive Approaches to Cognition*, Cambridge, 2023
- Gell A., *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, 1998
- Maestriperi D., *Games Primates Play: An Undercover Investigation of the Evolution and Economics of Human Relationships* Basic Books, 2012
- McConachie B., *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, New York, 2008
- McConachie B., *An Evolutionary Perspective on Play, Performance and Ritual*, in “The Drama Review”, 55, 4, 2011, pp. 33-50
- McConachie B., *Theatre and Mind*, New York, 2013
- McConachie B., *The Cognitive Sciences Meet Performance Studies*, “Reti SaperiLinguaggi” (ed. by D. Tomasello), 2/2015, pp. 191-226.
- McConachie B., *Evolution Cognition and Performance*, University of Pittsburgh, 2015
- Punday D., *Narrative Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, London, 2003
- Scalise Sugiyama M. (*Reverse-Engineering Narrative. Evidence of Special Design*, in J. Gottschall, D. S. Wilson (eds.), *The Literary Animal*, Evanston, 2005

Schechner R., *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, New York, 2020

Wallis J., *Making Games that Makes Stories*, in P. Harrigan, N. Wardrip-Fruin (ed.), *Second Person. Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, Cambridge, 2007.

Marta Calbi, State University of Milan

Luca Spadaro, Teatro d’Emergenza

Daniele Vagnozzi, University of Florence, APC SPC, Rome

Theatre & Science: Walking Emotions

Since 2020, Teatro&Scienza has been dedicated to transforming neuroscientific and psychological evidence into practical tools for theatre practitioners. We propose a workshop that integrates theater, psychology and neuroscience to explore the actor's work and inner emotional experience during the acting process.

(Facilitator: Daniele Vagnozzi, Luca Spadaro. Scientific commentary: Marta Calbi. Duration: the exercise is conducted in two parts).

Part 1 - Emotional hijacking: the amygdala as supreme commander. This exercise delves into the interaction between the “reptilian” brain and the cerebral cortex, inviting participants to explore the moment when the mind switches from thought to action. It examines the role of the “reptilian” brain and the amygdala in “shutting down” cortical processes. Participants will reflect on their experience, exploring the physical and emotional sensations that emerged, as well as any thoughts or distractions that arose. The theoretical discussion will focus on emotional hijacking in theater, helping participants understand how anxiety, panic and other emotional blocks manifest on stage.

Part 2 - The Chairs. In this exercise, one person moves chairs to prevent another blindfolded person from bumping into them while walking. The speed of the blindfolded person generates a specific “physical emotion” in the person moving the chairs, based on a specific task. Later, the blindfolded person moves slowly, and the other moves the chairs quietly: another physical-emotional state is activated. If the actor’s proprioceptive ability is sufficiently developed, these reactions will engage both the body and the brain, leading to a usable theatrical emotion.

Through these exercises, the workshop explores how theatrical practice, when supported by scientific knowledge and a precise vocabulary, can be more effective in deepening the emotional and physical experience of the actor. By integrating these scientific insights, we aim to enrich the actor's craft, fostering a deeper understanding of the mind-body connection in performance.

Xristina Penna, University of Derby

Making-up two minds: testing the more-than-material tools of Scenography

Scenography, also known as Performance Design, can be described as ‘the manipulation and orchestration of the performance environment’ (McKinney and Butterworth 2009, p.4). This workshop aims to focus on the more-than-material tools of a scenographer’s toolkit in line with

the conference's theme of cognitive tools in action and my current research on using action-oriented and agent-environment coupling cognitive frameworks (4Es) to explore the ways in which performance environments shape audiences' experience.

I will be focusing on the element of the human voice and will be exploring the questions: Does human voice, from its acoustical properties to its identity information, affect the audiences' perception of space?

This scenographic experiment (which I originally conducted at World Stage Design Exhibition 2013) involves two actions:

-Participants *read* a transcript of a person talking about a place, without having been given any information on who this person is, their gender etc. The participants, depending on their skills, are then given 15min to use tools provided (crayons, pencils, water-colours, card, magazines, glue, pen and paper etc.) to respond with either a drawing, a mood-board, a scale-model or short writing to imagine and interpret the space/place that is described in the transcript.

-Once they have finished with their 15min creation, they are then invited to *listen* to the *recording* of the voice of that person. Following that they are asked to reflect on how (and if) the sound/tone etc. of the voice describing the space has altered their perception of how this space looks like to them now.

This workshop-experiment explores the dynamic interplay between material and more-than-material affordances and how this interplay may affect our spatial perception. It responds to the conference's theme of cognitive tools in action by asking the participants to reflect on how their cognitive processing might change through their intra-action (Barad 2007) of themselves with material and more-than-material affordances (such as voice) and responding to the questions posed earlier.

The participants will complete a consent form agreeing (or not) to be recorded.

Amy Cook, Stony Brook University

Donmar Warehouse's *Henry IV* directed by Phillipa Lloyd: Scene screening and open discussion on intersections of cognitive science and performance

I would like to play a scene from Donmar Warehouse's *Henry IV*, directed by Phillipa Lloyd in 2015 and have a conversation about how we can see elements of our research at the intersection of theatre and cognitive science in the scene. While I have very specific lens I'd like to analyze the scene through—casting as a cognitive process that structures meaning in the rest of the performance, gesture as conveying meaning beyond the words, and how prosody in performance significantly impacts comprehension—I am interested in the frames and readings others bring to the same stimuli. We don't have to agree—in fact it's almost more rich if we don't—but I wonder if there are points of intersection or if there are things we agree we are interested in being able to say about the scene. What should be the aim of an engagement with a theatrical stimuli from a cognitive scientific perspective?

Martina Musilová, Masaryk University
Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner

The workshop on *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner* will introduce this practical psychosomatic discipline founded by Prof. Ivan Vyskočil in the late 1960s (Czech Republic). The discipline is one of the main subjects the students study at the Department of Authorial Creation and Pedagogy, Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. It allows us to explore and elaborate on the phenomena: creative state and public solitude (Stanislavsky), inner speech (Vygotsky), spontaneity (Moreno), cultivation of a double state of attentiveness, pre-reflective and self-conscious awareness, and self-perception. As Vyskočil explains: “The basis of Dialogical Acting is the experience and experiencing of interacting (speaking, playing) with oneself (with one’s inner partner or partners) which as a rule happens when one is alone. On reflecting, almost everyone should be able to recall the experience of talking to oneself, the experience of play on one’s own, from one’s own life. The point is to study and learn how to produce similarly authentic, spontaneous, playful interaction and interplay (behaving and experiencing in public) in a situation of ‘public solitude’ (Stanislavsky), in the presence and with the attention of ‘an audience.’ In a situation where it is ‘as if’ the others, the audience, were not present, in particular without visual and physical contact.” (Vyskočil, Ivan: *Dialogical Acting – Information for authorisation*)

The participants will have the opportunity to engage in the workshop practically, and there will be a discussion to provide a theoretical background of the discipline. Participants from all fields of experience are welcome. More about the discipline and its founder:

<https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/dialogick%C3%A9-jedn%C3%A1n%C3%AD?lang=en>

<https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/ivan-vysko%C4%8Dil?lang=en>

Mark Pizzato, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Creating “Sacred” Space as a Cognitive Theatrical Tool: Discussion and Experiment

This workshop will meet first in our designated room, to discuss its architecture and imagery as a potential sacred space, in relation to more natural environments, and then perhaps move outdoors. Participants will consider how sacred spaces developed from natural to built environments, in prehistory and historically—and have been meaningful in their own lives, within or beyond religious frameworks, creating a greater purpose (or problem) in life. Especially regarding the "inner theatre" staging of self vis-a-vis Other, through certain brain networks that all humans share, what are the competitive, melodramatic (good versus evil) dangers of some sacred designs and images? Which sacrifices do they demand (with "sacred" and "sacrifice" sharing the Latin root, *sacer*, meaning holy, accursed, or horrible)? Participants will also discuss the more cooperative, tragicomic, and *rasa*-cathartic possibilities of sacred spaces, in teaching, performing arts, or religious environments, with special areas designed for offering inner-theatre stagings through orderly insightful play—often regarding ancestors, spirits, or deities. Thus,

participants should wear casual clothing, perhaps for sitting on the ground and moving around while telling and showing through posture, gesture, and movement. Although it is not required, they may bring a special object, from home or travels, as offering or prop to share (yet keep)—with a personal story of how it is meaningful in their inner theatres. Through this experiment, we might collectively see how such objects, stories, and altered spaces, informed by neuro-theatricality, connect the varieties of inner cognition/emotion with outer meaning and purpose-making, as "sacred" meta-awareness.

Amy Cook, Stony Brook University

Nicola Shaughnessy, University of Kent

Rhonda Blair, Southern Methodist University

Maiya Murphy, National University of Singapore

John Lutterbie roundtable discussion and toast: on the introduction to *Toward a General Theory of Acting* (2011).

In honor of INCTP's founder, John Lutterbie, who recently passed away, we will conduct a roundtable discussion on the introduction to his seminal 2011 work on acting and cognitive science. In honor of John's love of wine, we will include a toast to him and his contributions to the field of performance and cognitive science. Participants are welcome to read the introduction to his book ahead of time and bring their favorite beverage with which to toast.

