

Can you train on your own? How?

As if.

As if we can be on our own.

The writer and materialist Richard Sennett, writing in 2008 in *The Craftsman*, identifies two harsh edicts circulating in contemporary society, which numerous corporations and politicians have investments in promoting: namely 'us against them' coupled with 'you are on your own' (280). Never has this seemed so relevant, in the paranoia-fueled attempted division of peoples and nations eight years later in post-Brexit Trumpland. Yet the truth is that while we can be in solitary situations, even if we wanted to, we are never truly 'on our own'. Rebecca Schneider, in her chapter 'Solo Solo Solo' in Gavin Butt's book *After Criticism* (2004) offers an eloquent take on this 'multiple I':

Often a solo artist performs 'as if' alone or singled out, only to perform a kind of echo palette of others, a map of citation and a subjectivity so multiply connected as to be collective. (36)

She is referring to solo performance, but this can equally be applied to the notion of solo training, or solo practice. As artists, we are historically connected to others, our bodies patterned and imprinted with past practices, learnt from teachers and colleagues, artists, friends, audiences and critics.

My training has necessarily occurred in both sociable and solitary contexts throughout my career, sometimes on the job, sometimes with teachers, in institutions like the Amsterdam School for New Dance Development and The Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, but more often alone, in my bedroom / squat / house /studio. It is an on-going continuous process. If you are curious, you are in

constant training, learning new skills and maintaining ones already learnt. Endless repetition of physical or vocal exercises, for example, is our bread and butter, done to feed physical tone - as boring done alone as in a group.

What does this solitary practice space consist of, and how can it be productive? Guy Claxton (2008) offers a useful dynamic model of mental creative space as three dimensional, which he calls 'The Glide Space of Creativity'. In this model, three different dimensions of attention exist simultaneously, involving focus, direction and interaction. Applied to solo training, these categories specify what is particular about it. Practising alone mainly engages solitary as opposed to sociable interactions. Certain mental modes are more conducive to a solitary environment, like contemplation, reverie or intuitive thinking, as well as 'hard thinking' modes like analysis or dramaturgical feedback. Training alone heightens physical interactions with inanimate 'others' in the room, like the floor, the pen, the paintbrush, the ballet bar or yoga mat. Practising alone involves both concentrated and diffuse foci of attention: concentrated in listening intently to one's own body and senses and at the same time, diffuse, in order to read the periphery of where one is, in space and time. The direction of the solo practitioners attention has to be both inwards; towards feelings, sensations, intuitions and somatic memories as well as outwards; to how ones working might appear to someone else. Training alone therefore requires us to be both learner, immersed in the work, and facilitator, or director, outside the working process, looking in.

This is hard, and (dare I say it) expert work. By expert, I mean drawing on experience and a history of experiment, repetition and failure. As Susan Melrose points out in 2011, in her keynote address 'A Cautionary Note or Two, Amid the Pleasures and Pains of Participation in Performance-making as Research', the etymological root of expert (as with experience and experiment) is

experiri, meaning 'to try'. So expertise is both a profound practised knowing, as well as more simply, giving it a go.

Practising with others is, at times, essential for the development of a professional performance practitioner. The presence of a teacher, as one who has failed more than you, over time, allows for someone else to see embodied patterns you might not be aware of, or to introduce new information verbally or physically. Another pair of eyes is looking out for you, noticing peripheral blind spots. Working with others can also be faster than working alone. However, solo training also offers specific challenges and rewards.

You develop a muscle of responsiveness, an agency that involves getting up off your arse and doing something – alone – which is hard work. There is no one there to be late for, no set plan decided beforehand, and no body sweating companionably, next to you. It makes you self-sufficient, potentially more capable when you do collaborate and work with others.

The absence of discussion, words and noise stills the madding crowd, away from debate and potential conflicts. In solitude, a more contemplative environment is possible, with time for self-reflection. There is also time for obsession and specific, detailed pursuit of one thing without interruption. The ever so popular 'outside eye' is closed or asked to look elsewhere and your internal eye is activated, developing your own specific awareness of your voice, body, energies and interactions.

So how do we practice alone, then?

Some suggestions, from my own solo practice and the echoes of others whom I have interviewed about solo creative working. Amongst them, loudly or calmly bending my ear when writing this, are Nigel Charnock, Wendy Houstoun, Tim Etchells and Mike Pearson.

Listen to yourself, your body. Pay particular attention to the soft monologue that issues from your arsehole.

Nigel said to make a plan of working, which you can stick to, or deviate from, at will.

Talk to yourself, physically, verbally.

Nigel asked what do you need to do, now, and now and now, and how do you feel?’

Practice. Practice.

Wendy wryly affirmed that you just have to keep doing it, keep doing it.

Use mirrors. Use video.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Nigel also said to embrace technique, so you can forget it, easily.

Surprise yourself into the unknown. Create an obstacle course, where you can jump, trip and bruise your brain. Or toe, at least. Make your opponents’ tough – loud music, impossible jumps, big blocks of text: rugged terrain, which you can fall into and also stride across.

Enjoy falling.

Practice. Practice.

Perform. Performance as a training ground – alone on stage but not in the room. Solo performing means listening to the audience, and working to be connected.

So if solo working requires being both solitary and connected, we return to Richard Sennett and to solo practices which jump across fake binaries of me and you, us and them, alone and together. Ambiguity, as David George says, in 2009, in his compelling article 'On Ambiguity: 'Towards a Post-Modern Performance Theory', involves the holding of two seeming opposites in a dynamic tension, without one cancelling out the other. It is written into the contract of performance. Solo training, which as I have suggested in this discussion works best after some time spent failing, engages an excellently ambiguous economy: alone and connected, peaceful and full of echoes, inward and outward focusing, involving the practitioner as hopeful learner and experienced teacher. Solo practitioners are well placed to span these differences, repeatedly working as maker and performer, writer, director, scenographer or choreographer.

Practising alone, which all performers do, thus maintains professional skills, and continues to develop curiosity, openness to change and a fluid moving between roles that encourages an ability to hold diverse perspectives. In the current climate, with the UK, Europe and the USA delineating and policing borders, and maintaining insider and outsider statuses, activities which encourage a passionate engagement with individuality at the same time as being able to stand back from and critique that passionate engagement are perhaps never more needed. Practising small steps towards change.