

Integrating Puppetry into Contemporary Actor's Training (A Practice as Research towards hybrid pedagogies in Performing Arts)

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Contemporary actor training increasingly requires interdisciplinary approaches to presence, embodiment, and ensemble practice. This paper examines puppetry's pedagogical potential through a practice-based case study of OTT – On the Table, a tabletop Bunraku-inspired performance created by Theatre Arts students at the University of Hyderabad, exploring bodily awareness, object animation, ensemble sensitivity, and hybrid performance strategies. The work resulted from a series of 15-day intensive workshops led by yours truly consecutively for the batches since 2022 to till date, which emphasised breath awareness and ensemble coordination and object/figure manipulation. Students engaged in the complete process of designing, constructing, and animating puppets – integrating materiality with performativity. Observations, training and rehearsal analysis, and participants' reflections traced the study's insights into how puppetry reshaped their engagement with performance. And how can hybrid pedagogy be developed by integrating puppetry towards the contemporary actor training, achieving fundamentals of performativity? Puppetry enriched actor training by developing spatial awareness, physical precision, and sensitivity to movement. Bunraku-inspired ensemble work strengthened coordination, rhythm, and responsiveness. Puppet construction and animation encouraged alternative approaches to storytelling and embodiment, expanding students' understanding of presence, agency, materiality, and non-human performativity while connecting traditional puppetry with contemporary performance practices. The research affirms puppetry as a transformative pedagogical tool, capable of reframing the actor's process through externalised expression, ensemble collaboration, and interdisciplinary exploration. By bridging traditional and emerging techniques, puppetry cultivates adaptability and creative agency, preparing actors for the contemporary performance context. Far from a peripheral practice, puppetry emerges as a vital medium for rethinking narrative structures and actor-body relationships within modern training environments.

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