

Middendorf Breath Work and Performance

For a long time I have been interested in bringing Middendorf breath work into performance, especially as I have really enjoyed teaching this work to dancers, and using it as focus and basis for improvisation. But a class is quite different to a performance. When I contemplate working with Middendorf in performance, what immediately strikes me is the inherent contradiction or problematic in bringing together a therapeutic and a performance practice: one exploring being present as a therapeutic experience and the other exploring being present as a product.

The bringing together of a therapeutic practice and a performance practice is not comfortable, but precisely because of this I also find it generative. Thoughts, assumptions and questions that hover at the edges of awareness, at the edges of our understanding of what performance is and what we might want with it, become more noticeable, assemble themselves into a form to be contemplated and thought through.

The practice of BreathExperience (the Middendorf based breath work that I studied) is an invitation to ourselves to become present with our breath and the world within and around us. As a therapeutic practice, it's an invitation which creates a space of experience. What we are able to experience in that space depends on what we are able to receive. It depends on the day, on the words or sensibility of a teacher, on the possibility for the words or actions (or non-actions) of a teacher to trigger perception and sensation. It depends on the day before. It depends on the many thousands of days before that and the many thousands and millions of pathways our brains and nervous systems have traversed over all of these days. It depends perhaps on the many thousands and millions of pathways traversed by the nervous systems of our parents and grandparents. It depends on the way we were held or a word we remember. But as a therapeutic practice, the Middendorf breath work does not oblige us to be present in the world, but teaches that being present is a possibility. It teaches that we can come closer to this possibility through a practice, a practice which emphasises generosity, softness, inclusion, allowance, gentleness and compassion. It teaches that becoming present is a practice of being, of having no goal, of attending to the present moment without judgement.

A performance practice is a practice of producing. We practice with the goal of achieving and making: for an audience, for a choreographer, even for ourselves. We practice to create something, to bring something into being, to deliver something, to be in dialogue with others. Even if our performance practice is a practice of experiencing, that experiencing, becomes an object, a product, something we give a form, something we define and offer to the world.

I do not mean to set these practices against one another or to hierarchise the two. They fulfil different needs and have different desires (which may overlap but remain distinct). We practice breath work to heal from trauma or sickness, or to be more comfortable in our body, or to understand our relation to the world, or to have a clearer sense of reality and ourselves. The work is a process which unfolds at its own pace and it is something we do for ourselves (though, of course, it also impacts on our relationships with others). We practice performance to create something, to have something to show, something to share, to experience the joy of making and doing. The work is also a process but its unfolding is

limited by time and though it may be something we do for ourselves, we ultimately do it for others.

As performance practitioners it makes sense that we have a therapeutic practice of some sort to support us, whether it is a meditative practice or Feldenkrais or Alexander or Rolfing or Fascia therapy or Cranial sacral therapy; or Middendorf breath work. These kinds of practices are interesting to us, not just because of their ability to regulate stress (helping our capacity to make work and deal with the pressures of the industry) but also because they offer alternative routes to shared questions: how can we be present in our bodies, how can we stay in flow, how can we shift perspective, how can we make unexpected connections? Many therapeutic practices have started to influence not just our ability to make work, but also how we make work, how we see, judge and make decisions, how we behave with others in a studio, how we engage with ideas and engage with the world and, perhaps most importantly, the form and content of our work.

But as therapeutic practices become more and more common in the performance world, I think it's important to take time to pause and reflect on this phenomenon. What is beneficial, opening up new perspectives and new ways of thinking; and what are the limitations and problematics?

My thoughts are centred on the practice of BreathExperience because this is my own practice and particularity, but I think that many of the questions I have in relation to bringing this work into performance would have many parallels with other practices.