

PRODIGAL THEATRE



A performer's view of L'art du Deplacement

INTRODUCTION

Prodigal is an internationally-touring multi-award winning theatre ensemble working in the Odin Teatret tradition of long-term, research based performances arising from a foundation of daily training and experiment.

Each performance is created through a research process lasting at least one year and the rehearsal period often lasts for six months or longer. To maintain a company working in this way is extremely rare in the UK but for Prodigal is essential.

We share a belief that quality will only be achieved through a dedicated long-term approach in which each individual must continually re-affirm their dedication to the work through actions.

This theatrical work - ethic was pioneered by Eugenio Barba – director of the Odin Teatret – and his master Jerzy Grotowski who in turn looked to the founding fathers of the world's theatrical traditions; from the Italian Commedia Dell'Arte companies to the master Zeami and Japanese Noh Theatre; from Balinese dance troupes to Russia's Stanislavski and the late 19th/ early 20th Century French physical tradition of Copeau and Decroix.

What all of these traditions have in common is an adherence to the importance of true actions – exemplified for many by the utilitarian principles observed in manual labour and the martial arts.

Copeau, in setting up his academy for training actors, adopted a method of physical training created by the French Naval Officer Georges Hebert – The "Method Natural".

Prodigal first encountered this method through an essay they read at the Odin Teatret in Denmark whilst studying there in 1999. The essay – from a book by theatrical scholar Franco Ruffini – re-iterated the importance of utilitarian action in the training of actors if the body is to remain responsive, communicative and truly connected to, rather than dominated by, the mind.

In 2003 Channel 4 broadcast the documentary “Jump London” in which Parkour was presented by Sebastien Foucan. The link between his urban discipline of “Free-Running” and the “Method Natural” was obvious and explicit.

The following day Prodigal began the process of adopting Parkour as part of their day-to-day training for actors.

THE URBAN PLAYGROUND

Full details of the original UPG project are attached – but it is suffice to say that Prodigal won a funding competition run by the Brighton and Hove arts commission and with their support constructed a modular series of platforms, stair sets and hand rails which together comprise the Urban Playground.

Purpose designed for the practice, presentation and performance of Parkour-inspired movement the UPG is 100% publicly funded and as such is unique in the world.

Prodigal’s UPG Team is made up of performers from various disciplines – would be traceurs work with actors, contemporary dancers and break dancers to achieve a total choreography directed by Prodigal founder Miranda Henderson.

The resulting performances are not intended as demonstrations of purist parkour, but follow more in the spirit of L’art du déplacement – exploring the physical relationship between the human body and the built environment.

As a training for actors L’art du déplacement is hard to beat. It deals strictly with truth and truth on all levels. One cannot act one’s way over an obstacle – there is no pretence here – one must either overcome an obstacle or not – and as trainees soon understand the obstacle one must overcome is as often emotional or psychological as it is physical.

The trainee therefore comes to know themselves better, whilst also increasing their knowledge of their body and their range of movement.

In Prodigal Parkour is undertaken in addition to a more fundamental movement training led by Miranda and evolved from release technique.

Release as a term is used by dancers to describe the group of techniques which focus on skeletal movement – that is to say; movement which is achieved when the muscles support the natural progressions of the skeleton, rather than using explosive muscular power to overcome a lack of movement in the skeleton.

Concentration on this way of moving inevitably leads to working with a spiral pattern in rising and falling, and an overall softness which promotes healthiness and avoids injury through correct articulation.

Approaching L'art du déplacement from this base immediately emphasises Prodigal's interest in achieving utilitarian action which is also beautiful, lyrical, and importantly for a performer – which can be repeated many times without incremental damage to the body.

In this way the approach of Prodigal's performers (as with all performers working in the Odin Tradition) can be compared to that of true martial artists. Repetition is a foundation for learning and discipline is dependent on a foundation of integrity.

If the artist fools themselves they will be dishonest to their audience – and the basis for all performance is the communication of a personal truth.

COLLABORATION

Prodigal's collaboration with Charles Perriere and Malik Diouf is a source of great inspiration. To work with the founders of a tradition is a rare and extraordinary privilege for any performer and we are very conscious of our responsibility in this regard.

It is our hope that by sharing our knowledge of and access to the performance traditions and practitioners which share the principles of utilitarian action with the work of the Yamakasi we will be able to provide a route by which their knowledge and practice will be enriched.

There is an old phrase in the Angolero tradition of Capoeira that says:

“In the circle I am the student, in the circle I am the teacher”

This reflects a belief that through play with each other we will all be given the opportunity to teach and to learn. We are extremely fortunate that through our collaboration with Charles and Malik we are being given the opportunity to repay them for teaching us by introducing them to what Eugenio Barba describes as “the tradition of traditions” by which even Masters of a tradition are able to learn.