

IN CONVERSATION WITH NEIL NEWBON

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Anton Rey: *Neil Newbon, you have worked in numerous countries all over the world. In August 2019, as part of our international conference to the research topic on our SNSF project “Actor & Avatar”, you trained for the first time with Swiss, German and Austrian actors and actresses. Would you say there is a notable difference in approaching, sort of locally marked depending on acting traditions?*

Neil Newbon: I think that acting craft has been shaped in Europe both east/west and in the Mediterranean for so long that there is a commonality that runs through this part of the world. Acting techniques may differ between Laban, Method, Meisner etc etc but ultimately Europe has such a great rich history of writing, theatre, film and acting craft that European actors tend to feel similar to one another in these respects and by and large in their approaches to character. I think there are noticeable differences in approach when

NEIL NEWBON



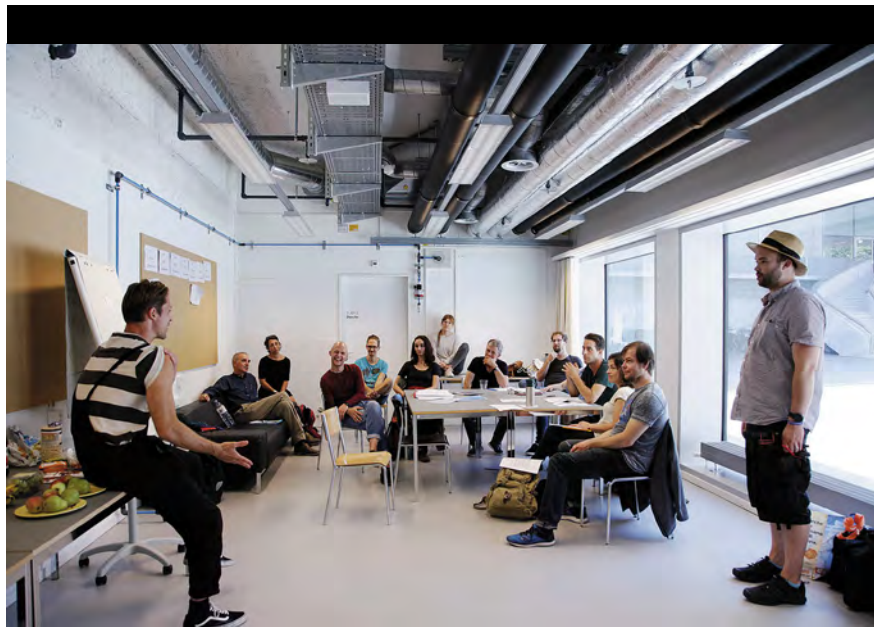
comparing say, Japanese actors or Indian actors to a German or a British actor, for example, due to different cultural influences and storytelling tastes than our particular continent did. Of course, it's worth saying, that at their hearts, all stories are universal and applicable to all Humans, even if their respective backgrounds, methodologies and palates differ in some respects.

A.R.: *What was the aim of the three days' workshop and how was it structured?*

N.N.: The aim of the course was to take the student performers abilities and knowledge—some from multi disciplines (dance, movement etc) as well as acting crafts, some whom had not a great deal of acting or performing beyond the theoretical and assimilate their various techniques into the givens of the “Volume”, which is the name of the specific working environment of Motion Capture/Performance Capture, which are in turn referred to as Mocap/Pcap respectively for abbreviation.

The major difference between the two historically is that Motion Capture is focused on body movements and head only, with or without audio and is usually animation locomotion (in game movements of player characters and non-player characters) that are intractable by a game player, world-building background characters (ie, people at a football stadium or in the street), combat and stunts (games, films and actor doubling etc.) or performances by say dancers or gymnasts for multi-media use. Performance capture can include all of the above but also has face data and finger data and is also with or without audio being recorded.

As new technical narrative mediums, in the same way that theatre, TV and film are technical mediums in which to tell stories, the overall goal is to teach the students how the technical systems work, how these constraints can affect their performance, how to start thinking in different ways about creating character and implementing movements in the animation for use in Film, TV, Games and Interactive theater, how to be able to use this new discipline and to show what freedoms and restrictions to their performance the technical givens. We encourage the idea that this is a hybrid of theatre and film techniques as the virtual camera can be anywhere the actor is essentially “live” throughout the take and we train people to adopt a live performance unless they leave the Volume area, as their movement capture can be used and cannibalised into other moments and the system captures everything they do. In this regards the stage is always live and is similar to theatre that there is no dead space in the Volume for the actor.



Alongside my co-founder, Saleta Losada Rodriguez, Performance Captured Academy's workshops are designed with a building block approach. We begin with an introduction to the technical aspects of the Studio using Industry specific jargon as it would be on a professional shoot, explaining how it works and how this may alter their performance.

We start in the suits, in the Volume and the nature of the workshop is predominately practical. We use a step-by-step approach—starting with natural basic walk cycles, observing the movements of a performer just as themselves, walking from one end the volume to the other to allow the performer to see character movement based on wants and needs and their habitual history to gain a fast insight into the need for total body involvement in this type of performance and how to start thinking of adjustments to create new and varied character archetypes.

This continues with more complex movement-based exercises, adding animation character rigs working with different gaits, weight distributions and size changes—we then begin to add scene study and creature workshops to take the basic locomotion of Motion Capture to a

full acting performance (including vocalization) which we refer to as Performance Capture. The student in only 2 or 3 days is exposed to everything that is atypical in our work in the Volume and in our experience, this is enough to get any performer from any discipline ready to work on a mocap or pcap shoot applying their craft to the level they possess.

A.R.: *While watching you work, I was reminded of games, but also of the silent movie era. The body language is emphasized and stands in the foreground; with the help of avatars one becomes aware of bodily expressions which on stage and screen, at least in the education, often stand in the background. During your training phenomena came to foreground which we would otherwise encounter e.g. with Commedia dell'Arte or as puppeteers. Do you see a direct link to these, silent movie era, CdA or puppeteer?*



N.N.: Indeed—we often refer to great movement artists of the silent film era such as, Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. Who created great characters and complex sequences with nuance and empathy without the need for dialogue or sound. Infact the use of the speech cards in between shots could be taken out and the viewer would still understand the story and motivations of the piece.

Puppeteers often attend our courses and do very well, their understanding of crafting performances without relying on words to describe the inner thoughts or actions of a character does require a certain training and also a certain bravery in trusting themselves to be present to create authentic truthful movements whilst not relying on exposition etc. We often encourage students to seek out additional training in things like mask work, CdA, dance, yoga, method acting, laban, gymnastics for example. Anything that helps quieten the mind and get the actors into their bodies is relevant. A good command and control of one's instrument (an acting term referring to the actor as a whole) is applicable to this work. Film technique alone will sometimes leave a good actor stilted and wooden physically, whereas theater work doesn't always allow for minute moments that film often focuses on. As the cameras are theoretically operating in both a wide and a close-up simultaneously (a Schrodinger's cat effect as you don't necessarily know where the final camera position will be or if that shot will be altered or reused in another place or indeed in another character). Thus, these training examples are especially true for Mocap work where often a look or a body movement is all that is required to tell the story of the moment. In developing the ability to make specific physical choices without generalizing movement quickly when portraying multiple characters during a day's shooting (which is often the case in these types of jobs), the performer will always be able to stay authentic even when portraying minor background characters that serve mainly to add to the immersion of the viewer into a world.

A.R.: *How about the face when the body speaks aloud? The Hungarian film critic and theorist Béla Balázs spoke, when describing Asta Nielsen's acting, of a polyphonic facial expression becoming possible when opposing expressions appear in a physiognomy. In*

a physiognomic chord, as it were, a synthesis of the most diverse feelings, passions and thoughts appears—a synthesis that perfectly expresses the multifaceted human being. Much to my surprise, you were describing a comparable process when explaining how you acted in PLANET OF APES: LAST FRONTIER and described how the Gorilla had a real story, a character, you even called it a “personality”?

N.N.: As a physical performer I don't see a separation of character no matter the creature type, for story purposes most non-humanoid creatures are anthropomorphized to relate to the audience—so even if the face is not being captured it is connected, it is still a part of the performance as a whole. The character is still rounded and developed in a way to be able to play—animals in our own real world have personality and wants and needs—they are all alive.

I work using the idea of an actor's instrument as a whole, the actor should be focused on the character at all times and commit with their intuition and the design of the character 100% using the totality of their being. Unless there is a tonal/style constraint where the face/body cannot be allowed to move for whatever reason (such as the muscularity of the creature—as in the case of apes where they must smile in different ways to humans, or



taking into consideration legs shape or arm length etc.) which is a design constraint the performer will have rehearsed and worked into their experience before capture, then it should be allowed to come in the moment naturally. This may take practice and experimentation, but ultimately should become habit for the performer to work as the character truthfully as you would do in any human role.

Obviously with dialogue this further alters this experience. I often design characters to have habits and quirks that I deem appropriate sometimes in the face—usually these represent to me something about the character but not usually

explained to the audience—but they work with all the facets of character to create a deeper well rounded person, a more interesting imaginary being, the aim being to add layers to the story and the characters moving through it and immerse the viewer further in the fictitious truth of the piece, working with a creature is exactly the same process, they have needs, wants, habits and instincts just the same.

A.R.: *Are you consciously training and applying layers of mimic masks on top of each other, in order to evoke unsayable expressions which yet hopefully will be “read” by the audience? And if so, do you get information from the director or camera operator how close-up the picture will be, because this might make a difference on your acting scale?*

N.N.: Constant physical and craft training in new techniques and skills is essential for any Actor in any medium—it helps our instrument stay fresh, engaged and interested and allows us further range in our work and craft. I often seek out extra training that isn't directly applicable to a project I am working on in the present day but I know and have always found at some point will become relevant.

In terms of the picture, I touched on this above, we are sometimes aware of placement of camera, sometimes not. Actors in all mediums work closely with the guidance and voice of the director/directing team which may include lead animators as well. We also work in Mcap and Pcap, on the premise that each shot is a close up and a master wide at the same time—this allows us to be completely free in the Volume and ironically not worry so much about this. Marks and specific playing areas in terms of camera angles can come into play typically more in scene work and in fixed sequences, but in locomotion it is more often an abstract with no set environments necessarily and our own orientation in the Volume in relation to not specific camera shot singularly but simply to the floor (or z axis) is actually more important—as movements can be mirrored and manipulated in isolation by post processing anyway. I try to not get too caught up in whether “this is my close up” or not and will play each moment to it’s fullest regardless of where I am told or believe the virtual camera will be.

A.R.: Does face tracking make acting artificial, is it the glycerine of crying, helped acting, or does it, on the contrary, reveal layers we were not aware of before today’s technical possibilities?

N.N.: I think as the fidelity of the tracking, solving and rendering can now bring tremendous detail and nuance to a performance in animation, those of us that have been doing this work the longest have seen a wonderful transition from a heightened level of playing characters with exaggerated movements and a more “telegraphing” playing style leaning towards the theatric, to that of a more introspective nuanced filmic style of playing. These days we can see an eye twitch, well with a tear, the lips gently pucker revealing a subconscious thought etc. whereas that may have been lost in less detailed images say 20 years ago.

Further, I always play scenes with total commitment and regardless of whether tears, to use your example, can be added in afterwards to sell a moment, as indeed it is now possible to do so in film.

I think the best scenes work when you know the actor is 100% present in the characters truth with their impulses and choices working symbiotically regardless of the ability to track and change the face data, everything that is possible in film is also possible in Pcap too—you can add or take away anything on screen and editing has far greater scope as the images can be directly manipulated. For Performers we think of it more as “digital make-up” an expression coined by Andy Serkis’, with whom I had the amazing opportunity to work with in the Apes franchise in 2015. I agree with him, it is a layer of makeup which can be manipulated but the layers of the character still come from the actor in their authenticity of the role and anyone watching the performance will be able to tell the difference in that respect.

A.R.: Taiwanese/US American director Ang Lee (*EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN*, *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*, *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, *HULK*, *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*, *LIFE OF PI*), three time Oscar winner and extremely experienced film director on diverse genres, also known for his careful, precise and effectful approach to actors, described the difference in acting after working on his latest motion picture *GEMINI MAN*:¹



ALL PICTURES FROM THE ZURICH WORKSHOP, ©IPF

¹ Interview with Tobias Kniebe, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 229, 4 October 2019

“What you feel inside is like a new world for directors. It will not be just the look that matters, the whole soul, the whole being will have an effect on you. That’s what I think when things get easier with a little bit of digital help. That’s where we going, we are going deeper in studying faces, we study people.” Would you agree that new technical possibilities reveal more than they hide?

N.N.: Yes, I agree with this—those of us that started in Mcap and Pcap in the early days I think all knew this from doing the work, that this was the future, before indeed others in the industry gave this style of performance much weight or could see it as another valid art form narratively as well as visually.

In terms of the technical possibilities this evolution offers up, an actor can even collaborate with other performers to create an individual role—one artist to perform say the voice and face locomotion, one to provide movement in mocap, another one to provide stunts and combat, lastly one to perhaps be “skinned” digitally to use as the outside look of the character.

All these artists from different background shooting independently sometimes, can now work together for one character, each adding part of their artists soul to it, under the guidance of the director and animation team.

We can ultimately show anything of the character in digital world the only real limitation is the story and the imagination of the animators, actors, writers and directors. We can study character in the same way that film and theatre can and we can visually add and hide anything in the world/of the characters as we desire. Again, it is a choice as to what the vision of the piece and story needs. It is of course the same in live action film and in all mediums that use animation technology. With technical progress and evolution of fidelity, the depth of detail is greater and more manipulable.

A.R.: Should actors be afraid their image will become a public playground?

N.N.: This is a lecture in on itself. The answer is—maybe, maybe not. We get paid for our usage for each project (voice and/or skin and performance)—contracts are in place to ensure fair usage is agreed and unions and bodies are already taking steps to ensure regulation of this. Often it is just our movements that are being bought not our actual images, so it kind of depends. However there is a good record of companies being transparent about this so I’d say for professional actors you will always be told of what they are going to use your work and potential your image for and how. Even deceased artists have been licensed for their images through their estates and “brought back to life”. Whether this is a good thing or not is really a matter for the audience I suppose and as long as there is a correct remuneration/protection of terms in the rights, I don’t see much difference in what actors have been doing already for years in tv, film and adverts for example.

Ultimately when you sign the deal you are making a choice for yourself whether you are getting a good deal. Read the contracts, get advice, make up your own mind, know what you are agreeing to.

What is more troubling I feel is people’s images being manipulated in the real world outside of entertainment such as pop stars and politicians etc. People that aren’t in the public eye and can be scanned or photographed and used maliciously. This has and will cause much hardship and trouble and is becoming more and more sophisticated by those unscrupulous to do so.

A.R.: Will some day the animator get the Oscar for performing a character which only ever existed as digitally mastered puppet, as an avatar?

N.N.: I have no idea—I think animators currently receive Oscars for the project as a whole and as such that I feel would include “puppeteering characters” if it is solely digitally driven. However, if you are talking about puppeteering an avatar, which will be captured as a performance which would be done shot by shot in real-time, then that surely is an acting award and could be certainly credited as such.