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Beyond Roles: A Body-Based Actor, Imagination, and Inner Motive Approach in Actor Training

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Abstract: this study examines the *Melbeyond the Role* ("Beyond the Role") acting method, a training approach that emphasizes honesty of expression, bodily awareness, and internal reflection. Developed through intensive workshop practice, this method positions the body, breath, and imagination as the foundation of performance creation, offering an alternative to acting practices that rely heavily on textual repetition and external imitation. The research applies a practice-based research approach, with data gathered from direct observation, reflective notes, and workshop documentation. A descriptive-reflective analysis was conducted to identify the core principles, training stages, and pedagogical mechanisms of the method. The findings indicate that *Melampaui Peran* integrates the body, imagination, and inner motive as the primary components of authentic performance. The body functions as a site of knowledge and awareness, imagination provides emotional context grounded in realistic presence, and inner motive directs the logic behind every performed action. The interplay of these elements produces a form of honest expression that enables transformative experiences for the actor on stage. Conceptually, the method extends classical acting theories (Stanislavski, Meisner, Grotowski) by grounding them in reflective and experiential processes shaped within the Indonesian performance context. This study contributes to the development of actor training pedagogy in drama, dance, and music education programs in Indonesia.

Keywords: Beyond Role, acting method, embodied performance, imprecisation, expressive honesty

1. INTRODUCTION

Role arts is a branch of performing arts that demands the presence of actors as the main medium to bring characters and dramatic events to life through body, sound, and emotions (Schechner, 2013). In practice, role-playing art not only functions as a means of entertainment, but also as a form of exploration of humanity that allows actors to interpret reality and present inner experiences in front of the audience (Benedetti, 2005). However, in many cases, the practice of acting in Indonesia still tends to be oriented towards the final result of the performance and memorization of the script. Actors are often positioned simply as executors of the text, rather than as creative subjects of creation. This condition causes the acting process to become mechanical or simply a reproduction of the character's behavior without deep emotional meaning. In fact, as Stanislavski (1936) emphasized, the essence of role-playing art is inner honesty and full involvement with the role played, not just an imitation of external behavior.

The condition of the actor, which tends to be textual and mechanical, encourages the need to revisit the position of actors in the process of creating theatre. As performative studies develop, the view emerges that the actor's body is not just a tool of representation, but a space of knowledge that stores memory, experience, and potential expression (Barba & Savarese, 2005). This perspective affirms



that the process of acting should not stop at imitation of behavior, but rather be rooted in bodily awareness and authentic inner experience. It is in this context that *the Beyond Role approach* is present as a conceptual and practical effort to return actors to the source of their honesty of expression. This approach was developed by Ab Asmarandana through intensive workshops that emphasize the exploration of the body, breathing, imagination, and inner motives as a path to the presence of honest actors on stage

Based on this background, the main problem to be studied in this paper is how the *Beyond Role approach* formulates an acting process rooted in inner honesty, body awareness, and directed imagination. The focus of this research is directed to understand how the exercises developed in these methods are able to help actors get out of imitation and mechanical acting patterns to authentic role experiences. In addition, this study aims to explain the theoretical foundations and working principles underlying *Beyond Roles*, as well as analyze its implications for actor training practices in Indonesia. Thus, this paper not only describes the training method, but also offers a conceptual framework that can be used to understand the process of acting as an activity of creation and self-discovery.

The *Beyond Roles Approach* offers novelty as it integrates classic principles of acting such as body awareness and emotional honesty with the context of the Indonesian actor's local experience. If Stanislavski (1936) emphasized psychological honesty through a system of mental action, Meisner (1987) highlighted the spontaneity of interactorial responses, and Grotowski (1968) emphasized the body as a spiritual instrument, then *Beyond Role* combines all three into a practice that is reflective and contextual. This method not only demands the actor's technical abilities, but also focuses the exercise on finding a balance between the body, breath, and self-awareness as a source of presence on stage. The urgency of this research lies in the need for an actor's training model that is relevant to Indonesia's socio-cultural conditions, where actors often face limitations in facilities, time, and formal learning resources. Therefore, *Beyond Roles* is an important alternative in strengthening acting arts education through a simple, organic, and rooted approach to the actor's hands-on experience.

Research on *the Beyond Role approach* is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of acting studies in Indonesia by enriching the discourse on experiential acting training methods. Through conceptual and descriptive analysis, this research can be a reference for teachers, researchers, and theater practitioners in understanding the role of the body, imagination, and self-awareness as the main foundation of acting. Practically, the results of this study can be used as an alternative model of role-playing learning in formal educational institutions and independent theater communities. The *Beyond Roles approach* provides opportunities for actors to develop creativity, emotional sensitivity, and reflective abilities that can enrich the performance creation process. Thus, this research contributes to the formation of a new paradigm in drama, dance, and music education that places actors as creative subjects and explorers of meaning, not just executors of texts.

2. METHOD

This research uses a *practice-based research* approach, which positions the artistic process as the main source of scientific data and reflection. This approach is commonly used in the performing arts field to examine creative practices through direct experience and systematic reflection (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). In this context, the practice of acting is understood not only as the result of performance, but as a process of knowledge that can be observed, recorded, and analyzed conceptually. Therefore, research on *Beyond Roles* focuses on the training experience, the structure of the activity, as well as the pedagogical principles that emerge during the workshop process. The goal is to identify the training mechanisms that shape the actor's honesty through the integration of the body, imagination, and inner motives.

The data sources in this study came from documentation, reflective notes, and recordings of the process of the *Beyond Roles workshop* organized by the Lanjong Foundation in Ladaya, Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan, on April 21–30, 2025. This workshop was led by Ab Asmarandana and attended by a number of actors and theater teachers from various regions in Indonesia. The entire process of activities, including body exercises, improvisation, discussions, and daily evaluations, became the main observation material to be analyzed descriptively and conceptually. Secondary data were obtained from the performance script "Beyond the Role" as well as the participants' diaries documenting their experiences and reflections on the training methods. Thus, the context of this research is not only practical, but also epistemological, as it places the creative process as a source of knowledge that can be scientifically tested through systematic analysis.

The data collection procedure in this study follows the structure of the workshop activities as recorded in the book *Beyond the Role*. Each training session that lasted for ten days was systematically recorded, including the description of the activity, the facilitator's direction, the participant's response, and the results of reflection after the exercise. The diary is the main source to identify the training patterns and pedagogical principles used by Ab Asmarandana in guiding actors. In addition to participatory observation, visual documentation and text of the performance script of "Beyond the Role" were also used as supporting materials to strengthen data interpretation. Analysis was also conducted on the transcript of the discussion, insights that emerged during the daily evaluation, and the conceptual statements delivered by the facilitator. Thus, the data collection in this study is simultaneous between direct observation, reflective recording, and tracing of relevant documents.

Data analysis was carried out through a descriptive-reflective approach by examining each exercise note and the results of the discussion thematically. This process involves three main stages, namely data reduction, interpretation, and synthesis. The reduction stage is carried out by selecting important parts of the workshop diary that describe the basic principles of acting training. The interpretation stage is carried out by relating these findings to the framework of actory theory from Stanislavski, Meisner, and Grotowski, to see the suitability and expansion of the concepts that occur in *the Beyond Role method*. Next, the synthesis stage is used to formulate a pattern

of relationships between body exercise, inner awareness, and honesty of expression that is at the heart of this approach. In this way, the analysis not only focuses on the description of the activity, but also seeks to uncover the epistemological structure that underlies the practice of acting in *Beyond Roles*.

In this study, the researcher plays the role of a reflective practitioner who directly develops, facilitates, and analyzes the practice process in the *Beyond Role* approach. This position places the researcher not only as an observer, but also as a creator of methods that are evaluated through practice. Reflexivity is an important part of the research process, where every artistic and pedagogical decision taken during the workshop is treated as data as well as an instrument of analysis. Thus, the researcher's empirical experience in leading the exercise is the main basis for understanding the body's working mechanisms, inner motives, and teaching strategies that give birth to the honesty of actors' expressions. This approach is in line with the view of Smith and Dean (2009) that practice-based art research requires full engagement between creative action and critical reflection as a single scientific process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The *Beyond Role Approach* departs from the view that acting is not just a process of imitating character behavior, but an effort to find inner truth through bodily experience and self-awareness. In this process, the actor's body is understood as a space of knowledge that stores emotional memories, natural impulses, and sensory sensibility that can be processed into sources of expression. The main principle is "honesty", which is the courage of the actor to present himself in his entirety without layers of pretense in front of the role and the audience. This concept is rooted in Stanislavski's thinking about *experiencing the role*, in which the actor does not simply play the role, but lives it consciously, but is further developed through an approach that emphasizes bodily reflection and spiritual awareness as found in the practice of *Going Beyond the Role*.

Researchers view that true acting begins when actors are able to transcend the text and find a natural presence space. Within such frameworks, text serves as a footnote, while bodily experience and emotions are the main source of creation. Therefore, the exercise in *Transcending the Role* is not directed at the reproduction of the script, but rather at the exploration of feelings, breath, and energy that build the connection between body, space, and consciousness. Through this principle, *Beyond Role* positions acting as a process of self-discovery that takes place between consciousness and impulses, between discipline and freedom, and between technique and intuition.

The *Beyond Role Method* is structured through a series of gradual exercises that place the body, breath, and consciousness as the main foundations of acting. The entire structure of the exercise is designed to help actors discover the experience of honesty through an internal process that takes place gradually—from physical awareness to emotional and spiritual awareness. In the context of the workshop, this stage is carried out through a series of exploratory exercises focused on the body and the actor's natural response to the space and situations created.

The first stage is called "finding an honest body", which is the process of returning the body to the naturalness of movement like a five-year-old child. This exercise aims to get rid of rigid body habits due to social patterns and accumulated life experiences. Actors are invited to retrace the basic sensations of the body walking, jumping, breathing, or interacting with space without aesthetic motives, so that the body returns to a spontaneous and receptive state.

The second stage emphasizes the practice of motives and the purpose of action, where every gesture or speech must have an inner justification. In this method, the actor's character is not interpreted as a representation of behavior, but as an expression of logical and emotional inner impulses. The researcher emphasized that every action on stage must depart from the actor's real needs for the situation at hand, not solely from the will of the script.

The next stage is known as the "what-if" imagination experiment, which is an exercise that invites actors to build an inner context through hypothetical questions such as "What if I were really in this situation?". This approach serves to foster an authentic emotional presence, connecting the actor's psychological reality with the fictional reality of the role.

Furthermore, the exercises are geared towards improvisational exploration and ensemble work, in which actors interact unscripted with other colleagues to hone sensitivity, concentration, and the courage to react spontaneously. This process fosters collective awareness and opens up space for freedom of play, while testing the actor's body and emotional consistency in the midst of changing situations.

The last stage is reflective exercises through monologues and the use of mirrors, which aim to bring the actor together with himself. In this stage, the actor is asked to look at his reflection in the mirror while saying a dialogue, so that an inner dialogue between the personal self and the role self appears. Through this stage, the researcher emphasizes that the process of acting is not only about the creation of characters, but also about the reconciliation between self-awareness and the role played.

The relationship between the body, imagination, and inner motives is central to the entire training process in *the Beyond Role* method. Researchers view that the body is the main gateway to acting awareness. A body that is conscious and free from habitual patterns will become a medium that is sensitive to emotional impulses. Therefore, body training is not only directed to form physical agility, but to foster the presence and preparedness of the body against mental stimuli. Through this process, the body is treated not as a mere means of expression, but as a source of knowledge that connects the physical and spiritual experiences of the actors on stage.

Imagination serves as a bridge between inner experience and outward action. In *Beyond Roles*, imagination is not used to create illusions, but to foster a realistic emotional context for the actor's actions. The *what-if* exercise is the main means of activating a controlled imagination, in which the actor learns to place himself in situations that are assumed to be real. Through this approach, imagination not only builds character, but also strengthens the connection between intentions, actions, and self-awareness.

Inner motives act as the driving core of every actor's actions. In the researcher's view, without a clear inner motive, acting is just an

empty form that loses its meaning. Therefore, every actor's movements, words, and stills must have a logical and emotional inner reason. This motive is not externally forced, but arises through the recognition of the actor's own internal impulses and needs. When the body, imagination, and inner motives work in harmony, the honesty of expression that is characteristic of the *Beyond Role approach* is created.

The integration between these three elements results in a condition that researchers call the "conscious body", which is a state in which the body is no longer controlled by rational will alone, but by consciousness that is fully present in the moment of performance. At this point, acting is no longer a representative act, but an authentic self-transformation.

Honesty is an ethical as well as aesthetic principle that underlies the entire process in *Beyond Roles*. The researcher emphasized that true acting is not measured by technical ability or proficiency in imitating characters, but by the extent to which the actor is able to present himself fully on stage. Honesty in this context does not mean revealing all personal emotions, but presenting an authentic inner experience, which is born from the harmony between the body, imagination, and inner motives. Through repetitive and reflective exercises, the actor is trained to remove the distance between himself and the role, until the boundary between the two becomes fluid and open to a true presence.

The process of acting aspired to in *Beyond Roles* is transformative. Each exercise is not only a means of character building, but also a process of self-discovery. Researchers view that when the body and consciousness reach a certain level of sensitivity, actors undergo a shift from "role-playing" to "being a role". At this point, the stage no longer functions as a mere performance space, but rather as a contemplative space where actors and audiences alike engage in an honest experience of existence.

This transformation does not happen instantly, but through discipline, reflection, and openness to experience. Researchers emphasize that honesty is not a condition that can be forced, but the result of a long process to free the body from falsehood and open itself to inner truth. Thus, *Transcending Role* is not only a method of acting, but also a spiritual approach that places the art of role as a path to a more complete consciousness and humanity.

The Beyond Role Approach has an important slice with the tradition of intercultural acting that has developed since the late 20th century, especially through the idea of the meeting of the body, culture, and spiritual experience in the process of creating actors. The researcher views that this method is not just a training technique, but a dialogue between the experience of local Indonesian actors and universal principles in the art of acting. The concept of the body as the center of consciousness and experience is a meeting point with the anthropological theory of actors introduced by Barba, which emphasizes that "The technique of the body in theater is always influenced by the social and cultural context in which it grows up" (Barba, 2005). In the Indonesian context, the actor's body responds to exercise, space, and dramatic situations.



Chart 1. Performance in Reog Sepuh Art

The intercultural dimension in *Beyond Roles* is also seen through the way the practice combines physical spontaneity, breath awareness, and the search for harmony between action and intention. This idea is close to Zarrili's psycho-physical approach that combines South Asian breathing and meditation practices to build body preparedness and stage presence. Although *Beyond Roles* does not explicitly adopt specific traditions, this method shows that the actor's body can be a meeting space between local traditional reflections such as contemplative practices and spiritual connections to nature, with modern theories of actors' perperitivity and presence.

In addition, this approach has an affinity with the concept of perdormability in cultural studies, which views the action of the body as a construct of meaning. In *Beyond the role*, bodily actions are never mechanical or decorative, but are always related to meaningful inner motives. Thus, the actor's body becomes a medium to convey not only emotions, but also human dignity and values. The researchers see that this approach shifts the focus of acting training from the search for external forms to internal meaning through reflective bodily experiences.

The linkage of this method with intercultural traditions reinforces the value of the novelty of *Beyond Role* as an approach that is rooted in the Indonesian context as well as relevant at the global level. This method's orientation towards honesty, directness, and direct experience allows actors from different cultural backgrounds to adapt it without losing their respective actors' identities. Therefore, *Beyond*

Roles has great potential to be developed as a model of actorial pedagogy that is not only local, but also can contribute to international discourse on role arts and performatives.

4. CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes that the Beyond Role approach is an actor-oriented method that is oriented towards honesty, awareness, and self-reflection through body work, imagination, and inner motives. Through a series of exercises that emphasize spontaneity, physical awareness, as well as emotional exploration, this method helps actors transcend the boundaries of the text and discover the meaning of the role authentically. The body is positioned as a source of knowledge and experience, while imagination plays a role in building a realistic emotional context, and inner motives are the main drivers of every actor's actions. The integration of the three gives birth to the presence of honest and transformational actors on stage.

Conceptually, *Beyond the Role* expands on the notion of acting that has been developed by Stanislavski, Meisner, and Grotowski by adding reflective and spiritual dimensions rooted in the local experiences of Indonesian actors. This approach not only offers an effective method of training, but also establishes a new paradigm about role arts as a process of self-awareness. Thus, *Beyond the Role* contributes to the development of the scientific discourse and pedagogy of performing arts, while providing a practical alternative to drama, dance, and music education that is oriented towards the formation of honest, sensitive, and humane actors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Budi Dharma contributed as the main researcher and developer of the Melampaui Peran method, conducting the practice-based workshops, documenting the training process, and formulating the conceptual framework that underpins the study. Edi Sutardi served as the academic collaborator and critical reviewer, providing analytical insights, strengthening the methodological structure, and offering reflective evaluations during the development and examination of the training stages. Both authors worked collaboratively in interpreting the findings, preparing the manuscript, and ensuring that the pedagogical and theoretical dimensions of the Melampaui Peran approach were presented comprehensively.

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