Can There be Real-Time Learning in the Brain? A Reflection from within the Praxis of the Work of the Performer upon Himself.

Extract from a paper by John Schranz.

“The performer does not seek to repeat slavishly in public performance that which he would have creatively generated in the studio; his fundamental urge is to be creative when he is being observed by the beholders, there where he is projecting himself as engaged in an act of creativity. Clearly, an ideal performance [1] is lodged somewhere within the performer … and yet each performer knows very well that the essence of his training aims to assist him to reach for that ideal performance, but in such a manner as to keep that ideal alive and in constant development, as unpredictably so as any creative human act can be. Learning processes, in the human being, are very much of that nature and not of the kind which generate the conditioning processes practised on ‘performing’ animals in a circus. From the athlete responding to the unique conditions which would apply in each environment (stadium) where he would find himself practising his discipline, all the way through to the surgeon plying his scalpel on the unique body awaiting his intervention, learning processes - if they are to be creative, that is - seek to meet the particular by sensing in it its uniqueness in terms of the abstraction.

On this topic, Wolf Singer (neuroscientist, head of the Frankfurt Max Planck Institute) says: ‘humans have the ability (and incidentally we don’t know how it works) to recognise consistent solutions without having to try them out. Every creative person knows this feeling. Suddenly we just know that something is right, that it works, and this gives us great pleasure, even though it was only an experiment in our minds. We know when something is right and when it is not. This means there must be an internal criterion of consistency, which is probably connected to the same criterion that compels the brain to search for coherent interpretations. This brings us closer to the question of where aesthetic criteria come from. The search for coherence and rightness must somehow be connected to aesthetic criteria. We search until we feel that something is right or, in scientific theory, until it is beautiful. We reconcile opposites and achieve this feeling of rightness, although no one can explain exactly what it is. This often occurs long before we have found definite proof that something ‘really’ is the way theory would describe it. The process in art must be similar.’ [2]

The performer of contemporary research theatre is constantly seeking for such a feeling of ‘rightness’, whether in training or in performance, and this search sheds light on the learning process. Observing the performer at work one soon senses that such ‘solutions’, such ‘right somethings’, somehow present themselves as, primarily, a gauging of a relationship with something other than oneself. That ‘something other’ may be an identified presence (a fellow actor, an object), it may be an imagined ‘other’, or it may be a situational context, or a spatial environment.

Whenever one sees oneself entering into any sort of relationship (with something known or unknown, animate or inanimate, human or not … it makes little difference) one envisages that potential relationship as being fraught with potential slips (minor or not, imaginary or not, it matters little). They are potential slips which somehow may impede one from relating to that thing in a manner which would be (a) adequate to the situation and (b) faithful to the manner in which one envisages that it would be advisable for one to relate to that situation, in a manner, therefore, that would be true to one’s intentions.

What we call ‘tasks’ are, precisely, the navigation of those potential slips. The process of the doing of something is more of a series of efforts launched at tackling the difficulties envisaged as being inherent in it, rather than a matter of ‘trying to do it’. The work of the performer in training seems to suggest that the ‘thing to be done’ is, rather, faced as itself being an unknown to which one is relating.

A ‘solution’, a ‘something that is right’ (in the way Singer uses those terms) seems to present itself to the human being’s potential for taking action - but here I feel it would be important to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the ‘thing to be done’ and, on the other hand,
the difficulty one may be encountering (which is why we speak of ‘learning’) in accomplishing ‘the thing to be done’.

One somehow knows that one’s reading of it is considerably removed from the nature of the thing itself. One thus launches into an exploratory relationship with it, a relationship which seeks to establish an awareness of the feeling of the dynamics of that execution, such that the sense of those dynamics may be compared to the kinesthetic sense which would have been acquired through the sensing of that ‘thing to be done’. I am rather reluctant to refer to the ‘thing to be done’ as ‘the task’. I would rather say that it is the fundamental human need to resolve the mismatch [3] one senses between these two feelings [4] which constitutes the nature of what we then envisage to be a ‘task’ as such. This would mean that what one would be seeking is to smoothen out those mismatches, in order to ease the sense of dissatisfaction, or anxiety, rather than to obtain the end result of ‘the task itself’.

[1] Although such a performance would be much less defined than an ideal geometric figure, of course.
[3] I use the word here as in G Gray’s theory of hippocampal function in anxiety.
[4] I use the word “feelings”, here, in the sense in which Konstantin Stanislavski used it in his writings on theatre pedagogy in the early years of this century, when he constantly referred to the importance of the performer feeling the “muscle tones”. One of Stanislavski’s key sentences went “In our language, to ‘understand’ is to ‘feel’.” And the word “language” in that sentence has two meanings - one is the Russian language, and the other is the terminology which he coined for addressing the complexities of the work of the performer.