Phillip Zarrilli: When the body becomes all eyes

PHILLIP ZARRILLI has been a defining figure in contemporary performance as a radical theatre director and trainer, incorporating an evolved aesthetic beyond Stanislavski in his training, writes PAYEL MAJUMDAR.

Phillip Zarrilli is not your regular flower child. The internationally renowned Welsh theatre director and acting trainer has worked with performance artists and actors for several years. His encouragement of his pupils to seek a higher level of awareness, using techniques from the ancient arts of kalaripayattu, kathakali and tai chi ch’uan. Guardian.com caught up with Zarrilli when he came down to India for a series of workshops.

Q. How did you end up working in the inter-cultural performance art space and learning kalaripayattu?
A. I lived in Kerala for seven years and I was the first non-Malayali to seriously train in kalaripayattu. I trained with Guru Govindankutty Nayar at the CVN Kalari in Thrissur, Kerala. I was also honoured later and presented a pitham, the stool representing mastery in the art, by my teacher. I think I was the only individual outside of India or Kerala to be gifted, so it was a great honour and responsibility. As a theatre director, I have always used kalaripayattu along with tai chi ch’uan as a means of training actors and performers. I use traditional trainings but I articulate them from my western sensibilities — what may be called a translation. This does not involve translating the techniques, which I try and keep [the same] as I was taught. I emphasise the inner work that goes into this sort of training as the most valuable part of it.

Q. Do you find any resonance between the three forms that you picked: kalaripayattu, kathakali and tai chi?
A. Yes, all kinds of deep training will have shared dimensions between them, if you do them deeply for a long time. The underlying principles and elements are articulated differently in different cultural contexts but there are some similar principles that inform them. In kalaripayattu and kathakali, the underlying paradigms of form are yoga and ayurveda. I wrote a book about it called When the Body Becomes All Eyes, which talks about these dances’ principles from a deep ethnographic perspective.

Q. How do you teach kalaripayattu exercises to actors and performance artists over relatively short periods?
A. When I’m working with contemporary practitioners, I need to make the lessons useful and practical. Another aspect of such a traditional training is that it is usually imparted to children. In Kerala, when I first started kathakali training in 1976, most of my fellow students were seven to 10 years old. When you are teaching a seven-to-10-year-old it is very different from teaching a 21-year-old. The 21-year-old has a very different body, and their comprehension is higher. So when I explain to contemporary performers, they can usually access those things sooner than they would at seven years old. The difference is they might not be able to sustain that because they haven’t yet absorbed it, but if I’m working with professionals they might have other training that is similar — it could be western modern dance. So in retrospect, what they take back with them from the training might actually be deeper.

Q. Tell us about the seven years you spent in a kalari in Kerala.
A. My preliminary training was in kathakali. Imagine me as a 29-year-old, a heavy smoker, who had no prior experience in movement training. I used to play American football, which frankly isn’t very useful for performance art — I was totally unfit for what I was doing. So it was a gradual re-learning for me — a whole different way of discovering my body-mind relationship. It was extraordinarily difficult in the beginning but anyone who is serious about long-term deep training and does it assiduously, is going to change as a person. I am not trying to romanticise it but kalaripayattu changed my life, yet had I been doing German expressionist dance or judo, that probably would have transformed me in a different way. It was the right training at the right time for me, and I had the right teacher. I even trained under other teachers during my time in Kerala, and different teachers have different lines of teaching; they believe their way is the absolute correct way. What I found interesting was understanding why, because then you come to the nuances on which they base their assumptions — why your spine should be in a certain position, or what’s happening with your breath.

Q. As an acting coach, what drew you to this sort of deep training?
A. In the 1970s, the Stanislavskian acting training was the primary paradigm of actor training in the U.S. Unfortunately, it was problematic and very limiting for actors, and my aesthetic and artistic vision was much broader than what you could realise through this sort of actor training. Stanislavski and his company went to the U.S. in the 1920s and made a big splash. The whole history of Stanislavski is very complicated, but in America, Stanislavski’s version of method acting is most appropriate for film. However, if you are going to do something other than realism and naturalism on stage, then you really need a broad repertoire of tools and a different understanding of acting than you can get solely from early Stanislavskian work. I was inspired by a Polish director named Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski followed the Stanislavski lineage, but he was developing his own method of working and had come to India gone to the kalamandalam, observe kathakali and was inspired by that to create a series of exercises. His exercises aren’t kathakali training but they are inspired from him seeing these young boys doing extraordinary exercises. I wanted to go to the source and experience that. I came and joined the kalamandalam and then found out that those exercises come from kalaripayattu.

Q. How easily do forms of deep training translate to contemporary actor training?
A. The problem that I mentioned earlier with Stanislavskian actor training is that all of it is scene study work and character study work. But how to develop the body-mind relationship? I do that with the use of kalaripayattu, tai chi and yoga — most of it is pre-performative. You begin to focus, to be more attentive, open and develop a certain kind of embodied awareness with a long-term practice of certain kinds of deep training, with which you extend yourself to the nuances of what I like to have an expressive body-mind. Now you have to learn other things as an actor, so you need to have other techniques as well, but this is the foundation. I also prefer Michael Chekhov’s training, which gets you to work on the imagination. I encourage actors to work with Japanese butoh, which enhances work with imagination, since even in my work imagination is central. There is saying in Malayalam about kalaripayattu for that state — the body becomes all eyes and I can’t think of anything better to describe the optimal stage of attentiveness of the performer. That is the kind of awareness and attentiveness you need on stage to access your imagination.