

The challenge of the “Ninja actor” in PT: Typology and tools in service of the Ninja actor

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Introduction

As a PT actor and conductor, I often felt there was one role that I never paid much attention to, “tree number 3” as we used to call it in our school plays. In the PT world, it’s the actor not chosen for any specific role in the long form enactment - the “ninja” actor. I first met the term in a conducting course with Jonathan Fox in NYC, where he casually mentioned it. The concept immediately struck me. Later I would find out that Kayo Munakata from the Japan PT School coined the term¹. I began exploring ways to give structure and terminology to this challenging role.

“What is the Ninja actor’s responsibility?” I ask in workshops. “Hold the story, provide background, move the story ahead, give depth/emotion/music/action to the story...”

“How can the Ninja Actor achieve these tasks?” Here people are less sure of their answers. As Buhler (2002) writes, it seems that there are endless options, and actors rely on their intuition and experience to choose what to do as Ninjas in every enactment.

What was “the difference that made the difference,” with regards to successful group improvisation? I ended up using a typology that combines ideas from the theater and coaching world. This paper will begin with a (very) short review of the historical Ninja Warrior, then continue to an initial typology of the default acting preferences of (Ninja) PT actors and end with a terminology and toolbox for this challenging role.

This kind of shared language in the ensemble will hopefully create, as Buhler (2002) writes, a cohesive, structured and interesting theater on the spot. Moreover, I hope this will inspire the Ninja actors to “be present on stage when needed, as well as *blurring* his presence and even *leaving* the scene, in order to allow the scene to evolve” (Lubrani-Rolnick, 2009, pg. 39. Translation from Hebrew). Gisler (1995) talks about saying yes in PT. She describes how the PT actor should say “Yes” to cooperation and variety. She also includes the term *complicité*: the playful, supporting, encouraging relationship of the actors amongst each other as one of the cornerstones for good theatre. Clarifying the Ninja role can enhance the *complicité* of the ensemble and enrich the PT performance.

A few words about Ninjas

Ninjas were rural Japanese farmers who specialized in warfare, popular between the 12th and 17th century (Levy, 2008). The Ninja Warriors excelled in flexibility, adaptability and improvisation in achieving their goals: “The Ninja’s goal is fixed, while his method is not. He is expected to use any means necessary and endure any hardship to achieve his end. He is mindful at all times of his environment and attuned to natural and manmade occurrences and processes... His response to people, events and situations is dictated by them, not according to predetermined mindsets... The ninja is good at seeing *what is*, not simply what he assumes or wants.” (Levy, 2008, pg. 103).

The Ninja’s fighting style was flexible and varied: “He is adaptable and flexible. He does not restrict himself to a set repertoire of moves, nor does he follow a strict choreography to generate his fighting style.” (Levy, 2008, pg. 111).

The above quotes remind me of Jonathan Fox's (1994) description of the PT actor’s need for high level of role flexibility: “He or she must have the spontaneity to play many roles quickly... to be able to portray immediately an opposite characterization...” (Fox, 1994, pg. 103).

With the above in mind, we can see how appropriate the metaphor of the Ninja is to the PT actor. The goal of the Ninja actor is fixed (a successful enactment of the story) but her method is flexible (different characters, different offers, to enter or exit the stage, to sing, dance, create sound effects...).

1 Thanks to Aviva Apel for this information.

First we must understand the actors' defaults when improvising, before we can widen her² repertoire.

What kind of Ninja Are you?

Before we provide options for the Ninjas, we must first understand our default acting style. Viola Spolin (1999) stresses the importance of self-awareness for theatrical expression. Salas (1999) writes that self-awareness is the grounding of the emotional and expressive flexibility of the PT actor. We should be aware of our default preferences as actors (and as people) so we can avoid the “strong role repetition” (Fox, 1994). The PT actor must remain flexible in the roles she portrays, as she sometimes enters the enactment a few times as different characters.

There are two main criteria I chose to help categorize actors. I find that people hate to be “boxed in” or “labeled”, but this typology is helpful when training Ninja actors. The two main criteria are Initiator/Reactor and slow/fast, and the third sub-criterion is human/non-human.

Initiator/Reactor

“Initiator” and “Reactor” were terms coined in relation to the basic preferences of an actor³. An Initiator is an actor who naturally drives a scene, giving the suggestions and endows the other actor/s in the scene⁴. A Reactor is an actor who naturally prefers to build on existing offers (also called bids)⁵. How do you know which one you are? Next time you are improvising with a partner, see if you naturally drive the scene (“hey grandma, where is my shoe?”), or do you naturally react (“I think your shoe is in the other room, Daniel...”)?

Initiators usually prefer being chosen as the teller’s actor during long forms and feel comfortable leading the enactment. Reactors usually prefer being Ninja actors, feeling that there is less pressure to “carry” the story. In short forms, Initiators will usually be the first to jump into the fluid sculpture, pairs, machine and so forth. The Reactors will naturally complement and add to the early Initiators already on stage.

Teaching this terminology to different PT companies, I find that there is usually a misconception, almost a bias, among PT actors. They think that being an Initiator is better than being a Reactor. However, both are equally important for the PT company. The Reactors add width and depth to the enactment through slower offers, often surprising the fast initiators. Contrary to formats like “whose line is it anyway”, the PT ritual is a group ensemble hoping to capture and reflect a wide range of emotions and ideas. For a wider range of reflection, best we have a wider range of PT actors.

Fast/slow

In the realm of theater improvisation, we find that actors fall into the spectrum of fast/slow. The speed relevant to our discussion is the speed of actor in *thinking* and *bidding* on stage. For some actors ideas rush to their minds quickly and they immediately go on stage and enact them. Other PT actors need time for ideas to float up and be expressed on stage. From my experience, there is some correlation between being an initiator and being fast, and being a Reactor with a slow pace (although there are always exceptions)⁶.

Human/non-human

The last criterion is the preferred *form* of the offer that the PT actor gives on stage. Some actors prefer

2 I will refer in this article to the Ninja Actor in feminine form, but I am referring to Ninja actors of both sexes.

3 I first heard a similar typology from Chris Johnstone. See Johnstone, 2004.

4 Which is similar to the description of a type of actor called the Driver (or Motor) whose pursuit of their drive is moving the action forward (Johnston, 2004).

5 I will use the term “bid” and “offer” throughout the article, for they share the same meaning for our discussion.

6 Sometimes a slow Initiator will become fast Reactor, if surrounded by faster Initiators. A fast Reactor will become a slow Initiator if surrounded by an ensemble of Reactor. See discussion later in article.

to enter the stage as humans (antagonist, uncle, neighbor). Others prefer to enter as non-human bids, such as animals, objects, energies, locations, colors and so on.

So now we can fill a default chart with 3 criteria:

Preferences	Quick	Slow	Human	Non-human
Initiator				
Reactor				

Once we charted our ensemble, we are more aware and better suited to enlarge our capacities as individual actors and as an ensemble. It is important to note that every ensemble needs a variety of different actors. As Salas (1999) writes, it's important that every member use his or her special gift (in our case, Initiators and Reactors), to strengthen the company's performance and range. Now that we are more grounded in self-awareness, let us continue on to the typology of the offers we can make as Ninja Actors: vertical and horizontal offers.

Vertical and Horizontal offers

An *offer* in improvisation is defined as “anything that is perceived or imagined as a possible stimulus to action. So an offer could be a spoken statement or phrase, it could be a physical action, a gesture, or it could simply be a look” (Johnston, 2006, pg. 332). A much simpler definition can be found in the seminal book *Impro*, by Keith Johnstone (1989): “I call anything that an actor does an ‘offer’. Each offer can be accepted or blocked” (pg. 97).

Offers are the basic language of any improvisation (see Johnstone 1999). The two terms of Horizontal and Vertical offers came from observing many long-form enactments, and trying to understand why some of the scenes were great and some seemed too crowded or too long. The basic premise is simple. There are basically two types of offers that an improvising actor can do on stage: a Horizontal or a Vertical offer.

Horizontal offers help establish the current scene by adding color or emphasizing the current mood or emotional energy. These offers often do not take too much focus from the teller's actor or move the story along, but deepen the “routine” of the current scene. For example, the Ninja actor may be a stop sign in the background of a scene that occurs on a street, or being an apple that cheers for the teller's actor to buy an orange in a scene that happens in a store.

Vertical offers move the story forward. This does not mean necessarily moving forward in time, but that they make the story move to the next chapter, basically ending that specific scene. Another way to understand a vertical offer is an offer that breaks the current routine to a new direction⁷. For example, if the scene is out on the street, the Ninja coming in as the mother and dragging the kid back home, where they have a big fight, is a vertical offer. Not only is the mother character breaking the routine of the game being played in the street, it changes the emotion from playful to tense. Another example would be a thief entering the scene of a lover's argument in a store; this not only breaks the routine of the argument between the couple, but also introduces a new energy and mood.

It is important to note that *any* offer can be vertical or horizontal. What will affect the type of offer is dependent on two factors:

7 See Johnstone (1989) for more on this topic, pg. 138-142

1. The intent of the Ninja actor offering the bid.
2. The way the offer is accepted (or rejected) by the other actors, especially the teller's actor.

This second factor is the more critical factor and will depend on the type of actor playing the teller's actor. (Fast) Initiators tend to endow the Ninja offer to vertical or horizontal, depending on their perception of what is needed in the scene. Reactors tend to allow the Ninja Actor to endow herself. For example, a Ninja Actor can choose to come onstage as a ticking clock to a scene set in a living room. The teller's actor (and other actors on stage) can choose to see this as a horizontal offer, keeping the clock in the background, allowing it to help build the tension of the scene. Alternatively, the teller's actor can choose to see the clock as a vertical offer, which evokes him to a dialogue with the clock, which tells him about his grandfather's secret chamber in the bedroom, which the teller's actor goes off to explore. As a vertical offer, the Ninja is moving the story to the next scene....

Finding the right balance and rhythm between Vertical and Horizontal offers prevents two problematic tendencies in narrative performance that Wiener (1994, pg. 99) discusses: Advancing the action too fast without dwelling on the emotional (all narrative, no color), or dilating the narrative with too much description and color, avoiding the "danger" in the story development (all color, no narrative).

Before we move onto the different types of Ninja actors, let us outline the typical characteristics of Initiators and Reactors in regards to vertical and horizontal offers.

Typical characteristics of a Reactor PT actor:

- Prefers not to be chosen as teller's actor (whether consciously or not).
- Tends to look early for ninjas when beginning scene as the teller's actor. The scene will begin and she will call out for other characters.
- When playing a Ninja actor, tends to initiate horizontal offers – Naturally, she will excel in offering horizontal offers

Typical characteristics of a Initiator PT actor:

- Prefers to be chosen as the teller's actor rather than Ninja roles (whether consciously or not).
- Will enjoy delivering a solo monologue on stage.
- When playing a Ninja actor, tends to initiate vertical offers – naturally, she will offer vertical offers that move the story forward.

Different types of Ninjas

From my experience, there are three distinct kinds of Ninjas in PT: Vocal Ninjas, non-human Ninjas and human Ninjas.

Vocal Ninjas

These ninjas do not even need to enter the stage; their contribution can be solely vocal, which can be vertical or horizontal bids:

- Song – singing different songs.
- Sound effects – cracking of a door, bird singing, cough, phone ringing, breaking of glass...
- Speech – someone talking with the teller's actor on stage, the announcer in the baseball game, person on the other side of the phone...

I have noticed that if and when there are two (or more) simultaneous vocal bids, they become a "chorus" which serves as a horizontal offer, giving energy to the current mood of the scene. In this case, the sudden stop of the chorus into silence can be a vertical offer, which "throws" the teller's actor to the next emotional scene.

Non-human Ninjas

These are offers that come on stage in non-human form. They can be animals (natural or invented), physical Objects or abstract objects (colors, energy, locations).

Again, the object can be a vertical or horizontal offer, depending on the intent and nature of the offer by the Ninja and the teller's actor's reception of that offer.

It seems that there are three relevant spheres from which non-human offers can be drawn. To illustrate these possibilities I will use examples from a scene in which the teller has a big fight with her husband in a shoe store whether or not to buy a new pair of expensive boots:

1. Direct sphere – Objects, animals or energies directly mentioned in the story. In our example it could be the boot, the price tag, the counter, the shelf that displays the boot...
2. Secondary sphere – This category includes non-human offers that are “one removed” from the actual story. In continuation of the previous example, these offer could be the stairs inside the mall that are across the shoe store, or the car waiting in the parking lot.
3. Meta sphere – This category includes objects that are on a different level to the story, be it metaphysical (such as god, angels, planet earth) or a more general level (such as the boot factory or the cow from which the boot leather was made).

In workshops we found certain directions for effective non-human offers. These directions include:

- A. Non-human offers that are part of a turning point or focal point of the scene (the specific boot that is to be purchased or the price tag).
- B. Non-human offers that can give voice to another character or point of view in the story (for example, the husband's shoe).
- C. Non-human offers that are emotionally charged in regards to the teller. (for example, the sock on the wife's leg, the old shoes the wife is currently wearing).
- D. Non-human offers that can identify with the teller feelings regarding their own reality (for example, the right boot can have a fight with the left boot about the space between them).

Human Ninjas

This type is the most common in PT ensembles. Here the Ninja actor enters the stage as a human, whether alive or dead: the father, neighbor, friend, dead sister, biblical character and so forth.

As you read through these types of Ninjas, you may recognize your preference as a Ninja actor. I remember one actor in my previous PT Company, who would always enter as a non-human ninja, with a gift for creative vertical offers. It is this awareness of a company that allows the group improvisation to be rich and diverse.

Now let's look at some short forms that can be tailored to fit the Ninja actor's needs and responsibilities.

Two types of Ninja short forms in long forms

Beyond the individual offers the Ninja actor can bring, there are two short forms that seem to assist Ninjas during enactments: Ninja Choruses and Ying Yang.

Ninja Chorus

Similar to the vocal ninja, The Ninja Chorus comes on stage together, consciously choosing whether the chorus is a vertical or horizontal chorus. Naturally, the chorus tends to be a horizontal offer, due to the amplifying effect it can have on emotional tone of the scene. The Chorus can be human, such as the other customers at the restaurant, or it can be a non-human chorus, such as the other animals in the zoo.

Finally, the chorus can be abstract, such as the desert chorus or the love chorus. The importance of the Ninja chorus is its relatively quick exit from the stage after it has served its purpose as a vertical or horizontal offer.

Ninja conflict – Ying and Yang

Deep in the Eastern thought, there is the concept of Ying and Yang: One cannot exist without the other/opposite. How can you know joy if you don't know sorrow? How can there be light without darkness?

In this context, the Ninja can complete an image/feeling on stage by offering an opposite/mirror bid on stage. For example, amidst a love scene in a park between the teller's actor and his soon to be fiancé, a ninja can choose to be a sad and bitter old man sitting on the opposite bench. Or a scene in which an upset teller's actor stands in line with other impatient customers waiting for the bank to open after hearing on the news that the bank was robbed, the Ninja can choose to be the polite person happy to wait, which accents the anger and frustration of the teller's actor.

These offers should be clear and practiced so that the teller's actor does not engage in a long discussion with the Ninja, but rather "leans" on her to heighten the emotional energy in the scene.

Thoughts on Ensemble and casting in light of the Ninja actors

When we cast actors for a show, we must think of building a balanced team. We want to have slow and fast Initiators, who can jump forward in short forms, and offer vertical offers in the long form enactments. We also want to have slow and fast Reactors who can offer slower, "deeper" horizontal *bids* in the long-form and surprise the Initiators with bold, deep offers therefore inviting the Initiators to new situations.

There are actors who default as slow Initiators/fast Reactors. These actors are more flexible in their default mode, depending on the rest of the ensemble. If surrounded by fast Initiators, they will move naturally to be Reactors. If surrounded by Reactors, they will tend to initiate more often. All the possible combinations could explain differences in the energy of actors on different nights, with different ensembles.

If we see this typology in light of the "gift giving" aspect of PT, then we can see how each actor is positioned to give a gift to his fellow actor. The Initiator gives the Reactor the gift challenging her with a given idea, as well as creative vertical offers. The Reactor gives the Initiator the gift of enriching horizontal offers as well as a partner to bounce ideas off without blocking.

The Initiator who allows herself to slow down and to react more to the slower offers of the Reactor, will be surprised and challenged into new situations and characters that she couldn't have initiated on her own, thereby increasing her range (and her enjoyment) on stage.

The Reactor who will challenge herself to initiate more, will make bolder offers, not knowing how the rest of the ensemble will react to those offers.

In both cases, these actors may enter unconsciously a "liminal" space of PT. The actor who is grounded in self-awareness and challenges herself to take on the other tendency is in fact stepping *into* the liminality, thereby enriching the story and experience to the teller, audience and actors⁸.

8 The root of the shallow enactments stems sometimes from a "fear of liminality" (Fox, 1994, pg. 101)

A word about tellers choosing Initiators or Reactive actors

From my experience, I'm beginning to suspect that perhaps tellers unconsciously and consciously choose actors to play them based (among other things) on their Initiator/Reactor preference⁹. The audience gets an initial exposure to the actors in the short forms and perhaps does a quick "assessment" to see which actor fits their own energy. So tellers that are more reactive in their lives might choose an actor who is a Reactor, therefore seeing the teller's actor react to the world around her. Other tellers, who are more Initiators, might choose an Initiator PT actor to lead the enactment of their story.

We might see a parallel process between the teller's experiences *in* the story, to the actor's (not the character's) presence on stage. As Penny (2002) writes "they (the tellers) are asking that the actor meet the spirit with which they themselves told their story". If I translate Penny's words to our context, that "spirit" can be the tendency with which the teller experienced (and told) her story. For example, if the teller tells a story in which he was at the mercy of his boss, he might choose a Reactor to play him. A different teller, who shares a story how she decided to break up with her boyfriend upon discovering that he was an alcoholic, might prefer an initiating actor to lead her story.

There is a constant process of identification and projection of the audience onto the actors, which might translate into their choices of which actors will play them onstage. I suspect that the preferences of Initiator and Reactor stretch farther than just acting preferences, and can sometimes be a general tendency of that person. As "citizen actors" (Fox, 1994), these actors are similar to the audience that watches them in their preferences. This similarity in preferences is what gives the PT ritual its power.

In closing, we have tried to define and classify possibilities of the Ninja actor. We began with a simple typology of the default preferences of the Ninja actor and then moved on to categorize the different types of Ninjas and a few specialized forms for Ninjas to use. We ended with a few thoughts on casting, ensemble and teller-actor relationship.

There is much more to research in regards to the Ninja actor. How can PT actors extend beyond their default preference? Is there a way to reincorporate or merge smoothly the different preferences in the same actor or in the ensemble? What other specialized forms can aid Ninja's in working together to build a successful long form enactment? Future PT actors and conductors who continue to explore this fascinating theater experience will hopefully find answers to these questions as well as new directions for the Ninja actors.

Let me close with a Ninja mantra that I recite at the beginning and end of every Ninja workshop which encompasses the essence of the Ninja actor in PT in my eyes:

"I am Ninja
My Magic is Training
My Body is Control
My Strength is Adaptability
My Weapons are Everything That Exists"

(Extract from Jay Sensei's Tiger Scroll of the Koga Ninja, in Levy, 2007)

9 This could connect to the phenomenon of Tele between people as described by Moreno (1987).

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