

## **Sexuality and Eroticism in PT: The “forbidden” spaces of playback theater**

Assael Romanelli<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

As a Playback Theater (PT) instructor and conductor throughout the years I’ve noticed that we rarely hear a story in workshops or performances that specifically talks about sexuality and eroticism. Thus, I’ve rarely seen actors enact erotic or sexual stories. A few years ago, I started wondering why this is so and began investigating these topics in workshops. Since sexuality is a major part of our lives, I thought that many stories we hear in workshops and performances implicitly include aspects of the erotic and sexual elements.

I started reading about this topic and found a book called “Mating in Captivity” by Ester Perel (2007) that influenced me both as a therapist and a PT trainer. I will refer to this book throughout the article.

### **Definitions**

Let us begin by defining the illusive terms of intimacy, sexuality and eroticism.

Intimacy is defined as “A close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group”<sup>2</sup>. Perel (2007) adds that Intimacy requires repetition, familiarity and security. We focus on our partner, take care of him or her and expect the same, allowing ourselves to feel vulnerable.

Sexuality (or sexual) is defined as “Involvement in sexual activity, having sexual organs or reproducing by processes involving both sexes”<sup>3</sup>. For our purposes we will use this term to refer to the physical act with the male and female genitals.

Eroticism is defined as “The use of sexually arousing or suggestive symbolism, settings, allusions, situations in art, literature, drama, or the like.”<sup>4</sup> Perel sees eroticism as a space or sphere within a relationship that includes separateness: “Aggression, objectification and power all exist in the shadow of desire, components of passion that do not necessarily nurture intimacy. Desire operates along its own trajectory” (Perel, 2007, p. 31). This description echoes Schnarch’s (1997) emphasis of differentiation, the ability to maintain who one is within a relationship with someone important, as a key component of sexuality and eroticism. Therefore, when we want to play onstage the erotic space, we must create

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from dictionary.com: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/intimacy?s=t> on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from dictionary.com: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sexuality?s=t> and <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sexual> on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from dictionary.com: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/eroticism?s=t> on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

a space where there can be power dynamics, aggression and most of all objectification.

Since the intimate and erotic spheres are addressed directly and indirectly, in some of the stories we tell and hear in the PT experience (and possibly in our daily lives), it is important that we develop simple techniques that will enable us as PT actors to play back these sensitive, elusive, somewhat taboo spaces.

## Archetypes

In order to play erotic spaces, we must know if our character is male or female. Since we never know if the character we are chosen for is the same sex as we are, I find that it is valuable for actors to be able to access their male and female archetype onstage. According to Carl Jung, there is a collective unconscious that is the psychic system of a universal unconscious that is shared by all humanity<sup>5</sup>. Archetypes are defined as universal, archaic elements and images that derive from the collective unconscious<sup>6</sup>. These archetypes are autonomous, hidden forms, which are transformed once they enter consciousness and are given particular expression. As inherited potentials, entering the consciousness as images or manifesting them in behavior or interaction with the outside world can actualize them. I will focus on the two main archetypes relevant for our discussion: Anima and Animus<sup>7</sup>.

Anima is described as the unconscious feminine psychological qualities that a male possesses, or as a feminine inner personality. Animus is described as the masculine ones possessed by the female, or as a masculine inner personality.

I use the Anima and Animus in broader terms. Anima is the feminine essence/quality in all of us, and Animus the Masculine equivalent. We all have both of these archetypes and shift between them throughout our life. These two archetypes could be compared to the Ying-Yang Chinese concept<sup>8</sup> of complementary forces that interacting to form a synergistic whole. Both Archetypes exist together in every character in every story we tell and hear. In some stories, we can decipher which archetype was the dominant one in the teller, antagonist or other characters.

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5 Collective unconscious. (2014, April 16). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 09:25, April 20, 2014, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Collective\\_unconscious&oldid=604496213](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Collective_unconscious&oldid=604496213)

6 Jungian archetypes. (2014, April 1). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 07:38, April 17, 2014, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jungian\\_archetypes&oldid=602313089](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jungian_archetypes&oldid=602313089)

7 The following descriptions of Anima and Animus are taken from: Anima and animus. (2014, February 11). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 07:34, April 17, 2014, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Anima\\_and\\_animus&oldid=594993064](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Anima_and_animus&oldid=594993064)

8 Yin and yang. (2014, April 17). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 07:55, April 17, 2014, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yin\\_and\\_yang&oldid=604552894](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yin_and_yang&oldid=604552894)

In our workshops, we tried to actualize these unconscious archetypes so we can have better control and clarity in the PT enactments. I have found two simple ways to embody these archetypes on stage. These embodiments help the actor avoid superficial stereotypical gestures (such as high pitched noises to play women, low pitched voice to play men, emphasizing the chest to play women, walking heavily in order to play men and such...). Focusing on breathing, physical awareness and a clear mental image, all help to deliver a powerful archetypal character that is authentic as well as a deep representation of the archetypal nature of the story's character, which can lead to greater identification with the audience.

The way we embody the Animus archetype is by nasal breathing to the chest area while squeezing the buttocks muscles. The combination of these two activities, send a message to the unconscious mind of certain energy. We add to this physicalisation, the imagery of a *line*, accompanied with mental focus of wanting to achieve a goal, to penetrate. The movement in space within this archetype is in straight angles, focused and walking in perpendicular lines. Usually in workshops, participants confuse this archetype with the feeling of anger or competition. It is important to stress that this is an archetype that can experience a myriad of feelings.

The way we embody the Anima archetype is by relaxing our jaw, and opening our mouth so it forms a small circle<sup>9</sup>, and breath deep abdominal breaths (with or without a hand on the abdomen to help focus the breathing there). The imagery is that of a *circle*, with the mental focus of nurturing the space, bringing it into myself, connection. Body relaxed, legs shoulder length apart. The movement when practicing this archetype is circular motions, with round limbic movements. Participants usually confuse this archetype with feelings of love. Like previously stated, this archetype can experience a wide range of emotions, including those of anger, hatred, jealousy and such.

When physically embodying these two archetypes, participants usually experience different emotions, associations, thoughts and even songs. I suspect that these instinctual and intuitive associations, usually dormant, are connected to the person's archetype. It is interesting to note that not every male prefers (or feels most comfortable) in the Animus archetype, just like not every female prefers the Anima archetype.

We have notice that every actor has certain idiosyncratic archetypal reactions and preferences, when interacting with a partner of the similar or opposite archetype. These

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<sup>9</sup> This is similar to the relaxation technique used in Lamaze birthing classes. Lamaze point to the similarity between the opening of the mouth and the opening of the cervix.

idiosyncratic preferences are a great treasure for these actors, which they can use onstage to better embody the archetype.

Once the physicalization of the archetypes is understood, it is possible to categorize characters in the teller's story by what archetype dominated them in the story. We must remember that coming on stage, with a clear archetype, is a wonderful gift to the fellow actors, allowing a clear, powerful depiction that can reverberate on deeper levels beyond the superficial stereotypes of men and women. Playing with manifestations of these archetypes brought to the surface many general issues regarding gender and power in society, much larger discussions than just the erotic.

### **Intimacy and eroticism: Yes/and or either/or?**

We now focus our attention to two different kinds of energies or ways of relating in the intimate and erotic spheres. Perel (2007) writes that the “seeds of intimacy are time and repetition” (p. 21). She adds that one shouldn't perceive intimacy as a static feature of a relationship, but as “a quality of interaction that takes place in isolated moments and that exists both within and without long-term relationships... I no longer look at relationships as being either intimate or not. Instead, I track each couple's ability to engage in a series of intimate bids tendered over time” (p. 51). In short, intimacy requires us to see our partner as a complex, sensitive subject (in contrast to an object) where we can feel safe and secure.

For our purposes on stage, we found that the quickest way to build intimate moments with a fellow actor is by matching their breathing, maintaining eye contact (better to focus on one eye than to switch between both eyes), and to imagine the soul/child/sage in that person. One can also imagine that he or she shares a secret with their onstage partner, thereby creating an invisible wall around the couple, distinguishing them and the world. Another helpful technique we found was to imagine an invisible elastic “thread” or “light” connecting you and your partner (through your navels). All these techniques help establish quick intimate moments onstage that can in turn create and exhibit an intimate relationship onstage.

Eroticism, as described earlier, is a sphere of separateness, selfish enjoyment and objectification. It is a sphere of danger, power and uncertainty. Participants are usually surprised and challenged by this view of eroticism as not being “politically correct” or “sensitive”. Perel (2007) writes that indeed eroticism is seen as a dirty, which doesn't fit with the western ideas of equality and feminism. That being said, eroticism is still a part of everyone's life and therefore should find its way to the stage.

Our translation of this energy on stage is by objectification of our partner, which is the process of not seeing one's partner as a complete "person" but as an object that can give him pleasure. That can be achieved by not looking in his or her eye and seeing the special soul within, but rather to deconstruct that human to different objects. These objects are his or her body parts. There is no need to focus on the partner's genitals or to think "dirty" thoughts about them for this energy to come across to the audiences. It is enough to just to deconstruct the fellow actor to specific body parts, and focus on those parts that give the watcher pleasure. We found that even focusing on a button, stain or jewelry can give the effect of objectification.

Objectification can be done not only to humans but also to objects/ideas that we desire: Chocolate cake, a raise, a new car and more. This technique can be applied to onstage objects as well as to fellow actors who play these objects or ideas. I find that in workshops, when working with actors, better to use the term objectification instead of erotic, to help actors avoid embarrassment.

These two energies are very different in nature and in practice on stage. "We're walking contradictions, seeking safety and predictability on one hand and thriving on diversity on the other" (Perel, 2007, p. 4). That tension which runs throughout Perel's book, is the same tension we actors face onstage.

### How do we bring it all together to the stage?

We can now construct a matrix of four options every PT actor, whether a Ninja actor or the teller's actor, can choose from.

Archetype/ energy	Intimacy	Objectification (Erotic)
Anima		
Animus		

We repeatedly find that a strong, clear choice of archetype and energy by an actor helps enhance the emotional intensity and universality of the enactment. As written before, the actors can listen to the dominant archetype in every character as a way to help choose how to play that character's archetype onstage and then match it with the appropriate energy.

### Touch

"Not coincidentally, this entire emotional history plays itself out in the physicality of sex. The body is the purest, most primal tool we have for communicating... The body is a

memory bank for the sensual pleasures of the skin... a storage facility for the distress and frustration we endured, and the pain we have suffered” (Perel, 2007, p. 111–112). In regards to touch onstage within erotic stories, we found that no touch is necessary to create these spheres onstage (or even text for that matter). The essence of the erotic can be portrayed through archetypal embodiment and interpersonal focus on intimacy or objectification. That said, we experiment in our workshops in the four types of touch through the above matrix, and found that even minimal touch can be sufficient to deliver the sphere of eroticism, as long as both actors hold on to their archetype and energy<sup>10</sup>.

### **The “third” in PT**

“The presence of the third is a fact of life... acknowledging the third has to do with validating the erotic separateness of our partner” (Perel, 2007, p.198). This “third” is the person external to the relationship that helps maintain the erotic within the dyad, by adding the possibility that the partner is not belong solely to the relationship, therefore emphasizing the partner’s separateness. In our context, it is the Ninja actor<sup>11</sup>, who is not one of the main characters in the story, who can help accentuate the unique relationship between the teller’s actor and the antagonist.

The ninja actor can choose to play the opposite energy to the antagonist, thereby enhancing the unique nature of the relationship between the teller’s actor and the antagonist. For example, to help emphasize the intimacy of a romantic crush between a man and one of the girlfriends of his sister, The teller’s actor can choose to objectify the other actor playing the other girlfriend, and save the special, eye contact, intimate energy to the antagonist.

Or to best depict an actor wanting “more than just friends” with his roommate, the ninja actor can play the third roommate, who maintains an intimate dialogue with the teller’s actor, say around a card game, while the teller’s actor can slowly start objectifying the antagonist.

### **A few lessons learned from workshops**

Here are a few lessons we learned in workshops when playing with this matrix in workshops:

- In short forms, best that actors choose one clear choice in the matrix and avoid shifting between the energies.

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<sup>10</sup> A deeper investigation of these kinds of touch together with Contact Improvisation techniques seems relevant and can be beneficial.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the role of the Ninja Actor, see Romanelli, A. (2013). The challenge of the “ninja actor” in PT: Typology and tools in service of the Ninja actor. *Interplay*, 18(1), 30–34.

- When objectifying, it's hard to feel rejection or shame. In order to connect to those feelings, the actor should look his or her partner in the eye. We find that the moment of creating or breaking eye contact can be a vertical offer<sup>12</sup>, changing the emotional scene forward to a new emotion.
- To play an onstage relationship (or affair) that is erotic and intimate, both actors can switch often between visual expressions of intimacy and objectification, while matching and mirroring each other's body language. The physical mirroring that produces a basic intimacy, together with the visual objectification, create a combined energy of erotic intimacy.
- Any song that is sung in one of the four options in the matrix can enable a powerful enactment on stage, as long as the singer is clear on the archetype and energy he or she is singing with. Actors can change the lyrics to enhance the song's effect.
- Any text can be used in any one of the four matrix options. It is not necessarily the content, but the delivery of the song that shapes the erotic/intimate mood.
- Metaphors can be a great tool to use when enacting erotic stories. Using the matrix within the metaphors deepens their resonance. We found that the best metaphors are words, expressions, of actions that are part of the teller's story. Each story is rich in its unique symbolism and language, so harnessing the unique text as an erotic metaphor can generate a powerful enactment.
- In order to avoid constant direct objectification of the onstage partner's body, we found that objectifying a shared activity or object can be just as effective. For example, if the couple is drinking coffee, then objectifying the coffee, the taste, aroma, flavor and such, can be a satisfying expression of the erotic sphere in the relationship.
- When playing a love triangle/affair, best to act the two relationships separately and only then have a scene with all three actors onstage.

### **Bringing it all together**

Perel (2007) describes the meeting of the intimate and the erotic, called Erotic intimacy: "Erotic intimacy is the revelation of our memories, wishes, fears, expectations, and struggles within sexual relationship" (p. 105). I also believe that this typology and matrix, when played with its full range, can allow a complete, "round" depiction of the human experience: The feminine with the masculine, the intimate with the erotic, the subjective humane and the object, the teller's actor and the antagonist (with the help of the ninja actor).

I believe that PT companies that feel comfortable working together on erotic and sexual

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<sup>12</sup> For more on vertical and horizontal offers, see Romanelli, A. (2013).



spheres within their rehearsals, perhaps unconsciously send a message to the audiences that these taboo and prohibited spheres, are welcome to the stage. By respectfully and tastefully acting these spheres in “regular” stories, tellers might be able to see the full richness of their experience, and help resolve some of the tensions between the erotic and intimate.

In closing, “Erotic intimacy is an act of generosity and self-centeredness, of giving and taking... We need to be able to connect without the terror of obliteration, and we need to be able to experience our separateness without the terror of abandonment” (Perel, 2007, p. 112). These words, in my opinion, also sum up the secret of good ensemble work. Perhaps we can see ensembles as one big relationship that is trying to find the between the intimate and erotic. Perhaps also, the relationship between the audience and ensemble in a show, can be seen a heroic effort to balance separateness and connection, in order to create a complete, human experience.

## References

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