

Gabe Halak Batak; Batak Toba Ethnic Bodiedness Traditions as a Reference for Actor Training

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ABSTRACT

Gabe Halak Batak is a term that was born from research on the bodiedness traditions of the Batak Toba people which means "Being a Batak Person". This research was conducted to take advantage of the bodiedness traditions of the Batak Toba Ethnic Community, one of which is Tortor. The author's interest in the tortor is because there are basic techniques in the tortor which are named metaphorically and through this naming can be an 'entrance' for actors in the process of exploring their physiology. In this study, the authors implemented it for actors from the Aka Bodi Theatre group in Medan who came from three different ethnicities. This study uses ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches in collecting data and interrogating the process of physiological exploration applied to acting training at the Aka Bodi Theatre. The results obtained are that each actor who participates in the training process experiences a variety of sensitivities related to the Batak Toba ethnic culture and has visual references regarding the creation of actions in the training.

KEYWORDS

Batak Toba
Bodiedness
Reference
Actor Training
Aka Bodi Theatre

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INTRODUCTION

Theater can be considered as a visual and aural manifestation of the written word (Suzuki, 2015: 1). Through this opinion, Suzuki basically confronts the difference between theater and literary works that rely on characters as subjects that run stories. Actors are interpreted as the most important part of theatrical performances because they carry out the communication function on stage. However, in contrast to the opening sentence of this article, Suzuki also stated that the hallmark of theater lies in the spontaneous sensation that comes from the actor's body. These feelings were ultimately concluded to originate from the imagination and rich linguistic heritage of the actor's body.

One of the most critical things about the actor's performance process is how the actor arranges the process of taking his actions for the purpose of conveying the text of the performance. Even though the dialogue or action originates from written text or nebensache, in turn the text is transformed into a body; 'letters become flesh, words become hugs, sentences become celebrations', and so on. This transformation is the most tempting part of a theatrical performance. Actor's performance that starts from written text (drama) of course often falls on the quality of imitation of characters and actors who try to practice imitating the behavior of characters in an effort to identify themselves with these characters (Lecoq, 2006: 2).

Most actors are tempted to choose acting practice through a theory that has been mapped out rather than constructing a flexible but strong practice as a foundation that refers to the development of an ever-evolving and living practice (Hess, 2016: 1). This problem actually

becomes an attempt to seek authenticity for artistic expression in theatrical productions or more specifically the acting performance. Especially with the development of today's theater discourse which offers many alternatives, namely; intracultural theater, intercultural and so on.

Accordingly, Nascimento (2008: 56) questions whether the artificial constructions carried out by actors in their acting work come from the domain of their own culture or outside their culture. This will determine how the actor will learn how to move, how to speak, intensively interpret his actions and communicate them. It can be concluded that the professionalism of an actor can be tested through the training process he undergoes to gain expertise in carrying out his duties as an "actor".

With the development of theater discourse that is increasingly inclusive and approaches that are increasingly eclectic, the role of the audience as one of the 'conditions' for a performance to occur becomes increasingly real. Nascimento is also worried about the actor's performance process and the audience's tastes which tend to override ethnicity and cultural behavior with the assumption that the actor's choice of action is related to the body as a natural thing for the audience's taste. This is related by Nascimento to intracultural theatrical performances where the audience often obscures the actor's idea of the body as a trained instrument (Nascimento, 2008: 53).

The trends described above are associated with the author's acting training activities that the author manages in the Aka Bodi Theatre group. The Aka Bodi Theatre group is a creative forum formed in 2017 with the aim of building an acting laboratory based on ethnicity. With this aim, Aka Bodi Theatre is committed to conducting research on certain ethnic cultures related to the repertoire which is the focus of group performance and the individuals involved in it. However, the most important thing is that the research is in the context of finding references that can be transplanted into the actors' bodies in order to build the conditions needed during the process even on stage.

In this context, if we use Eugenio Barba's point of view, it can be called a step to fulfill the actor's efforts in searching for his pre-expressive principles. The goal is to build an imaginary network that is able to provide encouragement to actors in moving the body (Barba, 2003: 10). The references obtained by the actor can influence the actor's physical state which reciprocally affects the mental state. So it can be understood that the incubation of these references into the actor's body cannot be directly related to the search for motion for a particular theater style (**contemporary theatre, for example**) instead it becomes a way to unlock even richer potentials from the actor's body.

Actor's performance in the realm of theater studies has undergone a paradigm shift and development, from the paradigm of "actor as interpreter of text" to "actor as creator". So it is not surprising that in the international theater arena, many academics and practitioners are redefining acting and its actor's performance. The prevailing paradigm in the development of post Diderot's discourse on actorhood is that actors are expressive beings who articulate their actions in a coherent manner, engage with the circumstances given to production (Blair, 2007: 51).

In the process of acting training at the Aka Bodi Theatre, the author first researches the culture that will be explored and becomes a reference for the actor's body. In the last one year of research, the authors focused their attention and research on the bodiedness traditions of the Batak Toba ethnicity. The uniqueness of the Batak Toba ethnicity is the musical and dancing traditions that have been deeply integrated into all life processes; birth, marriage as the birth of a new life, death, etc. Therefore, the writer has an interest in immersing himself in the traditions of the Batak Toba ethnicity while looking for traditions that can be

transplanted into the bodies of the actors of Aka Bodi Theatre. In this study, the authors implemented it for actors from the Aka Bodi Theatre who came from three different ethnicities.

There are various traditional activities carried out from generation to generation by the Batak Toba Community and generally these activities are carried out regularly and in an orderly manner within a predetermined series of activities (Heniwaty, 2022: 3). Most of the traditions carried out by the Batak Toba people are still related to sacred values, purity and high religiosity. In addition, the life of the Batak Toba people is closely intertwined with their traditional philosophy, namely *Dalihan na tolu*. This Batak Toba traditional philosophy has been integrated into all activities carried out by the Toba Batak community. *Dalihan na tolu* also becomes a social system that regulates the social patterns that apply in the kinship circle of the Batak Toba community. In short, *Dalihan na tolu* becomes a pattern of thinking and a pattern of behavior or it can be said as a fundamental guideline for the Batak Toba people.

In this article, the author will focus on the physiological conditions and exploration of actors when dealing with the bodily culture of the Batak Toba ethnicity. So that each training can be explained in depth, the author limits the discussion to exploring the basic movements found in the *Tortor*. *Tortor* for the Batak Toba ethnic community is a manifestation of their life values which are integrated in every life event or activity. The *Tortor* is used by the Batak Toba people to convey every wish, desire, prayer, and expression of feelings (Heniwaty, 2022: 19).

In this study, the authors used a physiological exploration approach which included landscape motion, senses and energy centers (Hess, 2016: 34). Motion landscapes are often named metaphorically which can help actors to enter into their allegorical settings and can help actors to break down the conditions in which bodies are used to being categorized into certain cultures. Sense stimulation is needed to bring up memories or associations with a condition that allows the actor to get his emotional value. In addition, Hess also explained that the energy center is often only focused on survival, the desire for power and sex but they do not understand that sometimes their dominant energy center is located in other parts of the body. Therefore, it can be said that the process of finding bodiedness references of the Batak Toba ethnicity is also an exploratory work for acting.

Based on that, in general the approach used in this study is the approach of performance studies in theater production (theater studies), namely studies that focus on the development of theater theory, the production of the socio-environmental system involved, as well as the socio-cultural context of theatre. Considering the limitations of this research, the approach used is actually close to what is called by Kershaw and Nicholson (2011: 7) with a multidisciplinary approach because it is produced in the transaction of theater science with cultural practices that involve a collection of expertise. In addition, it is also an interdisciplinary approach because it requires a combination of knowledge from other disciplines to create quality from the study of the performance of the actors to be studied.

METHOD

This research on the use of the bodiedness traditions of the Batak Toba ethnicity makes training documentation the primary data, which can be compared with other data in the form of literature and interview results. According to Lono Simatupang (2013), the need for this data has implications for data collection techniques which include: documentation studies, literature studies, archival studies and interviews. Thus, this research is a qualitative research using textual analysis as well as contextual analysis. The approach used is a qualitative

approach with descriptive analysis method. The data sources are observations of the actor's performance process, documentation of performances and rehearsals, results of interviews and notes during the process. Based on these data, an analysis was carried out on the effects and impacts of using the bodiedness tradition of the Batak Toba ethnicity as a reference in actor training at the Aka Bodi Theatre.

The method that the author uses to interrogate the process of acting training at the Aka Bodi Theater is ethnography and autoethnography. Ethnographic research actually requires in-depth and collaborative involvement in seeing the various possibilities contained in a study. Douglas Foley (in Campbell and Lassiter, 2015: 3) states that the most important things in becoming an ethnographer are knowing yourself, the desire to learn together, being a patient listener, and taking others seriously. This research requires involvement and commitment to communicate and build collaborative relationships.

Ethnographic research is based on human relationships and therefore requires a commitment to evaluate assumptions made when dealing with other people. A deep commitment to being in a certain environment and a certain level of involvement is also very much needed to know the effect and impact of the training carried out. The author uses autoethnography when communicating with actors from the Aka Bodi Theatre, both when conducting interviews or involved observations. Autoethnography actually gives the impression that the writer is a person who is really involved in the process carried out by the actors due to the author's professional background as a lecturer who teaches in the Acting Laboratory class and identity as an actor and director in the Aka Bodi Theatre group.

Ethnographic interviews will be a data collection technique used to explore the body traditions of the Toba Batak ethnicity. Besides that, it also relates it to the effects and impact of training on Aka Bodi Theater actors during the training process. The ethnographic interview was chosen because as a narrative tool, the writer can give the research subject the freedom to tell stories about themselves. The meaning of interviews can be contextual, improvisational and performative (Dillard in Denzin, 2003: 81).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the recent development of theater studies, the process of training and acting has become one of the discussions that has received a lot of attention and is considered a source of knowledge (Kershaw, 2011: 137). The process of acting training and actor performance carried out by an actor often raises questions about what potential is found when conducting research related to the performance that will be faced by actors. In the training process, actors will also try to explore their physical, mental and intellectual creativity in order to find an 'entrance' for the actions they will produce in their acting performance.

Actor training aims to develop the actor's body accompanied by the development of his creative logic. In this study, the use of Batak Toba culture as a reference for training is not intended only as a "cultural souvenir"; in fact, through this long-term training, it can shape the way actors think about their theater and the staging process in acting practice (Nascimento, 2008: 55). Reflecting this opinion, in a theatrical performance, the actor's task is not only to return himself to everyday reality but to use his contemporary life as an entry point to find himself in another reality or alternative fiction (Suzuki, 2015: 28). So that the utilization of Batak Toba culture can be used as a creative way for actors to enter their fictional life as Batak people or similar to the title of this article, namely '*Gabe Halak Batak*'.

Follow-up aimed at realizing research results and implementing the actor training mentioned above, the authors used three actors from Aka Bodi Theater who were brought up in different ethnic traditions, namely; (1) Herniati Putri was born and raised in **Acehnese**

culture, (2) Nur Ainun Pulungan was born and developed in the **Mandailing tradition**, and (3) Nabilla Manurung who has the Batak Toba clan but grew up in a **Malay cultured** area so that the culture that sticks to her is the culture Malay. The writer chooses the three actors to see how this training impacts the actors, especially on the body. The training, which is centered on the physical exploration of the Toba Batak ethnic tradition, takes about three months, starting from April to June 2023.

According to Grosz (in Shepperd, 2013: 33) the body has a sign that is formed or passed down through history and the specifics of its existence. Therefore, the body can be a medium for making biographies or as a way to talk about social conditions. Grosz further stated that the making of history must include the 'raw materials' from which the body is produced as well as its internal possible conditions, the tastes that shape it, preferences, movements, habits, postures, and other specialties. In the writer's opinion, *tortor* can be used as raw material in which actors are able to explore themselves when they identify themselves as Batak people. Furthermore, in the training process it is found how the actor's experience of physical movement gives birth to real, meaningful actions.

In physical exploration, there is a tendency where actors will show more feelings than tendencies to play. This seems natural because usually the body does have certain active reflexes to experiences that have been felt or had. So that in the process of physical exploration of the *tortor* being carried out, the author also records the original meaning contained in the movements used and the emotional sensations that arise for the actors in the process of the physical exploration exercise. *Tortor* for the Toba Batak ethnic community is the embodiment of their life values which are integrated in every event or life activity. The *Tortor* is used by the Toba Batak people to convey every wish, desire, prayer, and expression of feelings (Heniwaty, 2022: 19).

The word *Tortor* is taken from the word *manortor* which means 'to vibrate'. In addition, the word *Tortor* is also mentioned as onomatopoeic because it comes from "*turtur*" which is an imitation of the sound of people walking on stilts with floors made of wood. Marnala (in Heniwaty, 2022: 19) mentions that the footsteps were initially accompanied by the rhythm of the *Gondang* so that later they were called *Tortor*. There are several basic techniques used to master the *tortor*, namely; hand techniques, foot techniques, head techniques which in this study will be limited to exploring hand and foot techniques.

Exploration of Tortor's Deep Hand Technique Mangalo Mara and Patoru Diri

This motion exploration is carried out by following the original motion of the *manortor* activity (doing *tortor* is called *manortor*). In the original activity, this movement is done by stretching the arms forward while simultaneously lowering the right and left hands to follow the tempo of the music. This movement is often done while doing the *urdot* movement. This movement is distinguished between a male movement called *Mangalo Mara* and a female movement called *Patoru Diri*. However, in the exploration process, the author doesn't restricted his movements to movements that contain gender differences. In a sense, there are no restrictions on movements that may or may not be carried out based on gender. This is not intended to violate the cultural rules that apply to that culture, but the emphasis is more on the creative process and certain conditions that result.

In carrying out this movement, the author relates it to the energy center of the actors, namely conditions related to weight, harmony, ability, awareness, size, shape, and space. When doing this movement, the actor has quite a lot of weight on the legs where when the actors move their hands, they have to concentrate on doing *urdot*, which feels almost the

same as a squat movement. When the actor has the leg resistance to do *urdot*, there will be alignment between the hands and feet. However, in the long-term training that the authors do, it is necessary to emphasize getting used to breathing as normally as possible so that when performing this movement the actor doesn't look stiff.

This movement basically means the hope of the Toba Batak people so that their lives in the future will avoid danger and also implies the humility of the Toba Batak people. (Heniwaty, 2022). Reflecting on that, the actors get the sensation of being ready to receive something that is coming from outside or being ready to welcome something that is to come.



Figure 1. the habit of holding your breath when doing this movement makes the actor seem stiff

Manaen Roha

This movement is done by opening the hands slowly to the front of the chest then slowly turning to the right and left. If the author uses the perspective of Hess (2016: 112) regarding seven physiological states, this movement is centered on the state of the heart which is a symbol of the 'core self' of humans. This movement implies the openness of the Batak people in social life and openness to bear the burden together. In this movement training, the actors sometimes consciously show the interaction of their feelings with their training partners because they are triggered by their individual emotions and memories. Likewise with the process of its formation, actors when dealing with movements that have strong emotional impulses are often triggered to realize the character they want.



Figure 2. *Manaen Roha* movement is carried out by giving suggestions in accordance with the metaphors compiled by the Batak Toba ethnic community

Mangait Siamun

This movement is done by resting on the feet while the body is tilted alternately to the right and left. Meanwhile, the movement of the hand is done by placing the right hand in front while bending the fingers and slowly pointing to the left until it meets the left hand which is placed on the waist, and vice versa. When the writer shares the meaning contained

in this movement, the actors feel the weight of doing the movement. The author tries to interrogate further regarding the sensation that arises from within the actor when he knows the meaning of the movement is that the foundation feels weak. This is also related to the physiological conditions mentioned by Hess when the roots or legs feel weak, the feeling of self-existence also feels weak.



Figure 3. *Mangait Siamun* Movement has a meaning that is intended for boys to be able to be responsible for the family later

Marembas

One of the actor's favorite movements in this training. is the Marembas movement that describes the joy of the Toba Batak people. The feeling depicted by this movement is indirectly carried over into the mood of the actors in performing this dynamic movement. This movement is done by clenching the hands and then swung while crossing them in front of the chest and then lowering them. There is no burden felt by the actors in carrying out this movement, but the actors are still less varied in the exploration carried out on this movement, which the authors assume that this movement has a strong spirit of happiness.



Figure 4. Dynamic movements and exhilarating atmosphere are built when doing *marembas* movements

Somba

Somba is divided into three forms namely; (1) Somba Debata to honor God as the creator of the heavens and the earth, is done by bringing the right and left palms together in front of the face without going over the head. (2) Somba Raja to respect traditional elders, is done by placing the hands in front of the chest accompanied by movements to the right and to the left (3) Somba Situan na Torop to respect people in the surrounding environment is done

with the hands in front of the chest just like somba raja but in its implementation directed in four directions. The use of somba in this training practice is to understand the values of manners internalized by the Batak people which of course can be used to understand the social position of characters or even the position of actors in certain events.



Figure 5. Somba Debata, Somba Raja and Somba Situana Na Torop (from left to right)

Tangan Dibutuha

Before doing something or starting an action, always start with a ready attitude. In the tortor tradition, there is a certain position that indicates readiness to initiate a movement called the *tangan dibutuha*. This movement is distinguished between men and women, in which when carrying out this movement, the male's hands are straight and loose at the sides of his body. Meanwhile, women's movements are distinguished by the position of the left hand neatly squeezed by the right hand and then placed on the stomach.



Figure 6. there is a difference between the men's movement (in the center) and the women's movement (right-left)

Exploration of Foot Techniques

Patsiamun itarik tu pudu

This movement is the first basic technique on the legs where the actor must form a pedestal that is carried out by bending both knees and crossing his legs. Position the left foot behind the right foot and point the sole of the left foot. The position of the right foot treads

to support the actor's body weight. Being in this position for a long time causes a sore effect on the thighs, but after getting used to it actors often use it as a basis for variations in finding action in performance.



Figure 7. the strength and endurance of the thighs are quite tested in this movement because of the high-intensity kicking

Serser

This movement seems simple but requires concentration and coordination of balanced leg movements. Therefore it takes sensitivity to the rhythm of motion in order to avoid the risk of sprains due to frequent friction with the floor. Sometimes actors find it difficult to do this exercise on the mat because sometimes actors find their fingers tucked between the mats. This movement is done by moving the feet to the right and left smoothly and slowly. This movement is done by forming a triangle on the soles of the feet and bringing the big toes together, then bringing the heels together alternately.



Figure 8. starting with bringing the big toes together and then bringing the heels together alternately.

Urdot

This movement is the main movement pattern in the tortor, which is carried out with the knees and thighs as the support, this is carried out throughout the dance. This movement is done by moving the body up and down to the beat of the music. In exploring this movement, writers often offer certain metaphors for the actions to be performed by actors and accentuate them through their physical expressions.

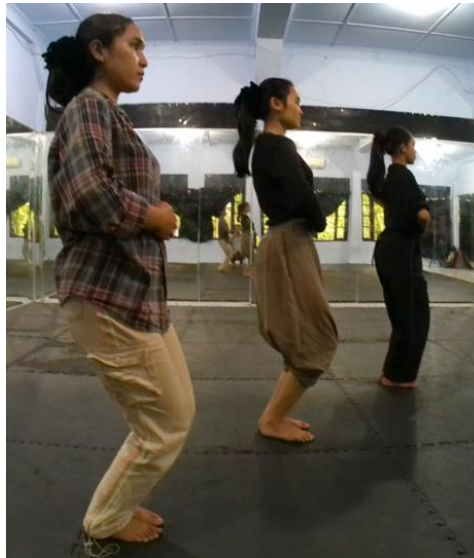


Figure 9. *Urdot* Movement

In the process of searching for references to the actor's body and investigating the performance of the actor, the writer finds many interactions with various scientific fields, or encounters with acting methods that have been well established by fellow theater practitioners. Likewise with the data search process in the field where sometimes when we immerse ourselves in the designed research setting, the acting training approach is designed to resonate with aspects of the creativity of the Toba Batak people who are the source of this research. In fact, the process of finding references is still the first step in developing acting methods based on the Toba Batak ethnic tradition.

CONCLUSIONS

The existence of actors is interpreted as the most important part of theatrical performance because they carry out the function of communication on stage. One of the most critical things about the actor's staging process is how the actor manages his action process for the purpose of conveying the performance text. This problem actually becomes an attempt to seek the authenticity of artistic expression in theatrical productions or more precisely acting performances. Therefore, actors need to train themselves or more specifically in this study train the body by conducting physiological explorations through the bodiedness tradition of the Batak Toba ethnicity, namely *tortor*.

The actor training process involved three actors from the Aka Bodi Theatre community who came from different cultural backgrounds from the Toba Batak culture which was the center of the research. The actor training period is carried out within three months which lasts from April to June 2023. In this physiological exploration, the authors focus on exploratory training on hand and foot techniques from the *tortor* tradition. In some techniques that require calm, the actor often doesn't even do breathing control, so it needs to be emphasized to get used to breathing as normally as possible so that when doing this movement the actor doesn't look stiff. Likewise with leg techniques that require more strength in the knees and thighs. Actors are required to be able to hold their body weight for a relatively long time. But slowly, this acting exercise has a relatively significant impact when dealing with movements that have strong emotional impulses that are often triggered to realize the desired character.

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