



Carrying the Chorus: Ensemble Theatre as Pedagogical Praxis

Prafulkumar Panchal

Theatre Arts Researcher and Practitioner, The Earthing Group, Gujarat, India.

[Underwood University, Georgia, United States]

Abstract

*This study investigates ensemble theatre as a form of pedagogical praxis by analysing the author's participation in *Socrates (Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas)*, produced by the Ahmedabad Theatre Group (ATG) under Rajoo Barot in 2014. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection and qualitative observation of forty performers, the article argues that collective performance functions as an embodied mode of learning that refines artistic, cognitive, and ethical awareness. Using Eugenio Barba's notion of the "bios of the actor" (1995: 11) and Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour" (2002: 28) as theoretical frames, the study reveals how chorus-based dramaturgy cultivates timing, listening, and spatial ethics. Data were collected through rehearsal journals, semi-structured interviews with fellow actors, and observation notes, following ethical approval. Findings demonstrate that ensemble practice constitutes a living curriculum, integrating performance literacy, design sensibility, and democratic collaboration. The study contributes to contemporary performance pedagogy by positioning ensemble theatre not merely as artistic production but as a method of learning that extends into everyday social praxis.*

Keywords: Ensemble Theatre, Autoethnography, Actor Training, Pedagogy, Ahmedabad Theatre Group.

INTRODUCTION

Ensemble theatre is more than a production method; it is a way of knowing that integrates artistic technique, ethical practice, and social imagination. In re-tracing an actor-researcher's journey through Ahmedabad Theatre Group's (ATG) *Socrates (Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas)* (2014–), this article frames the chorus not as a decorative sign of "Greekness" but as a pedagogical engine that organises bodies, timings, and attentional ethics. Within performance studies, the idea that behaviour is learned and re-learned through repetition is axiomatic: as Schechner argues, performance is "twice-behaved behaviour" composed from "strips of restored behaviour" that can be "stored, transmitted, [and] transformed" (Schechner, 1985: 36–37). This introduction situates the ATG project in relation to key debates on actor training, performance-as-research, and Indian theatre pedagogy, and articulates the problem this study addresses: the relative under-theorisation of ensemble-scale processes as pedagogy in contemporary Indian theatre discourse.

Actor Training, Embodiment, and Ensemble Practice

Twentieth-century reformulations of actor training—from Stanislavski's psychophysical approach to Grotowski's *via negativa*—share a conviction that training re-makes the performer's perception of time, space, and relation. Grotowski

famously stripped the theatre to its essentials—actor and spectator—seeking "poverty" so that technique becomes an ethical and psychophysical "*via negativa*," a method of elimination rather than accumulation (Grotowski, 1968: 17–19; 211–218). The ensemble intensifies this process by externalising attention: my breath is calibrated not only to text but to the pulse of adjacent bodies, sightlines, and light cues. In Barba's theatre anthropology, this shift is theorised as movement from daily behaviour to the "pre-expressive" organisation of presence (Barba, 1995: 8). Where individual technique organises a single body, ensemble craft organises many—producing a distributed cognition that renders timing, rhythm, and spacing teachable as shared practice.

Schechner's notion that "performance means: never for the first time...for the second to the nth time" (Schechner, 1985: 37) clarifies why the ATG rehearsal room functioned like a conservatory. Through repeated scores—choric entries, holds, and counter-flows—the ensemble learned to perceive micro-intervals as pedagogical units. The emphasis on restored behaviour does not diminish creativity; rather, it underwrites it, enabling variation precisely because a common score exists. The chorus thereby becomes a **situated curriculum** in which design choices (costume silhouettes, light architecture, sonic palettes) train performers to *listen with the eyes* and act with scenographic intelligence.

Citation: Prafulkumar Panchal, "Carrying the Chorus: Ensemble Theatre as Pedagogical Praxis", Universal Library of Arts and Humanities, 2025; 2(4): 60-69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulahu.2025.0204011>.

Autoethnography and Performance-As-Research

Methodologically, the paper adopts a hybrid of autoethnography and qualitative fieldwork—journals, rehearsal ethnography, and semi-structured interviews with fellow performers and the director. Autoethnography has legitimated first-person scholarly inquiry in performance, positioning the researcher’s experience as a route to cultural analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 733–734). Rather than offering confession, it proposes a reflexive method in which the “researcher as subject” becomes a site where social, institutional, and technical forces are traced (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 737–744). The study further aligns with performative research, in which creative practice is not simply the object but the **mode** of inquiry (Haseman, 2006: 100–104). In other words, the chorus is both the field and the method: the knowledge at stake is **procedural** (how timing is shared), **ethical** (how difference is negotiated), and **technical** (how light/sound/costume shape action).

To conceptualise spectatorship and the ethics of pedagogy, I draw on Rancière’s proposition that emancipation rests on the assumption of equal intelligence: the learner is not a passive recipient but an active translator who “learns by translating what she perceives into her own words” (Rancière, 2009: 13). In ensemble rooms, actors are simultaneously learners and translators; they read the score (movement, light, sound) and re-write it through situated decision-making. This resonates with ATG’s process where choric precision was achieved not by command-and-control but by distributed listening and mutual adjustment.

Locating the Indian Context: Institutions, Roots, and Experiment

In India, discourse on actor training has often orbited around institutions such as the National School of Drama (NSD), founded in 1959 and later becoming an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Culture (National School of Drama—official profile, 2025). While NSD formalised training and built an urban repertory culture, modern practice has also drawn energy from extra-institutional movements: Badal Sircar’s Third Theatre displaced the proscenium to build flexible, portable, low-cost forms centred on community encounter; its pedagogical implication is the actor’s **social** intelligibility (Sircar, 1978; Trowsdale, 1997: 1–3). Habib Tanvir’s Naya Theatre integrated Chhattisgarhi folk performers into contemporary dramaturgy, modelling a rehearsal room where bilinguality (linguistic and formal) becomes everyday pedagogy (Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 2009: 137–139). B.V. Karanth’s music-centred directing and deployment of regional forms (Yakshagana/Bayalatta) expanded actor training into vocal-rhythmic ensemble craft (Mukerji, 2009: 34–35; Burla, 2022: 3–4). The post-1970s Theatre-of-Roots movement—mapped extensively by Erin B. Mee—sought an Indian modernity by dialoguing with indigenous forms without mere folklorism (Mee, 2008: xiii–xvii; Awasthi, 1989: 11–14).

Amid these trajectories, ensemble-scale pedagogy within urban independent companies remains comparatively under-theorised. Scholarship richly documents intercultural debates (Bharucha, 1993: 1–6) and institutional histories, but **how** large ensembles train ethical attention and technical literacy—across design, timing, and choric listening—has received less granular analysis. This article aims to fill that gap by taking ATG’s process as a longitudinal case of **ensemble-as-school**.

Ensemble as Pedagogy: Design, Timing, Spatial Ethics

ATG’s *Socrates* refracted “Greekness” not as ornament but as **operations**: silhouette disciplines in costume trained the actor’s kinaesthetic economy; light “architectures” taught spatial ethics (don’t eclipse a fellow performer’s face; find the seam of visibility); choric movement encoded timing and attention. In Schechner’s terms, the score functioned as a contract—fixed enough to be rehearsable, open enough for situated choice (Schechner, 1985: 37–41). Interviews from the company highlight three learning vectors:

1. **Embodied cognition**: repeated choric scores recalibrated proprioception; actors reported sensing “traffic patterns” as if from above, anticipating turns before textual cues landed.
2. **Interdisciplinary literacy**: performers routinely handled presets, taping sightlines, adjusting gels—tasks that teach how scenography *breathes* with acting.
3. **Democratic imagination**: disagreements (tempo, dynamics) were negotiated dialogically; authority circulated rather than being monopolised. Here Rancière’s emancipated spectator becomes an **emancipated ensemble member**, translating and co-authoring the work (Rancière, 2009: 13).

The result aligns with Barba’s pre-expressive lens: the ensemble learns a common **bios**—a disciplined readiness across bodies that precedes individual expressivity (Barba, 1995: 8). Far from diluting artistic rigour, the chorus amplifies it by distributing responsibility: a missed breath is felt across forty bodies, turning attention into a shared ethic.

Why Autoethnography Here?

An actor embedded in the choric machine can describe **how** learning feels when it is collective: the *grain* of timing, the micro-rewards of precise presets, the ethical tug of not leaving a partner “in the dark”—literally. Autoethnography allows the researcher to integrate this felt knowledge with interview-based testimony, foregrounding tacit expertise often missed by external observation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 742–747). Because performative research asserts that practice **produces** knowledge (Haseman, 2006: 100–104), the field notes, cue sheets, and rehearsal scores function as both data and analytic lens.

Statement of Problem and Significance

Existing literature richly theorises training lineages

(Stanislavski–Grotowski–Barba), intercultural ethics (Bharucha), and Indian modern/postcolonial movements (Awasthi; Mee). Yet three interlinked questions remain under-addressed in Indian ensemble contexts:

- How does ensemble *scale*—forty bodies—operate as pedagogy?
- What kinds of knowledge (technical, ethical, civic) are learned when acting is inseparable from production literacy?
- How does a chorus train democratic imagination—listening, translation, mutual adjustment—as a transferable social skill?

This study argues that ensemble scale is not logistical excess but pedagogical form. It contributes (1) a vocabulary for choric pedagogy—*timing-as-ethics, design-as-literacy*; (2) an Indian case that complements institutional accounts; and (3) a methodological exemplar for integrating autoethnography with rehearsal ethnography.

Theoretical Anchoring: Restored Behaviour and Emancipation

Two theoretical nodes sustain the argument. First, **restored behaviour** clarifies how the chorus teaches: rehearsal re-composes “strips” into dependable, adjustable scores (Schechner, 1985: 36–41). The pedagogy lies in repetition’s *difference*—each run refines listening. Second, **emancipated participation** (Rancière) reframes training as shared intelligence rather than transmission from master to novice. The chorus presumes equality of attention; the “lesson” is produced by the group’s translations—“the spectator [or ensemble member] learns by translating what she perceives into her own words” (Rancière, 2009: 13). Together, these ideas model ensemble learning as both aesthetic and civic praxis.

Positioning within Indian Debates

By reading ATG’s choric process alongside Sircar’s anti-proscenium pedagogy (Trowsdale, 1997: 1–3), Tanvir’s folk-modern hybridity (Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 2009: 137–139), and Karanth’s musical dramaturgy (Mukerji, 2009: 34–35), the study proposes a continuum: from space to score to ethic. If Third Theatre relocates space, and Roots work re-sources technique, then ensemble pedagogy reorganises *time and attention* as the core curriculum. This complements institutional histories (NSD) by showing how independent companies operate as schools without classrooms - conservatories inside rehearsal rooms.

Contribution and Outline

The article contributes to performance pedagogy by naming and analysing ensemble-scale learning in an Indian urban theatre company; it contributes to methods by demonstrating a robust hybrid of autoethnography and rehearsal ethnography; and it contributes to ethics by articulating “democratic imagination” as a learnable

practice of attention. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: a literature review situates ensemble pedagogy across global and Indian discourses; a methods section details data and ethics; findings map three learning vectors (embodied cognition, interdisciplinary literacy, democratic imagination); discussion relates these to performance theory and pedagogy; and the conclusion identifies applications for training and community practice.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Building upon the preceding discussion of ensemble processes in Indian theatre, this section surveys the intellectual field that informs the study. It moves through global paradigms of actor training, practice-led inquiry, and intercultural performance, and converges on a theoretical articulation of ensemble theatre as pedagogical praxis.

The Living Archive of Actor Training

Actor training is often described as the invisible text of performance. Stanislavski’s system, articulated through *An Actor Prepares* (1936) and *Building a Character* (1949), defined acting as “a process of conscious psychophysical experience” (Stanislavski, 1936: 15). His insistence that technique serves truth became the foundation for modern rehearsal pedagogy. Jerzy Grotowski, advancing this lineage, reframed training as a “via negativa”—a process of elimination that reveals presence rather than constructs it (Grotowski, 1968: 17). In this sense, the performer’s body becomes both instrument and archive: the site where memory, precision, and vulnerability intertwine.

Eugenio Barba extended Grotowski’s vision through his “theatre anthropology,” identifying universal “pre-expressive principles” that generate extra-daily presence (Barba, 1995: 8–10). He defines the actor’s **bios** as “the organised energy that becomes visible through technique” (Barba, 1995: 11). Ensemble work magnifies this bios collectively; timing and spatial ethics emerge through inter-corporeal calibration rather than individual virtuosity.

Peter Brook’s writings converge with this ethos. In *The Empty Space*, Brook describes the director’s task as “creating the conditions for discovery rather than dictating results” (Brook, 1968: 57). Such facilitation re-situates theatre as pedagogy—a “field of concentrated attention” (Brook, 1993: xii). The ensemble thus functions as both aesthetic and ethical formation, a position echoed later by Schechner, who defines performance as “restored behaviour—behaviour that can be learned, transmitted, and transformed” (Schechner, 1985: 36–37). In this formulation, repetition is not mechanical but reflective: a rehearsal becomes an epistemic loop through which embodied knowledge is refined.

Performance-As-Research and the Legitimacy of Practice

By the late twentieth century, scholars and artists began to assert that practice itself produces knowledge. Haseman

called this **performative research**, arguing that creative practice “discloses a kind of knowing that is neither quantitative nor purely interpretive, but performative” (Haseman, 2006: 100). Barrett and Bolt (2010: 4) frame this as an epistemology grounded in “material thinking,” where making and reflection co-constitute inquiry.

Autoethnography emerges within this paradigm as a methodology capable of holding subjective, embodied experience within scholarly discourse. Ellis and Bochner describe it as research that “uses the researcher’s personal experience to understand cultural experience” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 733). Its credibility lies not in neutrality but in transparency and reflexivity: the scholar acknowledges positionality, turning emotion, embodiment, and context into data. For performance studies, this has been transformative—author-performers such as Deirdre Heddon show how autobiography and performance intersect as “a negotiation between the private and the cultural” (Heddon, 2008: 11).

Applied to ensemble theatre, autoethnography allows the actor-researcher to articulate tacit learning that rarely surfaces in external analysis—breath synchronisation, choric empathy, scenographic awareness. Practice is simultaneously object, method, and argument.

Intercultural and Indian Trajectories

The global theatre scene of the 1970s–1990s witnessed a surge of intercultural exchange. Barba’s Odin Teatret, Schechner’s Performance Group, and Brook’s international projects reconfigured rehearsal as a laboratory for transcultural learning. Yet Indian scholars such as Rustom Bharucha cautioned against uncritical appropriation, warning that “interculturalism without context risks repeating colonial hierarchies under aesthetic guises” (Bharucha, 1993: 5). He advocated for contextual negotiation – understanding performance encounters within their political and ethical conditions.

Within India, this negotiation took many pedagogical forms. Badal Sircar’s *Third Theatre* replaced the proscenium with open community spaces, making participation itself a lesson in egalitarian engagement (Sircar, 1978; Trowsdale, 1997: 2). Habib Tanvir’s *Naya Theatre* fused Chhattisgarhi folk performers with modern dramaturgy, demonstrating that tradition could function as living pedagogy rather than static heritage (Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 2009: 138). B. V. Karanth’s experiments with Yakshagana and music-driven ensemble craft taught rhythm as a form of collective reasoning (Mukerji, 2009: 34–35).

Erin Mee (2008: xv) identifies these directors as architects of the *Theatre of Roots* movement—a search for Indian modernity grounded in indigenous aesthetics. Yet, as she notes, while these practices generated profound pedagogies, academic attention often privileges directorial vision over actor learning. The present study redresses this imbalance by focusing on the ensemble as the true pedagogical agent.

Democratic Imagination and Pedagogical Ethics

Paulo Freire’s concept of *praxis*—“reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970: 87)—offers a bridge between performance training and social pedagogy. In an ensemble, learning occurs through reciprocal attention: each performer’s awareness conditions another’s. Jacques Rancière’s notion of the *emancipated spectator* deepens this connection; he posits that education begins when equality of intelligence is presumed, not imposed (Rancière, 2009: 13). Translating this to theatre, the ensemble becomes a classroom of equals where knowledge circulates laterally.

Applied to ATG’s *Socrates*, this framework positions the chorus as a democratic ecology. Technical tasks—adjusting light, taping sightlines, aligning sound cues—become moral exercises in mutual responsibility. The pedagogy is implicit: timing teaches care; design teaches perception; collaboration teaches ethics.

Ensemble as an Epistemic Framework

From this synthesis emerges the article’s theoretical foundation: **ensemble as pedagogy**. The ensemble is not only a means of staging but a mode of knowledge production that integrates the cognitive, corporeal, and communal. Following Barba’s *bios* (1995: 11) and Schechner’s *restored behaviour* (1985: 36–37), ensemble training operates as an ecology of attention—learning to listen, see, and respond across multiple sensory registers.

This framework also aligns with recent cognitive-performance studies suggesting that collaborative synchrony generates neuro-social learning loops (Gallese, 2017: 22; Cross, 2010: 13). Although not a neuroscience paper, the research resonates with such findings by evidencing how bodily co-ordination produces empathy and precision simultaneously.

In the Indian context, this epistemic model complements both the guru-shishya tradition’s emphasis on embodied transmission and the collective ethos of post-colonial theatre movements. Yet it departs from hierarchical models by decentralising mastery. The ensemble distributes authorship and therefore transforms pedagogy into co-authorship.

Conceptual Synthesis

To summarise the theoretical convergence:

1. **From performance theory:** Behaviour is learned, repeated, and transformed through restored actions (Schechner).
2. **From theatre anthropology:** Presence arises from pre-expressive organisation—discipline shared across bodies (Barba).
3. **From education theory:** Learning is praxis—a cycle of reflection and action grounded in equality (Freire; Rancière).
4. **From methodological innovation:** Practice-as-research and autoethnography legitimate embodied, situated knowledge (Haseman; Ellis & Bochner).

Together these strands form a framework where **ensemble theatre functions as an embodied curriculum**—a site of knowledge that is aesthetic, ethical, and social. In this view, ATG's *Socrates* becomes more than a production; it becomes a living classroom that trains the actor's eye, ear, and conscience simultaneously.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretivist design** rooted in **autoethnography** and **practice-as-research (PaR)**. As the researcher was both performer and observer in Ahmedabad Theatre Group's production of *Socrates (Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas)* (2014–), the study integrates embodied experience, rehearsal documentation, and ethnographic observation into a cohesive analytical framework. The purpose of this design is not to produce generalisable laws but to explore how learning occurs through ensemble collaboration, spatial negotiation, and choric attention.

The **performative research** paradigm (Haseman, 2006: 100–104) argues that artistic practice constitutes a valid mode of inquiry, generating “expressive form as data and outcome simultaneously.” In this sense, the rehearsal process functions as both the site of investigation and the medium through which knowledge is articulated. The ensemble becomes a “living laboratory” (Schechner, 1985: 40), and the actor's body an instrument of knowing.

Autoethnography allows this embodied knowledge to be narrated reflexively. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 733) define it as a form of research where “the researcher's personal experience illuminates cultural experience.” Its validity lies in the rigour of reflection, triangulation, and ethical transparency rather than statistical measure. In theatre studies, this methodology aligns with Grotowski's idea of “via negativa”—knowledge revealed through disciplined self-exposure (Grotowski, 1968: 19).

Research Context and Setting

The field site was **Ahmedabad Theatre Group (ATG)**, an independent company founded by **Rajoo Barot**, an alumnus of the National School of Drama. The 2014 production of *Socrates: Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas* served as the primary research environment. The play's structure—a large chorus of forty actors performing synchronised movement, gesture, and dialogue—created a multi-layered ecosystem of pedagogy and performance.

Rehearsals took place over six months (April–September 2014) at **Sundari Hall, Ahmedabad**, followed by performances across Gujarat and at the **20th Bharat Rang Mahotsav (NSD Festival)**. Over this period, the researcher alternated roles between performer (cast as “Ajes”) and observer, recording field notes, reflexive journals, and technical observations.

The ensemble's diversity—members aged 17–45, from

varied linguistic and educational backgrounds—offered an inclusive microcosm of collaborative learning. This heterogeneity proved pedagogically fertile, confirming Freire's proposition that “dialogue is born when the word is shared among equals” (Freire, 1970: 72).

Data Collection

Data were gathered through **three interrelated methods** over the period from 2014, ensuring depth and longitudinal consistency:

1. **Reflexive Journals and Field Notes**
 - Approximately 120 handwritten pages documented after rehearsals and performances.
 - Entries recorded sensory impressions (e.g., breath, rhythm, proxemics), group interactions, and technical adjustments (lighting, costume, sound).
 - Journals functioned as first-order data, embodying autoethnographic reflection.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews**
 - Conducted between 2014–2018 with six ensemble members (three female, three male) and the director.
 - Interviews explored perceptions of ensemble learning, role distribution, and artistic growth.
 - Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes and was transcribed verbatim.
 - Participant anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms (P1–P6).
3. **Archival and Visual Documentation**
 - Collection of 180 rehearsal photographs, 12 video excerpts, and technical cue sheets (lighting and costume).
 - These materials were used for movement and timing analysis, supported by observation of performance recordings.

This triangulated approach strengthened validity by intersecting introspective and observational perspectives (Denzin, 2012: 83).

Data Analysis

The analysis followed **iterative thematic coding** inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006: 79). Data from journals, interviews, and documents were read multiple times, coded manually, and categorised into three central themes:

1. Embodied cognition — understanding of timing, rhythm, and group movement through bodily interaction.
2. Production literacy — integration of technical, design, and logistical awareness into performance.
3. Democratic imagination — collective negotiation, empathy, and shared authorship.

The analytical process was cyclical. Codes evolved during writing, reflecting Haseman's principle that "in performative research, the outcomes emerge through doing" (Haseman, 2006: 104). Visual materials were analysed using **movement mapping** (Laban, 1966: 22) to identify recurrent choric patterns—entry diagonals, hold positions, and spatial echoes.

Analytic memos linked these patterns to theoretical constructs such as Barba's *bios* and Schechner's *restored behaviour*. For instance, one recurring observation—"actors entering at staggered beats created a living rhythm"—was interpreted as evidence of distributed learning through repetition, validating Schechner's notion of "behaviour restored and revised in each iteration" (Schechner, 1985: 39).

Methodological Limitations

While rich in depth, the approach has limitations. First, the insider perspective risks interpretive bias, potentially romanticising collective processes. To counter this, triangulation and member-checking were rigorously applied. Second, as qualitative research, the findings prioritise transferability over generalisability. The insights are context-specific but can inform broader models of ensemble pedagogy. Finally, due to the long temporal span (2014–2018), memory reconstruction may influence recall accuracy; hence archival data (scripts, photographs) were used to validate reflections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised into three interconnected dimensions that emerged from iterative thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 88):

1. **Embodied Cognition:** how ensemble performance trained bodily awareness, timing, and spatial ethics.
2. **Interdisciplinary Literacy:** how technical design and production processes became sites of creative learning.
3. **Democratic Imagination:** how collaboration fostered empathy, equity, and shared authorship.

These findings are discussed alongside theoretical insights from Barba, Schechner, Freire, Rancière, and others, situating the ensemble not merely as artistic collaboration but as a **pedagogical ecology** — an environment where embodied and ethical learning coalesce.

Embodied Cognition: Learning through Choric Synchrony

The first and most pronounced finding concerns the ensemble's development of embodied cognition - a learned capacity to sense, anticipate, and align one's movement with others.

During rehearsals for *Socrates*, forty actors performed in intersecting circles, entering and exiting through timed pulses marked by percussion cues. What appeared at first as choreography evolved into a pedagogy of listening.

As performer P2 recalled:

"After weeks of repetition, I could sense when the circle would open before I saw it. It was like feeling the rhythm beneath the floor."

This account exemplifies what Grotowski described as the "total act," in which "the actor's body and impulse are fused in one organised organism of signs" (Grotowski, 1968: 19). The precision demanded by the choric system transformed instinct into awareness, turning repetition into what Schechner calls "restored behaviour—behaviour that can be learned and re-learned" (Schechner, 1985: 37).

The data suggest that choric synchrony cultivated proprioceptive intelligence. Performers reported that ensemble timing sharpened their ability to read subtle spatial cues—light intensity, breath length, micro-gestural hesitation—creating a form of *kinaesthetic empathy*. This corresponds with Barba's notion of the actor's *bios* as "the visible organisation of energy" (Barba, 1995: 11). In the collective, this bios became distributed across forty bodies, each aware of its interdependence.

This embodied intelligence was not confined to performance. Participants noted that their attentional skills translated into everyday life: heightened sensitivity to space, sound, and group rhythm. As one actor observed, "I learned to wait before speaking, like waiting for the light cue." Such reflection aligns with Freire's conception of praxis—"reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970: 87). The ensemble's physical discipline thus extended into ethical comportment.

The findings confirm that **learning in the chorus is performative, not representational**: knowledge arises through the body's participation in structured, repeatable patterns. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological idea that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 146).

Interdisciplinary Literacy: Theatre as a Total System of Learning

The second major finding concerns how ATG's rehearsal structure dissolved disciplinary boundaries between acting, directing, and design. Actors routinely assisted with lighting, costumes, and props—a deliberate pedagogical design by director Rajoo Barot, who emphasised technical empathy as part of actor training.

This blurring of roles mirrors Eugenio Barba's insistence that theatre is "a meeting of energies, not of disciplines" (Barba, 1995: 58). The ensemble's participation in technical preparation—taping sightlines, pre-setting props, adjusting focus—was not ancillary labour but integral learning.

P5, a senior actor, explained:

"Once you know how a gel changes the mood of a scene, you never ignore the light again. You start acting *with* it."

Such insights reveal that production tasks became **acts of aesthetic literacy**—learning to “see the unseen” forces shaping a performance. As Heddon (2008: 42) notes, autoethnography often reveals the “microscopic textures” of practice overlooked by external observers. Here, the ensemble’s micro-labour—measuring, aligning, cueing—generated a practical curriculum in scenographic thinking.

This interdisciplinary literacy transformed the rehearsal space into what Brook (1993: xi) terms “a field of concentrated attention.” Barot’s direction, while rigorous, encouraged improvisation within structural limits. This pedagogical balance between structure and freedom resonates with Schechner’s theory of the “score” as both stable and dynamic (Schechner, 1985: 41).

Archival photographs and cue sheets analysed in this study revealed how aesthetic order emerged from cooperative negotiation. During a 2014 technical rehearsal, a lighting change designed by Kabir Thakor required the chorus to pause mid-step for two seconds—producing a luminous freeze. Actors later described this moment as “a collective breath.” This act of holding together—literally synchronising stillness—embodied what Rancière (2009: 13) calls “shared translation,” the moment when equality of attention becomes the basis of creation.

Thus, ensemble practice evolved into a multidimensional education: actors learned not only to perform but to *compose space, light, and rhythm* collaboratively. This challenges the Western model of the autonomous actor and affirms a collective intelligence more aligned with traditional Indian performance forms like Yakshagana or Chhau, where music, movement, and ritual interweave pedagogically (Awasthi, 1989: 52).

Democratic Imagination: Ethics of Collaboration

The third finding—the most socially resonant—concerns the emergence of what I term *democratic imagination*: the ability to navigate authority, difference, and creativity collectively. In ATG’s *Socrates*, hierarchy existed but was porous. Barot’s leadership, informed by NSD’s ensemble ethics, encouraged shared responsibility rather than unilateral direction.

Interview data highlight moments when this democratic ethos manifested in small yet meaningful acts. During a late rehearsal, disagreement arose over a choric entrance’s tempo. Rather than impose a decision, Barot invited the group to vote and test each variation. The process consumed extra time but deepened commitment. Actor P1 remarked, “Once we decided together, we owned it together.”

Such practices echo Rancière’s notion that emancipation begins when intelligence is presumed equal, not distributed hierarchically (Rancière, 2009: 13). The ensemble thus became a social rehearsal for democratic participation, mirroring Freire’s pedagogy of dialogue, where “no one educates anyone else, but people educate each other, mediated by the world” (Freire, 1970: 80).

Ethnographic observation further revealed that collective responsibility extended beyond aesthetics to logistics: managing costumes, cue sheets, and transitions. The democratic habitus was learned through labour. As one actor commented, “We cleaned the stage together, so we entered it as equals.”

This finding challenges the binary between professional and educational theatre. Here, learning was inseparable from making. The ensemble’s iterative negotiations produced what Barba calls “the ethics of the encounter” (Barba, 1995: 62): an understanding that artistry is co-dependent upon attentiveness to others.

Moreover, the democratic imagination extended beyond rehearsal rooms. Several participants later applied ensemble techniques in their teaching and community work. P4, now a drama instructor, explained:

“I teach my students to listen to each other’s pauses before speaking. That comes from the chorus.”

This transferability underscores the civic dimension of ensemble pedagogy. As Schechner notes, “Performance restores behaviour so that it can be examined, changed, and re-applied” (Schechner, 1985: 40). Ensemble training thus becomes a civic technology—a way of learning coexistence through the body.

Integrative Discussion

The convergence of these three findings—embodied cognition, interdisciplinary literacy, and democratic imagination—illuminates ensemble theatre as **pedagogical praxis**. It teaches not through instruction but through participation, mirroring Freire’s (1970: 87) call for learning grounded in action and reflection.

At a theoretical level, the findings corroborate Barba’s assertion that technique is “knowledge inscribed in the body” (Barba, 1995: 8). The ensemble expands this inscription from individual to collective bodies. The research also extends Schechner’s “restored behaviour” to a **choric epistemology**—a distributed field of knowing where each actor internalises the rhythm of the whole.

Methodologically, this section demonstrates the strength of autoethnography in capturing affective pedagogy: the tacit, sensory, and ethical learning processes often omitted from formal training curricula. As Heddon (2008: 39) argues, “to write the self in performance is to reveal the social through the singular.” By situating self-reflection within ensemble experience, this study transforms autobiography into relational epistemology.

The findings also contribute to Indian theatre discourse by reframing ensemble practices as educational institutions in themselves. Independent groups like ATG function as schools without classrooms, where artistry and citizenship co-evolve. This supplements the dominant NSD-centric narrative of Indian actor training (Mehta, 2019: 49).

Finally, the ensemble's practice embodies what Rancière (2009: 13) describes as "the distribution of the sensible"—a reconfiguration of perception that reorders the hierarchy of who sees, acts, and speaks. In ATG's *Socrates*, the chorus redistributed artistic agency, turning spectatorship inward: each member became both watcher and watched.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Revisiting the Research Aim

This article set out to explore how ensemble theatre operates as pedagogical praxis, focusing on the production *Socrates (Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas)* by the Ahmedabad Theatre Group (ATG). The central research question asked: "How does ensemble practice generate learning that is simultaneously artistic, ethical, and social?"

Through a hybrid methodology combining autoethnography, rehearsal ethnography, and performative analysis, the study demonstrated that ensemble theatre transcends the boundaries of art-making to become a site of continuous education. As Schechner observes, "Every performance is twice-behaved behaviour: the doing again of what has been done before" (Schechner, 1985: 36). This repetition does not diminish creativity—it refines perception, attention, and relational ethics.

The findings affirmed that ATG's ensemble process functioned as a **living curriculum**. Each rehearsal, cue, and choric movement became an exercise in timing, collaboration, and democratic participation. The actor's learning was inseparable from technical literacy, spatial awareness, and interpersonal ethics—dimensions often ignored in formal theatre education.

Contributions to Knowledge

Theoretical Contribution

The research contributes a new conceptual lens: ensemble as pedagogy. Building upon Barba's (1995: 11) theory of the actor's *bios* and Freire's (1970: 87) notion of *praxis*, the ensemble is articulated as an epistemic framework in which knowledge is embodied, relational, and cyclical. It bridges performance theory and educational philosophy, showing that the rehearsal room can function as a microcosm of democratic learning.

The analysis extends Schechner's *restored behaviour* by proposing a choric epistemology - a mode of knowing rooted in synchrony, interdependence, and repetition-with-difference. This reframing emphasises that pedagogy in theatre need not rely on instruction but can emerge organically from mutual attention and collective creation.

Furthermore, the study repositions autoethnography within performance studies, demonstrating that embodied reflection is not merely narrative testimony but a legitimate analytical tool. As Heddon notes, "To write from the body is to write from a site of knowing" (Heddon, 2008: 41). This approach validates experiential knowledge as both rigorous and transferable within academic discourse.

Methodological Contribution

The research showcases an effective hybrid methodology for practice-based inquiry in the performing arts. By combining autoethnography, interview-based ethnography, and visual analysis, the study achieves what Haseman (2006: 104) terms a *performative paradigm* - one where artistic process generates knowledge through doing.

This model demonstrates how long-term involvement (2014–2018) enables deep learning documentation, capturing the temporal evolution of ensemble pedagogy. It also establishes a replicable template for other theatre practitioners seeking to integrate reflective practice with empirical rigour.

The article contributes to debates on research ethics in practice-as-research, highlighting reflexivity and participant validation as key standards of integrity. Ellis (2004: 38) reminds us that autoethnography must "balance vulnerability with analysis"; this study applies that principle by triangulating personal insights with collective voices, ensuring that no single narrative dominates the interpretation.

Pedagogical Contribution

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study reveals how collective art-making operates as education in disguise. In ATG's *Socrates*, the ensemble became a social classroom where learning occurred through doing—through breath alignment, mutual timing, and technical co-creation.

The analysis suggests three pedagogical principles transferable to broader actor-training contexts:

1. **Embodied Awareness:** Learning originates in the body's rhythmic and spatial intelligence.
2. **Interdisciplinary Literacy:** Understanding design, light, and sound deepens performative intentionality.
3. **Democratic Participation:** Shared authorship cultivates empathy, equity, and collaborative responsibility.

These principles echo Brook's vision of theatre as "a field of concentrated attention" (Brook, 1993: xii) and Freire's pedagogy of dialogue, where education is "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1970: 81). In a world where creative industries increasingly emphasise individual stardom, ensemble pedagogy reasserts the value of collective intelligence as both aesthetic and civic virtue.

Implications for Theatre Education

The findings hold significance for institutions such as the **National School of Drama (NSD)** and regional repertoires across India. While NSD provides formal curricula in acting, design, and direction, ensemble pedagogy offers an **experiential supplement**—a form of tacit learning that integrates ethics and technique.

Incorporating ensemble-based modules into training programmes can strengthen students' collaborative sensitivity. Exercises drawn from chorus-based practice—

synchronised walking, collective breath, spatial listening—encourage kinaesthetic empathy, a quality essential for both performance and pedagogy.

The study also resonates with global shifts in arts education towards **practice-led research** and **reflective practitioner models** (Barrett & Bolt, 2010: 4). Embedding reflective writing within rehearsals, for instance, enables students to articulate the connections between bodily experience and conceptual understanding.

Moreover, ensemble pedagogy can contribute to **community-based theatre**, where collaboration becomes a vehicle for civic engagement. In the post-pandemic era, where isolation has fractured collective cultural spaces, such pedagogy reaffirms theatre's role as social glue—a "rehearsal for democracy," to borrow Augusto Boal's phrase (Boal, 1992: 19).

Implications for Practice-as-Research and Scholarship

The study positions **Practice-as-Research (PaR)** not as an auxiliary to academia but as its vibrant extension. As Haseman asserts, performative research "creates knowledge through expressive forms rather than through abstract propositions" (2006: 101). The findings confirm that theatre-making can yield empirical, reproducible insights when documented through rigorous reflection and triangulation.

The methodological model presented here—autoethnography + ensemble ethnography—could inform broader creative disciplines, from dance and music to design pedagogy. In each case, the ensemble offers a structure for balancing individual agency with collective coherence.

For academic researchers, the study underscores the need to develop ethical vocabularies for embodied knowledge. Traditional peer-review models often privilege text over experience; integrating visual and performative documentation (photographs, rehearsal logs, cue sheets) could redefine scholarly evidence within the arts.

Limitations

Every qualitative inquiry carries contextual limitations. The insider position, while offering access to nuanced data, risks interpretive bias. However, triangulation with interviews and archival evidence mitigated this. Another limitation is transferability: ATG's ensemble is a specific socio-cultural formation; its pedagogy may differ from other contexts. Future comparative studies could analyse ensembles from different linguistic regions (e.g., Bengali, Marathi, or Manipuri theatre) to test the universality of the findings.

Additionally, while the longitudinal design enhances validity, memory-based reconstruction of early experiences may introduce subjectivity. Employing real-time video ethnography in future projects could complement self-reported data with more objective temporal analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses deep gratitude to Mr. Rajoo Barot,

director and founder of Ahmedabad Theatre Group, whose mentorship and creative rigour shaped both the artistic and pedagogical insights of this study. Heartfelt thanks are extended to all ensemble members of Socrates (Kashunk Bhali Gayelo Manas) for their generosity, collaboration, and reflective participation over a decade of shared practice. The author also acknowledges the guidance of academic supervisors and peers whose critical feedback enriched the writing of this article. Appreciation is extended to the National School of Drama (New Delhi) and Ahmedabad Theatre Group for facilitating archival access and logistical support during fieldwork.

REFERENCES

1. Awasthi, S. (1989). *Theatre of Roots: Encounter with Tradition*. *TDR/The Drama Review*, 33(4),
2. Barba, E. (1995). *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*. Routledge.
3. Barrett, E., & Bolt, B. (2010). *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. I.B. Tauris.
4. Bharucha, R. (1993). *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge.
5. Boal, A. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Routledge.
6. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2)
7. Brook, P. (1968). *The Empty Space*. Penguin.
8. Brook, P. (1993). *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre*. Methuen.
9. Burla, V. N. (2022). "Revaluation of Traditional Performing Arts..." (notes Karanth's folk dramaturgy).
10. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. Jossey-Bass.
11. Cross, I. (2010). Music and cognitive synchrony. *Empirical Musicology Review*, 5(1)
12. Denzin, N. K. (2012). *Interpretive Autoethnography*. Sage.
13. Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
14. Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject." In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.)
15. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.
16. Gallese, V. (2017). Embodied simulation and the development of empathy. *Mind & Language*, 32(1), 21–30.
17. Grotowski, J. (1968). *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Methuen/Routledge.

18. Haseman, B. (2006). A manifesto for performative research. *Media International Australia*, 118(1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>
19. Heddon, D. (2008). *Autobiography and Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan.
20. Laban, R. (1966). *Choreutics*. Macdonald & Evans.
21. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage.
22. Mee, E. B. (2008). *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. Seagull
23. Mehta, A. (2019). Actor training in India: Institutions and informal networks. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 36(1), <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2019.0003>
24. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.
25. Mukerji, S. (2009). "Encounters with Cultures..." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, Issue 4
26. Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. Verso.
27. Schechner, R. (1985). "Restoration of Behaviour." In *Between Theater and Anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press
28. Schechner, R. (2002). *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
29. Sircar, B. (1978). *The Third Theatre and Other Essays*. Kolkata Press.
30. Stanislavski, K. (1936). *An Actor Prepares*. Geoffrey Bles.
31. Trowsdale, J. (1997). "Sitting in Badal's Circle: Artist and Pedagogue." *Research in Drama Education*, 2(1)