

*The Well-Tempered Body: Expressive Movement for Actors, Improvisers,
and Performance Artists*

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First Edition

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Based on “Effects of Actor Training on Personality”, a dissertation
submitted by David Petersen at the University of Malta in 2003

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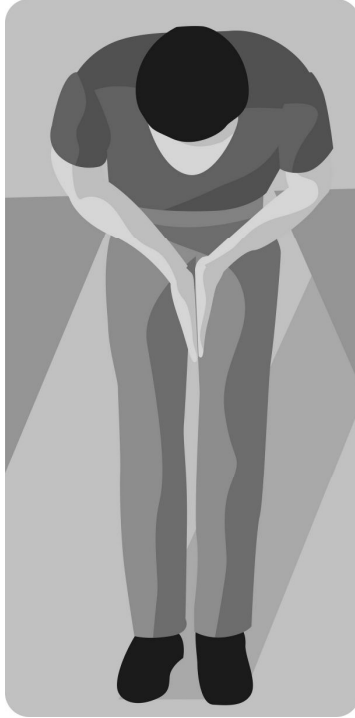
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To John, Frank, and Mandy, in that order

I live in company
with a body, a silent
companion, exacting
and eternal.

Eugene Delacroix
(1798 - 1863)



Our bodies are our
gardens - our wills
are our gardeners.
William Shakespeare
(1564 – 1616)



Kandinsky – Improvisation 12 (Rider)

Table of Contents

1. The Power of Physical Expression	9
2. Body Basics: A First Look at Expressive Range	31
3. The Motion of Emotion	79
Space Effort	81
Time Effort	90
Weight Effort	96
Flow Effort	102
Mixed Efforts	107
4. Shaping: The Plasticity of the Body	129
5. Expanding Reach-Space	151
6. Broader Issues in Expressive Movement	183
7. Improvisation and Session Structure	219
REFERENCES	248
Appendix A	260
Articulate Body Coding Sheet	260
Appendix B	273
Enhancing Rehearsal from the Outside In	273
Appendix C	277
The Kinematics of Laban	277
Biographies	281
Index of Biographical References	292





The Power of Physical Expression

Physicality is the basis of performance. It is hard to argue otherwise: yes, voice is important, costumes are important, scenery is important, but rapport with the audience is established primarily by *what* the performer is doing and *how* it is being done. The reality of the body – our movements, and our reactions to context (real or imaginary) – engenders a sense of presence, especially in the absence of dialogue.

One need only think of the great actors of the silent screen to know that characterization does not require a word to be spoken. A skilled improviser has the ability to suggest a mood or a place, a status relationship or an enduring friendship, simply by relying on our ability to “fill in” the background to the behavior we are witnessing. And the performance artist can create a powerful experience, transforming private vision into feeling and physical action. Even in the wildest experimental theater, where the inner logic of the scene is initially baffling, the presence of the actor’s body can be enough to lend structure and coherence, and to encourage the audience to give what they are seeing a chance.

In this fragmented age of ours, the genres of conventional acting, improvisation, and performance art may sometimes seem worlds

apart, but they are linked inextricably by reliance on the expressive power of the human body. The reason is simple: theater in whatever guise is fundamentally a stylized social exchange, and the “decoding” of movement is always a part of the dialogue we establish with other people.

This process of nonverbal communication is actually a very familiar aspect of everyone’s life. Whether at home or at work, at rest or at play, we gauge personality (i.e. long-term temperament and short-term moods) based on holistic appraisals of physical presentation. We know when the boss is unapproachable even before he opens his mouth, just as we know if a first date is going well or badly. And the basis for this is our innate sensitivity to subtle (and none-too-subtle) behavioral cues.

For the actor, impact onstage is thus intimately connected with recognition of everyday action as a communicative device. Nonverbal dialogue shapes all of our lives, and appreciating the way in which behavior clashes with or conforms to context is part of our heritage as social animals. But as the consummate physical performer, the actor needs to take this process to a new level, harnessing the nuts and bolts of “impression management” and applying them to artistic ends.

Less is More

Before getting too far into this topic however, we should clarify that expertise in nonverbal expression has nothing to do with “emoting” or indulging in melodramatic gestures. On the contrary, the expressive power of the body is easily undermined by trying too hard, especially when it comes to playing a mood. There are of course a myriad of things that can be said (or left unsaid) through physical action – states of rage and joy, sadness, regret, and everything in between. But as the great

theater directors have always preached, physical mastery is more often than not about distillation, about the *elimination* of certain signals.

This in turn brings us to the issue of stress management, which for our purposes refers to the reduction of states of tension (physical or mental) that undermine the creative process. This is a fundamental challenge, one that dogged Stanislavsky for example throughout his career. Which is understandable, as acting is often a stressful experience, especially for the novice. After all, it is hard enough to act purposefully as we navigate the myriad of status relationships facing us in daily life – how much harder is it to maintain expressive integrity under the potentially crippling stress of mass public scrutiny?

But learning to eliminate tension is worth the effort. Metaphorically, if we compare a performance to a radio program, tension functions much like a ghost signal, competing for the attention of the audience, and diluting whatever artistic conception the actor is attempting to convey. In the worst case, stage nerves can trump stage reality, shattering the suspension of disbelief so important to the theater.

Physiologically, taut muscles and a stressed mind limit artistic range, reducing expressiveness, and squashing the performer's "window of finesse". Equally disturbing is damage to self-efficacy – the sense of flow that can only occur when the artist feels challenged but not overwhelmed. The development of a stress-busting toolkit is thus a crucial element of physical expression, and will be returned to periodically throughout this book.

Reality from Response

Clearing the first hurdle of stress management brings us to the next challenge, which I call “physical composition”. A simple definition of this would be *the use of the body to deliberately suggest a situation, attitude or history*. Note that this is merely an extension of everyday behavior - our nonverbal reactions continuously provide those around us with commentary on our experiences, attitudes, and preoccupations, information that contributes to their assessment of our place in the world. The articulate physical performer merely takes advantage of this very human phenomenon, by tweaking elements of presentation to increase the likelihood of the audience arriving at specific hypotheses.

The specifics of physical composition depend of course on the performance in question. In some cases, the actor may wish to add or eliminate a gesture to suggest a cultural background or attitude. In other cases, rehearsal may focus on finding a posture or a walk congruent with the back story for a character. In any case, the performer needs to raise the ordinarily subconscious process of impression management to a new level, reflecting on instinctive skills, and then adding them to her expressive toolkit. Here as always, the actor is a thief – rummaging through the unspoken, often neglected aspects of our behavior, and emerging with treasures that can be applied to artist production.

And while we’re on the subject of managing impressions, it is also useful to know how to subvert expectation, how to shake the audience out of reverie. In many theatrical genres, this is done not by eschewing conventional characterization, but by transcending it: i.e., deciding on a nonverbal persona, taking it apart action by action, and then reassembling the pieces in a novel (and appropriate) way.

This process of deconstruction is particularly suited to sessions of “free movement” or “expressive improvisation”, venues where the actor is under no obligation to conform to the pervasive Hollywood notion of naturalistic behavior. Here, the actor is fascinated by the metaphor of the body-as-instrument, and wishes to explore the limits of communication through physical expression.

Such a performer combines the best of the athlete and the scientist; in the spirit of a researcher or explorer he identifies the building blocks of everyday actions, lays bare the primal structure behind a smile or a handshake, and then reorganizes the pieces, like a jazz musician playing with a riff. The results can be bizarre, but when it works, the audience is witness to something truly special - something “extra-daily” as the great theater director Eugenio Barba might describe it.

Elevating the Energy Level

Such techniques are by no means restricted to actors at the fringes of contemporary performance. Deconstruction is also a part of the conventional actor’s toolkit – an aspect of the distillation and stylization of behavior required to craft even the most naturalistic presentation. The reason is that art is, after all, distinct from real life. Actions onstage have an energy that sets them apart. When they do not, when actors “go through the motions” with the same lack of concern as when shopping or riding the bus, they risk betraying the spectator’s investment of attention, time, and money.

It is thus not surprising that performers in very disparate traditions in Europe, Asia, North and South America all share an interest in finding ways to escape the reflexive rut of everyday actions. Imagery,

costumes and even hands-on physical manipulation have been used to “recolonize” the body - to disrupt movement habits, thereby freeing up expressive potential for application in the service of stage art. The process is nowhere more evident than in Asian theater; whether the program is a day-long Japanese Noh cycle or an Indian Kathakali dance, the deliberately bizarre quality of the movement infuses the performance with an energy and freshness that transports the audience to a world apart.

The Heritage of Physical Training

The literature of the early 20th century theater masters is a treasure-trove of insights into the communicative potential of the human body. Stanislavsky for example is best known for his work with emotional recall, but in later years became obsessed with the power of what he called *Physical Actions* – meticulously crafted sequences of movement, utilized as the scaffolding for scenic development.

Like many other great directors, Stanislavsky was adamant that physical training is necessary to alleviate movement habits and to enhance opportunities for creative expression. The concept of “training” as understood here has of course little to do with body-building or any other specific regimen. Instead of adding muscle mass or the ability to crack bricks with a hand strike, we are talking about *subtraction*, about the systematic elimination of unnecessary stress, mannerisms, or any other blocks to sensitivity and behavioral control.

The Polish director Grotowski extends many of Stanislavsky’s ideas, challenging his actors to adopt a “poor theater”. Do we need floodlights? No. Do we need scenery? No. Do we need costumes? No.

This relentless paring away of the superfluous takes us back to the very roots of theater, to the encounter between actor and audience. But theatrical communion is only possible if the performer has something to offer the spectator besides a jumble of habitual movements and gestures. Only by digging deeply, by rediscovering authenticity, do we find the possibility of a new theater, unfettered by artifice and stereotype.

The renowned choreographer and theorist Rudolph Laban shares with these directors an appreciation for the expressive potential of physical action. But his approach is based on the internalization of techniques aimed at underscoring neglected aspects of presentation – untapped possibilities of physical and emotional range. The performer becomes much like a student of the martial arts, honing the body/mind through long-term participation in structured movement exercises. I will have much more to say about his system of training later in the book.

The fascination with physical action that informs Laban's writings is one of the hallmarks of the 20th century theater literature. And like a theme for improvisation, the topic itself is subjected to countless variations. World's apart from the cool logic of Laban and his movement systems we find his contemporary, the French theorist Antonin Artaud. Plagued by ill health and the effects of long-term drug use, Artaud channels his frustrations into searing critiques of the state of the theater. He challenges the actor to take back the stage from the tyranny of the playwright. In his ideal "theater of cruelty", dance, ritual, lighting, and music are fused in an unscripted, spontaneous outpouring of spontaneous response. Yet even here, the basis for freedom is commitment and self-control, as the actor seeks inspiration from other performance cultures, and guidance from the subconscious in the quest for alternative modes of relating to the audience.

Equally concerned with theatrical reform and the role of the body in communication, Artaud's compatriot Jacques Copeau establishes the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, one of the most influential experiments in theater history. Anticipating the "poor theater", his stage design eliminates affectation and maximizes opportunities for actor-audience contact. But to justify the resulting attention on the performer, he first takes his players on a journey of physical and mental attunement, convinced like Aristotle that creative excellence is necessarily an extension of technique. In the process, the actors develop versatility and sensitivity to the rhythm of the text, as well as an appreciation for themselves as collaborators rather than subordinates in the creative process.

Étienne Decroux, a student of Copeau, goes even further toward defining the modern concept of the "physical actor". Inspired by the disciplined approach of his mentor, Decroux uses the tools of the theater to investigate the very roots of impulse, always striving to replace hackneyed gestures and facial expressions with the flexibility needed for authentic encounter. In contrast, the English director Gordon Craig works backwards from the stage to the self, manipulating the psychological impact of the actor's body through changes of scenic context, based on groundbreaking innovations in lighting and the scale of the sets.

These are only a few of the perspectives in the 20th century theater literature on the subject of physical expression. Sometimes the focus is on acquisition of technique, other times, on elimination of mannerisms and other clichés. But across the decades and the schools of performance, the goal remains surprisingly consistent: the cultivation of a "well-tempered body", a stage presence capable of extraordinary subtlety and communicative range. This is the goal that underlies all of the

exercises in the chapters to follow.

From Theory to Practice: The *xHCA* Program

Honing the body/mind through participation in experimental theater was certainly not a process I was familiar with when I began my postgraduate degree with the *xHCA* program at the University of Malta. Tucked away south of Italy and surrounded by the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean, Malta is the kind of place one would expect to find courses in sailing and diving, not performance studies. Yet this tiny island nation has much to offer anyone interested in contemporary European theater. The program I entered in the late 90s was rooted in Stanislavsky's work with Physical Actions, and branched from there into cutting-edge multidisciplinary collaboration and research.

The *xHCA* program, which stands for Questioning Human Creativity as Acting, predicated the work of the performing artist as a unique and valuable instance of artistic innovation. Appropriately enough, investigations at *xHCA* were always a creative process in and of themselves, with scientists attending sessions of theater training, performers participating in a range of interdisciplinary seminars, and everyone gaining from the ensuing dialogue.

With a background in psychology, my initial plan was to focus on links between actor training and personality, a fascinating and under-developed branch of the social sciences at the intersection of trait theory and performance studies¹.

¹ There is some data to suggest that as players rehearse a particular character, they

Arriving in Malta with such studies in mind, I was reasonably sure of the direction that my research would take over the next few years. I would prepare questionnaires to document psychological traits, and administer these before and after the rehearsal of new roles. The results would be expected to confirm that self-concept tends to migrate toward the personality of the character being adopted.

A simple and elegant project, but one that was not to be – for a very unexpected reason. I had naively assumed that the performers under investigation would be involved in the presentation of conventional plays. In fact, theater in the program turned out to be closer to my idea of contemporary dance. This was a combination of improvisation and performance art, one in which scripts emerge gradually through exploration of the expressive potential of the body in motion.

At *xHCA*, members of the participating troupe would meet for sessions of “theater laboratory,” a term suggesting Grotowski’s collaborative workshops during the 1960’s. Each of these performers brought a unique background to their work in Malta. Some had experience with conventional acting, others with corporeal improvisation, ballet, or mime.

Individual sessions were shaped by private investigation of improvisational material (often a fragment of text, or a short sequence of gestures) in a public context. Onstage activities were coordinated by only the most tenuous links, such as a shared theme or prop, or by a voluntarily adopted “constraint” – a movement rule such as “do what you

unwittingly produce long-term changes in self-concept, as documented by psychometric tests and by self-assessments. Professional actors for example appear to be less shy and more open to open to the emotional reality of others, and changes in personality have long been attributed to participation in drama therapy. But even participation in high-school level theatrical programs has been shown to act as a catalyst for improved scholastic achievement, likely due in part to gains in public speaking and other aspects of social “IQ”.

wish, but always face your partner". Sometimes, the process was intensely introverted, as if the participants were oblivious to their fellow performers. At other times, an unspoken bond was clearly at work, forging links between self, space, peers, and the audience.

An interest in self-actualization was evidently a significant part of this process, and so it was not surprising that the range of projects reflected the diversity of the group. Yet however idiosyncratic the presentations, they were also an extension of a collective, a troupe schooled in certain basic creative techniques.

One such element was the shared interest in *deconstruction*. Onstage, nothing about verbal or nonverbal behavior was taken for granted. Movement habits were always fair game and a great launching pad for improvisation. Snippets of everyday action were brought into the "laboratory" as curiosities – specimens to be dissected, inverted, and subjected to changes of scale and context. A walk would be repeated playfully and yet methodically, in endless variation: Why does the hip lift at this point? Is this really necessary for locomotion? And how do the hands move when lighting a cigarette? In unison? Apart? Where does the sequence begin? Where does it end? What if my arms were heavier, lighter, closer to the ground? – and so on.

Phrases were revisited again and again, subjected to countless variations in the quest for the Holy Grail of each session, the *personally relevant moment*. At times it seemed that the actors were prospectors, sifting through detritus of their extended improvisations for that precious grain of truth. And truth would come (more often than not) with persistence, sometimes after ten minutes of rehearsal, sometimes after hours. That unmistakable instant of clarity, a hastening or a pause in the action, suggested to actor and audience alike the resolution of some

personally significant problem. Perhaps it was recognition of (and release from) a habitual gesture, perhaps simply an awareness of similarities in the phrasing of quite disparate actions. Whatever the details, such states of grace were appreciated as the gifts they were. Actors even learned to tag “hot” moments with a word or other cue, so that they could be recalled and revisited in later sessions.

Over time, the pool of such material would become rich enough to warrant the birth of a specific performance piece. At this point, the quality of the sessions would shift discernibly from free play to composition, from relatively unstructured improvisation to the elaboration of what was called the *movement score*. Again suggesting Grotowski’s writings, the term basically refers to choreography that functions in analogy to a conventional script. It is a series of physical actions, committed to memory as scaffolding for the construction of a fully-elaborated performance piece.

Once preparations began in earnest, the actors involved would schedule more time together to perfect their performance. Vocalization, costumes, scenery, and other elements would be added, and when the process was sufficiently mature, a date for opening night was announced. Then just as with conventional theater, feedback from the audience became a key issue in fine-tuning the project, and in deciding whether to forge ahead, or to abandon the piece as an ambitious but ill-fated experiment.

Actor Training as Physical Training

Ultimately, the key to finding my way in this unexpected context was the willingness to shift paradigms from word to deed – from an

emphasis on scripts toward a more general definition of what it means to be a performer. To realize that conventional actors, improvisers, and performance artists all share a vested interest in enhancing awareness of expressive potential, particularly the artistic potential of the body in motion.

I began to appreciate that *xHCA* was one instance of a rich heritage of actor training, a tradition concerned with cultivating a well-tempered body as a catalyst for personal and interpersonal change. And I came to see the scrutiny of unconscious movement habits and the transcendence of one's own limitations as key elements of preparation for performance, whatever its incarnation.

Focusing on nonverbal communication brought my study of temperament and artistry into line with the style of acting at *xHCA*. And it opened the door to a whole new world of research - one in which changes in gait patterns or habitual gestures are treated on par with profiles of "shyness", "irritability", and other essentially linguistic constructs. It also encouraged a deeper investigation of the "somatic orientation" in the literature of the 20th century masters - tracing the theme of Physical Actions from Stanislavsky to Meyerhold, and from there through a kaleidoscope of choral dance, corporeal mime, paratheatrical experiments, postmodern dance, and contemporary improvisation. These are the topics that shape the approach to training described in this book.

The Actor's Challenge

As a specialist in impression management, the onus is on the actor to extend the limits of "physical smarts" beyond what we take for granted in everyday life - mastering the communicative potential of the

body so as to convey intentions with precision and conviction. Yet there are few things in life more complex than human motion. Our everyday behavior is anything but ordinary, for we are talking of a real-time extension of the evolutionary structure of the brain: from instinctive or stereotyped response to more selective action based on “higher” assessments of environmental contingencies.

Our activities unfold across a range of time-scales, through the coordination of multiple physiological control centers. Every action that we take, on or off the stage, reflects social heritage, temperament, biology, and our immediate task focus. We may reflect our ethnicity, whether we wish to or not, in how we walk, how much we gesture, and how we hold ourselves when standing quietly. And there are also personality aspects in play. How do we see our status in relation to those around us? Do we subconsciously cower or puff out our chest in bravado? Do we enjoy what we are doing, or find it all a bore? Our state of health too will affect presentation. In the short-term: were we out too late last night? Drank too much? In the long-term: do we exercise regularly? Eat well? Decisions and strategies of course have an impact as well: what is the motivation behind the action? Are we trying to make an impression? Explore our range of movement? Execute a particular dance step? Recall a well-rehearsed scene?

Step One: Mindfulness

In the face of such a potentially chaotic network of influences, it makes sense to begin as simply as possible, with a gentle mindfulness of “instinctive” behavior. To illustrate the concept, keep your eyes on the page, but do a quick scan of your body. Start with your face – are your lips taut? Pursued? Are your shoulders even? How are you holding your arms?

Are they twisted with respect to your torso? Where are your legs? Are your feet flat on the floor? Can you feel your toes against your shoes? Attending to the state of your body as it is right now – breath patterns, tensions, aches and pains, unusual or awkward posture – is crucial to the progress of the performer, whatever her genre. Mindfulness gradually raises the subliminal elements of communication into consciousness, opening up a new level of expressive choice.

What I'm talking about here is a basic attitude toward action, toward presentation, toward life – a willingness to *wake up* instead of sleepwalking through the day (as we so often do unless shocked out of reverie). From this perspective, actor training takes on the quality of an intention, a movement meditation, or a challenge to rediscover the inquisitive attitude of a child. Mindfulness is what makes it possible to proceed, methodically trying out new responses by incorporating them in performance, and receiving feedback on their communicative value.

If nothing else, I hope that this book will help your growth as an actor by reminding you to keep your eyes and ears open - noting what you and those around you are doing through the day, and finding ways to characterize, contrast, and revisit specific states of action and emotion for the benefit of professional development.

Step Two: A Frame of Reference

There is no shortage of bodywork out there for the actor. Rolwing, pilates, tai chi, dance... the list is endless. Certainly participation in any of these disciplines can be a rewarding experience, and will provide a degree of insight into physical presentation. What we are after at this early stage however is a way of clarifying our goals with respect to expressive movement. Basically, we need a framework to help organize

our investigation of the body in motion.

And for that, I suggest a return to the theater literature. More specifically, to the writings of the choreographer and theorist Rudolf Laban, whose movement schemes have proven their effectiveness in any number of performance contexts as a powerful means of understanding physical creativity².

For the moment, I would like to introduce four keywords associated with his approach to movement studies. In this book, they will function much like signposts, helping to guide our attention as we venture into the potentially confusing waters of nonverbal communication. And they will be returned to again and again as themes for organizing concepts and exercises.

Body: Laban used this term to indicate certain fundamental properties of our body, and to remind us that physiology always informs expression. Included here are qualities such as left/right symmetry, center of gravity, and radial action (phrasing that travels from the trunk to the limbs, or from the limbs to the trunk). Over the years, a number of specialized movement systems have been developed by writers inspired by Laban to investigate these topics in detail. While deceptively simple, such studies can have a profound impact on presentation, both on and off the stage.

Effort: This category addresses the instant between the impulse to act and the realization of the act itself. One of Laban's greatest insights was that motion proceeds out of emotion: actions arise from and naturally

² A glance at the reference section will suggest the range of projects in which his theories have been adopted.

stimulate clusters of feelings, both in performer and audience. Conventional actors rely on this truth all the time, knowing that certain qualities of movement can trigger assumptions by the spectator about a character's moods and motivations. It makes sense then that the wider the spectrum of physical expression at one's disposal, the greater the emotional subtlety that can be conveyed onstage³.

Shape: This is a general term for Laban's observations about the impact of our 3-dimensional form - the way in which our volume impinges on the surrounding space, and in the process, on the psyche of the spectator. If Effort is about the body in motion, Shape addresses our "sculptural self"; the short-term and long-term postural adjustments defining our zone of movement, and indirectly, our social world and status relationships.

This is not as abstract as it sounds - ask yourself what your posture is saying right now about your attitude toward the people around you. Are your arms drawn in defensively across your chest, or have you adopted a more approachable stance? Are you slouching in defeat or is your head held high? What is your body telegraphing about your status, intentionally or otherwise?

Such questions are critical to the performer, particularly in the initial stages of defining a role or scenario. Should your character adopt a formidable stance, facing her audience/partner squarely as if in a doorframe, extending the arms with an immutable or confrontational

³ And offstage for that matter. Laban observed that in the business world, the "winners" are often those who show the greatest sophistication (flexibility) with respect to nonverbal communication. Leaders instinctively adapt their physical presentation to the needs and beliefs of their audience, building rapport on a subconscious level through the medium of the body. Sensitivity to the emotional implications of expressive behavior is thus a topic of interest to performers in any number of contexts.

energy? Or should she position herself more obliquely, like a wheel poised to roll forward and back with dynamic flexibility? These and other Shape-related metaphors help to clarify the boundary between action and interaction, especially the way in which physical tension correlates with emotional and psychological stress. For the actor, sensitivity to Shape thus fits seamlessly into the process of scenic construction.

Space: This last category deals specifically with the mobile, private zone of action serving as a buffer between us and the rest of the world. Referred to as the kinesphere, this region is defined physically by the habitual extent of our limb movements, and psychologically by our “comfort zone” in social encounters.

As an illustration, see if you can visualize what your kinesphere typically looks like. Do you tend to project strongly into your environment, as if you own the space, or do you subconsciously limit your zone of contact, taking up as little room as possible? And how does this presentation differ from other people in your family, or your social network? Kinesphere analysis is yet another useful addition to the actor’s toolkit, particularly when fine-tuning the physical implications of self-perception.

Step Three: Separating Function from Form

As another precursor to the exercises in this book, I would like to suggest a look at the subtle distinction between function and form. Basically, every aspect of our behavior is realized on at least two levels. There is a function (what we are doing), which is based on our immediate motivation. And there is a form (the “how”) reflecting a host of influences biological and social. Take a walk across a room for example. The

function is our conscious rationale – mostly likely to get us from point A to point B. But the form, the expressive envelope, represents an additional layer of complexity. Are we striding or strolling, quickly or slowly, powerfully or weakly, with determination or hesitation? A single function can spawn any number of formal variations, each hinting at something different about a character's inner life.

In conventional theater, learning to separate function and form can be a very powerful tool at the rehearsal stage. Function needs to be analyzed in detail to determine what exactly is going on in a given scene: [*What does my character want, and what is he doing to meet that objective?*] And then form needs to be addressed to clarify the message behind the movement: [*Am I carrying myself like I always do, or as my character would?*]

Switching fluidly between function and form can be a great way of clearing the cobwebs. When staging is weak for example, it can be helpful to improvise solely with formal movement qualities, retaining the skeletal sequence of a particular action, but finding fresh ways of fleshing it out. In effect, the actor becomes a musician, creating variations on a (movement) theme.

In peer work, attention to form can be honed by objectifying peers – treating them for a time solely as interesting collections of movement patterns. This is the rationale behind some types of mirroring exercise, in which gestures and sounds are perceived, varied and then re-presented as quickly as possible. Or actors can become co-conspirators in the search for alternatives to conventional modes of social intercourse. To this end, random, rapid-fire shifts of mood, motivation and setting can help break the ice and establish a collaborative atmosphere. Working with form like this provides insights into physical

expression and attitude, between reach-space and status, and between gaze patterns and onstage relationships. And when the body has been sufficiently “loosened up”, scripts or other materials can be re-introduced more successfully.

Scripted scenarios are certainly not required for this type of analysis. The contemporary improviser may start literally from nothing, playing with props or repeating random snippets of dialogue until an activity begins to suggest itself. Anything will do as a point of departure - a cultural reference (1930s New York), a performance mode (silent movie melodrama), a physical attribute (mannerism) or even a change of media (fish in the sea)⁴. Once the ideas begin to flow, revisiting phrases with attention to form ensures that material never runs dry. And if the process does begin to flag, it can be helped along by skillful interventions from a director, who points out neglected possibilities with respect to spatial positioning, scale of movement, timing, or body part emphasis.

Step Four: From Monologue to Dialogue

Of course, any journey is easier if we are willing to travel light. In terms of artistic “baggage”, one of the biggest handicaps for improvisers (and to a lesser extent, conventional performers) is the belief that the actor, director, and audience must agree about “what’s happening” onstage. That unless behavior is grounded in naturalism and spelled out explicitly, the presentation will come across as somehow unsatisfactory or worse, anarchic.

As implied by the discussion of function and form, nothing that people do ever has a single “meaning”, even in the context of a scripted

⁴ Often the more bizarre the setting, the easier it is to take risks, because performers feel liberated temporarily from “being themselves”.

performance. The “what” may be the same, but the “how” is never completely under our control. Even less so is the reading of the “how”, which represents both the intent of the performer and the private biases and associations of the spectator. Each night of the performance is different, and everyone involved, whether actor or spectator, will necessarily come away with a different experience.

We need to realize that even in conventional theater, the glue that holds a production together is not fidelity to real life behavior, but the commitment of the performer to whatever is happening onstage. Extending this idea, Grotowski’s contemporary, the Italian director Eugenio Barba notes that as long as our actions contain an inner logic, as long as they make sense *to us*, they will necessarily convey a truth to those witnessing the performance⁵.

But if *why* something is being done takes a backseat in contemporary theater to *how* it is being done, then flexibility and expressive skill become all the more crucial. If we are “stuck” within the limited repertoire of our own everyday behavior, then our capacity to bring other characters and perspectives to life will likewise be deficient, and there will be that much less to justify the attention of our audience. Conversely, if we are seekers of novelty, and know how to break free by “changing the frame”, then we will instinctively reinvent our walk, our posture and our gestures to suit the needs of the moment. This shifts the paradigm from monologue to dialogue, from imposition to communion, and rest assured that such finesse will be sensed and appreciated.

⁵ The underlying structure will naturally vary with the style of performance, but can range from a script to a set of images in the head of the improviser, or even the rules of a movement game.

Summary

Here I suggest a pause, to reflect on how far we have come in such a short span. This chapter began by introducing the communicative potential of physical action. In the process we touched on the power of elimination as a means of enhancing the ratio “signal to noise”, rather than trying too hard and ending in melodrama. We then looked at the concept of physical composition, the use of impression management to create a statement about a situation, attitude or history. (It is worth noting that this is a point of intersection in the artistic process for performers of all types.) And we also talked about the energy level of a performance.

From there we delved briefly into the theory of physical performance, as represented by any number of traditions in the writings of the 20th century theater masters. And from theory to practice, with an introduction to the *xHCA* program and the premise that personality (longstanding behavior) is as much about nonverbal as verbal response. We concluded by outlining a few suggestions that clear the way for the exercises in the remainder of this book: 1) quieting the language mind; 2) grounding our investigations with a basic frame of reference; 3) untangling form and function; and finally 4) giving the audience its due (allowing for the interpretation of the spectator).

The next four chapters will present a series of practical concepts and techniques intended to enhance expressive technique. They are organized according to Laban's four “signposts” already mentioned (i.e. Body, Effort, Shape, and Space). After this, we will continue with general comments on broader issues in physical characterization, and conclude with tips for composition (particularly handy for improvisers and performance artists working without the benefit of scripted scenarios).