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MOVEMENT FOR THE ACTOR: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE APPLICATION  
OF MOVEMENT TRAINING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine  
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by  
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May, 2011

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## Abstract

### MOVEMENT FOR THE ACTOR: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE APPLICATION OF MOVEMENT TRAINING

By Elizabeth Lorraine Ressegger-Slone, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Major Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson, Associate Professor, Theatre

An essential tool in actor education, movement training is often viewed as esoteric and difficult to apply directly to an actor's craft. It varies widely from institution to institution, and covers anything from stage combat to Alexander Technique. One never knows what they will encounter upon entering a movement class, and students frequently have difficulty connecting work done in the movement studio to work done in the acting studio. In order for movement training to become better integrated and more easily identifiable as a necessary part of actor training, it is important to get to the essential qualities that all movement training is designed to teach. In my thesis I will

explore the tenets of Stanislavski and identify the core concepts of physical work that can be found in most movement disciplines. I will conclude with an exploration of my personal experience teaching movement for actors at the junior level.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM WITH MOVEMENT TRAINING

As soon as the actor is in front of the spectator, her body is no longer her own. Everything she does is under scrutiny and acquires meaning, just as every word that passes her lips is heard, interpreted, and processed. For this very simple reason, it is clear why an actor must develop her body just as fully as her voice and skills of textual interpretation. (Potter 252)

Over the last fifty years or so, movement training in the United States has become an integral part of an actor's craft and many undergraduate and graduate programs recognize the need for such training by offering classes in Laban, Suzuki, Grotowski, Viewpoints, staged combat, and dance, to name just a few. More and more job listings posted are for movement teachers, and many universities seek professors with certifications in a wide variety of movement disciplines.

Unfortunately, though an essential tool in actor education, movement training is often misunderstood and viewed as esoteric and thereby difficult to apply directly to an actor's craft. One never knows what they will encounter upon entering a movement class and students frequently have a difficult time connecting the work done in the movement studio to the work done in the acting studio. Many movement disciplines are centered on strengthening the body and releasing unnecessary tensions, such as yoga, Pilates, or Feldenkrais; teaching a skill such as combat or dance; or creating character, gesture, and shape, such as Laban or Viewpoints. While there is value in both skill

building and conceptual exploration, the underlying issue remains that they are either too specific in their form to the point of being niche, or too broad and thus making them no more designed for the theatre than for, say, dance. Classes become so focused on the training and manipulation of the body that they neglect the purpose of developing the physical body for theatre, which is essentially the telling of story through the pursuit of a character's wants and needs. As Rudolph Laban states "Man moves in order to satisfy a need" (Potter 73).

There is a large (perhaps inherent?) disconnection between the mind and the body that continues to occur and must be addressed. Part of this can be traced back to a misunderstanding of Stanislavski's acting work, first introduced through legends such as Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg, as a primarily mental process relying upon sense and memory based techniques. Both Adler and Strasberg studied with early students of Stanislavski's, students who were with him at a point in time where he was exploring inner, psychological exercises as a means to break himself of the habit of being too mechanical in his approach to acting (Barton 173). This led to an internal process in which the body was largely ignored or forgotten.

Later in his research, however, Stanislavski became less enamored of trying to pinpoint the emotional life of the character based on "feelings" and more interested in developing the concept of the "physical action" that would potentially express the inner life of the character through behavior. He felt that concentrating solely on the emotional life was flawed due to its inherent unpredictability, making a repeatable performance elusive at best. Stanislavski said, 'Do not speak to me about feeling. We can not set feeling, we can only set physical actions'. (Potter 73)

Adler would later work with Stanislavski in Paris on his Method of Physical Action, and work to train a more fully rounded actor (Stanislavski xx).

Another cause for the disconnection between mind and body is the confusion between Stanislavski's "system" and the "Method" as defined by Lee Strasberg. The "Method" is centered on emotion where the actor calls to mind personal feelings that correspond with the character. "Whereas in the 'system' each section of the play contains something the actor has to *do*, in the Method it contains something he has to *feel*" (Stanislavski xx). With the commercial success of actors such as Marlon Brando and directors such as Elia Kazan in Hollywood, the Method gained great popularity and was indelibly linked with Stanislavski's system. "This was made possible because most actors and directors, as Stanislavski had feared, thought that *An Actor Prepares*, a cut version of half a book, was the complete 'system'" (Stanislavski xxi).

In order for movement training to become better integrated and more easily identifiable as a necessary part of actor training, it is important to get to the essential qualities that all good movement training is designed to teach – an actor wholly integrated in mind, body, and imagination.

In an article in *Callboard Magazine*, "What are Stage Movement Classes For?" Professor Edgardo de la Cruz of California state University at Hayward lamented, "It has taken me four decades of training in dance, mime, clowning, stage combat, etc., and many workshops...to arrive at a conclusion: Stage Movement teachers all want their students to be flexible, all want their students to have fun and be 'creative' (meaning to express themselves spontaneously with great gusto and abandon), all want their students to find shortcuts to characterizations or find physical ways to tap into their emotions. But no one has shown anyone the way to apply this to scripts, rehearsals, or productions....Are physical agility, flexibility, and fun all we can offer to students?....as teachers, we have to train students to use such a tool creatively within the demands of production, not just exercises." (Potter 189)

As Stanislavski is the basis for most modern American actor training (with newer schools of thought either a continuation of or reaction against) I believe it is important to re-examine his system of training in an effort to find a clear path to re-connect mind,

body, and imagination. In the next chapter I will focus on the tenets of Stanislavski's system of acting that I feel most important to the teaching of movement for actors.

## CHAPTER 2

### STANISLAVSKI'S SYSTEM FOR ACTOR TRAINING

As previously stated, Stanislavski is the basis for most modern American theatrical training, whether the various schools are a continuation of or a reaction against his methods. His writings are an exploration of his own process and technique as an actor and continued to evolve and grow with him as he honed his craft. On re-examining Stanislavski's writings I have identified seven areas that I feel are most important in relation to movement training and the connection between mind and body. I have divided them into: The Body – tension and muscular release, action, physical characterization; The Mind – objective: tasks and the Supertask, tempo-rhythm; and The Imagination – given circumstances.

#### THE BODY: TENSION AND MUSCULAR RELEASE

An important aspect of movement training is the preparation of the body for the stage. It requires not only the training of the physical self, but a development of the awareness and understanding of the body in its relation to the space. Due to the physical demands of performance – from the length of the show, to the length of the run, as well as specific blocking, character, and choreography requirements – it is vital that an actor develop the necessary strength and stamina. Perhaps even more

important in the physical training is the ability to recognize their personal physical make-up. From the knowledge of the way they hold their bodies, to the way they walk, sit, stand, and what tensions they hold and why, the actor will develop a more acute sense of self. If the physical development of the body is not directly or consciously tied to an exploration and understanding of the awareness of actions and movements, then the actor is simply physically fit and not equipped to handle the demands of character or story. The movements are simply learned movements without intention or justification. “Can I persuade you that physical tension paralyses our whole capacity for action, or dynamism, how muscular tension is connected to our minds” (Stanislavski 120)?

Before any creative work can begin the actor must work on the body, working towards being able to find and release unnecessary tensions, and building the strength and stamina necessary for performance (Stanislavski 121). This must not be something done solely in class or rehearsal, but has to become a daily habit of monitoring the body for excess tension. It may seem cliché, but just as a musician practices their instrument every day, so should the actor. Their body is their instrument and the audience will interpret everything they see on stage, from the set and costumes to the way the actors move. The reasons behind strength and stamina are obvious, acting is a physical activity and the body must be prepared for what is being asked of it. Muscular tension and release may seem a bit harder to grasp, but if an actor is unnecessarily tense onstage it will stifle the creative work and block any connection they might have with scene partners and audience alike. “Onstage we need to see, walk, speak differently – better, more normally than in life, more closely to nature. First, because our defects are

all too visible, all too glaring in the footlights. Second, because these defects influence our state of mind” (Stanislavski 124).

While the understanding and ability to release tension is a valuable tool, one mustn't release excess bodily tension altogether, not only is it impossible but it is also unnecessary. Certain amounts of relaxation and tension are essential for different positions, actions, and characters. The key is to understand and execute only what is required, making sure that it is a conscious decision by the actor and justified by the wants and needs of both character and story.

#### THE BODY: PHYSICAL CHARACTERIZATION

“If you don't use your own body, voice, way of speaking, walking and behaving, if you don't find the right features for the character, you can't convey the life of the human spirit” (Stanislavski 516). In order to embody different characters, the actor must take on the physical characteristics of said characters while still maintaining the inner self. While the physical task may seem daunting at first, there are many ways to achieve physical embodiment of a character; such as through observation, mimicry, pictures, books, stories, etc. What is important to remember is that all acting is transformative and that each character is told through the lens of the actor. “And since actors have to create a character and not just show themselves to the audience, we all need transformation and physical characterizations. In other words, all actors, without exception, create characters and transform themselves physically” (Stanislavski 535).

## THE BODY: ACTION

Action. This simple word is quite possibly the most important underpinning of this entire thesis. It may seem simplistic but we often forget, and as Stanislavski states “Acting is action” (Stanislavski 40). It requires both mental and physical action. It is not merely a cerebral exercise, it is in the *doing of* and not the thinking or feeling – theatre is, after all, a visual medium.

Everything that an actor does on stage is seen and interpreted by the audience, whether it is conscious or not. For that reason, everything that happens on stage must have a justification behind it and should not be action for action’s sake. “Everything that happens on stage must occur for some reason or other. When you sit there, you must also sit for a reason and not merely to show yourself off to the audience” (Stanislavski 39). A pitfall for many actors is trying to show or feel emotion on stage, which is absolutely impossible. You can not feel on stage, you cannot simply be happy or be sad. Emotion is the result of an action, of the pursuit of a goal.

Stanislavski illustrates this best in the description of an acting exercise in which a student is asked to look for a broach which had been pinned on the curtains of the stage. The broach is given significance by stating that its value would pay for said student’s schooling. The actor knows that the broach is not there. On her first attempt at the exercise, she looks through the curtains but spends more energy on trying to evoke the feeling of misery and on being distraught at the loss of the broach. The result is a failed exercise. There is no truth in the actor’s actions – she cannot simply be miserable or distraught.

You can’t force feelings. That only leads to the most repulsive kind of ham acting. So, when choosing an action, leave your feelings alone. They will appear of their

own accord as a result of something which has gone before, that evokes jealousy, love, or suffering. (Stanislavski 43)

On her second attempt she actually looks for the brooch working meticulously through the folds of the curtains. This second attempt is successful because she was truly doing the task. "Onstage you shouldn't perform actions "in general" for actions' sake. You should perform them *in a way which is well-founded, apt and productive*" (Stanislavski 42). Justification and intention, or given circumstances, should fuel the actions making them less mechanical and giving them purpose. Whether the action is simply sitting in a chair, crossing the room, or executing a piece of choreography, every action should have a reason that justifies it and makes it truthful and thus engaging to watch.

#### THE MIND: OBJECTIVES: TASKS AND THE SUPERTASK

From action we move to objectives which links directly to the justification and intention of actions on stage. People move for a reason, whether to satisfy a need or to achieve a goal. Movement on stage is magnified and every action must have an intention and justification, it should not be movement for movement's sake. Many actors make the mistake of going directly for the end result and bypassing all of the steps along the way, or simply creating gestures because they feel the need to move but do not have a reason or justification behind the gesture. They forget the moment-to-moment work and are more interested in playing the end and embodying stereotypical gestures in an effort to illuminate the character. When this happens, the scene is over because the ending has been given away and there is no connection to the character other than a superficial one. An audience wants to follow the character on their journey,

they want to be able to connect with the character and relate to the story being told. Stanislavski states that actors should “Learn not to play the result onstage but to fulfill the Task genuinely, productively, and aptly through action all the time you are performing. You must love the Tasks you have, find dynamic actions for them” (Stanislavski 144).

When we speak of a character's wants and needs, we speak of their objectives. An objective is a task that is active and that the character vigorously pursues throughout. It must be concrete, immediate, real, and achievable, and every action or gesture onstage should relate directly to the character's objective. The main objective for the character, the one that drives them throughout the entire piece is what Stanislavski calls the Supertask.

Everything that happens in a play, all its individual Tasks, major or minor, all the actor's creative ideas and actions, which are analogous to the role, strive to fulfill the play's Supertask. Their common link with it, and the sway it holds over everything that happens in the play, is so great that even the most trivial detail, if it is irrelevant to the Supertask, becomes harmful, superfluous, drawing one's attention away from the essential meaning of the work. (Stanislavski 307)

The naming of the Supertask, as well as the continuous pursuit of it, gives sense and direction to the performance of a role. It is in the connection of actions to objectives that we can reconnect the mind and the body. Again, people move for a reason. An actor must be able to justify their actions through the pursuit of their objectives. As in the story of the actor searching for the broach, only once she pursued her main objective to find the broach – rather than merely playing emotion and using stereotypical gestures to communicate feeling to the audience – was she successful.

## THE MIND: TEMPO-RHYTHM

Just as in music or dance, variations of tempo-rhythm can help us to create a wide variety of moods and atmospheres on stage. It has an immediate and direct effect on the audience and can stimulate both emotional and visual memory. “In a word, Tempo-rhythm possesses not only outward features which affect us, but inner content which nurtures our feelings. It is in that form that memory retains it and makes it available for creative purposes” (Stanislavski 473).

Tempo refers to the pacing of a performance, it can be fast, slow, or anywhere in between. “Tempo is quickness or slowness. Tempo can curtail or extend an action, shorten or lengthen speech. Performing an action, speaking a word demands time” (Stanislavski 465). Rhythm is the flow, the occurrence (and recurrence) of strong and soft elements. It is the combination of these two forces that provide an energy, a life force that propels the story forward.

For the actor to grasp the idea of tempo-rhythm and its’ effect on performance, they must first understand the difference between external and internal tempo-rhythm. External tempo-rhythm is the actor’s outward pace and measure of their physical actions. By merely changing the external tempo-rhythm, an actor can change the mood of a performance. Whether quick, slow, or medium paced, the rate with which an actor performs an action can speak volumes. However, just as tension can alter the way an action is performed, so too can a contrasting internal tempo-rhythm (Stanislavski 470-487).

An internal tempo-rhythm can be a bit harder to grasp. It is the pace and measure of inner thoughts and feelings. Stanislavski believed that instead of saying,

“How are you?” it would be better to ask, “How’s your tempo-rhythm?” (Stanislavski 487- 488). The internal tempo-rhythm informs how everyday actions are performed. If someone is agitated or upset, it will manifest itself in their outward actions.

We think, dream, grieve in certain Tempo-rhythms because we reveal our lives in all these moments. And where there is *life* there is *action*, and where there is *action* there is *movement*, and where there is *movement* there is *tempo*, and where there is *tempo* there is *rhythm*. (Stanislavski 488)

It is possible to have a contrasting internal and external tempo-rhythm, and is in fact often necessary and quite interesting to witness, but again the actor must be conscious of the decisions made.

#### THE IMAGINATION: GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

The Given Circumstances are an easy yet important facet of actor training. They constitute the structure within which the actor is allowed to play and are derived directly from the script providing the substance for the imagination (Stanislavski 53). The Given Circumstances are a central and necessary tool in scoring the text.

In practical terms you are faced roughly with the following sequence of events. First, you must have a clear, personal view of the Given Circumstances which you have brought together from the play itself, the direction, and your own creative imagination. This gives you an overall picture of the character and his circumstances... You must sincerely believe that such a life is possible in the real world. You must become so used to it that it becomes an intimate part of you. If you can do that, then the truth of the passions or feelings that seem true will arise of their own accord. (Stanislavski 53)

## CHAPTER 3

### TEACHING JUNIOR MOVEMENT

When approaching the teaching of Advanced Movement for the Actor – a year long, junior level class – I tried to think of what would best serve the students on their journey. I began with the essential question “Why is movement training an essential and integral part of an actor’s craft?” This was a question that I believed I knew the answer to, but wanted to continue to explore with these students.

I’ve always been a physical person and movement has always been somewhat intuitive for me. I’m sure this was the case for some students, but not all. As we grow and age we forget about our bodies, we hold onto tensions, stereotypes, ideas of how we look. We take our bodies and how they move for granted. Also, movement training can be a difficult class to apply to acting because it often just trains the physical body. In order for the training to be useful it needs to treat the entire person – mind, body, and imagination.

In past classes, students would take stage combat for one semester and mask work the next. My issue with that structure was that the combat class was mostly a skill based class teaching the basics of swordplay. To truly teach the art of stage combat would take much longer than one semester and all I would be able to properly focus on would be safety and technique. I felt the mask class was too advanced for the students

who still did not seem to have an understanding of their bodies or how they moved, and again would be very difficult to teach in one short semester. I also wanted to be able to build from one semester to the next so that it was a year-long exploration as opposed to a one-semester immersion. With the previous structure, I felt that at best I would be able to give them only shades and ideas but nothing concrete. I understood that I could only present the information and that it would be up to them as to how they interpreted and used it. However, I desperately wanted to be able to find a more concrete way (if possible) to help them make the connections from movement class to what they are doing on stage.

In looking at the year, I decided to divide it between personal exploration in which we worked on the physical structure building strength, stamina, and flexibility; and partnering and scene-study in which we worked on pursuing a character's wants and needs, and telling a story through physical action. The first semester would be focused on identifying personal habits such as where we hold tension and what coping mechanisms we employ, exploring the ways in which our bodies moved, and discovering what was unique to us as a person and how we can bring that to different characters we were asked to play. I wanted to give the students a taste of different movement disciplines such as Laban and Suzuki to show them different ways of approaching the same thing. It was essential for me to have them understand that they needed to find their own way; that I was merely giving them options but that it was up to them to find what works. Only they know what will work for them.

What is important in any acting technique is not the answers it provides, but rather the space it offers for you to propound the most important questions for yourself. What particular challenges do you encounter in your acting? What kinds

of exercises excite you and speak to your needs? What makes acting truly alive for you? (Barton 175)

My goal over the course of the first semester was to explore the ways in which we can strengthen and free our bodies, release our imaginations and unlock our expressive potential in order to gain an awareness of the body as a vital and necessary tool in performance. I asked students to take physical risks. I wanted to be able to push them past where they thought they could go, both mentally and physically. I wanted them to be able to recognize habits and develop an awareness of body and self; to explore space, rhythm, and shape; and to examine gesture and body language. The key activities and skills that I wanted to focus on were neutral, isolations, impulse, shape, gesture, strength, flexibility, and stamina.

In the second semester, I wanted the students to be able to directly apply what we had learned from the first semester to scene work. I also wanted to get them acting, asking questions such as: How do we physicalize objectives? How do we deal with emotion? How do we integrate our internal thoughts and objectives with our physical tasks? This would hopefully lead them towards integrating body and mind with imagination.

Giovanni Fusetti, a clown and teacher of movement, states “words are movement, text is movement, ideas are movement, everything moves” ([www.giovannifusetti.com](http://www.giovannifusetti.com)). I wanted students to begin thinking of text as more than just the words we speak and to continue to ask and explore the question “Why is movement training an essential and integral part of an actor’s craft?” I was also interested in asking the question “How can we build upon our knowledge of our bodies and express that outward towards our relationship with both the space and other performers?”

Over the course of the second semester I hoped to build upon the discoveries of self, continuing to strengthen and free the body. I also hoped to further explore how we as performers relate to the space and how that is read by an audience, recognizing the fact that the moment we enter the stage, our body is telling a story and the audience is watching it. Again, I wanted students to take physical risks, and to explore movement in relation to space, audience, and other performers, to explore the differences between rhythm and tempo, and to examine gesture and body language. The key activities and skills that I focused on were spatial relations, rhythm and tempo, and the all important objectives, obstacles and tactics. In the following chapters I will give a detailed account of each semester, discussing the activities and exercises covered as well as the discoveries made.

## CHAPTER 4

### FIRST SEMESTER: THE PHYSICAL BODY

The very beginning of the year was a bit rocky as the students were unhappy to learn that not only would they have a graduate student teaching the class, but they would not be learning stage combat or mask. I decided to begin class with a brief discussion of what the semester looked like, what we would be exploring and why. Over the course of the semester we would explore the ways in which we can strengthen and free our bodies, releasing our imaginations and unlocking our expressive potential in order to gain an awareness of the body as an essential tool in performance. I told them that the aim was to find and unlock their expressive natural body. I emphasized that this would be a journey that we would be going on together and asked that they at the very least open their minds and give class a try.

#### CREATING A GROUP CULTURE

It was important for me to begin the year by developing a group awareness and rapport. I was not interested in ensemble building because it was not necessary for the students' learning, but I did find it important that they were able to speak to one another about the work being done in a constructive and supportive manner. I also wanted to get everyone in the room on the same page with me – there was some amount of trepidation and dissatisfaction at having a graduate student as their teacher. They had

had a bad experience with a graduate student teacher before, many had hoped for Dr. Anderson, and some said outright they wished they'd taken the other movement class which was Musical Theater.

So, I needed them on my side from day one. In order to get everyone on board and create an environment that would be comfortable and conducive to learning, it was very important to establish a group culture – to get everyone at ease with working with each other physically and creatively. I also wanted to make sure that they had fun. If they enjoyed the process, I could hopefully get them on my side and they would be more open to learning.

The first two weeks began with a series of games and exercises designed to get everyone working together, listening and responding, and letting down their guard. We started with a name game not only to help learn and remember names, but to work on concentration and focus. We next played a series of tag games that required them to be physical and also required them to build an awareness of themselves, others, and their surroundings. One of my favorite tag games, *Hug Tag*, forces the players to hug in order to remain safe from getting tagged. (One person is “it” and must try to tag others. In order to be safe a participant may hug another for up to 3 seconds. If someone is tagged they become the new “it”.) I often use this game when teaching stage combat because it demands an explicit acceptance of a physical ask, and I thought it would lend itself well to theatrical movement too. Through playing games such as tag and other theatre games we were able to work on listening and responding in the moment. It also created a good group rapport and got them having fun. Using simple theatre games was

a great introduction to begin discussing the concept of space, group awareness, spatial awareness, and both verbal and non-verbal communication.

We ended this section with a modern dance exercise that I borrowed from the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange called Bulking the Image.

One person assumes a shape, then additional dancers “bulk” the image by reiterating that shape. This structure isolates spacing as a choreographic element and encourages careful observation to reproduce the established shape. (<http://livedetoolbox.wordpress.com/new-in-the-box/bulking-the-image/>)

I vary the exercise by first only allowing shapes to be copied exactly, then I allow them to put the shape in a different orientation, next the shape may be a reaction to the original, and finally sound and movement may be added to the shape. I like this exercise because it encourages participants to think about space, shape, gesture, and rhythm. It also gets them responding in the moment to what they are seeing onstage, relying on impulse instead of trying to make things happen. When beginning the exercise I limit it to four people at a time on the stage, but by the end I allow people to come and go as they see fit. I initially used it to simply have them relate to one another in the space and as a way to illustrate how an audience interprets what they see and automatically begins to build story based on the images. I would bring this exercise back several times to illustrate different things. It inspires an almost immediate connection among the participants and was a good lead-in to the semester’s exploration.

## BOOT CAMP: STRENGTH, STAMINA, AND FLEXIBILITY

Once I felt that we had begun to develop a positive group culture, the next step was to develop the body. I was amazed at how out of shape a lot of these young students were. Some students were very nervous about beginning a strenuous physical regimen and came to speak with me outside of class. I assured them and the entire class that it was not about getting them to conform to a certain body image, but to make them the best possible person they could be, giving them the tools needed to work in the physically demanding field of theatre. Boot camp was designed to work on strength, stamina, and flexibility and also to install a work ethic in the students. My hope was that they would quickly see the value of physical training and it would become a part of their daily practice, not just something they did in movement class two days a week.

## DAILY WARM-UP

It was during this unit that I introduced the daily warm-up that would be performed every day before the beginning of class. I go back and forth on warm-ups. I don't believe they do anything to prevent injury, but I do think that they are a great way to get mentally prepared, to leave behind whatever has happened that day and get ready for the work ahead.

The warm-up consisted of seven *Sun Salutations* (a classic sequence of yoga asanas, or poses) done in unison and on breath. It provides both resistance training and a cardiovascular workout while at the same time focusing the mind and increasing flexibility. Next in the warm-up was an exercise called *Triangles* in which each person secretly chooses two other people in the room and attempts to make an equilateral

triangle with them. This gets students subconsciously working on space and spatial relations as well as keeping them connected and aware of the group. Finally we did a marching sequence where the group formed a circle, marching and counting down steps 1 through 7, repeating four times and alternating direction with each count down (1-7, 1-6, 1-5, etc). The exercise is designed to have students work on simply doing the action and to keep open to the group and themselves, remembering with each change of direction to turn towards the open leg.

Before beginning the warm-up students were instructed to check in with themselves, making sure they were in actor's neutral, the spine aligned from head to tail bone, with soft knees and allowing their breath to drop freely and naturally into their bodies. In the beginning I would adjust each student to ensure they were standing correctly, and as time went on students were asked to make the mental/physical notes themselves, observing where they were holding tensions and why.

## YOGA AND STRETCHING

During boot camp I interspersed strength building exercises with stretches to ensure that bodies stayed limber and flexible. Good for both strength training and as a cardiovascular exercise, yoga and Pilates as well as isometric stretches increase flexibility and stamina and work on the core, which is incredibly important to overall physical health. A good core helps with balance, breath support, and stability. Impulse and gestures (movements expressive of thoughts or feelings) emanate from the core and it is important that actors are in touch with their centers to become balanced, centered, and focused.

## STRENGTH BUILDING

We worked on building muscular strength so that students would develop the physical ability to meet the demands of being a professional actor. Strength training helps to develop strong bones, control weight, and boost stamina. Exercises were focused on strengthening the entire body and finding ease in physical movement – ease found through breath work, breathing through the sweat and the pain, and singing while holding certain positions. We worked on core strength, arms and legs, and also balance exercises such as pigeon, head stands and Suzuki's egg exercise. In the egg exercise, students balance on their sits bones, using their core muscles to keep feet and arms elevated. The challenge of the egg is to find ease in the breath and voice while holding a strenuous pose. Weight is shifted from one side to another, and eventually students work towards being able to create different shapes with their arms and legs while maintaining balance on the sits bones and ease in the breath and voice.

## ISOLATIONS

As students were working towards building strength and flexibility, I also wanted them to develop an intimate awareness of their bodies and a deeper understanding of how each body part moves in relation to the whole. One of the first exercises we explored was Grotowski's *The Cat*, an exercise based upon the observation of a cat stretching and meant to develop flexibility in the spinal column (Slowiak 2007). *The Cat* begins with students lying face down with all points of the body touching. The head is slowly liberated; next the shoulders, chest, stomach, pelvis and so on until the entire

body is free to move save the hands and the feet. Once students have fully awakened their spines and are moving freely, the sequence is reversed until the head is the last thing to come to rest on the floor.

We also worked on isolations – isolating one body part at a time, from the tip of the head down to the toes, and exploring the range of movement and how that affected the rest of the body. Finally, we explored a mime exercise called *The Sound and Movement Wheel* in which the body is explored from the spine down in terms of tipping and thrusting. *The Sound and Movement Wheel* is also a great tool in character development and one that I would bring back once we arrived at physicalizing a character.

## STATUE WORK

Statue work is essentially impulse work in that you have to immediately be able to strike a pose and hold it, finding the ease and focus in the statue. We worked on extension and contraction, image, and gesture through static poses. We began with an exercise called *Take* in which students simply strike a pose on the command *take*. As the exercise continues, I give levels on which to create the statues – low, medium, high – to influence the shapes, and finally I add words/images to continue to influence and shape the statue. I had half of the class work while the other half observed, looking for images and stories that came from the statues. This continued to build upon the enduring understanding that everything an actor does on stage is seen and observed by the audience. This exercise progressed from working individually to working in pairs, then groups of three and more.

I also used an exercise called *Filling the Negative Space* in which students, working in pairs, would fill the negative space around each other, working in, around and through the space their partner's body occupied. I began by giving them unlimited time to act then moved it to 10 seconds, 5 seconds, and finally 1 second. *Filling the Negative Space* gets students comfortable with working in close proximity with one another and responding physically and in-the-moment.

Lastly we did an exercise called *Screaming Statues* in which students were divided into small groups. Each group was given an image to portray and one at a time they would enter the space with a vocal and physical attitude, freezing when they hit their statue. The following students would add on until the image was complete. Once the image was completed, the rest of the class would walk around and observe the statue noting how the bodies were relating to one another and what kind of story was being told by the image.

## IMPULSE

Impulse work is designed to have students move without thinking or planning, getting them to live in the moment and respond to stimulus as opposed to trying to carefully craft reactions, letting their minds remain free and open to possibility. The exercise I chose to start with is called *Sculptor and Clay*. It begins with one person acting as the sculptor and the other the clay. The clay relies solely on physical information from the sculptor to move. The sculptor gently touches various parts of the body and the clay impulses away from the touch, allowing their body to continue moving in the chosen direction until stopped by the sculptor. Variations include moving in short

bursts, impulse towards the touch, and allowing the clay to choose whether they impulse to or away from the touch. Students were a bit self conscious at first but quickly fell into the exercise. I allowed the exercise to continue for enough time for the students to fully explore their bodies in motion, noting differences in reactions and what felt comfortable and what did not.

At the end of the boot camp and statue/impulse work, I had hoped students were beginning to have a better understanding of their bodies and how they move, and an appreciation for the strength and stamina they had acquired in a short amount of time. With the end of the first unit of the semester came the end of boot camp as well. Had we had more than two hours of class time I would have liked to continue a conditioning routine. But due to time constraints, I decided to move forward with physical character work. Students did create a group outside of class that met regularly to go to the gym. I would like to say they kept it up for the entire year however it only lasted a few short months. I was happy that there was a realization of the amount of physical work that is required and an understanding of the importance of being physically fit. The next unit would begin with putting that new-found-knowledge of self to work, and looking at ways of creating characters and expressing images, thoughts, and feelings through different physical forms.

## ANALYZING THE BODY

We began the second unit with an assignment of creating *Character Collages* that I learned from friend and local Washington, D.C. costume designer Ivania Stack. The exercise is meant to create a portrait that visually represented them, asking the following questions: What do I like to do? What is it that makes me a unique individual?

What are my core values and goals? What do I care deeply about? How have people, experiences, and places shaped me? What symbols best represent my true self? How do images, color, texture, scale, and composition answer these questions? The format for the collage was 2-dimensional but students could use any material that would help to create the visual representation of themselves i.e. magazine images, prints, photographs, newspaper, fabric, scrapbook paper, paint, markers, glitter, yarn, and stickers. Students were asked to glue or tape the finished collage to a board, anything from a cereal box to a cardboard box, for presentation. Students were also asked to write a one page description of their collage describing the process of creating it and the thoughts behind the exercise. For the presentations we sat in a circle and each person shared their collage. Students were then given a chance to walk around and look at each other's collages. It was a very personal exercise and it gave everyone a chance to be open, vulnerable, and to share a personal part of themselves. The ability to be vulnerable is extraordinarily valuable for an actor; actors must be open and available to the audience in order for a connection to be established. I liked the idea of doing a visual representation of self in addition to a written representation because I felt that it could help to physicalize, or make more real, the physical make-up of each person. It gave students the opportunity to explore a part of themselves visually as well as mentally, and allowed for the imagination to play a part in the creation and recognition of self.

Once we had a chance to thoroughly analyze and review our own bodies, we began to look at how to embody characters both similar and different to us. I did this by introducing different ways of being able to describe movement, recognizing essential

core strength, and recognizing what is a comfortable way of moving and what is challenging to us. We began with body leads, looking at how by simply changing your body's center you could evoke different types of characters. We then explored Laban's effort-shapes as a way of being able to describe movement and look at movement in very specific ways. What I find most valuable in Laban's work and the creation of a physical character are his explorations of attitude towards time, space, weight, and flow. I also like how descriptive and easily recognizable the effort-shapes are: Punch, Slash, Wring, Float, Glide, Dab, Flick, Press. I wanted to be able to share with the students that there are many different ways of creating a physical character and that it was up to them to find what worked best for their own personal craft.

## EMOTION

As we were going through the semester, students became very confused on the subject of emotion. In their acting class they were being asked to find their emotional centers and to *feel*. Many had a hard time calling upon emotion, and I personally feel it is not useful. Emotion is the result of pursuing an objective. You can't just feel on stage, you have to act. But because there was so much questioning surrounding "What if you just have to feel something?", I thought it important to show a few different ways of getting to the same result while at the same time illustrating that emotion will come from physical action and that we can communicate emotion to an audience without actually having to feel said emotion.

I brought back the mime exercise the *Sound and Movement Wheel*. The *Sound and Movement Wheel* works on isolations of the body, describing what each part

communicates and speaking in terms of tipping and thrusting. The body is broken down into the head, shoulders, upper chest (rib cage), full chest, and hips. The head is the only body part that both tips and thrusts and communicates thought. The shoulders thrust, both together and independently, and communicate tension. The upper chest tips, which is a very subtle movement communicating love. The full chest thrusts and communicates balance. And finally, the hips tip (A source for much confusion amongst the students! But if you look at the skeletal structure, the pelvis actually tips.) and communicates passion. We began the exercise with everyone standing in a circle exploring each body part and the range of motion. Next, we added breath and sound, and finally we created some small improvisatory scenarios to illustrate how a simple movement such as the tipping of the upper chest when approaching another can communicate so much of how that person feels about the other.

After exploring isolations and the ways in which they are interpreted by an audience, we moved on to *Rasaboxes* and *Alba Emoting* in an attempt to explore ways in which we could produce emotion. The first exercise we explored was *Rasaboxes*, a technique developed by Richard Schechner in which actors are asked to be able to jump from one emotion to the next – an actor as athlete of the emotions. *Rasaboxes* are an exploratory, personal way of connecting to emotion. *Rasaboxes* are a fully embodied and individual means to express eight key emotions separately and in combination through direct physical practice. *Rasaboxes* trains participants to work holistically: the body/mind/emotions are treated as a single system.

In practice, *rasaboxes* produces performances that are visceral and useful across a wide range of contexts: from subtle film acting to bold commedia dell'arte, from naturalistic theatre to pure dance, music, and movement. *Rasaboxes* integrates rather than separates acting, movement, and voice. *Rasaboxes*

engages the whole performer in a single, powerful, and learnable approach. (www.rasaboxes.org)

A grid is placed on the floor with each box containing a different emotion which is also written on the floor. The emotions are written in both Sanskrit and English and are: adbhuta (surprise, wonder), sringara (love, eros), bhayanaka (fear, shame), bibhatsa (disgust, revolt), vira (courage, the heroic), hasya (laughter, the comic), karuna (sadness, compassion), and raudra (rage) (www.rasaboxes.org). The exercise began with each student moving individually through each box, responding to the emotion through written words or pictures. The next step was to step through each box and explore the emotion through physical statues. At first the statues were a bit stereotypical, but as the students continued to explore they found new and different ways to express the emotion physically. Then they were allowed to add gesture and sound. Once students felt comfortable in the exploration, they were then asked to jump from one box to another, immediately switching emotions and finding that quick physical switch that enabled them to successfully express the emotion.

After exploring *Rasaboxes*, we moved to *Alba Emoting*. *Alba Emoting* takes a scientific approach looking at breath pattern, facial, and postural expressions. The effects of all three can produce an emotion.

*Alba Emoting* was developed by neuroscientist Dr. Susana Bloch as a safe, purely physical alternative to emotion memory and other psychological techniques for releasing, maintaining, and controlling emotional states on stage. *Alba Emoting* identifies six "basic" emotions from which all others derive. Each of the basic emotions, as well as emotional neutrality, has its own unique, identifiable set of bodily responses ("effector patterns") which are universal to all humans. By reproducing three aspects of these patterns — breathing, posture, and facial expression — an actor can experience and express genuine, organic emotion at will, without the use of memory or images. (www.albaemotingna.org)

For example, standing with a relaxed body, head tilted back, eyes shut, the corners of the mouth curved upwards with teeth showing, taking breaths in through the nose and releasing through the mouth in short saccadic breaths can elicit laughter which reads as happiness. What students found to be the most effective in *Alba Emoting* was the breath and how easily it could affect the emotional state.

The class was fairly evenly divided on which method they preferred. Those that preferred *Rasaboxes* enjoyed being able to find postures, gestures, and breath patterns that worked specifically for them. They felt that *Alba Emoting* was too generic and didn't allow them to find a full range of response. Those that preferred *Alba Emoting* liked the specificity of the facial and postural expressions coupled with the breath pattern. They felt lost in the *Rasaboxes* and unsure if what they had created effectively communicated the emotional state to an audience. What excited me most was that they were coming at the issue from a physical/active perspective and truly looking for what worked best for them.

## NEUTRAL MASK

We ended this unit with an exploration of Neutral Mask. I wanted to give them a taste of mask work, but more specifically, I wanted them to be able to focus on the body and what it was communicating. We did the *Wave Goodbye* in which the neutral mask walks across the beach to a dock to wave one last goodbye to a loved one, and then exits once the boat has sailed away. The exercise looks at lines of force and double direction, being open to the audience, the moment of physical presence, emotional honesty, and economy of movement.

The Neutral mask allows those who wear it to get in touch with their core being, their most authentic, intuitive self. The mask encourages a sense of wholeness, of physical, emotional, and intellectual centeredness. In the mask, one lives in the moment, questioning nothing, yet empowered to make changes as needed. It integrates mind and body, clarifies impulse, and allows the wearer to experience the power and increased presence that come from absolute self-acceptance. Energy that formerly would be wasted on self-doubt and critical comments about a given situation is now used on problem solving. Neutral mask allows you to take off all the other masks. ([www.foolmoon.org](http://www.foolmoon.org))

## ACTION

After our explorations of body and character it was time to take the next step and begin to look at action and intention. Using James Slowiak's exercise, *Four Steps*, we examined how something as simple as taking a step can become an action filled with intention by layering on imagination and given circumstances. Students begin by taking four steps, making sure each step has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and that the steps are repeatable. Once the steps have been established, students change the task into action by answering questions about environment and mood such as: What time of day is it? Where specifically are you? What are you wearing and how does it affect the ways in which you move? Students are encouraged to become more and more specific as they repeat the four steps creating a solid structure. The next step of the exercise is to add intention by answering questions such as: Where are you going? Are you moving towards something or away from something? Why? What is your goal? Do you achieve it? Again, students are encouraged to become as specific as possible. Next we looked at the technical aspects of each of the steps, focusing on where the eyes were looking, what the hands were doing, how the body was moving through each step, etc.; once more ensuring that each step had a clear beginning, middle, and end, and was repeatable. Finally, I stepped in as director and added the given circumstances to the

*Four Steps* stating that they were startled by a loud noise at the beginning of the second step and felt a twinge of pain in the middle of the third step.

In the end, *The Four Steps* has become a very interesting and engaging action, full of detail and precisely performed. From *Four Steps*, we have arrived at a score of physical action performed with intention and precision. This is a very elementary exercise, but it makes the point about how one can begin to work on action from something as simple as a footstep. There is no excuse for not finding action. (Slowiak 2007)

As a homework exercise, students were asked to find a simple task (such as washing the dishes or folding clothes) and convert it to action and bring it in for the next class. I would later marry their task to text. Student response to this particular exercise was fantastic. At first they felt the activity was too simplistic, but as we continued to layer on imagination and given circumstances they were amazed at the depth they found in the action of taking a few steps.

## TEXT AND ACTION

Our third and final unit began our work with text, uniting physical storytelling to verbal storytelling. I started with a Shakespearean sonnet because I wanted something with heightened language, a firm structure, and little to no character. We spent a small amount of time discussing Shakespeare's language and his use of rhythm and imagery to ensure students had a clear understanding of their sonnet. We also discussed and explored physicalizing the language with the understanding that heightened text requires a heightened body. I then asked students to layer the text into their tasks, finding ways to justify both the action and the text. The result was both frustrating and exhilarating as students struggled to find intention for their actions while staying true to the meaning of the text.

We finished the semester by working on monologues of the students' choosing, utilizing everything that we had worked on over the course semester – body, character, and text. In the analysis of the monologue, I asked them to create character collages for their character and then had them compared to their personal collages. We looked at the similarities and differences and each student crafted an approach to bring themselves to the character. They were also asked to focus on the action of the monologue making certain their piece was actionable and not just the telling or retelling of a story. Students also had to write a one page score of their monologue explaining the methods they used to prepare for their performance.

The performance of monologues concluded the first semester and brought to an end the personal exploration of body and character. The following semester we would explore working in groups of two or three to tell a story, focusing on action, intention, and most importantly, objective.

## CHAPTER 5

### SECOND SEMESTER: PHYSICAL STORYTELLING

Going into the second semester it was important to continue to build upon the personal discoveries from the previous semester, but more importantly the students needed to be able to put into practice the concepts that we had been working on. Movement training is a conscious act whose main medium is the body, but which is affected and influenced by the mind and imagination. The mind sets the parameters/goals for the action and the imagination fleshes it out. All movement training is (or should be) designed to address the whole actor – not just the physical apparatus. Neglecting to do so results in a disconnected, mechanical actor who may have great control of their body, but no thought or feeling behind their actions. Therefore it was imperative that we begin to fully explore the connection between mind, body, and imagination, and what better way than through scene study.

#### NON-VERBAL SCENES

I began with non-verbal scenes so that we could focus on doing and not showing, repeating the simple mantra learned from Dr. Aaron Anderson, Associate Professor of Theatre at VCU, of “Do what you are doing, not what you are not doing.” This proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Students often turned to indication or bad mime instead of just doing a task and pursuing their objective.

In preparation for non-verbal scenes I brought back the Liz Lerman exercise *Bulking the Image*. This time I was interested in not only using it to illustrate how quickly and easily an audience can create story based on images that they see on stage, but I wanted to give students time to explore space and spatial relations with others, working on listening and responding physically in the moment without trying to add their own story overtop or to steer the creation in any specific way. I allowed the exercise to continue for a much longer time than we had previously done so that the students could get out of their heads and stop thinking and planning and start to just do. Following the exercise we had a great conversation about what images were most powerful and why, and how listening and doing proved to be more successful than trying to go in with a pre-planned agenda. We also discussed the audience's perspective and how we as actors can help to focus an audience's attention.

In order to continue working on space and spatial relations, as well as telling a story through physical action, we next moved on to retelling fairytales. I divided the students into four groups and assigned each of them a popular fairytale (Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Jack and the Beanstalk, The Three Little Pigs) that they had to retell using only their bodies and voices, but no spoken words. They were allowed to use the entire studio but were instructed to think of where the audience would be seated and how to direct their attention to the action. This exercise began our discussion of indication as many of the students tried to show what was happening instead of telling the story through doing actions and pursuing a goal.

I had them repeat the exercise several times eventually confining the playing space to a 6x4 box taped on the floor. By confining the space, it forced the students to

be more concise in their actions, limiting them to doing only what was essential for the story to be told.

Our last exercise before diving into non-verbal scenes was called *Love at First Sight*, it combines the in-the-moment lessons of *Bulking the Image* with the given circumstances and story structure of retelling fairytales. *Love at First Sight* begins with two students lying in their own space. When the music begins (I use *We've Only Just Begun* by The Carpenters) each person wakes up and begins to go through their daily routine until they are distracted by someone else across the way. They fall immediately in love and must find a way to win the other person. This gives them a structure within which to work but the freedom to play in the moment finding new tactics to achieve their goal.

After exploring space, action, and impulse through the above exercises it was time to finally move onto non-verbal scenes. As a class we worked through a couple of different scenarios as a way of exploring the assignment. Students were then divided into pairs and given class time to create their story and to rehearse. Students were also asked to write and turn in a one page score of their scenes, detailing the given circumstances and their character's goal. In performance, many students struggled to find ways of communicating and a lot tried through indication, extraneous movement, and verbally forcing meaning. We re-worked many of the scenes focusing on the action and making sure that every action had a purpose and worked towards achieving the character's goal. I reminded them of the lesson from the *Four Steps*, making sure that each action had a clear beginning, middle, and end and was shaped by intention and the given circumstances.

## CHOREOGRAPHY

From non-verbal scenes we moved to choreography, and fight choreography specifically. I wanted to give the students a very tight physical structure that they had to justify and make work within the limits of a scene. I likened it to any kind of choreography, be it dance or specific blocking, which as an actor they would have to figure out how justify. Questions that we would be focusing on were: How do we flesh out given choreography? How do we make it our own?

I chose to work with rapier because I knew the students had been eager to work with swords, but also because other than hand-to-hand combat, rapier would be the most common form of stage combat they were likely to encounter. We spent time going over the basics of swordplay such as foot work, cuts and parries, working in quarter speed, and emphasizing safety and technique. I worked several drills with them to ensure that they at least had an understanding of proper form even if we did not have time to perfect it.

I created a short piece of choreography and gave students class time to learn and rehearse it. Because of our limited time, I did not allow students to bring the fight up to performance speed. It was more important to me that they were able to safely execute the choreography and work towards telling a story with it than getting the fight to look pretty but without any real substance behind it.

Once they felt comfortable with the choreography I used a couple of exercises that I learned from Society of American Fight Director's Certified Director, Jamie Cheatham. The first was the *Oh, No!* exercise in which the combatants vocalize the danger of a move as well as the aggression behind it. This gets them thinking of the

severity of each action as well as its' end goal. It also allows them to experience the danger and consequence of each action. The other exercise I used, *Hero/Villain*, asks each combatant to secretly decide whether they are the hero or the villain of the fight. This simple directive immediately gets them thinking of character and motive, fueling each action with an intention and goal.

Once we had had time to explore the choreography through the exercises it was time to put it in context of a scene. I chose the Tybalt and Mercutio scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* because of its recognition and for ease of reference. As a group we talked through the scene, looking at each character's motives and intentions. We discussed the given circumstances, the moment before, where these characters were meeting, and how best to make the choreography fit the scene. We tried several different ways of inserting the choreography until we found the best fit. Through this group exploration we were able to justify the actions and make sure the choreography was telling the story and not just a piece that was plugged into the action.

## SCENE WORK

After our many explorations of telling a story through physical action it was time to add text. I allowed students to choose their own scene provided it wasn't a piece of classic literature (such as Shakespeare or Moliere) and that it was not a simple conversation. The scene needed to have conflict and be no longer than two pages. Students were asked to submit their scenes to me for approval. We read through each scene as a class and discussed the arc of the scenes as well as the conflict.

Students were then given class time to do table work on the scene, breaking it down into beats and exploring the given circumstance and moment before. They were also asked to define their character's objective. This simple request of defining a character's objective led to much consternation and a lot of discussion. Students seemed to be very confused as to what an objective was. It appeared that in their acting class they were receiving conflicting messages as to the definition of objective. Their acting teacher asked them to state their objective in the form of a noun, such as "I want validation." or "I want love." They were also asked to create a new objective for each beat in the scene. I felt that this was completely inactive and impossible to successfully do. The result was an actor trying desperately to feel something and/or gain something but with no way of actually achieving it.

I, on the other hand, was asking them to refer to the Stanislavski system, stating their objective in the form of a verb and thus making it actionable. It was important that they understood that they had to have an objective that was capable of being done (actionable), that was specific, had its test in the other person, and was in line with the intentions of the playwright. ([www.feeneymcsweeney.com](http://www.feeneymcsweeney.com)) They struggled for quite a while with the idea and I tried my best not to discount what their acting teacher was telling them while at the same time reinforcing what I feel is the most effective method.

As we began to get the scenes up on their feet I decided to start with setting the stage. I thought it was important for the students to understand how to create the set, positioning the furniture in such a way as to create tension and obstacles. We took a look at each scene, discussed the objectives, and set the stage in a way that best fit the scene.

Many students questioned why we were going through such an exercise, stating that that was the director's job. This brought about an excellent point. I was able to begin the discussion of the need for an actor to fully prepare before stepping foot on the stage, and the importance of giving the director something to work with. The actor needs to have an understanding of not only their characters objective but also how physical obstacles can help to build the tension and give the actor something to fight against.

This also led us to a discussion of tactics. I, for one, do not believe in writing down each and every tactic before getting the scene up on its feet. I do think that an actor needs to have an idea of how they will pursue their objective based on the given circumstances of the scene and the intention of the playwright, however tactics come from listening and responding in the moment to the scene partner(s). This allows for the performance to remain fresh and truthful.

After we had the opportunity to discuss staging and create a firmer understanding of objectives, obstacles, and tactics, students were given class time to rehearse. I then took a look at the opening beat of each scene, coaching students through and providing them with feedback on how to move forward. The students next presented their scenes and were also asked to perform their scenes non-verbally. Almost all of the scenes were clearer when performed non-verbally. Students still seemed to get stuck in the text and trying to feel what they thought was required of them instead of just doing the action. It was a wonderfully illustrative moment to highlight how important it was to "Do what you are doing, not what you are not doing." It also made clear when objectives were not strong enough or not the right choice,

because the non-verbal scenes failed miserably and the students regressed back to indication and bad mime.

## RED NOSE

After a frustrating yet rewarding semester of scene work, I decided to change my original plan of having the students create original group compositions to clowning. I thought that not only would it be a fun way to end the semester, but it would tie up the lessons from the entire year.

The art of clowning involves much more than the slapstick and oversized shoes of the traditional circus clown. The character of The Fool is an essential ingredient of human society - a universal archetype found in some form in all cultures and in all times. The Clown is the " puer aeternus" , the eternal child in all of us - the innocent who sees things as they really are and not as convention decrees, who can be counted on to tell us, in the loudest possible voice, that the emperor's not wearing any clothes. It is the part of us that has never grown up, that lives in the heart and in the moment, with no past to regret and no future to dread - the part that only wants to play, completely free of responsibility - and yet is willing and able to save the world if necessary. ([www.foolmoon.org](http://www.foolmoon.org))

Clowning is about being open to the audience, listening and responding, and being in-the-moment. It requires the actor to be vulnerable, creative, truthful, and open to all possibilities.

For this last unit I dispensed with our daily warm-up and instead played games as a means to get the students having fun and finding their "inner child". I wanted them to be able to simply play. Next we did several red nose exercises including a presence exercise in which the student dons a red nose and stands in front of the audience, taking them in and allowing themselves to be open and available to impulse. We also did a *Save the Show* exercise in which the clown enters to find themselves the unlikely savior of a failed show, taking direction from the clown coach as to what to do. The

exercise makes the student say yes and be in-the-moment. Finally, I used a commedia dell arte exercise in which the student enters having seen the “funniest thing ever” and must communicate that to the audience until they spy the “saddest thing ever” off stage left, and finally the “scariest thing ever” off stage right which eventually forces them to exit. The exercise requires them to jump from one emotion to the next, but more importantly to not show emotion but to communicate why the thing is funny/sad/scary. The more the student works to communicate the “why” to the audience, the more successful the exercise. We were able to end the semester on a fun note while reinforcing the lessons learned over the course of the year.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The year was a tremendous journey for me and helped to reinforce my assertion that movement training, in order to be effective, must unite body, mind, and imagination. It is not just about training the physical body, but training the entire actor. Movement training is a conscious act whose main medium is the body, but which is affected and influenced by the mind and imagination. The mind sets the parameters/goals for the action and the imagination fleshes it out. All movement training is (or should be) designed to address the whole actor – not just the physical apparatus. Neglecting to do so results in a disconnected, mechanical actor who may have great actor control of their body, but no thought or feeling behind their actions.

I found the re-examination of Stanislavski's writings to be an invaluable tool in my approach to teaching and allowed me to help students connect what we were doing in movement class to what they were doing in acting class and in rehearsals. Specifically important were his thoughts on tension and muscular release, action, physical characterization, objectives, tempo-rhythm, and given circumstances.

Having gone through the year working towards teaching movement from an acting standpoint, I now firmly believe that undergraduate students should be taught physical acting, not a skills based movement class or any one specific movement discipline. They should be given a wide variety of forms to help them develop their own

technique, but it all should be married to the essential tenets of Stanislavski's method of actor training. It is by far the most universal, easily recognizable, and applicable system. Movement training must train the whole actor, an actor integrated in mind, body, and imagination.

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## Appendix 1

### FIRST SEMESTER SYLLABUS

Why is movement training an essential and integral part of an actor's craft?

Over the course of this semester we will explore the ways in which we can strengthen and free our bodies, releasing our imaginations and unlocking our expressive potential in order to gain an awareness of the body as a vital and necessary tool in performance.

#### **Enduring Understandings:**

- Everything an actor does on stage is seen and interpreted by the audience.
- Acting requires strength, stamina, and flexibility.
- Emotion is the result of action, of fully pursuing a goal.

#### **Course Objectives:** Students will...

- Take physical risks.
- Recognize habits and develop an awareness of body and self.
- Explore space, rhythm, and shape.
- Examine gesture and body language.
- Discover various ways of creating a physical character
- Explore emotion through physical action.
- Examine action and task.

#### **Key Activities and Skills:**

- Neutral
- Isolations
- Impulse
- Shape and Gesture
- Strength, Flexibility, and Stamina

#### **Grading**

- Active Class Participation – 30%

- Journal – 20% (must have a minimum of 12 entries to receive a passing grade)
- Personal collage – 10%
- Performance of personal piece/monologue – 20%
- Character collage – 10%
- Written score of personal piece/monologue – 10%

**VCU's Grading Scale:**

A	100 – 90%
B	89 – 80%
C	79 – 70%
D	69 – 60%
F	59% and Below

**CALENDAR**

Aug 30 & Sep 1 Sep 8	CREATING A GROUP CULTURE
Sep 13 & 15 Sep 20 & 22 Sep 27 & 29 Oct 4 & 6	PHYSICAL EXPRESSION
Oct 11 & 13 Oct 18 & 20 Oct 25 & 27 Nov 1 & 3	SHAPE & GESTURE
Nov 8 & 10 Nov 15 & 17 Nov 22 Nov 29 & Dec 1	BUILDING CHARACTER

Dec 6 & 8

PERFORMANCE OF MONOLOGUE

\*Syllabus subject to change at professor's discretion.

## Appendix 2

### SECOND SEMESTER SYLLABUS

“words are movement, text is movement, ideas are movement, everything moves”  
-Giovanni Fusetti

Why is movement training an essential and integral part of an actor’s craft? How can we build upon our knowledge of our bodies and express that outward towards our relationship with both the space and other performers? Over the course of this semester, we will build upon our discoveries of self continuing to strengthen and free our bodies. We will further explore how we as performers relate to the space and how that is read by an audience, recognizing the fact that the moment we enter the stage, our body is telling a story and the audience is watching it.

#### **Enduring Understandings:**

- Everything an actor does on stage is seen and interpreted by the audience.
- Acting is doing. “Do what you are doing, not what you are not doing.”
- Objectives must be actionable.

#### **Course Objectives:** Students will...

- Take risks.
- Explore movement in relation to space, audience, and other performers.
- Examine the differences between rhythm and tempo.
- Explore telling a story through physical action.

#### **Key Activities and Skills:**

- Spatial Relations
- Rhythm and Tempo
- Shape and Gesture
- Objectives, Obstacles, and Tactics

## Grading

- Active Class Participation – 30%
- Performance of nonverbal scene – 20%
- Written score of nonverbal scene – 10%
- Performance of choreography – 10%
- Performance of scene – 20%
- Written score of scene – 10%

## VCU's Grading Scale:

A	100 – 90%
B	89 – 80%
C	79 – 70%
D	69 – 60%
F	59% and Below

\*Syllabus and Calendar subject to change at professor's discretion.

## CALENDAR

Wed 1/19	Review of syllabus Exploration of Space Introduction: A day in the life...
Mon, 1/24	Work – A day in the life...
Wed, 1/26	Present – A day in the life...
Mon, 1/31	Space Bulking the Image
Wed, 2/2	Introduction to Non-Verbal Scenes
Mon, 2/7	Work Day
Wed, 2/9	Work Day
Mon, 2/14	Love at First Sight
Wed, 2/16	Present Non-Verbal Scenes *written score due for all scenes
Mon, 2/21	Storytelling through combat - swordplay
Wed, 2/23	Introduction to Choreography

Mon, 2/28	Building the Story
Wed, 3/2	TBD
Mon, 3/7	Work Day
Wed, 3/9	Presentation of Fights
Mon, 3/14 - 18	SPRING BREAK – look for scenes!!
Mon, 3/21	Present scenes for review
Wed, 3/23	Scoring the text
Mon, 3/28	Listening & Responding
Wed, 3/30	Staging
Mon, 4/4	Objectives
Wed, 4/6	Work Day
Mon, 4/11	Work Day
Wed, 4/13	Presentation of Scenes *written score due for all scenes
Mon, 4/18	Presentation of Scenes/TBD
Wed, 4/20	Red Nose
Mon, 4/25	Red Nose
Wed, 4/27	Red Nose

## Appendix 3

### End of Year Handout

**Advanced Movement for the Actor**  
**THEA 311-002**  
**Academic Year 2010-2011**

#### **MOVEMENT DISCIPLINES COVERED OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR**

“What is important in any acting technique is not the answers it provides, but rather the space it offers for you to propound the most important questions for yourself. What particular challenges do you encounter in your acting? What kinds of exercises excite you and speak to your needs? What makes acting truly alive for you?”

-Robert Barton

#### SUZUKI METHOD OF ACTOR TRAINING

- The egg, statue work
- The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki

-Tadashi Suzuki and J. Thomas Rime

#### VIEWPOINTS

- Spatial awareness, movement, and gesture
- The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition

-Anne Bogart and Tina Landau

- SITI Company, blends both Viewpoints and Suzuki, website: siti.org

## LABAN MOVEMENT ANALYSIS

- Effort-Shapes:

Glide – light, direct, sustained

Wring – strong, indirect, sustained

Press – strong, direct, sustained

Float – light, indirect, sustained

Dab – light, direct, quick

Flick – light, indirect, quick

Punch – strong, direct, quick

Slash – strong, indirect, quick

- Actor Training the Laban Way: An Integrated Approach to Voice, Speech, and Movement

-Barbara Adrian

## RASABOXES

- “Rasaboxes is a fully embodied and individual means to express these eight key emotions separately and in combination through direct physical practice. Rasaboxes trains participants to work holistically: the body/mind/emotions are treated as a single system. In practice, rasaboxes produces performances that are visceral and useful across a wide range of contexts: from subtle film acting to bold commedia dell’ arte, from naturalistic theatre to pure dance, music, and movement. Rasaboxes integrates rather than separates acting, movement, and

voice. Rasaboxes engages the whole performer in a single, powerful, and learnable approach.”

- website: [rasaboxes.org](http://rasaboxes.org)

## ALBA EMOTING

- “Alba Emoting identifies six "basic" emotions from which all others derive. Each of the basic emotions, as well as emotional neutrality, has its own unique, identifiable set of bodily responses ("effector patterns") which are universal to all humans. By reproducing three aspects of these patterns — breathing, posture, and facial expression — an actor can experience and express genuine, organic emotion at will, without the use of memory or images.”
- website: [albaemotingna.org](http://albaemotingna.org)

## NEUTRAL MASK

- “The Neutral mask allows those who wear it to get in touch with their core being, their most authentic, intuitive self. The mask encourages a sense of wholeness, of physical, emotional, and intellectual centeredness. In the mask, one lives in the moment, questioning nothing, yet empowered to make changes as needed. It integrates mind and body, clarifies impulse, and allows the wearer to experience the power and increased presence that come from absolute self-acceptance.”
- website: [foolmoon.org](http://foolmoon.org)

- Dody Disanto, director of the Center for Movement Theatre, teaching protégé of Jacques Lecoq, teaches class in the DC area, website: [thisisthecenter.com](http://thisisthecenter.com) – she is *amazing*

#### NEUTRAL MASK COMPREHENSIVE SUMMER INTENSIVE

JUNE 13 – 18, 2011

MONDAY - SATURDAY 10am - 5pm

Tuition: \$600; Deposit due with Registration: \$100

#### GROTOWSKI AND JAMES SLOWKIAK'S FOUR STEPS

- the cat, plastiques
- [Jerzy Grotowski \(Routledge Performance Practitioners\)](#)

-James Slowiak

#### STAGE COMBAT

- Society of American Fight Directors, website: [safd.org](http://safd.org)
- International Order of the Sword and the Pen, website: [iosp.org](http://iosp.org)
- Dueling Arts International, website: [duelingarts.com](http://duelingarts.com)

#### STANISLAVSKI

- "Acting is action." – Konstantin Stanislavski
- [An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary](#)

-Konstantin Stanislavski (Author), Jean Benedetti (Translator)

## Appendix 4

### Actor's Handbook Excerpt Handout

<http://www.feeneymcsweeney.com/downloads/TechniqueSummary.pdf>

#### **Technique Summary**

##### Introduction:

It is helpful if you can focus just on the job at hand, this scene, this call-back, this role – rather than worrying about the consequences of missing out on the job, or screwing up this role/ opportunity. Then you take the heat off and can just play. Having a technique means that you are focused on the satisfying and ongoing task of honing your craft, which is something bigger than the task at hand, and so takes your mind off your worries.

Only you know what works for you. In the end we want to activate our instincts and imaginations and make strong choices in our acting that define the contribution we have to make. There are no verities or guarantees, and outcome is always more important than process. I'd only ever want you to use this technique if it resonated with you, and helped your results. All I ask is that for the period of our workshop you give it a go and see if it helps.

The Technique summarized here from *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* will help you bring your own personality to bear on each role, and by playing a simple action tune you in to the other actor, keeping your performance unselfconscious, spontaneous and true. It'll get you asking the right questions. Say Mamet and Macy say in the *Handbook*: "Always tell the truth, it's the easiest thing to remember."

### **Scene Analysis**

Once you know what a good action (also known as intention) entails (see below) you must learn to choose the best action for a scene. The following simple formula, if employed consistently, will always lead to a performable action in line with the intentions of the playwright.

Ask yourself these three questions: -

1. The Character's Action: What is your character literally doing in the scene? – state this simply from your character's point of view i.e. in the third person (he, she)

Example: Stanley is screaming for Stella to come back to him [All examples from 'A Streetcar named Desire,' the "Stella" scene, Act 5 Sc 3]

2. Your Action (also called your want, or your intention): what you want from the other person/ people in this scene? – your action is:

- Stated as a verb ('to convince,' 'to wake-up')
- What you are trying to accomplish in relation to the other character/s in the

scene (NOT what the author says you are feeling)

- Have just one action for every scene that works for every line.
- Different from your literal description of the scene.

The purpose of your action is to give you something more important, more interesting and fun to concentrate on than trying to believe the fiction of the script.

Example: (from the 'Stella' scene) To beg a loved one's forgiveness Your chosen action, as well as being in line with the intentions of the playwright, should also be influenced by the style of the play/ film AND what you know from the script of your character. Character comes primarily from the aggregate of actions you chose, and these should be obvious in the writing of each scene. Equally, sometimes the quality or intensity of your chosen action can be productively influenced by keeping what you know overall of your character in mind.

3. What is that action like to me? It is "as if..."

The 'as if' grounds the action in your own experience, activating your sense of play:

- Your 'as if' should come out of your action, not the scene. It is a means to remind yourself what the action means to you in personal terms, so is also stated in the first person.
- Sets real stakes for the actor in the scene; reinforces the actor's scene of play
- 'As if's' that somehow aid another person can be more effective and more fun.

Example: (from 'Stella') It is as if I broke my mother's prized family heirloom and she threw me out of the house. To be allowed back into my house I must beg her forgiveness.

## **Actions**

Actions/ Intentions form the basis of your craft. An action expresses the essence of the scene for your character.

A good action:

1. is physically capable of being done.
2. is fun to do.
3. is specific.
4. has its test in the other person.
5. is not an errand.
6. does not presuppose any physical or emotional state.
7. is not manipulative.
8. has a "cap."
9. is in line with the intentions of the playwright, fits the style of the play and what you know of the character

## **The Tools of the Craft**

Since we frequently refer to the various tools and skills that you have at your disposal, here is a list of them. Remember that it is within anyone's power to obtain any one of these. All that's involved is hard work and practice. Note: worry is not work.

- A strong clear voice
- Good clear speech
- A strong supple body
- The ability to analyze a scene usefully
- Semantics—the ability to use words specifically in order to choose a good action
- Memorization by rote
- The ability to work off the other person
- The ability to act before you think (i.e., on your impulses)
- The ability to concentrate, developed by getting into the habit of: when it wanders it can only be tempted by a good action and placed lightly back on the task at hand.
- Bravery
- Will
- Common sense
- Skills: e.g. Accent practice

From *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. Notes in italics by P Feeney

## Appendix 5

### RED NOSE

Philosophy of Clown, by Jan Henderson

[www.foolmoon.org](http://www.foolmoon.org)

In a lifelong search for meaning, I have found the clown to be the best, all-encompassing metaphor for the human condition - an uncompromising mirror to look into for glimpses of the truth. We look at the clown and see ourselves - our hopes, dreams, fears, and virtues, our flaws and our process. Clowns show us how, as a species, we get into trouble - without ever meaning or wanting to - and how we sometimes stumble onto sublime solutions to our problems. The Fool has eyes to see, and heart to recognize.

Clowning isn't something we need to learn so much as something we become aware of in ourselves. Any time that we are curious, playful, or creative, we are in clown mode. When we are in a state of wonder or awe, surprise or amazement, we are in clown. Whenever we have hunches, act on impulse, or digress - we are in clown. Whenever we have strong emotions, we are in clown. The clown lives in the place of laughing and crying at the same time.

1The art of clowning involves much more than the slapstick and oversized shoes of the traditional circus clown. The character of The Fool is an essential ingredient of human society - a universal archetype found in some form in all cultures and in all times. The Clown is the " puer aeternus" , the eternal child in all of us - the innocent who sees things as they really are and not as convention decrees, who can be counted on to tell us, in the loudest possible voice, that the emperor's not wearing any clothes. It is the part of us that has never grown up, that lives in the heart and in the moment, with no past to regret and no future to dread - the part that only wants to play, completely free of responsibility - and yet is willing and able to save the world if necessary.

The clown takes everything literally and personally, questioning everything under the sun except itself, blithely flaunting the egg on its face and the heart on its sleeve. With the best of intentions and no thought of failure, it leaps naively into danger - getting knocked down over and over - but never failing to get up and try again. It is an embodiment of hope in the face of hopelessness, and possibility in the face of the impossible. It blissfully ignores the obvious and somehow convinces us of the wisdom of folly, and if, as I suspect, we are here to bear witness to the universe, the clown aspect of ourselves provides the best color commentary.

Clowning is about the freedom that comes from a state of total, unconditional acceptance of our most authentic selves, warts and all. It offers us respite from our self.

doubts and fears, and opens the door to joy. And the best part is, we are all already our clowns. They are here inside us, waiting for us to recognize them so that they can come out and play.

## Vita

Elizabeth Lorraine Ressegger-Slone was born on September 12, 1975, in Richmond, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from John Randolph Tucker High School in 1993. She received a Certificate of Fine Arts from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, New York, NY in 1996 and a Bachelor of Individualized Study in Theatrical Movement and Dance from George Mason University, Fairfax, VA in 2002. She has worked as a teaching artist for many regional theatre companies including Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles, CA and the Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, DC. She is a founding member of the theatre company dog & pony dc.