Flow-Acting: Modern Sports Science and the Preparation of Actors

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FLOW-ACTING: MODERN SPORTS SCIENCE AND THE PREPARATION OF ACTORS

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

by

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Abstract

FLOW-ACTING: MODERN SPORTS SCIENCE AND THE PREPARATION OF ACTORS

By Barrett Slade Billew, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

Theatre artists and acting teachers throughout history have sought to find and create presence. By combining modern sports science with an understanding of systems of actor training I have suggested an approach that makes presence a trainable skill. My coach Dr. Scott Sonnon, developer of the Circular Strength Training System, has refined modern sports science to emphasize the development and maintenance of flow-state. This state allows the athlete to respond openly and freely within a constantly changing situation.
By combining my life long study of acting with my eight years of work with Coach Sonnon I am developing a system to teach actors the skill of cultivating flow. This work will enhance the actor’s presence and ability to handle the stress of performance while developing a strong, supple, and coordinated psychophysical instrument. Video of examples of the exercises can be found in the accompanying materials.

This work was created in Microsoft Word 2004 for Mac.
The Presence of the Actor

“My book has no pretensions to be scientific. Although I take the view that art should be on good terms with science, I am alarmed by the kind of scientific sophistries actors use at moments when they are creating intuitively, and it is that with which this book is mainly concerned. Acting is above all intuitive, because it is based on subconscious feelings, on an actor’s instincts. That, of course, does not mean that an actor should be an ignoramus, that he has no need of knowledge. Quite the contrary, he needs it more than anyone, because it provides him with material with which to be creative. But there is a time and a place for everything. Actors should educate themselves, build up a store of learning and real life experiences, but on stage, while they are acting, they should forget what they have learned and be intuitive.”

- Stanislavsky

Centuries of acting teachers, whether in the traditional apprenticeship model or in the modern academy, have sought to place actors in an altered mental state for performance. Not all traditions have embraced this notion, but from the Noh actor staring at his masked face in the mirror to the modern actor practicing Patsy Rodenberg’s second circle work this idea has existed across cultures and time. Some teachers have argued that someone either has presence or they do not. I would counter this argument by suggesting that everyone has presence. It is simply a question of discovering how to access it. I want now to explore some of the central issues that make the learning of presence difficult and then explore an alternative approach to achieving this state.
Despite the prevalence of the concept in modern actor training there is little agreement on a definition of presence or how to achieve it. Most teachers of acting seem to believe that it is not so much taught as it is released. This is not far from the truth, but it leads to misunderstandings of the actual psychophysical mechanics of this transformation. There are several primary reasons for this confusion. First is a rampant sense of mysticism within the theatre community. Second is a belief that presence cannot be taught. Third is confusion over the process of how people learn and the best ways to prepare someone to perform.

Theatre’s association with mysticism stretches from the religious significance of primal ritual performance to the pervasive folk superstitions of later periods. Acting teachers have often been treated like mystics or gurus. This is in part a hold over from the past. It is also tied to the very real sense in an audience that something magical happens when a performer transforms into another person. While we in the theatre should certainly be loath to give away our magic, we should endeavor to understand the art that produces it. Mysticism became increasingly rampant following the sixties. Many theatre artists tried to return performance to its ritual function. Many companies at this time turned to drugs to achieve altered states and many others came to believe that the secret had to do with exhausting physical work. They believe pushing the body to the edge of physical collapse could unlock an ideal creative state. This ethos pervades modern alternative theatre especially that work closely allied with Grotowski. Double-Edge Theatre and The Dah Performance Research Centre are two prominent examples. From a very different cultural background the Suzuki Method of Actor Training falls into this trap as well. While this
method does produce the desired psychophysical state it also leads to excessive physical injury and is ridiculously inefficient.\textsuperscript{ii}

The second problem is common to most of the approaches based in realism as well as those systems tied to the Copeau tradition. Much of the American Method influenced work tries to ignore this question all together. Either they believe that presence cannot be taught, or that it will come as a natural result of their other techniques. This method is hit or miss at best. In the Copeau tradition there is a strong belief in presence and the learning of it, but little idea how it can be systematically taught. Instead presence can only be recognized when it occurs and therefore the student actor must be placed in situations where they might exhibit presence and then told whether or not they have it and at what moments. While this method is certainly superior to the other two it is still rather slipshod. Lacking a logical, clear definition of what is being sought leaves the student with a limited idea of how they achieve presence, and puts too much power in the hands of the teacher as arbiter of right and wrong.

Confusion about effective methods of performance enhancement has left many students flailing about in the dark, which creates stress and inefficiency. In my extensive research into learning methods the most effective method of enhancing student efficiency I have found is the Performance Diagnostic Trinity.\textsuperscript{iii} This approach allows any activity to be broken down to three basic parts: skills, attributes, and work under pressure.\textsuperscript{iv}
Skills are the actual psychophysical techniques. In acting this is the most nebulous area as the skills of acting vary from system to system. For example in Stanislavsky’s work the acting of objectives is a skill where as in Noh learning to move in the jo-ha-kyu rhythm is a skill. Attributes are the traits necessary to effectively utilize those skills in performance. For the actor attributes would include standard athletic attributes like strength and speed, but also more specific attributes like a sense of space or emotional responsiveness. Lastly these skills and attributes must be utilized under increasing levels of pressure (competition) in order to prepare the actor for the stress of performance. In this model competition exists both in a public setting, and also within ones learning environment. My experience has been that many theatre people resist the use of the term competition, so in my work with actors I replace it with the word performance. By understanding in which of these areas a problem lies you can determine the most efficient method to address it: the practice of
skills, the training of attributes, and performance to develop mental, emotional, and physical toughness.

How can these three issues be addressed? How can we achieve healthier, more effective, and more efficient preparation of actors? I believe the answer lies in cutting edge sports science particularly in the work of an organization called RMAX International. To be sure many of the criticisms I have laid at the door of modern actor preparation could also come knocking at most sports training facilities, but in the last century there has been an effort to approach sports training as a science and to come to a clear understanding of the best way to prepare athletes. The former Soviet Union exemplifies this approach. Over decades the USSR conducted detailed research into all aspects of preparing athletes for high performance. The success of these athletes speaks for itself, as does the longevity that many of them were able to achieve. Still being healthy and active well into old age, which cannot be said of many non-Soviet athletes. The work of RMAX International is rooted in this Soviet research and has continued its path of exploration and development adding many new insights to the work, and truly working on the cutting edge of the field.

One of sports science’s major contributions is the understanding of the concept commonly called “the zone.” In all areas of physical endeavor we hear about high level exponents being “in the zone;” they are in full mastery of their environment and able to respond to everything happening around them in a successful and creative way. Most people can think of some experience either of being in this state or of observing someone in it. Michael Chekhov speaks of this state when he talks of “double consciousness.” For this work I am replacing the generic phrase “the zone” with the concept of flow-state.
Flow-state is a clearly definable, trainable, and replicable psychophysical state. It is neither abstract nor mystical. We will explore a detailed definition of flow and how to maintain it later. The concept, first brought to public attention by the psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, was later refined by my coach Scott Sonnon for modern athletics. It has already been applied across a wide variety of athletics, and a number of people have begun to apply the concepts to life in general. I am the first person to attempt to systematically apply this work to the preparation of actors.

Sports science has done the major research into the practical preparation of human beings for high intensity high effort performance, and as such provides an excellent foundation for the work of the performer. With very few exceptions systems of actor training have not been rooted in detailed and practical research. Many of the practitioners who did attempt detailed study became overly caught up in anti-theatrical issues, such as Strasberg’s emphasis on true emotion or Grotowski’s desire for theatre to be transformative ritual. Stanislavsky comes closest to conducting a scientific study, and it is interesting that his work developed in the same cultural environment as the early days of the work that forms the foundation here. However, Stanislavsky’s work has become a set style that is now a collection of old practices rather than the continually innovating work of his lifetime. I am not suggesting that actors should be prepared in the same way that athletes are. The needs of each are strikingly distinct, but the techniques of both program design and mental preparation at the cutting edge of sports science have much to offer the actor. I am not talking about the fitness of actors, but rather a specific approach to making sure actors grow in terms of skills, attributes, and performance.
Most actor preparation systems and programs are not integrated in terms of the three areas of skills, attributes, and performance. The history of western acting training has been one of division. Looking at theatre training programs across the country acting is separate from movement, which is separate from voice. The three key tools of the actor are ripped apart and rarely integrated. Some have begun to reintegrate them. This has largely been done by grafting parts of disparate approaches together or by one person creating a personal method and then teaching it to others. The first method creates a Frankenstein’s monster program that propagates the disintegrated performer. The second assumes that an idiosyncratic approach that may or may not have been key to a given performer’s success will work for everyone. What I am proposing is a foundational concept that integrates separate elements, and allows you to bring concepts and practices from a variety of systems into the preparation of actors without creating dissonance between the pieces. The pedagogical construct that underlies all of this work can be used to integrate material across a wide scope.

Despite the assumptions of many teachers most methods of actor preparation specialize in only one or two areas of the PDT. Generally they focus on skills while occasionally touching on the other sides of the triangle. Training is usually ignored all together. It is common wisdom that going to the gym or playing sports are good physical training for actors. This position comes either from laziness or ignorance. Gym training in the US is predominately about physique not function. It is about looking a certain way rather than developing the attributes necessary to perform. It would of course be ignorant to deny that in the modern entertainment industry physique is highly important to actors,
but if it is the focus of their training then they are not adequately prepared for the demands of their field. Playing a sport is no better. First most people simply go out and play the sport not train for it so they are missing most of the attribute development anyway. Secondly, the attributes developed by a specific sport have value in the context of that sport, but rarely crossover well to other activities. For example basketball is a game of quick reaction times, fast twitch muscle fiber, and bursts of energy. Running a marathon deemphasizes reaction time, and requires slow twitch muscle fiber as well as steady continuous energy over an extended period. Playing basketball will make you a better marathon runner than the average couch potato, but at a certain point you are only receiving diminishing returns as the two activities attributes sets conflict. What actors need is a specific physical training program that fully integrates their skills practice, and performance work.

Conditioning is foundational to the development and maintenance of flow-state. Once the performer has embodied the process of gaining, losing, and regaining flow through a physical training experience, they will be better equipped to find it in a variety of circumstances and maintain it under the pressure of performance. A sample physical training program for actors serves as the centerpiece of this paper. While it can simply be used as is, I hope that it will become a model for the creation of individual programs for actors to address their specific needs. The program will include the address integration of practice and performance with the training component. For this purpose I will use my work with the Viewpoints as a model. From this model teachers will be able to meld their own idiosyncratic approaches to the material without compromising the integrity of either. First
I must quickly survey what theatre is. A clear definition is a necessary basis for creating and understanding the exercises that follow.

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\(^ii\) These statements are based on my own personal experience training with Double-edge and the Dah as well as training with SITI Company in the Suzuki Method. Additionally I have had conversations with other people who have trained with all three groups.

\(^iii\) For additional research into learning methods I recommend the works of John Holt, Howard Gardner, Ellen Langer, and Alfie Kohn.

\(^iv\) This work would be impossible without my years of study and work with Scott Sonnon, the RMAX faculty and online community. Most of the diagrams in this work, and many of the intellectual constructs are drawn from Scott’s extensive body of works as well as hours of personal training and conversations. For a full list of Scott’s works go to: http://www.rmaxinternational.com/home/index.php?&option=com_phpshop


\(^vii\) Csikszentmihalyi has written or co-written a number of books on flow. The most relevant to this work are *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life* and *Flow in Sports*. 
A Universal Definition of Theatre

The variations and types of theatrical performance and the related actor preparation methods vary widely across cultures, and even between artists working in theoretically similar ways. For example the Ontologic Hysteric Theatre and the Wooster Group\textsuperscript{viii} are both New York based theatre companies influenced by the cultural milieu of the sixties and a postmodern aesthetic. They have even collaborated in the past, but the actual work that each group produces is strikingly different in a number of ways. If these two companies with so much in common can be dissimilar, the challenge of trying to compare across cultures is immense. How does one find the common ground between performance styles as diverse as the Broadway Musical and Wayang Kulit? Yet even non-practitioners readily identify both as theatre.

Since Copeau there has been a branch of Western theatre seeking a universal language. Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba are significant examples. Each has attempted to find a universal theatre. Brook strips theatre down to what he perceives as its foundations. Barba with the International School of Theatre Anthropology studies the “pre-expressive” basis of performance from an intercultural perspective. While I have profound respect for both and certainly what I am attempting is marked by their influence, my purpose is different.

I would like the work I am doing to function across systems and styles. Therefore it is important to create a broad definition of theatre. For this purpose I am utilizing a model
created by RMAX for the analysis of sports and activities. This model assumes that any organized activity has a specific underlying doctrine that then influences the strategies, tactics, and techniques used by practitioners.

Doctrine is the basic point of view underlying everything. Strategies grow down from that doctrine to form a base level of beliefs about how to accomplish the doctrine. Tactics are more specific outgrowths of the strategies. They form the practical foundation of what you actually do. Techniques are what you actually do in response to a specific situation.

I will begin with a general analysis. In developing it I found a close match to my own beliefs. Initially this caused concern, but my work has crossed so many different styles, approaches, and occasionally cultures that it is only logical that my philosophy bridges multiple types of work. After the general analysis I will break down an approach antithetical to my own: realism. This serves two purposes. First it is a demonstration of a useful tool in the analysis of theatrical work, secondly it can serve as a model for practitioners to delineate their own beliefs.

The doctrine of theatre is to create a shared experience in space and time between performers and observers that expands everyone's experience of life. This embraces a wide range of artistic possibilities as it avoids limiting the particular goals of theatre in terms of affect, and addresses the central relationship of the theatre, while also recognizing that the basic mode of communication in theatrical art is action in space and time.
This leads naturally to several strategies:

i. Communication through sound and movement.

ii. Use of spatial relationships between performers and with the space itself.

iii. Rhythm in the space as well as movement and sound.

iv. A combination of story and artistic logic – not necessarily a traditional story but a unified artistic world.

v. Responsiveness between the work and the audience – The performer cannot ignore the existence of the audience and must allow their energy and acting to be impacted.

vi. Attempt to create a specific experience for the audience whether mental, visceral, psychological, spiritual, or any combination.

Several tactics are used to achieve these strategies.

i. Careful attention to the physical and aural construction of the performance space as a text read by the audience.

ii. Consciousness of how all of the elements of the performance from the written text to the body text of the performer are being read.

iii. Methods of performative communication utilized by the actors.

iv. Priming the audience both prior to and during performance.

These last two points need further explanation. Creators of theatre in our intercultural world must make strong choices about performance style. Many pieces of theatre fall back to a specific style of performance because that is the style that seems “natural” to the
artists, but in this postmodern world, we need to question those assumptions. Audience priming is another often overlooked aspect of art. What does the audience already know about the performance? How can we convey to them through advertising, the arrangement of the pre-show experience and other means the state that will prepare them for this particular production? Many shows are damaged not by the quality of the show, but by the difference between the actual show and the audiences’ perceptions of what the piece is going to be.

Some systems apply specific techniques regardless of context and others match up techniques from a menu of options when confronted with a situation. I believe techniques should be created spontaneously to address specific needs when they arise. Many now codified training methods developed in this way. For example, the Suzuki Method of Actor Training began as a set of solutions to specific rehearsal problems, but over time those solutions became set. Other systems, such as Stanislavsky’s, continued to change in response to specific challenges, and did not become fixed until after his death. What I am advocating here is that we imitate the living Stanislavsky and allow our approach to continuously adapt in the face of the needs of specific productions.

The doctrine, strategies, tactics, and techniques of realism below serves as a model for how other practitioners can began to define their own work in these terms. I have simplified at the technique level. It is outside the scope of this paper to list all of the techniques of realism. An explication of the acting techniques alone would require several volumes. I chose to generalize a few specific examples.
Doctrinal analysis for Realism

1. Doctrine:
   a. To create for the audience an experience of verisimilitude as if they are viewing real life for the purpose of revealing the relationships between people.

2. Strategies:
   a. The true emotional experience of the character conveyed to the audience
   b. An emphasis on the relationships between characters
   c. Literal representations of lived spaces
   d. Use of language that reflects the actual rhythms and variations of human speech
   e. Situations that are believable occurrences

3. Tactics:
   a. Acting methods that create a true and personal emotional experience for the actor
   b. Research into the specifics of the spaces, times, appearances, and behaviors of the characters conveyed in the script
   c. An understanding of the psychology of the period of composition so that the behavior of the characters reflects modern understandings of how people think and relate.

4. Techniques:
   a. Sturdy and detailed set and prop construction
b. Lighting and sound that are true to the environment

c. An emphasis on detailed analysis of the relationships found in the script.

d. The fourth wall

e. Acting methods that emphasize finding true emotion, and relationship while
deephasizing movement and vocal technique.

This type of analysis can be the foundation for a training program. The school that
uses the realism analysis as their foundation is going to train very different kinds of
designers, playwrights, and performers than a program that uses the more general model
above or another model altogether. The program for the preparation of actors that follows
seeks to avoid style specificity. Therefore it will focus on pre-expressive training (to
borrow Barba’s term.)

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For more information on these two theatres see Richard Foreman’s numerous writings
about his own work at the Ontologic Hysteric and for The Wooster Group David Savran’s
Breaking the Rules.
A Physiological Profile of Acting and General Physical Preparedness

To develop a physical training program for any activity it is first necessary to determine its physiological profile. Indebted to the work of Tudor Bompa the profile is composed of an analysis of the basic movement patterns and energy use of a given activity. It could be argued that the types of conditioning needed for the actor are as varied as the roles they play. I would agree, and want to explore the training of actors for specific roles at a later time. There is, however, a basic profile for the needs of theatrical performers that can serve as a foundation for general training. Keep in mind that this training is pre-expressive. It is not tied to any particular technique of acting or style of performance, but rather prepares the body for the general work of performance. Knowing the specific needs of the actors would influence how they are trained, but in the education field our goal should be to prepare actors for any potential need.

To create a physiologic profile I am going to use Bompa’s analysis of biomotor abilities based on three key attributes: force or strength (F), Endurance (E), and Speed (S). We can represent these abilities in diagram form by placing Acting (A) in its relationship to the three components in a pyramid structure. Acting requires long-slow endurance with bursts of energy. The actor, on stage for often hours at a time, has to jump from a steady base to a sudden explosive rev-up. Reactive power is key, the ability to change suddenly and explosively. This is not only an emotional attribute, but must be supported by physical attributes. Finally actors must have good speed-endurance meaning the ability to repeat
high velocity actions numerous times over the course of a performance. The below diagram based on Bompa’s example suggests the relationship of these three attributes to the actor:

Figure 2: Physiological Profile of Acting

The diagram suggests that actor training relies heavily on speed and endurance training while deemphasizing strength training. This is not to say that strength training is unimportant, but it is not primary.

Other attributes that are essential to the training of the actor are mobility, strength in all 6 degrees of movement, and tidal (or breath) volume. The six degrees of movement
address all of the potential movements of the body. Any movement can be broken down as a combination of these degrees. They are: heaving (up to down), surging (front to back), swaying (side to side), pitching (folding forward and back), yawing (rotating at the core), and rolling (tilting the body to the side). The specific exercises that follow will address issues of mobility, 6 Degrees of Movement, and Tidal volume. The manner in which the exercises are programmed will address the force, endurance, and speed elements. As the work gets more specific it will address some additional attributes in particular spatial awareness, responsiveness, and timing.

The development of this training process is based on the Training Hierarchy Pyramid. The THP models the development of training for any activity.
This chapter addresses General Physical Preparedness. GPP is your capacity for work. In other words it is how prepared your body is for the workload at hand. Specific Physical Preparedness will be addressed in chapter four. It is work sophistication, the ability to perform in increasingly more sophisticated ways based on the foundation of the GPP. Activity Specific Preparedness begins the process of applying the attributes developed in the GPP and SPP phases under conditions that stimulate the same neuromuscular firings as the activity. Finally Mental and Emotional Preparedness apply the attributes developed in incrementally more stressful circumstances to train the performer’s ability to cultivate flow under pressure. ASP and MEP will be explored in more detail in chapter five. It is important to note that while it is difficult to describe this process without making it seem like steps up a ladder, the process is more one of gradually shifting from area to area.

**THE GPP EXERCISES:**

Section 1: MOBILITY

The exercises will begin with Joint Mobility. Mobility is the basis for all movement and is also central to healthy longevity. The program here is gloss specifically for actors. For an exhaustive mobility program please reference Coach Sonnon’s “Intu-flow”. This training provides nutrition to the joints, and cleans out the joint capsules.
NECK MOBILITY

1. Extend the neck with the chin leading forward and up

2. Swoop the chin back in and into contact with the upper chest

3. Tilt head from side to side, reaching with the mandible towards the ceiling
FACIAL MOBILITY

In my experience most acting teachers perform some sort of facial warm up and they all address the mobility and blood flow to the face. Therefore I am going to offer just a few examples, (feel free to insert your own work here.)

1. Leave your chin in place as you tilt your head back using the top joint of your spine to fully open the jaw. In this position open and close your mouth, and then from the open position move the lower jaw from side to side, then into a circle.

2. Maintaining this fully open position make circle the tongue in both direction, then wave the tongue forward and back.
SHOULDER MOBILITY

1. Keeping your elbow straight and your shoulder packed in place make big windmill circles across the front of your body 3-5 times. Then reverse directions.

2. Do the same thing behind. You may have more limited mobility here. Keep your elbow straight and shoulder packed to gradually increase mobility. Then reverse.

3. When you are comfortable with these two movements combine them into figure 8’s in both directions.
Arm Waves:

1. Lifting and relaxing the shoulder, elbow, and wrist sequentially create an arm wave forward with each arm. Practice each individually then combine them.
THORACIC MOBILITY

1. Extend the rib cage forward. Gradually let your shoulder blades pinch together behind you. If you can interlace your fingers together behind your back.

2. Then extend the rib cage towards the back. Let your shoulder blades slide forward interlacing your fingers to the front. Repeat both exercises 3-5 times.
3. Slide your rib cage to one side. Reach with the opposite side fingertips towards your thigh. Do the same thing on the opposite side. Repeat 3-5 times.

4. Combine these four motions into a circle.

As thoracic mobility is especially important to performers, there is one other exercise to be done here. It is a small circle and may be challenging at first.

1. Lift your chest straight up towards the ceiling.
2. Shift your chest to the side.

3. Compress the chest down towards the solar plexus.

4. Shift to the opposite side. Repeat and reverse.
PELVIC MOBILITY

1. Press your pelvis forward. Tightening your glutes allow yourself to fully exhale.

   Tilt your head down to your chest.

   ![Image](image1.jpg)

2. Release the pelvis back with the intention of reaching your tailbone towards the back of your head. Tilt your head back and allow yourself to inhale fully into this position. Alternate between these two positions 3 – 5 times.

   ![Image](image2.jpg)

3. Keeping your right leg straight sit your right hip back at a diagonal as if you were going to sit down. Allow your upper body to lean forward extending your arms for counter balance as you sit back even further. Hold for 15-30 seconds. Repeat on the other side. Perform 3-5 repetitions.

   ![Image](image3.jpg)
4. Combining the motions make a pelvic circle.

SPINAL MOBILITY

1. Bend forward into a flat back position. Hold for 15-30 seconds and then tilt back to wave your spine to the back. Make this as fluid a movement as possible. Hold.

   Come back up by creating a lap and sitting into it. Let your head be the last thing to come up rather than the first. Repeat 3 – 5 times.
2. Tilt from one side to the other. Hold each position for 15 – 30 seconds. Repeat 3 – 5 times.

3. Come back to the front and relax down. Combine the above movements into a circle.
1. Begin a gentle figure 8 with one leg to the inside and outside. Gradually increase the amplitude of the figure 8 working until you are able to swing the leg up to touch your hands placed on the inside and outside of your leg. Repeat 5 – 10 times, and repeat on the other side.
ACCORDION

1. With your weight evenly distributed exhale down and let your shoulders roll forward.

2. Twist to one side letting the opposite heel leave the ground, and letting your arms open up to expand your chest.

3. Return to the center position and repeat on the other side.

4. Continue back and forth for 20-30 repetitions. Allow your breathing to happen naturally though the movement. If you need to think about the breath concentrate on the exhale and let the inhale happen.
**ACTING FLOW - BASIC**

Below are the exercises developed specifically for this program. Each exercise should be practiced individually until you feel that you can perform it with a rate of perceived technique of 8 or higher, and a rate of perceived discomfort of 3 or lower. At this point we will begin to put the exercises together. At the end of the chapter is a video clip of the exercises performed in sequence. This flow should be trained for 20 minutes three times per week. Initially you should feel free to break when you need to, but your ultimate goal is to progress to being able to perform continuously for the full time with only ten second rests as needed. You want to always work at the level of perceived technique of 8 or higher, and discomfort level of 3 or lower. Once you can perform this first flow at this level for a solid week you are ready to move onto the exercises in the next chapter.

**ACTING FLOW LEVEL 1**

**TIDAL SQUAT**

1. Open the arms and expand the chest.

2. Moving your hips back squat by swinging your hips back in place.
3. At the bottom of the squat exhale fully and roll your head and shoulders towards the floor to achieve full exhalation.

![Image of a compressed forward lunge](image)

4. Reverse the procedure to bring you back to standing and repeat.

**COMPRESSED FORWARD LUNGE**

1. Open the arms and expand the chest.

2. Step forward with one leg.

3. Bend the front leg.

4. Keep the back leg straight and press that hip towards the floor.
5. Bring the torso down to the forward leg to compress the air out of it.

6. Return to standing and repeat on the other side.

SIDE SUMO

1. Open the arms and expand the chest as above.

2. Step out to the side into a wide squat.

3. Curl your arms and torso inward to fully exhale.

4. Return to 1 and repeat on the other side.
BASIC SIDE SWING

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Lift one leg and extend it along the ground to the opposite side.

3. Lift your opposite hand off the ground, and expand the chest.

4. Place the hand back on the ground and curl the leg back in compressing the lungs.

5. Return to squat and repeat on the opposite side.
TWISTING QUAD SQUAT

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Gradually shift your weight forward until it is evenly distributed between your hands and feet. Let your knees and elbows flair out at a 45-degree angle.

3. Twist your hips to one side letting your knees point in the same direction.

4. Shift to center and twist to the other side.

5. Return to center and shift your weight back to the squat.
WRINGING SIDE BEND

1. From standing spread your feet slightly wider than shoulder width.
2. Tilt to one side allowing the other arm to reach overhead expanding your chest.
3. Reach the same side arm back across your waist.

View the accompanying video to see the exercises in order and linked for practice.

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ix The ideas contained here are from Bompa, Tudor. Periodization Training for Sports. Human Kinetics. Champaign: 1999. The diagram was created by me based on models for various sports.
Specific Physical Preparedness

The SPP exercises below are designed to sophisticate the movements practiced at the GPP level. They build directly on the previous exercises, but increase the range and depth of the movement in order to provide a safety valve for unexpected movements and therefore preserve the health of the performer when accidents happen. Working through the levels should follow the same protocol outlined in the previous chapter.

ACTING FLOW LEVEL 2

TIDAL SQUAT (same as Level 1)

1. Open the arms and expand the chest.

2. Moving your hips back squat by swinging your hips back in place.

3. At the bottom of the squat exhale fully and roll your head and shoulders towards the floor to achieve full exhalation.

4. Reverse the procedure to bring you back to standing and repeat.
FORWARD LUNGE TO TRIANGLE POSE

1. Open the arms and expand the chest.

2. Step forward with one leg.

3. Bend the front leg.

4. Reach the lead arm down and place it on the ground (or as close as you can) at the same time extend the rear arm towards the ceiling. (Note foot position)

5. Return to standing and repeat on the other side.
COSSACK ACCORDION

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat

2. Shift weigh to one side allowing the back knee to drop towards the floor with the full inside of the foot in contact with the ground.

3. Open the arms and expand the chest while rocking onto the ball of lead foot.

4. Rock back into the squat and repeat on the other side.
EXTENDED LEG SWING

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Lift your one leg and extend it in the air to the opposite side.

3. Lift your opposite hand off the ground, and expand the chest and hips as far as possible.

4. Place your hand back on the ground & curl the leg back in to compress the lungs.

5. Return to squat.

6. Repeat on the opposite side.
SIDE PLANK HALF TWIST

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Shift forward into plank pose or push up position.

3. Shift your weight onto one arm into side plank.

4. Expand your free arm and chest.

5. Compress the free arm down to the ground and place your palm on the ground while maintaining the side plank structure.
6. Shift back to the push up position and switch to the other side.

TILTING TRIPOD

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat.

2. Collapse down to one side.
3. Walk your feet up until you are balancing in a tripod on your two feet and one
shoulder. Your next should be completely free with no weight on your head.

![Image of person in tripod position]

4. Relax back down and return to squat. Repeat on the other side.

View the accompanying video to see the exercises in order and linked for practice.

**ACTING FLOW LEVEL 3**

**TIDAL SQUAT (same as level 1)**

1. Open the arms and expand the chest.

2. Moving your hips back squat by swinging your hips back in place.

3. At the bottom of the squat exhale fully and roll your head and shoulders
towards the floor to achieve full exhalation.

4. Reverse the procedure to bring you back to standing and repeat.
FORWARD LUNGE TO COMPRESSED COSSACK

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat.

2. Shift your weight to one leg to free the opposite leg to step forward.

3. Step forward and rock your weight forward as in the accordion.

4. Shift your weight back and then step back to return to the tidal squat.

5. Repeat on the opposite side.
DESCENDING SHIN ROLL

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat.

2. Shift weight to one side allowing the back knee to drop towards the floor with the full inside of the foot in contact with the ground.

3. As you point the back foot, roll your hips in to sit on the top of that foot.

4. Twist to compress the torso into the forward leg.

5. Shift the hips back to free the bottom leg, and roll back into the flat foot squat.

6. Repeat on the other side
SWING SPLIT

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Lift your one leg and extend it in the air to the opposite side.

3. Extend the other leg to a slight V.

4. Lift your opposite hand off the ground, and expand the chest and hips as far as possible.

5. As you place your hand back on the ground curl the legs back in to compress the lungs.

6. Return to squat.

7. Repeat on the opposite side.

SIDE PLANK FULL TWIST

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat. Place your hands on the ground.

2. Shift forward into plank pose or push up position.

3. Shift your weight onto one arm into side plank.

4. Expand your free arm and chest.
5. Compress the free arm down and wrap it underneath yourself while maintaining the side plank position with the legs.

6. Shift back to the push up position and switch to the other side.

TILTING TRIPOD TO COMPRESSED PLOW

1. Enter a squat as in the tidal squat.

2. Collapse down to one side.

3. Walk your feet up until you are balancing in a tripod on your two feet and one shoulder. Your next should be completely free with no weight on your head.
4. Roll your chin to your chest and walk yourself into a full plow.

5. Open your knees and drop them towards your chest. Keep the weight on your shoulders and off of your neck.

6. Relax back down and return to squat. Repeat on the other side.

View the accompanying video to see the exercises in order and linked for practice.
COMPENSATION PROGRAM

When following any training program (even sitting on the couch) you are developing overspecializations, and it is wise to build compensation for that into your program. These are specific exercises that are the functional opposite of the movements you are regularly performing. When doing compensation work, you want to move as deeply into each pose as you can. For each pose there are three points of adjustment. Continue to adjust through each as you go along. You want to slowly increase your time in each pose. One minute is about the maximum that you want to go. You should feel a good sweat develop, but you should not feel “worked out”. The goal is to release specializations that have built up. At first practice each of the exercises individually. I recommend 3-5 repetitions of each exercise. Then you can begin to connect them together in the prescribed way. Combining the exercises together increases their efficacy. Once you are combining them together repeat the entire flow 3-5 times. Go slowly.
EXERCISES

MOUNTAIN POSE BENDS

1. Standing in mountain pose, tuck your pelvis; lift your chest, and your crown.

2. Bring both arms above your head place your palms together and interlace all but your pointer finger.

3. Bend to one side expanding your chest. Reach out with your top arm, adjust your bottom shoulder under, and open your ribcage forward. These are the three points to continue to adjust to deepen the pose.
DOWNWARD FACING DOG

1. Place your hands and feet on the ground. Straighten your arms and legs to create an upside down V with your body. Tuck your chin to your chest.

2. Three points: press your hips towards the sky, rotate your elbow pits forward, and reach your heels towards the ground.

BOW POSE

1. Laying on your stomach, grasp your ankles with your hands.

2. Kick your feet back into your hands, and lift your chest off the ground. This should also lift your pelvis off the ground.

3. Three points: Kick with the feet, press your chest forward, press your shoulder blades together.
SHOULDER BRIDGE

1. Lying on your back, place your feet on the ground with your knees pointing towards the ceiling. Grab your ankles.

2. One vertebra at a time lift your spine off the ground pushing your pelvis up.

3. Three points: Push your pelvis up, press your chest towards the far wall, and press your knees towards each other.

SCREW-UP

1. The screw-up is not a pose, but an exercise. Start in a plank pose or push up position.
2. Gradually collapse each joint of one arm and allow yourself to roll slightly to that side.

3. Reverse the movement back up to the original position, and repeat on the other side.

4. Rather than holding a position here try to smooth out the movement. Start with 3-5 sets of 5 repetitions on each side. Work up to 20 continuous screw-ups on each side.
SEATED LATERAL TWIST

1. From a seated position with both legs extended cross one leg over the other with the foot on the ground.

2. You may continue from this position or for more challenge tuck in the extended leg.

3. Lift the same arm as the crossed leg and twist towards the extended or tucked leg. Place the other hand on the ground behind you.

4. Place the lifted arm on the other side of the same side knee. Twist until you can look behind you.

5. Three points: press your crossed hip towards the ground, lift your chest, and deepen the twist.

View the accompanying video to see the exercises in order and linked for practice.
ASP & MEP

Activity Specific Preparedness

Now it is time to begin applying the attributes developed in the previous training to exercises that stimulate the type of performative behavior the actor needs. Attributes are still the focus, but ASP begins to apply the previously developed work to the external focus necessary for the activity. Theatre is an intrinsically partnered activity and now the shift must begin from an internal focus, which naturally occurs during solo work, to an external focus on a partner or partners and the broader environment. This external and broad focus, attention, is a necessary step to achieving flow. The actor achieves a level of mastery of the necessary attributes, and now begins to move into the mental and emotional skills of maintaining flow in work. The ASP exercises, however, remain pre-expressive, and therefore should only enhance performance whatever your technical base.

Warm up with a partner by performing a mobility session, followed by a few light repetitions of whatever level of the Acting Flow seems appropriate. Begin to add sound. I save sound until now because it is an external expression in space and therefore should be explored in relation to a partner. Just let whatever sound grumbles out of you come. Heighten your awareness of your partner and their movement. Let the sound develop in relationship to them. Play with basic elements of sound: tempo, rhythm, dynamic, pitch, timbre, etc… Begin to explore the movements of the Flow as a movement palette.
Improvise vocally and physically with your partner. Continue until you are beginning to respond spontaneously.

The central work of the ASP section is the responsiveness scale. This series of exercises progressively develops your ability to respond to your partner and later partners without conscious thought. It is important with this work to be slightly uncomfortable. If the work is too easy then you should increase the speed or intensity. If you find yourself or your partner bracing then you should dial back the intensity and the speed, then gradually dial back up. Partners must match speed with each other. This idea will be referenced as time-framing. Through the entire sequence allow sounds or emotions to follow their natural course. However you should refrain from chatting.

THE RESPONSIVENESS SCALE:

1. Face your partner. One partner begins to push slowly and gently, but with commitment and depth on the other partner. The partner being pushed should try to move in an articulate manner only responding with the amount of movement necessary to respond to the force. One partner should push five times and the other should then push each moving from whichever position they happen to be in.

2. Once you have become comfortable with the previous exercise then begin to limit your point of contact. For example work for a while only using your right arm or your left leg or your head. The purpose of this work is to get the whole body involved. Once you are freely using many parts of the body return to the previous drill incorporating the full body.
3. Now have one partner take on only the positive role of pusher and the other take on the negative role of receiver. (I mean positive and negative in the sense of polarity not value.) The receiver should gradually begin to move sooner so that they are getting touched only rarely. Be very conscious of your time-framing. Switch roles occasionally.

4. Begin to exchange movement back and forth. Think of this as creating a continuous flow together rather than as a game of tag. Once this exercise is moving well become aware of your breath and allow sound to happen naturally.

5. Probably at this point you have picked up the pace. Slow down again and begin to focus on allowing your movement response to happen based on your partner’s movement. Think of your movement as dependent on the movement of your partner.

6. If you have access to a group of students or multiple training partners begin to try this work in groups of three or four with one person taking the negative role in the center of the group of positives.

7. Return to your original partner and improvise with sound and movement in this context. Animals at play are a good image for this work.

8. Once you have developed in your work on the previous exercise gradually begin to build distance between yourself and your partner. Respond as if they can reach you even if they cannot. Move as far back as you can.
9. Begin to explore distance, moving closer or farther away as you feel. This exercise and the previous one will begin to force you to increase your awareness of the rest of the space, which is an important element of flow.

10. The last step in this scale is to return to larger groups and eventually to allow groups to shift and change as you work.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL PREPAREDNESS

MEP begins to incorporate expressive work and therefore beliefs and ideas about training approaches. The most important element in this section is the definition of flow state and how to encourage, recognize, and maintain it within students. I am going to reveal the theoretical underpinnings of the work, and then give a specific example from my own practice. This example is designed to serve as a model. Hopefully through it you will be able to see how to apply these concepts in your own context.

The first step towards achieving flow is developing Attention. Attention is one of four basic types of awareness. The awareness diamond below lays them out:

Figure 4: The Awareness Diamond
Attention is broad and external. It enables you to take in your surroundings without fixating on any particular aspect. The other three types of awareness are equally valuable within their own contexts, but awareness is the necessary state for flow. Attention leads to indistractability, (sports scientists like to make up words as much as academics,) which is the ability to notice details and changes in the surroundings without allowing them to force you to give them focus. These two elements encourage temporal distortion when time seems to slow down, and you have plenty of time to respond to events. This slow down seems like an obscure and mystical idea, but it can easily be explained. When attending and indistractable you are able to see more of what is happening. The first time you taught a class you probably had few memories of what happened afterwards. You were more focused on your own internal experience of fear and discomfort. Becoming more comfortable over time you notice more and more what is occurring in the classroom. As confidence grows the mind is literally taking in more information from the external world, which leads to psychospatial acuity. You begin to notice details you might otherwise miss. If as a performer you have ever had the experience of seeing details of a random audience member or fellow performer then you have experienced psychospatial acuity. This leads to a sense of predictability. You are able to orient to each new event and respond to it openly rather than relying on reflex or reaction. Predictability encourages a perception of control. This control is not dominance, but rather a feeling that everything can be handled and adjusted to. Eventually you begin to be able to process and respond without thought. You feel like you just know what the appropriate thing to do is without stopping to think. When all of these elements come together performance begins to exceed expectation: flow.
Flow is predicated on the integration of the breathing movement and structure within the body that we developed in the GPP, SPP, and ASP phases. Training must combine the mental development above with the proper preparation in psychophysical integration. This enables the actor to experience and maintain flow in performance. Flow is a positive state that everyone has experienced and enjoyed and is therefore self-perpetuating. Students have intrinsic motivation to seek it again.

Not an on/off switch, flow is a process of constant maintenance and awareness. The most common sign of lost flow is a shift away from attention usually occurring in response to perceived mistakes. When (not if) mistakes happen, the tendency is to shift internal and either analyze the mistake or engage in negative self-talk. Both tendencies cause the actor to lose touch with the events unfolding on the stage, and therefore to make further mistakes and create a downward spiral of frustration. Maintaining or recovering flow begins by recognizing the internal shift, and finding positive performance cues to return to attention. Positive cues mean simple active directives such as “listen” or “connect.” The simpler the cue is to remember and do the better it is. Mistakes will happen and success is not avoiding mistakes, but rather recovering quickly from them.

Basic physiological events associated with lost flow can also be addressed to aid in flow recovery. Breathing becomes shallow and constricted. The solar plexus and the lunar plexus (or the pelvis region) lose their ability to move independently of each other. The limbs become constricted in their movement. A simple set of procedural cues to address this state, Equalize, Depolarize, Mobilize, can recover flow. Equalize your breathing by focusing on a few hard, sharp exhalations; let your inhalation happen passively. Next begin
to move your pelvis and solar plexus independently. Then allow your limbs to begin to respond to that movement to mobilize them.

The training to this point has acquainted the performer with flow, and now they must begin to incorporate that experience under increasing levels of resistance. There are two aspects to this, the learning of skills and the application of skills and attributes under pressure. Pressure should be gradually increased so that the performer’s ability to maintain flow is constantly being tested, but is rarely fully overwhelmed. I am going to explore models for addressing this, and give specific examples from my work with the Viewpoints.¹

Coach Sonnon’s work supplies the models for working first with skills and then with resistance. The skill side of the three dimensional performance pyramid is below. In learning new skills it is important to step through these levels. Static drills are working in an environment where everyone involved knows exactly what is going to happen and tries to achieve a specific result. Fluid drills add an element of spontaneity so that the student begins to apply the newly learned skill in a more open environment. Lastly, Dynamic drilling creates an opportunity for students to incorporate the skill they have just been exploring into their preexisting skill set.
For example if I was working with the Viewpoint of Tempo I might start by having the performers move through the space on a grid, and assign them specific tempos to use in their movement (Static Drilling). Next they might be asked to move freely and choose a tempo for movement of their own accord changing in response initially to cues from me and later from the group at large (Fluid Drilling). Then I might ask the group to incorporate this new work on tempo with their preexisting work on gesture for instance. So they would continue to move around the space as before but begin incorporating gestures into the work, and explore the relationship between gesture and tempo. Each of the Viewpoints worked on up to this point would then be added in, until the new one is fully incorporated into the previous practice.
The performance side of the pyramid challenges the actor’s ability to maintain flow under pressure. Diagramed below, it comprises a continuum from Softwork to Hardwork.

Figure 6: Performance (or Competition) side of the Three Dimensional Performance Pyramid

Softwork relates to the efficiency of the effort you are putting forth under resistance. It develops the performer’s ability to spontaneously improvise in the face of resistance and perceived error. Hardwork relates to the effectiveness of the effort put forth. This enters the vicinity of what is generally considered performance in the theatre. I use “vicinity” because an actual performance is outside of this work. It is what the training is preparing the actor for. The progression from Softwork to Hardwork should be explored incrementally, and the balance between the two should hinge on the skill level of the performers. Beginning performers need to smoothly work through the continuum so they are gradually being
eased into the experience of Hardwork; intermediate performers should focus on Hardwork while occasionally stepping back to Softwork to reincorporate efficiency. Seasoned performers can work predominately in a Softwork manner only occasionally stepping up to Hardwork. They already have extensive experience of performance under pressure and therefore only need to touch once in a while.

For simplicity’s sake, the key element at play in the Softwork to Hardwork Continuum is speed. When exploring at a pace where the performer can easily maintain flow and literally play in the moment you are experiencing Softwork. When the pace causes the performer to struggle to maintain flow, and forces them to make choices based on what they know will work then that is Hardwork. The appropriate pace for different points on the continuum will vary from performer to performer. When working in a group the key is to find the functional pace for the whole group. Other elements that can be manipulated in this continuum are the number of participants, the importance attached to the situation, other multiplier elements such as set, costumes, text, music, and any other elements you can think to add.

In the following example, again utilizing the Viewpoints, I will move from Softwork to Hardwork within a single session. Starting with free Viewpointing I would initially encourage the students to find their maximum tempo for the moment, a tempo where they feel like they can freely orient to what is happening around them while maintaining attention. I would then allow them to explore for a while either below or at that tempo incorporating all of the Viewpoints. I would ask them to increase their max tempo only when it is necessary to keep them on the edge of discomfort. Gradually I would
add multipliers. First objects would be moved into the space so that the architecture becomes more sophisticated. After a bit more time music, and then add text would be added. If everyone seemed to be holding their flow fairly well I would ask them to continue to increase the speed pushing and challenging their own ability to stay in flow.

This is of course only one example and many other multipliers could be added depending on the focus of your work. Hopefully though this serves as a clear example of the methodology, and readers will be able to adapt the underlying principles to their own specific approaches to the skills and performance practices of acting.

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My personal experience of the Viewpoints is rooted in my own training with Anne Bogart and SITI Company. I have wrestled with and utilized the Viewpoints in a variety of circumstances since 1996. For a good introduction to this fascinating system see: Bogart, Anne and Landau, Tina. The Viewpoints Book. Theatre Communications Group. New York: 2005.
Conclusion or Quo Vadimus

The ideas contained in this thesis are the current state of the long development of my approach to working with actors. I have been involved in the study of theatre since I was seven years old, and begin training other actors my freshman year of undergrad. I never set out to teach acting, but it has become a focus of my life. In that time I have utilized everything from ancient Japanese martial arts to possibly apocryphal American Indian ritual to enhance the performance of actors.

The work contained here grows out of that, but is most heavily influenced by the eight years I have spent with Coach Sonnon. These ideas have been brewing in my head all that time, and I am certain of the effectiveness of many of them from years of trial and error. The specific exercises at the GPP and SPP level are new. They have been limitedly tested with actors over the last few months. So far the anecdotal evidence is good. However I know for myself that is not enough. I must continue to test and refine these exercises with students, and with myself. If they are the same in ten years, then probably I failed in some way.

If there is one belief that underpins everything I have done and everything that I hope to do, it is that theatre artists must always be changing, and striving to find new and better ways to work. For if we are not then the dire predictions of many for the future of theatre are not far off. Therefore I hope that everyone who reads this whether you agree with my ideas or not will continue to ask the question “Where are we going?” So that the theatre can be the ephemeral, transmogrifying journey it should always be.
VITA

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Slade is a coach in the Circular Strength Training System, and a life long martial artist. He has taught theatre at schools all over the Richmond area, and has conducted CST workshops up and down the East Coast. Slade is married and looking forward to beginning his next adventure in a new place.