

From American Theatre Magazine - January 2011

Let's Get Physical: What's Happening Now?

U.S. movement teachers prefer either a hybrid or an integration of disciplines in the service of training the actor's body

By Nicole Potter



Top row: Janice Orlandi's summer program at Actors' Movement Studio (photo by Elke Van Dyke); Daniel Stein with Brown University students (photo by Mark Turek); Marianne Kubik demonstrates the biomechanics etude "Throwing the Stone" (photo by Richard Termine); Robert Francesconi's mask class at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in 2009 (photo by Donald Dietz); Dusty Alvarado and Tro Shaw in *Commedia Project* at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University (photo by Louis Stein); Bottom row: Daniel Stein's *Still. Going Forward Backward* at Dansville, Ky.'s Centre College in 2008 (photo by Adam Brown); *Scapino*, directed by Robert Francesconi at UNCSA (photo by AAycock); Janice Orlandi's summer program (photo by Elke Van Dyke).

While sharing his thoughts on the current state of movement training for actors in the

U.S., Daniel Stein speaks of a play he's written called *Still. Going Forward Backward*. "It's basically about men and women using the same words but speaking a different language," says Stein, the director of movement and physical theatre for Brown University/Trinity Repertory Consortium. "I know my wife uses words that I use, but she doesn't mean the same thing. That different usages are perpendicular, because they intersect, but they're coming at the same word from completely different angles. And I can't impose my meaning on her words—I have to try to figure out what she means. That perpendicularity is not a problem to be solved—it's a communication to be savored."

Stein's metaphor resonated powerfully and often as I conducted interviews with a broad swath of movement educators and practitioners: People who teach movement and artists who are involved in physical theatre use the same words to mean different things. Take, for example, the critical word "integration," which is employed by all practitioners, in many different contexts. In some situations, educators agree on the meaning of integration, but in others, the usage of the term is perpendicular. Everyone would agree a well-trained actor has an integrated set of skills that comprise a technique, but there are different ideas about how to arrive at that integration. Many would posit that every artist ultimately creates his own technique; therefore, synthesis of skills occurs within the individual. Others, like Kari Margolis, artistic director of the Margolis Brown Adaptors Company and creator of the Margolis Method, champion a completely integrated training system, encompassing voice, movement and acting.

Barbara Adrian, professor of theatre arts at Marymount Manhattan College and author of *Actor Training the Laban Way*, has merged vocal and physical training into a rigorous and highly successful course. Robert Francesconi, assistant dean of acting, movement and masks in the professional actor training program at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, like Daniel Stein, points to his program as a model of integration, not because multiple skills are taught in one session but because the faculty shares a language and references each other's work. (Even this little contemplation of a single word has reminded me of the importance of shared language!)

Integration also refers to the ultimate goal of somatic training, which is mind/body/spirit awareness and harmony—although some practitioners favor somatic training purely because it teaches efficient usage of the body, and not for the other parts of the trinity. Integration is also used in conjunction with another term, "psychophysical." "The mind and the body must both be engaged. It is not pieces, it's one," says Deborah Robertson, professor in the school of theatre and dance and associate dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Northern Illinois University and president of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators (ATME).

Janice Orlandi, artistic director of the Actors Movement Studio Conservatory and a senior lecturer at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, is trained in Williamson Technique, but

also teaches integrated systems. "This semester it's a study of psychophysical techniques that I am crossing—one of them is Williamson, one is Michael Chekhov and the third is Rasaboxes. I'm using the framing of these different pedagogies to enhance and to expand one another," says Orlandi.

Williamson Technique was created by Loyd Williamson, who refers to his discipline as "the physical process of acting." The basic concept behind his approach is this: The five senses establish contact with the outer world, which leads to inner experience, which produces outer behavior, which leads back to new contact with the outer world.

Williamson is an accrued technique that can ideally be learned over the course of several semesters of study. It begins with heightening awareness of the senses, the imagination and the body, and progresses through learned movement phrases and character exercises, culminating in a Salon Project, an extended exploration of period and style.

Deborah Robertson and Janice Orlandi both studied extensively with Williamson (who is semi-retired), and both refer to him as a visionary and pioneer in the movement-training field. Both are also certified in Michael Chekhov technique and have made extensive studies of other actor-training approaches. They want to preserve the Williamson legacy, but also to keep the training current. Explains Robertson, "I have been working on a documentary about Loyd's work for the past five years. There are three of us, all certified Williamson teachers, working on the evolution of the work and its application in all areas of theatre training. Orlandi, who now runs the studio that Williamson founded, has not only broadened her own knowledge, she's expanded the curriculum of the studio. Its summer institute offers intense training with master teachers from a wide array of movement disciplines, including Chekhov, Rasaboxes, Viewpoints, Margolis Method, Laban and Feldenkrais.



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Actors on the Move

10 performers analyze the training regimens that animate them on stage

The interviews in this collage of voices—actors and actor-trainers who are devotees of a range of movement techniques—were conducted by the *American Theatre* editorial staff. Some are presented entirely in the artist's voice and others incorporate the reporter's framing comments.

- RICHARD CRAWFORD and ADRIENNE KAPSTEIN
- BEN CUNIS
- HEATHER HARPHAM
- MARGUERITE MATHEWS
- DAN LAWRENCE
- ORLANDO PABOTOY
- TOM PELPHREY
- JESSE PEREZ
- PABLO SCHREIBER



Tom Pelphrey in The Lion In Winter at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (photo by Gerry Goodstein).

TOM PELPHREY, actor, The teacher: Janice Orlandi, artistic director, Brooklyn, N.Y. The method: Williamson Technique Actors Movement Studio Conservatory

When Tom Pelphrey appeared last fall in Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's *The Lion in Winter*, he found—as he says he often does—that his training in Loyd Williamson's

movement technique stood him in good stead. "It sort of felt like a melodrama—there are all these massive needs and hurts and betrayals, and this big longing that's really larger-thanlife," Pelphrey says of James Goldman's oft- performed play about scheming royals. "And I felt very free to express all those feelings in my body. I was doing gestures and moving in a way that I don't think I would usually do in a more naturalistic play, but the show called for it—and I never had a fear of jumping off the ledge. I think you can trace my confidence in that back to the movement technique I learned with Janice Orlandi."

At Rutgers State University in New Jersey, Orlandi imparted to Pelphrey a technique she learned from the training innovator Loyd Williamson. A performer and designer, Williamson noticed that actors—particularly young actors—who were encouraged to tap big, volatile emotions by Method-style training ran into trouble finding a way to express them, particularly with their bodies. He developed his movement training to release the tension of such unexpressed emotions into actors' bodies.

Pelphrey says he noticed much the same thing about himself as a young actor. "When you're a young actor, you don't know what to do with a lot of these feelings, so you become tense," explains Pelphrey, who achieved some fame on TV's "Guiding Light" and is a co-founding member of New York's Apothecary Theatre Company. "This technique allows you to have all these feelings you're not sure what to do with, but forces you to run them through your body. It teaches you to release them into these structured movements." The program includes sections such as the "drunk salon"—an ensemble-wide improv with pretend alcohol—as well as the self-explanatory "animal work" and a period-style salon. The result, as Pelphrey says, is "a means to an end." Unlike the roles in *The Lion in Winter*, many naturalistic stage and film parts won't call for a lot of stylized or structured movements. But, says Pelphrey, "You slowly realize how you can use Williamson's training in your work—you start to recognize how your body feels when it's open and available versus when you're tense and shut down."