

Tradition of physical exercises and martial arts in actors' education

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Source of support: Departmental sources

Received: 10 May 2011; **Accepted:** 14 May 2011; **Published online:** 16 May 2011

This article in its reduced version was presented at the Scientific Conference of Historians and Theoreticians of Physical Education, which was held on 24–26 November 2010 at Paweł Włodkowic University College in Płock, Poland, entitled “From the Tradition and Concepts of Sports, Physical Education, Recreation and Movement Rehabilitation (1867–2009), with a particular focus on Mazovia”.

Abstract

This article is an attempt to provide a synthetic explanation of the phenomenon of the application of movement exercises and martial arts to the actors' educational process. The author draws attention to the importance of exercise and physical fitness in acting and brings us closer to the views of the performing arts most outstanding educators and reformers.

The author examines the relationship between the actor's body expression and martial arts, explains why ideas about using the body and training methods from Far Eastern martial arts aroused great interest among prominent actors, directors and acting school teachers.

Key words: actors' education • movement exercises • martial arts

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BACKGROUND

An actor – as reported by multilingual, electronic sources – is a person who interprets a role in the theatre, in the cinema, on television or radio. The acting profession requires a certain talent and preparation, involving the development of abilities needed for interpreting various roles and it also requires gaining relevant knowledge and special skills. Therefore, master courses preparing for the acting profession involve numerous theoretical and practical subjects, directly or indirectly related to theatrical acting. Among the many subjects taught in acting studies, a few blocks may be mentioned [1]:

- block of theoretical and historical matters (history of art, theatre, cinema, music and the like) which are supposed to enrich the students' knowledge and comprehension of links between art, historical and social processes;

- block of special subjects directly related to the acting profession (basic acting tasks, enunciation, poetry and prose interpretation, vocal training, acting styles and the like);
- block of matters developing motor skills, physical condition and the actor's body aesthetics (plastic gymnastics and acrobatics, dancing, pantomime, fencing, judo or elements of other martial arts).

The development of the subject blocks mentioned, the contents of which are similar at acting schools in many countries, took place after a long-lasting, complicated historical process of the development of speech and drama, as well as related concepts.

It is known from different sources that the art of acting has several thousand years of tradition, that it was already known in Egypt and Greece, as well as in other

Francois Delsarte

(1811–1871) – French teacher of acting and singing. Delsarte formulated certain principles of aesthetics that he applied to the teaching of dramatic expression. He set up rules coordinating the voice with the gestures.

Adolphe Appia

(1862–1928) – Appia became an architect and theorist of stage lighting and décor, and a pioneer of modern stage design.

Konstanty Stanisławski

(1863–1938) (original name: Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseyev) – Russian actor, director, and producer, founder of the Moscow Art Theatre. He is best known for developing the system or theory of acting called the Stanislavsky system (or method).

Denis Diderot

(1713–1784) – French philosopher, man of letters, art critic, and writer, co-founder and chief editor of the *Encyclopédie*, one of the principal literary monuments of the Age of Enlightenment.

regions of the world. It was practiced for different reasons and in various forms. It provided cheap entertainment, religious or aesthetic experience; it could stimulate critical thinking, and influence attitudes towards various human actions or social phenomena.

The historical analysis of the theatre reveals that it has always been immersed in culture, connected to spiritual life and value systems of societies in which it functioned [1]. “The theatre art expressed tragedy, antinomy and euphoria of societies, new behaviour patterns and it criticized negative patterns. It is impossible to see the theatre as a static form (...). The theatre is a synonym of movement and change, a synonym of real people and of an open process of creation” [1, p. 67]. This means that the concepts concerning the significance of actors’ personalities, as well as their education, have been changing alongside the evolution of the theatre. New visions, concepts and theatre forms required changes in the approach to the educational process and training of an actor, they required modifications to the value system and culture of an actor, his life and professional competences.

Particularly significant changes in the field of the theatre, art of acting, and educational methods of actors occurred at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This period is associated with the phenomenon called the Great Theatre Reform in Europe. New theatre was born then and it was looking for the objective truth about man, nature and things, truth about human reactions to their natural and social environment [more: 2, p. 10–73]. Criticism was aimed at the theatre dominated by mindless entertainment, the theatre where actors were – similar to the audience – divided into categories and disrespected, the theatre where commercial and matrimonial transactions were concluded, and where costumes, gowns, jewellery, as well as social and political intrigues of the amused audience reigned supreme. Actors drowning in exaggerated costumes, limiting their theatrical performance to facial movements and to the lines they say [2]. Thus, more and more attention was paid to the inadequacy of movement in theatre, to the importance of the actor’s body, to the need for his rehabilitation and re-education. The theatre of movement, light and body was slowly coming into existence. It was inspired by prominent, creative personalities, who influenced the direction of changes.

GREAT INNOVATORS OF THE ART OF ACTING

Denis Diderot, the author of *The Paradox on the Actor* published in 1830, was a precursor of the changes in the approach to the art of the theatre and the craft of acting. He was in favour of creative acting, technically

perfect, in favour of professional actors, capable of playing each and every role. He attached a lot of weight to movement on stage claiming that movement struck far stronger and faster than the actor’s voice, that it was better to unfold the plot on stage through action rather than through a story [3, p. 15–16]. Then, **Francois Delsarte** (1811–1871) appeared in society, propagating the necessity of placing the aesthetics of the body and its theatrical distinctiveness on the scientific ground. From 1839 Delsarte conducted various courses on theatrical arts, and made a great impression on his contemporaries. However, he did not write down his complicated system of meticulous codification of movements which was later referred to as aesthetic gymnastics with elements of free dancing [4, p. 20–22].

One of those who changed the approach to the human body in theatre was also Swiss, **Adolphe Appia** (1862–1928). He recognized movement as the heart of theatre. It arises from the actor’s body which derives expression from light and shadow. Movement composes time and space, introduces artistic order, and may also result from cooperation among actors. Appia claimed that, to be an artist meant not being ashamed of one’s body, seeing one’s own living body in other people’s bodies. This body – volatile, naked and beautiful – may be the basic material of the new theatre of movement [2, p. 60–68]. Appia, by promoting the praise of sports and physical fitness, praise of developing hygiene, aesthetics of the body and health, provided foundations for the new theatre and for introducing regular movement exercises in the education of actors.

A very significant contribution to the development of theatre and the art of acting was made by a Russian actor, director and theatre teacher **Konstanty Stanisławski** (1863–1938). He introduced and consistently employed comprehensive, psychophysical training for actors, he also practiced preparatory exercises. He wanted the actor to be able to impersonate the characters they played both internally (mentally), and externally, with the use of relevant physical action. Stanisławski noticed that “physical fitness, muscle relaxation and total subordination to the whole physical apparatus played a great role in the state of creative inspiration” [5, p. 319]. He also noticed that physical action of actors was clearer than their mental states and that physical action mirrored human mental states and his relationship with the environment. Stanisławski also deserves the credit for drawing attention to the significance of aesthetics in the actor’s professional work, and to the necessity of the comprehensive development of his personality. Stanisławski wanted to form actors capable of creating theatre looking for the truth about man and society, theatre with a positive, moralizing impact on the audience.

The need for the dominance of movement in theatre was promoted by an Englishman, **Gordon Craig** (1872–1966). He claimed that everything - including music - resulted from movement. However, Craig preferred to introduce the so-called über-marionette instead of real actors on the stage of his dream theatre. The idea resulted in introducing movable puppets and marionettes on the theatre stage [2, p. 121–123].

Particular credit for the development of concepts and methods of physical exercises for actors may be given to **Jacques Copeau** (1879–1949), who criticized the ignorance, cheap exhibitionism and lack of discipline, common at that time among French theatre actors. In 1913 Copeau created his own theatre and acting school which he referred to as a laboratory. During the initial weeks of training, students were forbidden to speak with one another and were taught to communicate only with their bodies. Students studied pantomime, mime, dancing, eurhythmics, and acrobatics. They attended movement improvisation classes without saying their lines, with expressionless masks over their faces. This forced students to intensively look for modes of expression only with their bodies. “The body imposes various plastic shapes: tree, bridge and the like. Movement is moulded through rhythmic exercises, dancing, gymnastics” [6, p. 18]. The subjects of movement improvisation given to Copeau’s school’s students concerned simple activities: a person driving away a pesky fly, different professional activities, movements of machines, or a woman strangling a fraudulent fortune-teller. During the classes, various sounds of nature, of the city, of animals were imitated using mouths, hands and legs [7, p. 16–17].

Copeau claimed that words constituted only the final stage of the process of what had already happened, what had been felt, experienced or thought. It is worth mentioning that Copeau was friends with the Swiss, Dalcroze, the creator of rhythmic gymnastics. Copeau had a number of outstanding students and co-workers. One of them went down in history as the creator of a modern movement in theatre, and the creator of pantomime – **Etienne Decroux** (1898–1991).

Decroux devoted his life to studying a new body “language” of the actor, and created a performance in which the only mode of expression was the human body and its movement. The first performance of this type was “Primitive Life” which he created together with his wife in 1930. Decroux acted on stage, and appeared in movies. He introduced body movements typical of sports, circus arts and dancing into the actor’s repertoire of physical exercises. He was also inspired by sculpture and architecture, studied poetry and group recitation. In 1941 Decroux opened his own, experimental school in Paris,

attended by Jean-Luis Barrault and Marcel Marceau. It was them who showed Decroux’s findings to the world when lecturing in Piccolo Teatro in Milan, the Theatre of Bertolt Brecht in Berlin and the like.

Decroux resigned from stage decorations, costumes and text, he moved actors and the movement of their extremely agile, minimally dressed bodies to the foreground. Whilst making his actors fitter, Decroux took advantage of the achievements of acrobatics, athletics, eurhythmics, classic ballet, and experiences of other cultures. He set a rule that a good, expressive actor needs to have perfectly fit muscles, tendons and joints, needs to control them to be able to *bend*, *twist* and *move* each body part freely. Decroux considered the actor’s torso to be the source of bodily expression; for which he developed several sets of exercises (separately for the spine, chest, shoulder blades, waist and hips). The aim was a training system which “allows to perform what we imagine” [7, p. 191]. Decroux applied difficult coordinating exercises in which actors simultaneously performed movements of different body parts to various rhythms. They required a great attention focus, and taught “to think with the body” which was supposed to obey the actor in order to draw free pictures in space. The actor was supposed to learn to replace the forms of the body (picture) which it takes in everyday life, with the form or picture that he wants to act on stage. Decroux named it as *identification* which he recognized as the basic right of the pantomime created by himself and training of the actor who was able to illustrate spiritual life only with body movements (Decroux called such actors mimes). His actors had to be able to identify themselves with natural phenomena, animals, people and emotions with the use of movement expression. This was possible due to the fact that Decroux discovered the *principle of counterpoint* which allows, through the use of movement and appropriate contractions of muscles, to create the illusion of interaction with non-existing objects, the illusion of overcoming different types of resistance, forces and of experiencing emotions. Decroux taught actors such mime actions as: pushing, lifting, pulling, marching, fake running, climbing stairs and the like. Decroux also taught an important rule for bodily expression referred to as *course*. He meant both a certain state of focus and the psychophysical readiness of the actor, as well as the ability to initiate movement with an impulse flowing from the stomach and midriff section. This was about engaging – similarly to sports – the actor’s entire body and psyche for stage performance.

Wsiewołod Meyerhold (1874–1940) deserves a separate chapter on the development of the actor’s physical training methods, first in Russia and then in the Soviet Union. He is known in the history of acting as

Gordon Craig
(1872–1966) – English modernist theatre practitioner; he worked as an actor, director and scenic designer, as well as a theatre theorist.

Jacques Copeau
(1879–1949) – French theatre director, producer, actor, and dramatist. Copeau was one of the founders of the Nouvelle Revue Française and the founder of one of the most important theatres of the century: The Vieux Colombier.

Etienne Decroux
(1898–1991) – French actor and teacher who has been called the father of modern French mime. During his long career as a film and theatre actor, he created numerous pieces, using the human body as the primary means of expression.

Vsevolod Meyerhold
(1874–1940) – Russian theatre director, actor and theatrical producer considered one of the 20th century’s greatest theatrical innovators. He developed the biomechanics, a system of actor training.

the creator of the stage performance method which he himself referred to as *biomechanics*.

Meyerhold developed his method in opposition to intuitive and psychological methods. He derived inspiration from the circus, boxing, gymnastics, military drill and scientific reflection concerning body movement and human psyche. He drew on the experience of Japanese and Chinese theatre, commedia dell'arte, market shows, as well as Dalcroze eurhythmics. He took into account principles of Taylorism, concerning the economy of movements while working, as well as reflexology, whose authors claimed that the human being reacted to external stimuli first emotionally and then intellectually. Meyerhold reached the conclusion that the human being originally reacted to all stimuli with movement. Therefore a good actor should be able to express all emotional states and experience the characters played only through appropriate, expressive body movements (in physical action). Meyerhold developed a number of movement exercises called *études* which were small dramas expressed only with movements (e.g.: *Slapping, Stab with a Dagger, Jump onto the Chest, Pyramid, Tripping up* and the like). Practicing *études* was supposed to develop the culture of stage movement of actors, as well as instil in them body awareness [2, p. 230–234]. Meyerhold did not limit movement exercises for actors to biomechanics. They also learned fencing, boxing, gymnastics, eurhythmics, various dancing styles, and juggling.

The creator of biomechanics, after a number of successful years and cooperation with the political authorities of the Soviet Union, was accused of artistic formalism, arrested and executed in 1940.

Henryk Tomaszewski (1919–2001), the creator of the Wrocław Mime Theatre, contributed significantly to the development of concepts and training methods for mime actors. In an interview for the monthly magazine “Dialog” Tomaszewski stated that movement was an affirmation of life, that it was life itself and a reflection of life. “That is why I attach so much weight to movement, and that is why I try to build my theatre through movement” [8].

In Tomaszewski’s concept, movement is a creative force of all things, space, and time. It also reveals emotions, reactions, personality and human fate. Human actions always represent the certain form of a battle, a struggle against the environment, of life and surrounding objects. These struggles are clearly visible in movement, they build its drama, and they may be presented on stage by actors. However, this may be achieved only by an exceptionally fit actor, who knows the stage principles allowing him to perform the drama of human struggle against opposing forces. Tomaszewski described the ideal type of a mime

actor as a sensitive athlete. Such an actor should have a harmonious body, strength, physical fitness, emotional sensitivity, and a poetic disposition. While performing, it is indispensable for the actor to convincingly illustrate, through movement and the contractions of his body, human struggles and conflicts with the surrounding, uncooperative matter. Tomaszewski placed the actor in the centre of the surrounding world and in the situation of mutual, dramatic interaction. The actor’s body became his creative technique which was supposed to be suitably prepared and fully engaged [4, p. 53].

Another Pole, who became one of the greatest authority in the field of acting pedagogy in the world, who influenced the development of concepts and practice of psychomotor exercises for actors, was **Jerzy Grotowski** (1933–1999). His name in the world of stage arts is associated with the concept of Poor Theatre. Grotowski was in favour of the theatre where actors’ bodies were the source of expression of the contents conveyed. He rejected unneeded stage decorations and the sumptuous attire of actors, limiting their expression abilities which were supposed to combine words with the body. While looking for efficient training methods for actors, Grotowski arrived at a conclusion that it was not possible to create a universal, codified system of exercises that each actor needed to find exercises and methods which were most suitable for solving his personal problems. Yet Grotowski paid attention to the existence of certain universal regularities which one needed to consider during acting exercises. Instead of thinking how to perform a given exercise, it is better to look for internal obstacles which hinder this exercise, or prevent it. Generally, such obstacles are unnecessary psychophysical contractions, and a lack of the ability to relax. The actor should learn the ability to “unblock” his body and mind. Selected exercises from yoga, kathakali and Meyerhold biomechanics may be appropriate means to achieve this. Applied systematically, they allow the elimination of various obstacles to stage expression and develop the creative fitness of actors [9, p. 77]. These exercises may not be performed in a mechanical, automatic way. Each exercise should help to research and explore different phenomena: mechanisms of contracting and relaxing the muscles engaged, changing the position of the centre of gravity of the actor’s body, functions of spine positions and the like [9, p. 80]. Grotowski did not accept exercises performed thoughtlessly, exercises consisting only in the mechanical performance of certain forms of movement.

SPORTS AND MARTIAL ARTS IN ACTORS’ TRAINING

Training elements of fencing, boxing, judo and the like have always been used in the education of professional

Jerzy Grotowski
(1933–1999) – Polish theatre director and innovator of experimental theatre, founder of the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław. He was an avant-garde theatre theorist.

Henryk Tomaszewski
(1919–2001) (aka Heinrich Karl Koenig) – Polish mime artist, dancer, choreographer and theatre director. Founder and artistic director of the Wrocław Mime Theatre.

actors [10, chapter 2.3]. The usefulness of martial arts for the craft of acting resulted from various reasons: those connected with both the technical needs of stage performance and the need for shaping the personalities of artists. The art of acting consisting in the verbal and physical presentation of diverse conflicts existing in human life – also those connected with violence and physical aggression – required the knowledge and training of basic attack and defence techniques, learning suitable, expressive body postures, as well as the important ability to fall safely. These modes of expression are indispensable for presenting dramatic scenes of conflicts in a convincing way, tension and fighting, owing to which commercial cinema have also become successful. Certain creators of mime theatre – as was the case of Henryk Tomaszewski – strengthened the ties with martial arts. They based acting on the assumption that the movement and psychophysical tension connected with the struggle (fight) against different barriers and environmental forces surrounding the human being. It is known that various genres and forms of theatre arts have existed for ages in Far Eastern countries, which are – as *The Opera of Beijing* or certain forms of Japanese theatre – strictly connected with Eastern martial arts, concerning both philosophical assumptions and forms of physical expression [10]. Many movement elements referring to fighting are also visible in numerous national dances, or in more contemporary, rhythmical forms of health training performed to music [11].

Yet another important motive behind the interest in budo martial arts from prominent theatre artists and contemporary reformers of the art of acting were their creative experiments within new, deeper approaches which could be the basis for training, as well as for the stage performance of actors. While attempting to find a more convincing, and more interesting, culture of stage appearance of actors for the audience, theatre educators paid particular attention to the uncommonly efficient way of using one's own body and mind, applied in Eastern sports and martial arts. Their example was employed to display the expressive usefulness and dependence of the actor's body, filled with energy and ready for immediate reactions, on the ability to achieve a specific, *prereflective* state of mind, characterized by the elimination of all discursive thought, inner "emptiness", as well as intensive concentration on the present moment. "Only in this state of mind – as the authors of *The Theatre Anthropology* claim – is a samurai able to fight effectively, an artist to create or to be a performer, an actor to recite, and an athlete to realize his tasks effectively" [12, p. 204]. The example of budo also explained that obtaining the desired state of concentration as well as the ability to perform effectively and immediately, requires a great deal of effort and long-standing,

conscious training, consisting in overcoming the automatic responses of everyday life, a gradual increase in the potential of one's personality as well as the ability to activate one's own psychophysical energy without delay.

Sports and martial arts – regardless of their significance for acting skills – possess a number of autonomic elements and advantages, worthy of stage presentation, since their contents are connected with conflict, threat and they present a tremendous abundance of movement solutions of fights, resulting from the observation of animal behaviour as well as the laws of nature. Training, or a demonstration of self-defence techniques such as budo, is a manifestation of an active disagreement with violence of others, possesses peculiar stage scenery of its own, medication with action, cooperation with preventing aggression. It also includes numerous symbolic elements of mutual respect, respect for the centuries-old tradition, for the master-teacher, as well as for the audience. Traditional forms of movement (kata) are also a physical, even theatrical expression of universal laws which were formulated by the creators of classical budo systems. The existence of energy is manifested in them (often in slow motion), or the forces of the human body in a close relationship, opposition or cooperation with external forces [10, chapter 2.5]. Such a dialectical link between the tension of human muscles and the resistance of the environment was expressed in the counterpoint concept, formulated by Decroux for the training of mime actors. It needs to be emphasized that this is connected with the ability to present energy and counter-energy, constituting the source of movements and contractions of the actor's muscles. This ability allows one to create an illusion of interacting with non-existing objects, and overcoming various resistances. It is – as prominent theatre specialists believe – a basis for both correct acting technique and for the mental transmission of a mime artist [12, p. 20–23].

When analysing the art of acting with martial arts one should not forget that abilities attractive to the media such as hand-to-hand combat and the wielding of cold weapons are associated with the ethos of chivalry, and the lifestyle which was oriented towards following the values elaborated and shared by the chivalrous (mounted warriors) during the European Middle Ages period. The initial ideal of the chivalric ethos is a brave warrior fighting loyally for the commitments made, and the virtues professed. The principal autotelic value of the chivalric ethos was honour, requiring purity of intentions, as well as conduct consistent with the code of ethics. The basic values of this code are as follows: valour, fidelity, loyalty, veracity, fortitude, and the ability to overcome one's own weaknesses and suffering, defence of the weak and defenceless, respect for one's

rival. The values associated with the chivalric ethos inspired great writers, creators of theatrical arts and they contributed to the elaboration of the gentleman's rules of ethics. It was them which codified the rules of conduct and fighting worthy of a knight in the form of fair play and they became one of the main sources of modern sports ethics [13,14].

It is worth remembering that one of the sources of the origin of sports and martial arts existing in Japan was the samurai ethos. The authors of the book "Budo: The Martial Ways of Japan" [15] claim that the theoretical grounds for the development of Japanese Budo arose in the period called Tokugawa (1600–1868), when the balance between teaching values and the skills of military and civil importance were promoted. The ability to kill ceased to be the main target of combat training. Training was supposed to help develop personality and self-control, to shape the stance of preventing unnecessary violence. These arguments – captured symbolically as the need for transforming a life-taking sword into a life-protecting sword [15] – are still applied today. The samurai ethos and history, the fitness and skills of the Far Eastern masters of martial arts as well as the philosophical motives associated with the tradition of various combat schools appeared to be exceptionally inspiring and attractive to the film-making art. Films raising the subject of Far Eastern martial arts were made as early as the first half of the 20th century [16]. Both brilliant works (e.g. "Seven samurais" by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa) and films of low quality were created. Dramatic fight scenes appeared increasingly often in different film genres and attracted viewers. There was a growing demand for choreographers who were experts on martial arts as well as for actors well-prepared for performing difficult fight scenes. An opportunity to make a film career opened for masters of sports and martial arts possessing acting talent. Their skills and presence on the screens were indispensable for developing the genre of Martial Arts films initiated by Bruce Lee (actually Lee Siu Loong). Bruce Lee practiced Chinese martial arts (kung-fu). Due to him, the style of Ving-Tsun, which he practiced for a certain period of time, achieved renowned [17]. Chuck Norris, holding a 7th dan in Tae Kwon Do, became an outstanding action film actor. Then, Steven

Seagal, aikido master holding a 7th dan in this martial art, entered – owing to the presentation of his skills – the circle of the most popular Hollywood actors [18]. A number of people practicing sports and martial arts of different origin, often with high master ranking, followed in the footsteps of the masters mentioned.

CONCLUSIONS

A review of the concepts considering the contents of movement exercises and the use of martial arts in actors' education allows to formulate several conclusions (in the case of the author of this article they are also a result of personal experience gained during many years of work as a lecturer in the Theatre Faculty of the Veracruzana University in Mexico):

1. Movement exercises, elements of fencing and various martial arts are indispensable elements of integral training for actors.
2. The acting profession requires – apart from talent – good physical condition, psychophysical ability to concentrate and the development of a specific and comprehensive motor coordination.
3. The basis of stage movement expression consists of: high level of suppleness of the whole body of the actor and the ability to consciously adjust the tension and relaxation degree of muscles.
4. Relative strength is the condition for using the body efficiently to the extent of allowing one to overcome resistances generated by the actor's body weight, as well as gravity.
5. An inappropriate lifestyle, lack of discipline and of one's own psychophysical fitness results in lowering the competence level of a professional actor.
6. When planning various forms of movement exercises for students of acting schools one needs to take into account regularities derived from the theory of sports considering the gradation and rational system of training loads, as well as the processes of biological regeneration.
7. The creative approach of stage artists, their ability to draw on the experience and achievements from various forms of art and culture (including sports) deserve to be imitated and commonly applied – both in life and in the field of physical education.

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