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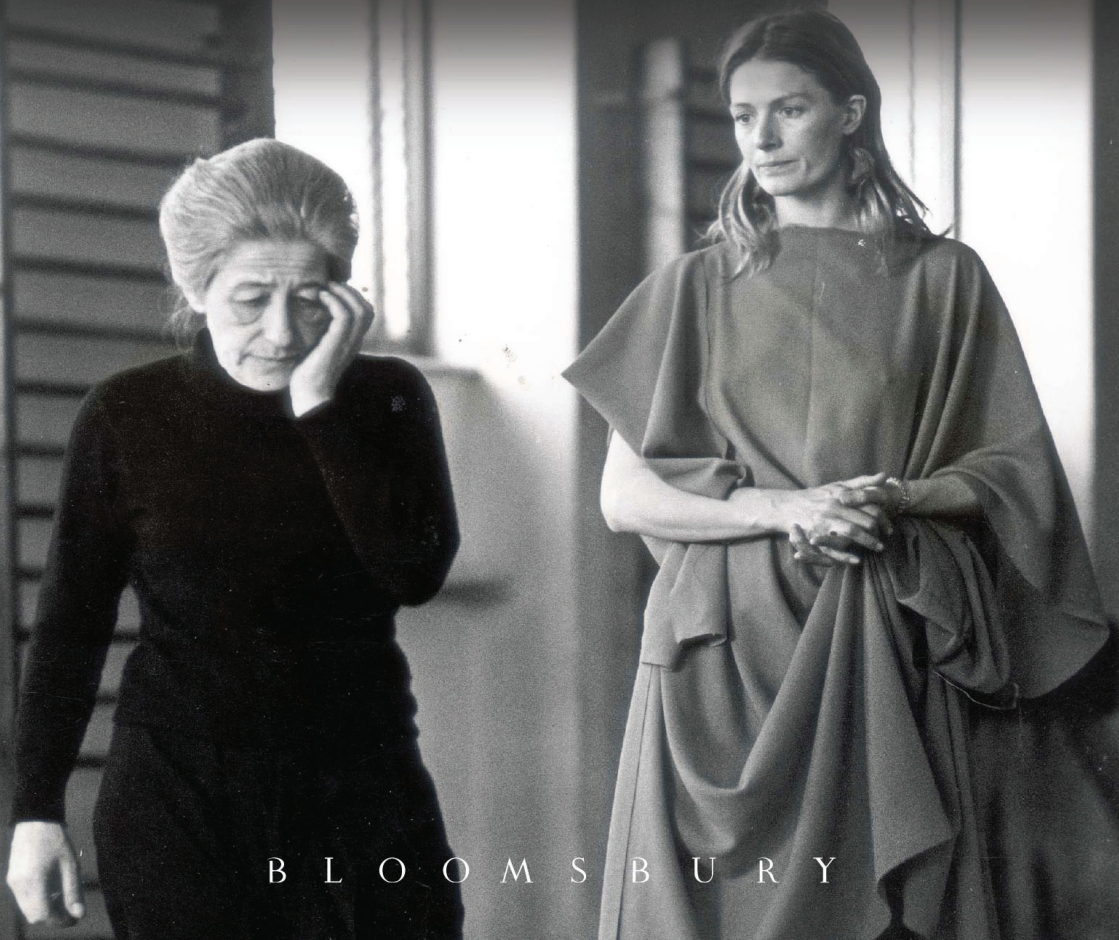
THE ACTOR AND HIS BODY

4TH EDITION

LITZ PISK

INTRODUCTION BY AYSE TASHKIRAN

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ELLIOTT



B L O O M S B U R Y

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Fourth Edition

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Introduction by Ayse Tashkiran

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INTRODUCTION

Who was Litz Pisk?

You look very carefully at who stands in front of you and you start from that person

Pisk in Watts 1975: 10

Litz Pisk¹ was an inspirational actor movement teacher and a forerunner of movement directors in British theatre. There is no one single system for the training and development of the actor's movement craft, so *The Actor and His Body* acts as a guide for an eclectic practice that has been honed through a lifetime of integrating trainings, experience, repetition, intuition and much innovation. Pisk encapsulates what good movement teachers aspire to: a practical and creative engagement with the actor's abilities, enabling the actor to embody his or her imaginative and emotional impulses in service of a career of transformations. Litz's sense of movement, her embodied experience and her philosophy imbue every word and drawing of this classic book. As readers of a book on movement, we know that a word or a drawn line can only be a partial representation: this is a trace of movement – but what a good trace. Pisk's book is the summation and synthesis of a practice that continues to shape the understanding of the actor's body to this day, earning its place as a classic work not only for actors, movement teachers and movement directors, but also for any theatre practitioner.

Context

Litz was a central artery to the Central European tradition of movement.

Lefton 2013

Early Influences

Alice Pisk was born in a Jewish family in Vienna in 1909, the youngest of four children, with three elder brothers.² Exactly what her early movement practice

comprised is unknown but she was to grow up in a cosmopolitan city fermenting with creativity in dance and art.

The early part of the twentieth century had seen the rise of natural and free movement in Europe. A proliferation of new schools and philosophies was leaving its mark on modern dance and actor movement as well as gymnastics, health and well-being. Movement theoreticians and dancers were providing a platform for many of those considered to be pioneers of this wave of innovation, much of which was originating in Central Europe.

One such theoretician was **François Delsarte (1811–1871)**, a French singer and musician, who began his exploration of movement as an attempt to solve his own vocal problems. Through a process of observation and analysis of human motion in everyday life, he developed theories on the relationship between gesture and emotion, which he entitled a ‘science of expression’. His legacy to actor training and modern dance was to suggest that the torso acts as a source for emotion emanating outwards to the peripheries of the body; that is, from impulse to gesture. Secondly, he focused on the physical connections of the body to the ground and then built an interrelationship between breath and gesture. He did not see movement as technical or mechanical but as an access to emotion. Expressivity through movement was to be at the heart of Pisk’s approach.

Another influence on Litz Pisk’s work can be seen in the American-born dancer **Isadora Duncan (1877–1927)** who was performing, theorizing and advocating a radical new approach to dancing. Duncan’s vision of dance involved connecting to the universe through the beauty of a body moving freely. To this end, she was interested in the creation of avowedly subjective choreographic material. Thus by working from personal creativity rather than the constraints of pre-existing forms, Duncan was untethering dance from ballet.

Elizabeth Duncan, sister of Isadora Duncan, had moved the Duncan school to Klessheim Castle, near Salzburg, where it was to remain from 1925 to 1933. And, although contested, it is thought that Pisk might have been sent to Elizabeth Duncan’s school for corrective movement and dance to address her scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. If she did, in fact, undertake some training at the Duncan school, what she would have encountered was a rich, diverse teaching where inspiration for movement was sought in the observation of animals (wild and captive), museums and the natural world.³ A newfound physical freedom and expressivity was afforded the largely female cohorts of students. The spirit of Elizabeth Duncan’s teaching chimes strongly with Pisk’s approach:

Every expression is a consequence of inner experience. ... The simplest physical movements, walking, running, jumping, every motion of the arm or the head has to be controlled through a corresponding technique of harnessing and releasing the will. The harnessing of energy in order to transcend gravity

and the sinking back that is connected with its ebbing and release: being able to recognize this regularity in the movements of the waves, as well as, the most tender grasses, is also fundamental to expressive physical movement. (Merz in Peter 2000: 35)

Whether this teaching philosophy actually formed part of Pisk's body knowledge or acted as an inspirational backdrop, we know that by the age of fifteen she was combining her aptitude for drawing and design with movement training. Moving from inner impulse to expressive gesture was to shape a lifelong investigation of movement, laying the foundation for her unique movement pedagogy.

The public face of Vienna's new dance scene in the 1920s was predominantly female and Jewish (Amort 2009: 118). Litz Pisk was to work with two such successful artists: **Gertrud Bodenwieser** and her student **Hilde Holger**,⁴ both of them dancers, teachers and choreographers. Pisk was to train, design and collaborate with both women in different ways through the 1920s and 1930s. Bodenwieser's dance formation was a classical training informed by Dalcroze's and Laban's work – both leading practitioners in the natural and free dance movement prevalent in Vienna at the time.

Swiss musician and composer **Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950)** connected the body to rhythm by developing active movement pedagogy for musicians. His analysis of movement came from the observation of motion in life as opposed to virtuosic movement forms, such as ballet or sports. In 1910 Dalcroze opened the Hellerau College of Rhythmic Training to develop ideas about teaching rhythm systematically through movement with an emphasis on coordination in group and individual exercises. It was a practical, systematic approach to movement teaching, using a base of accessible, common movements, such as walking, swinging and skipping. In 1913 the Dalcroze Association for Rhythmic Gymnastics was founded in Vienna and then in 1925 the Hellerau School relocated to the Laxenburg Palace on the outskirts of Vienna.

Secondly, Hungarian-born **Rudolf Laban's (1879–1958)** multifaceted practice in movement analysis, chorus movement and training spearheaded the development of *Ausdruckstanz*⁵ at the time. Laban was developing two main sets of movement theories, known as Choreutics and Eukinetics. Choreutics 'explained human movement as shaping its own spatial environment: expanding, contracting, elevating and lowering, designing the body as a mass and leaving virtual trace forms in the surrounding space' (Nicholas 2007: 96). Eukinetics was concerned with the actual make-up of motion as expressed through four factors – weight, time, space and flow. Laban extended his exhaustive movement work to many types of people: from factory workers to children, from amateur dancers to professional performers.

Through the work of these practitioners, movement training had taken a creative leap by harnessing the physical imaginations and movement capacities

of men and women equally, and by developing movement practice out of human expressive qualities, rather than movement technique. Their emphasis was on movement improvisation, rather than on virtuosity: a practice of expression rather than form.

Under the influence of these new ways of moving and conceiving movement, Bodenwieser sought to reconcile classical dance training with the ideas of Delsarte and the practices emerging from Dalcroze and Laban. From 1920 to 1938 Bodenwieser taught 'mime and dance' and later 'artistic dance' at the Vienna Academy for Music and the Performing Arts (Amort 2009: 135). In 1922 she also opened her own private studio and ran an authorized Laban School in Vienna. Her interdisciplinary approach was manifested in collaborations with fine artists and theatre practitioners as well as her dance creations that were 'characterized by fluidity, the use of sculptural forms, tableaux vivants, and visionary content. Key components of her style were *Spannung* (tension) and *Entspannung* (relaxation)' (Brown 2010: 3). To that one might also add narrative-led themes and new subject matter for dance works. Bodenwieser was a very successful teacher. A student from that time describes the content of a class thus:

Bodenwieser classes always commenced with basic barre exercises to stretch and flex various muscles of the body. Each lesson was built around an idea or image and the students made aware of a specific motor or kinetic movement that was to be the 'theme of the day'. Following the introduction of this theme, it was then carried into space, from which variations were developed through experiments consisting in change in dynamics, time, or stress or in the addition of leaps or falls. Her classes invariably ended with improvisation. ... The amazing range of movement she devised, from the lyrical to the demonic or bizarre, was the hallmark of her individual success, both as a teacher and choreographer. (Dunlop-MacTavish in Amort 2009: 130)

This is the training that Hilde Holger undertook and may well have influenced Pisk too. In fact, there is much overlap between the structure described above and Pisk's classwork forty years later. Readily available training proliferated in Vienna.⁶ While their city was an international hub for visiting works, Viennese artists were also creating their own style of *Ausdruckstanz*. It is not hard to imagine that Pisk as a visually acute, energetic art student would have fed her movement practice from a variety of these sources – both by participating in and seeing work. And it was alongside her studies at art school that she pursued training in movement at the Hilde Holger's *Neue Schule für Bewegungskunst*, The New School for Movement Arts.

Concurrently Pisk was studying stage architecture at the *Kunstgewerbeschule*, the State School of Art and Craft from 1924 to 1928. Her teachers included Franz

Čížek and Professor Oskar Strnad.⁷ Pisk herself describes the range of formative movement training running alongside her art studies, as she recollects that

during this period I also began to feel that the imposed stillness of the model in a conventional life drawing class interested me less than the human body in action or at rest. At the same time I joined in classes of all sorts related to movement – Laban, ballet, folk, national and even acrobatic. So full of these ideas and experiences, I finally started my studies with Strnad. (Pisk unpublished notes)⁸

From 1931 to 1932 Pisk appears to have also attended the Max Reinhardt Seminar, which had been under the direction of the pioneering actor and director Max Reinhardt since 1928 for acting and production students.⁹

After a period of training with Hilde Holger in the late 1920s¹⁰ Litz Pisk became co-owner of The New School for Movement Arts. Its curriculum¹¹ was divided into practical and theoretical components: with Pisk and Holger teaching gymnastics and dance together, Pisk was also teaching acrobatics and another teacher led ballet technique.¹² What is perhaps significant here are the components of the Holger curriculum – it was a programme that included anatomy, music, history of dance as well as acrobatics, rhythmic gymnastics and ballet – all of which one can identify in Pisk's future actor movement practice. Pisk's teacher of history of dance from that school, Dr Alfred Sandt, was also publishing articles on the history of dance for the journal *Archives Internationales de la Danse* and these indicate the depth of knowledge that could be the base from which Pisk was to launch her own historical dance research. As a trainee teacher she was active in teaching a range of professional and amateur students (actors and dancers), as well as children.

Why Holger and Pisk parted ways is not known, but later in 1929, Pisk – having obtained a teaching diploma – opened her own school: a private school for gymnastics, rhythmic, drawing and painting (1929–33).¹³ During this period it is highly likely that Pisk accompanied Bodenwieser and her troupe to *Le Grand Concours International de Chorégraphie* – an international choreographic gathering in Paris in 1932.¹⁴ Laban sat on the judging panel of the competition. Pisk is credited for the costume designs for Bodenwieser's award-winning work entitled *Les heures solennelles* (The Canonical Hours). It is here that Pisk¹⁵ would have seen the other twenty competing dance companies, including Kurt Jooss's Company with their seminal prize-winning work *La Table Verte* and Oscar Schlemmer's *Les Ballets Triadiques*.¹⁶

Pisk's early career had already combined costume design, set design,¹⁷ movement teaching and drawing. In this multidisciplinary formative practice there are the foundations of what would develop into a theatre-specific practice of expressive and intentional movement.

In Britain: Movement Teaching at Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), the Old Vic Theatre School and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD)

Every exercise that Litz demonstrated was a piece of theatre.

George Hall 2016

Like many Jewish artists Pisk left an increasingly anti-Semitic Vienna ahead of the Anschluss. In 1933 she started visiting and working in Britain, obtaining British citizenship in 1937. Pisk started her working life drawing cartoons for a variety of publications. She also designed the costumes for a performance of *The Pageant of Labour*¹⁸ at the Crystal Palace with a cast of over 1,500 participants celebrating the centenary of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1934. Even as a German speaker newly arrived in a different cultural environment, she managed to keep aspects of her interdisciplinary approach alive.

For a period Pisk was juggling teaching in two different settings. One was the progressive primary schools¹⁹ where she taught children drawing and painting. The other was what would become the first phase of actor movement teaching, as a part-time tutor and then full-time movement teacher at the RADA from around 1936 to 1942. Here her work covered movement, costume and stage design, and history of theatre. There is evidence that she was teaching regular movement classes as well as rehearsing and mounting student shows of mime plays. Her classes were called 'Mime' – a term that was apparently being used very loosely for a new kind of movement. The Tatler Magazine reported that a class in 'Mime and movement to drum beats make Miss Alice Pisk's class feel cheerful and unrepressed' (1940). Physically freeing the body was to be a recurring and fundamental objective to her practice. Pisk herself described her curriculum as having three interconnected components: physical training (gymnastics), movement (dance) and expression (imagination of surroundings, situation, emotion, reaction, relationship). Her relationship with the structures of teaching at RADA appears to have been complex, maybe even fractious. She wrote several times to the principal suggesting alternative ways of offering movement over the three years of the training. Pisk's long-term collaborator, actor and teacher George Hall²⁰ suggests that when principal Sir Kenneth Barnes engaged Litz to teach movement 'he thought what she was doing was interesting – but he drew the line when she suggested classes in improvisation, which wasn't done at all in the 30s' (Hall in Susi 2010: 39). A sense of her innovating in the training structures is further supported by a series of Pisk's

written suggestions about how movement could interact with other aspects of the ethos and acting training. In 1941 the school building was bomb-damaged after an air attack on London, and Pisk wrote to the principal making a passionate case for new ways of making movement flourish outside of the 'small stuffy rooms'. She wrote: 'The academy has been bombed. We have carried the last of the millions of buckets of debris out of the remaining building. We have gained free space. Let us start now. Why not use the open space for physical training.'²¹

Pisk notes that her ethos was not finding a foothold at this particular school, remarking that she had had '5 years "Royal" experience with youth, 5 years "Dramatic" experience with authorities'.²² She would resign in 1942. Perhaps the transition from the independence of running her own training in Vienna to aligning her movement to that of this English conservatoire had proved to be an uncomfortable one. A small cohort of students pursued movement improvisation with Pisk outside of their formal training once she had left the school.

The frequent change of schools became a feature of Pisk's career – those who knew her say she aimed for cycles of change. Another consistent feature was alternating drawing,²³ teaching drawing to art students with more extended periods of teaching movement to actors all through her working life.

Pisk's next phase of actor movement teaching was at the new post-war conservatoire, the Old Vic Theatre School directed by French theatre director, Michel Saint-Denis.²⁴ This was a short-lived yet influential training built on Saint-Denis's experience with his uncle, Jacques Copeau. Movement teacher Trish Arnold²⁵ suggests that Saint-Denis was instrumental in placing expressive movement at the heart of actor training and for drawing different continental movement lineages together (Arnold in Evans 2009: 55). The interrelationship of training elements and the anti-commercial stance of the directorship characterized the school. The curriculum at the Old Vic Theatre School was movement heavy and included elements of gymnastics, dance, acrobatics, period movement, dramatic movement and fencing.²⁶ Significantly the whole faculty directed their teaching towards plays and creative exercises that demanded a particular style and approach from the actor, so that each skill supported the specific demands of a theatrical form. From 1947 to 1951 Pisk worked on the two-year acting training and her daily movement class for first-year students started with stretches, swings and barre work. As a student at the time, George Hall recalls that Pisk's strength lay in inventing movement combinations and variations, thereby building very systematically throughout a week of classes. He suggested that as many male students arrived at that drama school straight out of military service with the rigidity of army training present in their body memory, Pisk sought to create a malleable body and to that end worked at loosening and shaking out the spine. This was then followed by variations of swings²⁷ or spirals to and from the floor to increase suppleness. This powerful work required strong support with the legs – so flexibility of the spine

was matched with strengthening activities. She worked a lot on the feet – using undulations and coordinations to activate intricate articulations of the ankle, arch and toe joints. Hall also describes ‘putting a little more weight on the outer foot, a little more weight on the inner foot – and drawing very much from the Basque dance – a very, very even, tremendously controlled, transfer of weight’ (Hall 2016). Another student of the time talks of how movement preparation would then feed into applied movement tasks:

We would start every day with three-quarters of an hour of bar [*sic*] exercises, then go on to do the dance of different periods – a good way, this, of getting us to feel history through our bodies, to forget our modern selves. ... The movements of history, the movements of emotion; she taught us to express feelings in the way we moved, to make our bodies take a different shape, even to feel what it was like to be a tree reaching far into the sky. ... (Montague in McCall 1978: 146–7)

Litz’s own embodiment of physical transformation offered living proof of what was possible through regular practice and visual imagination. Pisk offered pure movement practice and then applied it to period and folk dance. By teaching students core movement principles, such as the use of weight, extension in space and rhythm, she was able to activate these principles in dances from different historical periods. Another student at the time illuminates this further, remembering that Pisk was ‘not only experimental in terms of her own sense of movement but also her visual sense – so that things like period movement were always done with a sense of space, you felt that were in a “given” space and shape and place’ (Snyders 2016).²⁸

The movement of the dances was filtered through Pisk’s historical insight (observation of how fashion and clothing shaped the body through different eras) and her knowledge of aesthetics (cultural and religious mores encoded in an era’s paintings).²⁹ She then synthesized this into movement so that students could experience the spaces of dances, the feel of the music and the interaction of humans in physical, social narratives. All these came together to feed the visual and sensory aspects of the imagination of the actor.

The Old Vic Theatre School phase must have consolidated her pure movement teaching simply through the intensity and regularity of her practice. At the school Pisk was also combining drawing in classes and encouraging crossover by inviting the scenic design students in to draw during movement class – so her understanding of movement was embodied both in the observational and gestural art of line making and through her pedagogy. The interconnectedness of her understanding of the fine arts seems to have come into its own during this phase.

Following Pisk's departure (ahead of the Old Vic Theatre School's closure in 1952),³⁰ we see growth in her movement work on productions. This was part of a more general trend for other movement directors in British theatre too. It was at this time that Pisk also started a public movement lecture series.³¹ Between 1951 and 1955 Pisk taught full-time at Bath Academy of Art at Corsham Court.³² This full-time post included classes on movement, movement and drawing, natural form and life drawing.

Towards the end of the 1950s Pisk embarked on what was to be a fruitful and enduring movement direction collaboration with director Michael Elliott.³³ Elliott's career not only encompassed theatre and television; he was influential in placing regional theatre production firmly on the creative map. Elliott and Pisk first worked together on the movement of a television version of *The Women Of Troy* by Euripides.³⁴ This continued with the '59 Theatre Company with an acclaimed production of Henrik Ibsen's *Brand* at the Lyric Hammersmith, which was to launch Elliott's career. In 1961 Pisk and Elliott were also working on William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* for the Royal Shakespeare Company with a seminal performance of Rosalind by Vanessa Redgrave.³⁵ Then the Old Vic Theatre building was offered to Elliott for a short period whereupon he formed the Old Vic Company for a year (from 1962 to 1963) and it is here that Pisk became the in-house Director of Movement for a company of professional actors.³⁶ George Hall recalls how unusual it was at that time to have a resident movement practitioner on board: 'It was an extraordinary year. ... Litz was choreographer and movement coach. I gave voice and singing tutorials to the company; she gave movement classes. You have to remember that although it is commonplace now for a company to have a dedicated voice and movement team, there was nobody doing that kind of work then' (Hall in Susi 2010: 59). Litz's input was very much into the narrative-driven movement and she was most determined that her production process 'would not be thought of as choreography' (Hall 2016). Movement on production has to harness the logic of the actor's character journey and to extend that into a movement style or language that supports and realizes the director's dramaturgical production choices. Pisk's creation of movement material for shows was mainly on classical plays. This intense phase of production work overlapped with her third phase of actor movement teaching at another British conservatoire, Central School of Speech and Drama³⁷ (Central). This long-established conservatoire with a reputation for excellence in voice teaching was, in the early 1960s, in the throes of disruption. Theatre director John Blatchley and movement teacher Yat Malmgren resigned from teaching on the acting course and a number of students left with them.³⁸

Pisk had already been undertaking some freelance historical dance teaching at Central, but this was substantially increased from 1962 onwards and she became Head of Movement from 1964 to 1970. In this third phase we see Pisk developing some new aspects to her teaching – notably animal movement