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DRAMATIC DANCE

An Actor's Approach to Dance as a Dramatic Art

Darren Royston

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To all the dancing satyrs who follow Dionysos
and the snail shells that remain

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INTRODUCTION: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES – MAKING DANCE DRAMATIC

At the beginning of every new course I teach at RADA, I always begin by saying:

On the timetable it says you will now receive a dance class ...

Well, actually we will not be teaching you how to dance.

You are not here to become dancers, but to develop as actors.

You have joined an academy for dramatic art.

So, instead, you will learn how you can use dance as a dramatic art.

This distinction is very important to me. It means that the actors will be able to use whatever previous training or experience of dance they already possess. It does not mean that they will not gain new skills and develop useful and practical techniques in dance, but the reason for learning dance as a dramatic art is very specific.

Dance is part of the art of theatre. Dance cannot exist on its own in the context of dramatic performance. It connects movement with communication, improvisation and performance. Dance works in conjunction with other elements to enable meanings to be created in performance. For actors to perform dance as part of the drama, they must master the art of dance in this particular context. This book offers several approaches which can contribute to developing this understanding and training this skill. The aim is that the whole active and thinking body and mind are fully engaged with the task of making dance an integral and vital part of theatre.

You will notice straight away that each chapter in this book has a title that locates the material to a specific era and time period. However, this is not a textbook on the history of dance, as such. Dance history is being used to give an imaginative context for the activity of dance. This historical evidence should be used to inspire feelings in the actor that can then be expressed through performance in the present moment. There is a need to generalize and to categorize the material into a particular 'period' so that, sometimes, we give the abbreviation 'period dance' to the classes on the drama school timetable. So, for this book, I have selected some ideas and dance forms from a selection of time periods that can also develop a way of making dance performance dramatic.

Part of the approach in this book is how the body can adapt to display different styles. Specific historical dances will be used to demonstrate how variations exist between different societies. A specific

historical period may be represented by the style of dancing performed by that particular society. Certain dancing techniques may be identified with these historical circumstances. However, a lot of these skills will also be transferable between the different time periods. Various approaches will train the actor to use these dances in a dramatic way, so I have chosen certain elements from the body of historical material that can inspire actors to move confidently, and have fun with the lessons.

Sometimes people mock the subject, dubbing 'historical dance' with the title '*histerical* dance'. That never worries me as a teacher, as I firmly believe that if the students are finding enjoyment in the material they will also get a sense of why this strange activity of moving in what is now a 'weird way' might have been entertaining for the people living at the time. It is strange to imagine that we ourselves would have behaved differently if we had lived in another time period, so the aim for the actor is to discover how a true feeling can be expressed through different artistic forms that may differ from now. We laugh at a fashion when it is no longer in vogue, but we need to imagine what it felt to wear this outfit when it was the norm, and the people wearing this fashion felt 'cool'.

The chapters will include some suggestions for more serious historical research that could be followed up: for example, original sources and academic commentary on this evidence that could be studied, as well as suggestions of things in other disciplines that might help an actor place the material into a bigger picture – quite literally. What art relates to the period? What music was being played? Who lived at this time that may have spent time doing these dances? Now that we can search things very quickly on the internet, the decision has been made to give keywords in the text which can send you into the right direction to find out more and begin your own independent research.

The question remains the same for each chapter, in whatever era or time period. Why are people moving in this dance dimension? Believable answers can only be found when the body turns the imagination into physical action. Each chapter will produce its own recipe to produce the particular physical result, with the hope that this will also inspire personal responses, alternative exercises and imagined situations, rather than simply present a step-by-step syllabus. However, there are certain approaches which will always be found in play, so this introduction will now explain the philosophy that supports the idea that dance can be performed as a dramatic art.

The Actor Approach to Dance

The main question for this book is: how can the dances of history become dramatic dance?

Time Travel to the Dance Dimension

As you begin a new chapter, I invite you to imagine you are being transported to a different historical world. Each chapter gives a brief introduction to the particular style of the particular dance world you are about to enter.

An Actor Prepares to ...

As an actor, you must be prepared to dance, so the body needs to be warmed up to be ready to take on very specific instructions for moving parts of the body, responding freely to music and imaginative

exercises, and being receptive to others in the studio. Each chapter gives some exercises that will gradually warm the body up, while also getting the mind thinking about the reality of the world where the dance was a current activity.

Setting the Scene

- What are the educational, scientific and cultural reasons for considering this time period as important, and which section of society is dancing in this world?
- What elements do those joining the dance share?
- How do these ideas translate physically?
- What terminology is used to communicate dance instructions in practice?
- How can this physical activity of understanding what makes up a dance form be useful for the actor as an artist?

Every dance exists in a context of given circumstances as much as a scene of dialogue and action; there is purpose and intention in steps and movements in the same way that actors may consider objectives and actions in the preparation of a scene.

Four Practical Approaches

The book presents four practical approaches on each topic. These four approaches can be considered separately, but you will find they overlap and combine in practice. I have called them:

Expressive Dance, Historical Dance, Laban Dance and Show Dance.

You may decide to give them your own names, deciding which is most appropriate at different times: in actor training, in preparation for a role, in creating dances and scenes with dance, exploring the period of the play during rehearsal and learning a technique for dancing in the performance of drama. In some ways, each approach is saying the same thing in its own way, with the aim of combining thought with action. Each chapter will prioritize different approaches, as the most relevant for an actor using the material in a practical way.

I have chosen to find sound-bite titles within the chapters, which suggest something about the nature of each exercise. These are not intended to belittle the importance of the techniques developed over time, but to try to get you to jump in at the deep end quickly and start doing the exercise rather than trying to explain everything beforehand. The aim is to allow you to make connections with your own experience in dance, theatre and life, so that the exercise is a personal expression. Don't try to be someone from another period – just put yourself physically in each differently constructed world.

Here is a description of each category with the explanation of how it is a different approach to the same theme.

Expressive Dance

What abstract themes are being expressed and how can this expression create a 'movement mode'?

This is dancing as a chance for free expression and exploration. It is part of the process to lose inhibitions and start moving in ways different from daily life. The 'dance dimension' is to be considered a place for open interaction and improvisation. Through movement exercises based on the theme, you will be asked to draw on your past experiences, remembered images and personal thoughts and feelings. Every interpretation is right if the actor feels it expresses the theme for them, with their full moving bodies combining with their concentrated focused minds. This should always be a good warm-up, requiring the whole body to be moving around the studio. Ideas will be explored freely, so that there is no right or wrong at this stage, as long as the actor is engaged with the ideas while moving the whole body. The themes should be used as ways to approach movement exercises – as games to play with – which may produce ways of moving that make the ideas visible in the studio. The outcome is the creation of a 'movement mode' by which I mean a way of moving that everyone in the studio creates together, sharing in the experience. Interaction with other moving bodies then can establish how the particular movement style was shared in a society at a moment in history. Abstract ideas and representation in art can inspire this approach.

Historical Dance

What specific elements from the historical context can be emphasized in performance and how is this way of moving particular to a moment in time?

This is dancing with the knowledge of history. Historical dances are dead, buried, probably forgotten, and therefore can only be revived actively, by the actor using an active historical imagination. Consider the people and the place. How was the dance floor a place of negotiation and establishment; for instance, relating to the social, political and sexual negotiations particular to that society, and the creation of status and hierarchy to maintain the order of this society? From where did it come? How did people of a past period create these dances? How did the social rules create movement modes, manners, etiquette and recognized style identifiers? What links can be made to the music, visual arts and cultural developments of this historical period, and was an artistic aesthetic established alongside? How can an actor use historical evidence to create a physical performance: such as dance instruction manuals, guides to polite conduct and historical choreography deciphered from descriptions and notations? Practical exercises based on this research connects a particular physical technique to a way of moving, creating an awareness of the historical body.

The chapters in this book follow a basic chronological structure. If you follow the chapters in order, you will move, quite literally, through a historical development from the classical worlds to the beginning of the twentieth century. Certain evidence from each chapter will be more useful in practice for an actor working on a role set at this particular time period. It may be useful to also consider the original practice of the actors when working on classical texts with references that will need to be researched and reinterpreted in modern theatre or film performance. To remain aware of the various styles from the different periods, you will need to have an analytical approach to your movement study.

Laban Dance

What technical skills can be used to give the illusion that the performing body belongs to the imagined world and how is this shared as a dynamic experience?

This book considers an analytical approach to the discipline and art of dance. It is influenced by the principles of dance and the art of movement as systematized by Rudolf Laban and used with all types of movement study, including being developed with the actor, dancer, choreographer and performance artist in mind.

Rudolf Laban (1879–1958) was a pioneer of dance and movement study in the twentieth century, who worked with many individuals, in many countries. His work has influenced many teachers of dance and acting, and this developed work has become part of many programmes of actor training. Throughout his life, Laban himself continued to explore movement as an art, and was influenced at different times by a diverse range of disciplines, philosophies and cultures including the Dada Cabaret, Karl Gustav Jung psychoanalysis, Contemporary Dance and Austruckdanz Dance Theatre. His work specifically applied to actor training was professionally promoted by Jean Newlove (movement director to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop) and in theatre choreography by Geraldine Stephenson (who also developed work in historical dance for film and TV). Now, Laban's work is best known in the Eight Action Efforts, sometimes abbreviated to 'The Efforts'.

This book will also draw upon other elements of Laban's work that can be used by actors to consider dance as a dramatic art, particularly with the use of rhythms in space and time. These elements have been given different names through history: Space Harmony (Choreutics), Movement Dynamics (Eukinetics), Choreosophy (Wisdom of Circles), Tanz-Ton-Wort (Dance-Sound-Word Triad), Architectonics and Spatial Scaffolding, Swinging Scales of Movement, Laban Movement Analysis, Choreology and Choreological Studies, Posture Gesture Merger and Movement Profiling. Using symbols to record movement was proposed as a way to write down movement, to generate something akin to a score as used in music, and this system has developed into Labanotation or Kinetography Laban. Laban included dance exercises in his early writings, such as the *Manuals for Gymnastic Training* (1923) and *Choreography* (1926), which suggested themes and styles that could develop a systematic approach when training physically. Established dance forms and historical material could be examined using the Laban Approach to consider how the meaning was conveyed through particular movement codes. The main written text by Laban with a focus on drama is *The Mastery of Movement for the Stage* (1951). Here, Laban writes that the aim of the actor must be to be able to 'think in terms of movement'. The technical analysis and the discipline of this approach strives to attain this vital skill.

In this book, each chapter will consider how 'thinking in terms of movement' may help us understand how the body is working technically as an organism in the space, and how we can sense a particular way of moving as both an actor and as a member of the audience. This role of the 'onlooker' may be someone who would have witnessed the dance in its original social context (such as a member of the same society), or someone who watched a contemporary depiction of the dance in a theatrical event (the historical audience), or someone engaging with the performance in the present day (an audience now). This Laban Dance movement analysis will see how different layers may interact and combine. A 'body language' is something that is created in practice, and may change in different cultures, so from this analytical standpoint, the way that dance can be performed by an actor today will become the most important thing. Each actor needs to consider what the audience will be aware of during dance performance today.

Show Dance

What does the performer present to the audience and how does the audience participate in this performance?

This is dancing with the awareness of an audience. Exercises are all well and good, but how do you take these into performance? We need to consider how performance practice has changed and how audiences will view the dance. What resonances will the movement have today? How should a dance be choreographed, and what needs to be contained in a choreography, a dance scene or a routine? An actor may consider specific characters and how they might move, or scenes where dance occurs. An actor, director or choreographer will need to consider how the work explored in the studio, including the imaginative exploration, historical research and technical reconstructions, will need to be represented in a performance context.

Combining the Approaches

In summary, this book proposes a way for the performance of Dramatic Dance to combine practical knowledge from many different approaches.

For those using this book to create teaching plans, the four approaches can be combined in any order to give a methodical and creative structure. Exercises can be selected from each category, to make a structure moving from playful theme-based games (Expressive Dance), to thinking about the historical authenticity (Historical Dance), then considering the technical elements which are particular to this specific style (Laban Dance), and then taking elements of this material into consideration of performance for the audience today (Show Dance).

Depending on the available time, teachers may choose to spend an entire lesson on one section from a relevant category, or maybe spend a term in one historical period. The book can be used as a good follow-up for students who can then reconsider after class what has been done physically in one session, and make connections to further research, and find other resources by following links from the references.

Date Order

The chapters have been ordered with an historical chronological development, based on standard divisions in cultural periods, mainly with reference to Western European history. These themes connect very easily to Western classical theatre, from the Ancient Greeks, through Shakespeare and Restoration Comedy, to Victorian and twentieth-century period drama and beyond. Historical periods may of course be referred to in other imaginative ways, either as complete production interpretations or as a choice for an actor's role. It would be a hugely simplistic view to think that each historical period moved easily into the next, although I have found that teaching in sequence is very rewarding, as the students can order the material to match a time frame. I have therefore developed themes to suit the development of the actor's technique as a dancer. These follow a sequence moving from general to specific, as we travel forward in time from ancient to modern.

There is at least one benefit of beginning with early historical periods – we start at a point of relative ignorance! Dance historians have very few definite facts about these lost ancient cultures. Because of this, the actors are required to engage their imaginations immediately, rather than feel they have to revive a dead dance as an exact scientific task. Attention to detail is always important, but this is very different from having pressure to present historical authenticity. Having said all that, I have also taught separate workshops on isolated historical periods, and when working as a choreographer it may be that a particular production requires instruction on a particular dance or movement style: in this case it may be possible to select the relevant section.

My advice is that you should follow the lead of the dancing bodies and, as an actor, your own moving body. Whatever starts to produce the dramatic effect in the studio should be allowed to generate the process. When the feeling you are hoping to achieve with the dance starts to take shape, then let the dance become part of the drama. The most spontaneous and seemingly unrelated choices made while in the flow of dance creation can be the most revealing about the dramatic tension and can generate the dynamic of a good performance. Systematic analysis and repetition (that being the real meaning of rehearsal, of course) can then make sure the experience is channelled into memory. Memory was the mother of Terpsichore, the Greek muse of Dance, so it is a skill that is also needed for a competent performance. Using different approaches will make things easier to remember, using different ways of engaging with the desired quality.

Words of Warning

Only by doing can you understand dance. So use this book as a springboard to dance, not as a textbook to memorize by rote or follow word for word.

This book considers what must be avoided when executing a particular style. Confidence in a particular way of moving may mean that certain things become overstated, or develop beyond what is required. The actor may perform the move perfectly in the class, having worked through the exercises, but this moment needs to be *remembered* (meaning re-embodied) when it appears in performance, in the context of a scene in the play. The real reason for moving in that particular way may be forgotten and bad habits may creep in, so you are encouraged to use a combination of different approaches to keep the material alive for you, as a dancing actor.

Online Teaching Tools

Nonsuch Dance Reconstructions

In this book, I will refer to various sources that connect to the material, sometimes literally and sometimes not. Artists depict dance in each period, but even these visual references are not necessarily physically accurate. However, I recommend a number of online supporting materials. As far as possible, all references in the book are freely available through WIKIMEDIA COMMONS or equivalents. However, these are not prescriptive and you should enjoy discovering additional materials as part of the process of creating a context for your dramatic dance.

This book refers to online Nonsuch Dance Reconstructions. You will find links to filmed footage of these reconstructions on p. 155. These are technical reconstructions of authentic dances for illustrative purposes. The music and choreographies are selected from teaching-aid manuals produced by Nonsuch History and Dance (a registered charity). They offer an extensive collection of dances from all periods of history, in replicated historical costumes and with appropriate music.

The Nonsuch Dance Reconstructions are performed out of context, and are not to be viewed as definitive models of dramatic dance. You are encouraged to consider the reconstructions and then respond creatively with a greater degree of confidence in the historical dance vocabulary. You yourself need to then make your own choices within the exercises and in the way you decide to act through the material. Notes in the chapters will explain how and why certain choices have been made, considering connections between the physical realization and the historical evidence. As an actor, you should be able to justify your performance according to its dramatic purpose.

Choreo-Captions

The Nonsuch Dance Reconstructions include captions. Sometimes these are abbreviations of technical terms that point to specific elements in this book that are drawn from historical dance manuals. For example, steps that repeat are shortened to their first letter (e.g. a Reverence – the technical term for a bow to your partner – appears as [R]). They should make it easier for you to consider what elements have been combined to create the dance structure. As in studying music, there is a need to know that the piece of music is created from individual sounding notes and rhythmical units, but then entire phrases need to be felt as being the creation of the composition as a whole. The micro-elements of the steps are then put into a macro-structure which, in the end, must be seen as simply ‘the dance’ – just as in performance the lines of the character will in the end be considered as ‘the play’.

To move to this holistic performance, some of the captions will use sub-headings to identify sections within the dance. While most of these *choreo-captions* connect to traditional ways of determining new sections of dance by the spatial patterns made by the moving bodies (e.g. ‘separating out’), these are only basic technical suggestions to get you to independently produce a more creative response to the shaping of the dance. I would suggest that students and teachers differentiate each section by finding names for the sections themselves.

You are encouraged to come up with your own *choreo-captions* that match how you yourself interpret each section of the dance, and connect to how it makes you perform this differently from other parts of the dance. The choreographies of each chapter are often comprised of very similar steps, so it is possible that by making each dance personal to you it can lessen the confusion between the different dances you learn. This process of captioning sections can be used as way to prevent you getting swamped by the mass of material as you experience many dances. Hopefully you will develop an historical framework for the dances and the movement styles attributed to different histories, and all the while link this to your muscle memory. So, to begin with, you may even want to connect to very specific things that happen in your studio and rehearsal situation – giving *choreo-caption* names to dance steps because of where you go in the studio (‘the escape to the window’) or relating to the narrative of the drama (e.g. ‘the near-miss kiss’ as you pass someone during a country dance), or the relationship between the characters’ dancing and their intention.

When creating your own *choreo-captions*, it is of course good practice to try to connect to ideas that might have meant something to the people living at the time when the dance was in vogue, and