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Mara Della Pergola

"The theater is the situation, the place, the point where one can catch the human anatomy and through it heal and direct life."

ANTONIN ARTAUD

WORKING WITH ACTORS

MOSHE FELDENKRAIS

"What I'm after isn't flexible bodies but flexible brains. What I'm after is to restore each person to their human dignity."

STAGE OF OUR LIVES

Life and theater are very much the same for the performer who devotes his life to the stage. In this article I speak about my experience with actors as a Feldenkrais teacher, and I would like to raise curiosity in the reader about the verbal and non-verbal process of communication and contact that actors learn and practice.

SETTING THE STAGE

When performing, an actor is singularly centered, vital, and focused, in other words ready for action. The result is a special combination of elements that move in two directions: toward the actor's own internal experience and centeredness, and toward the exterior action. This energy is communicated to the group of fellow actors present on stage as well as toward the audience.

This complex interaction of communication can generate many variations. For example, the internal centeredness of a quiet and unmoving actor, which seems almost like a meditation, can lead to direct and straight contact with the observer's soul, and is highlighted and reinforced by the movements and expressions of the other actors present around him. Conversely, when an actor is speaking and moving, his strong direction toward the exterior might be counterbalanced by the group of colleagues staged in the background.

The three subjects—the actor, his colleagues on stage, and the audience—are therefore creating rich combinations of communication. The dialogue doesn't flow in a linear way, one to one, but it moves on several different planes, forming a moving spiral, which is a three-dimensional figure that never closes in on itself, and that can develop in crescendo or in decrescendo.



This level of intentional, directional dialogue and energy is one ingredient that elevates a simple conversation or a lecture from an ordinary activity into a successful theatrical performance.

The actor speaks and shows feelings and ideas of his character every moment on stage, and sometimes with more intensity than in his private life. This strong dialogue and passion must first be cultivated and then organized in order to reach the audience.

AN ACTOR'S AWARENESS

It is evident that the key in the actor's training is that he or she learn to cultivate this particular performance capacity through improved self-awareness. In this way an actor can sense what is happening moment by moment in performance, and can adjust the manner in which he moves and speaks, in relation to this dynamic environment. Awareness, that special attention directed by the actor to his own way of being, moving and speaking, becomes the most significant tool for his expressiveness. It helps him to remain free of unnecessary and uncontrolled acts that may unduly interfere with his personal style and expression.

In the search for the best interpretation of a character, the actor has to go through the recognition of all that is his own in attitude and essence, and learn to access the difference in meaning of movements for interpretation of a character and the movements of daily life. He must also learn to recognize the bad imprinting of previous learning and poor habits acquired during more traditional years of training. This process takes time and is like a cleansing of all that is unnecessary to move or to express a character, such as trying too hard, or using an excessive amount of muscular work. It is a search for *neutral centeredness*, where one is balanced, flexible, and adaptable. It is only from this *neutral centeredness* that one can easily move in any direction, utilizing personal sensations to develop new and different relationships with oneself, with the character being interpreted, and with the artificial space and time of the theater. This internal flexibility enables the actor to identify the unique and subtle aspects of a character which, in turn, are felt and internalized by the audience.

EXPLORING NEUTRAL CENTERDNESS

As I've mentioned before, an actor's communication must be clear and precise. Any extra small and uncontrolled movement or badly expressed word is felt like an extraneous noise during a musical concert: the message is muddled and confused, it disturbs concentration, and the audience's attention is momentarily lost. On stage, each gesture has a unique meaning and context, creating a dynamic exchange with the audience. An actor must cultivate an ability to use the body in space with the appropriate width, intensity, and rhythm.

A special strategy, now employed in several theater training programs, is the use of the neutral mask. The neutral mask is a physical mask with no expression and it covers the face of the person. In this way it highlights the movement of the rest of the body, which becomes much more expressive than when the face is included in part of the expression. The mask is a constraint for the actor's face, which brings freedom elsewhere. Working with this mask helps in finding a common neutral minimal and "poetical" core for actions, from which the actor can go back and forth, playing and creat-



ing the character he wants. Even natural elements like an ocean or a tree can be shown, starting from that minimal poetical and stylized core. There are multiple, different oceans, but all have in common that artistic root, evocative of other dimensions. The actor has to find that minimal neutral presence and move from there to always-different directions, adding the colored details he wants, each time he acts. The observer will always be captured by what has a universal significance.

In a similar way, in our work with the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education, when we want to mobilize parts that are not active enough, we create constraints in the lessons with the purpose of limiting the movement in one area and increasing it somewhere else. For example, if we want to mobilize the area between the shoulder blades we can frame our head with one arm, laying the forearm on top of it, and then we can move the head together with the arm as a unit. In this way the movement takes place between the shoulder blades, and not just in the neck, as it usually does when we move the head. It's like using the neutral mask: the constraint of

the arm around the head produces a change in the habitual use of our neck and other parts have to be more active. The actor student, as well as the non-actor student, is fascinated by the discovery of new sensations in parts of himself that he is not moving actively or in the habitual way, and this empowers him to explore further.

Because of this discovery, each performance, repeated over many days, weeks, or months can never be acted in the same exact way because of the continuous interactions between the actor and the context. In the art of playing, it's always as if it is the first time. In this way the actor can refine his technique because he rediscovers it each time. This idea is echoed in our Feldenkrais lessons, which are also never exactly the same, although one might repeat the same lesson time and again. They maintain their functional theme, but they are created each time for the students' needs. And the student is asked not to move in a mechanical or habitual way, but as if it is the first time. In this way one has the choice to rediscover how to sit, how to get up, how to roll as a baby learning his first steps.

THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD IN ACTORS' TRAINING PROGRAMS

The Feldenkrais Method has become part of the actors' training in several schools all over the world. Feldenkrais himself taught many actors in the U.S. and in Israel. During the early seventies he regularly gave workshops at Bouffes du Nord, the Paris theater where director Peter Brook works with the Centre International de Création Théâtrale. From those collaborations Moshe's work spread to other countries and to very different schools. Now many actors are enrolling in Feldenkrais professional training programs because they know it is enriching and helpful both for themselves and for their work.

At the Teatro Stabile School in Torino, Italy, where I have taught as a Feldenkrais teacher, I have developed a teaching strategy to guide my students to a more ideal state of being, both as people and performers. This strategy was the result of a simple request by our school Director who asked me to have the students "stand up straight" and abandon the postural "defects" that were freezing their voices as well as their movements.

I chose to start with a series of lessons that bring the attention of the students to their skeletons and help them feel and discover that no muscular effort is needed in order to stand up and be awake. The classic "Pelvic Clock" series, lessons where all the pelvic movements are explored while on the back, sitting, kneeling, or standing, is a great and effective introduction to discovering how powerful one can be, by learning to connect pelvis and head through the spine. The head moves in resonance with the pelvis if there is no interference with it. The result is a renewed capacity to let go of one's weight to the floor and let the floor support the entire standing structure. This helps to get rid of all the efforts one habitually makes to stand up and gives the sensation that one can stand quietly and not move voluntarily in order to keep balanced. In our imagination, bones come to light, while muscles, which are sometimes very "noisy," become more "silent."

The Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons, mostly on the floor, or sitting and standing, gradually lead the students, while moving, to explore and feel parts of themselves in different contexts. This means that they are in touch with their skeletons, their center, and they become more aware of their habitual way of moving and behaving. While feeling and sensing, they discover the existence of neurological patterns. They understand that each person has his own way of doing things, but that there is a

more ideal way of acting which can give more freedom and ease. They learn to protect themselves physically, and even more important, to go in and out of the character's emotions with more ease.

SOME SPECIFICS

Many lessons are useful for the actor's training. I generally structure a group of lessons on different subjects:

- There are lessons that help the actor in his exploration of all the basic movements one can do in the daily life, like getting up from a chair or from the floor, sitting, turning, walking, reaching, pulling and pushing.
- Other lessons are built to do big and accelerated movements in space like rolling, jumping, running.
- There are lessons more focused on balance, stability and instability, where we challenge our relationship with gravity. Using rollers to stand on or standing on one's head are just two examples.
- Other lessons are more focused on breathing and the use of the voice.
- Some series are designed to clarify minimal face movements: the use of the eyes, the lips, the tongue, and the jaw. Here the accent can be more on the soft parts and noticing how moving these muscles in a very gentle way has a tremendous effect on the central nervous system, and therefore on posture.
- Other lessons are given in order to concretely feel different rhythms, different volumes, different colors internally: a new space that can invite a person to travel within himself and discover beautiful landscapes for the first time in his life. In these lessons one can notice very clearly how many of the conceptual abstractions created by humans have their roots in the human body. Geometrical lines and volumes, spheres, cylinders, rectangles, circles, straight and crossed lines can be felt inside ourselves, which gives our habitation to space more complexity.

Skeletal perception is certainly a guideline present in all these lessons. Without that clear awareness it is easier to have an accident during the acrobatics exercises.

OBSERVATION AND IMITATION

Parallel to the self-exploration, the actors are encouraged to be better observers of others through imitation games. In this way they can begin to appreciate their own capacity for sensing themselves while observing or imitating others, and even observing themselves while feeling and thinking. This involves working with several levels of approximation:

- *Imitating without reflecting or thinking*
- *Imitating with awareness*, which means knowing which details are being perceived
- *Imitating and feeling at the same time*
- *Feeling or thinking about something and observing oneself while standing and moving.*

This develops and refines the innate sensitivity of the actor while at the same time directing his attention toward his companions and the group.

As an example, during a lesson I ask one participant of a pair to make a gesture, like shaking a hand, and then the other one to imitate this gesture:

- 1 Without paying attention to the way he does so, but just reproducing the "color" or the energy of the gesture. In this first step we will see imitations of people shaking hands strongly and fast, or just giving the tip of their fingers, or without real participation.
- 2 Observing the details in a Feldenkrais manner. In this second step it happens that some can focus more on the path of the gesture and will reproduce the movement from the hand through the arm to the shoulder and the head, while others can notice the speed of it, or can observe just one part of the moving body and imitate the moving hand in all the details. To compare these different ways of observation is a very enriching tool for the students because not only do they learn to observe someone else, but they also understand that there are so many models of observation and reproduction, as many as they are.
- 3 The next step is to imitate and add the observed details to the first colored attempt. The result is a richer and fleshier imitation.
- 4 And finally, start from a personal thought or from a special state of mind like, happiness or anxiety, and add it to the imitation of the partner's gesture. Now the student will show very different gestures and therefore will notice the power of his own mood and his own thoughts when developing his interpretation.

At the beginning of their training, imitation is not an easy task for new and young actors. It may become a parody and therefore be rejected. On the other hand, when asked to play a particular character, it is not enough to search inside oneself for the kind of emotions that belong to the character in order to reproduce it. In fact, the younger the students are, the harder it is for them to find inside themselves all the facets of that character. They need to recall something more objective, and therefore we must cultivate the capacity for observing what the other is doing, his motivation, and also the ability to differentiate in one's own action.

THE USE OF DIFFERENTIATION

The ability to differentiate movement, voice, interpretation, and thinking can be mastered through the process of differentiating movements according to the Feldenkrais Method. The differentiation of one joint from another is direct and immediate: in fact we practice that in all our lessons. However, in acting we deal with thoughts and emotions and how to communicate them to others. This leads us to rhythm and timing, and exploring a silence, a gesture, or a stop in movement just as we would explore how a knee or an ankle would cooperate in the walking of the whole person.

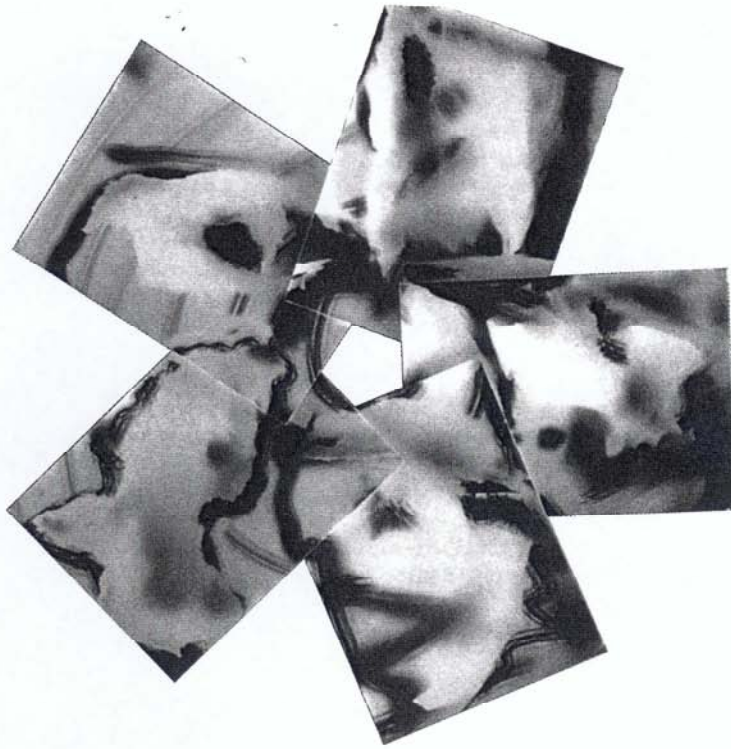
As an example, let's see this lesson:

Working alone, the students are asked to make some movements. Then they try the same movements with different rhythms, slow and fast, with breaks but without thinking. Then they are asked to add speech and speak at one speed while moving at another speed.

Another level of differentiation:

While playing their role, the students are asked to do a judo roll and to continue acting while walking away.

This proves to be very challenging for the students and also confronts them with one of the dilemmas of their training. As soon as the movement



is not well organized and mastered, breathing stops and therefore the voice changes with it. I used videotapes to let them see the difference in the quality of their voice in relation to the movement.

A certain way of teaching would impose a posture on the student without considering the artificiality of it, changing only the position of one body-segment or imposing a muscular effort to maintain it. I use an example of this from my days as a classroom instructor at the Teatro Stabile School. It used to be that the students were required to read the play scripts while sitting, and this went on for days. In parallel, they learned singing, acrobatics, voice, mime, dance, and the Feldenkrais Method. Some famous actors, who have had a long and successful experience in the theater, gave workshops to suggest breathing techniques or postures unacceptable for people with our experience. Sometimes, the students were asked to assume certain postures and hold them. Naturally, the students wanted to please these teachers, and as a result, they ignored their own internal awareness. The postures and the characterizations became mechanical and forced. This situation ignores the fact that no back is like any other, no person has his pelvis in relation to his head like any other, and all voices are different.

In such a situation what can we do? Some students can become confused by conflicting messages and at first do not understand the necessity of becoming aware of themselves in movement. They would like to receive a

recipe for how to act, such as learning how to enter the stage, since they are focused on the "what" and not on the "how" at the beginning.

I think that it is much more interesting for the performers' learning that they be guided to feel abstract concepts like "be straight" inside themselves without copying models, because copying brings effort or artificiality. A lesson on balance and stability, or on spine movement, would easily help to achieve these sensations. It is useful to become aware of how one can align all the vertebrae without effort in order to assume a desired posture at any moment. It is very helpful that each one makes his own exploration and finds his own images. The teacher can help at the beginning.

During a lesson the teacher gives movement indications that are addressed to the whole body and not just to a segment. The new organization that emerges will produce the straight sensation, which doesn't mean the most vertical possible, but a different relationship with gravity: something at the same time stable and flexible. This new organization allows for better standing and a better use of the voice. Some of these lessons can make the students enthusiastic, but the work can be long and hard for those who are not used to listening to themselves. Some students, therefore, find it difficult to move and talk at different speeds. Others find it difficult to talk and remain standing still for a long time. Some find it very demanding to maintain a subtle and deep attention. Others have found that imagining their spine to be very long or very short can be disorienting. However, the game of discoveries in movement and sensation eventually seduces everyone, leading to new skills and capabilities.

. . . AND, SMALL GROUPS

I have found it very interesting to work with pairs or small groups, just as in the Feldenkrais trainings where I teach. This is a good way to expand the field of observation beyond oneself, and to direct the same quality of attention to the other members of the actors' group. It can begin by helping the students face the difficulty that some of them have in observing themselves and others while moving. Several people, as it happens in life, can mainly notice the limitations of another person. They might more easily make comments on what is bad or stiff in their companions' movements, like: "He has a stiff pelvis" or "Her shoulders are too lifted up" instead of noticing how all the body's parts are organized to act. In this way the communication has a negative connotation and it is far from a learning process.

Accepting this, the teacher can help the actors observe new details, directing their attention toward functions and away from static patterns, and then ask them to sense in themselves what they were observing in the others. Thus, moving from observing to sensing, to understanding, and therefore to acting differently is a natural process that leads to spontaneous interest in the Feldenkrais Method and reduces a too judgmental attitude. Another important way to expand attention is working in couples and exploring with hands the partner's movement. For example, while a student is coming to sitting from lying supine, his partner follows the movement with soft hands over different parts of the body. In this way, and without being corrected, the student can feel his limits, feel what he is doing, and have a clearer image of himself.

MOVING THE VOICE

At this point in the actor's training, I like to work with voice and movement together. The expressiveness of the voice is the first thing that is noticed on stage, together with the scenic presence. We all can notice a broken or

forced voice, a powerful or subtle voice, just as we can recognize a fluid or jerky, strong or uneasy movement. The quality of a movement and of the spoken word is even more evident to our eyes and ears if the actor is interfering by using effort in his action, or in contrast, is breathing freely because of appropriate use of the skeleton.

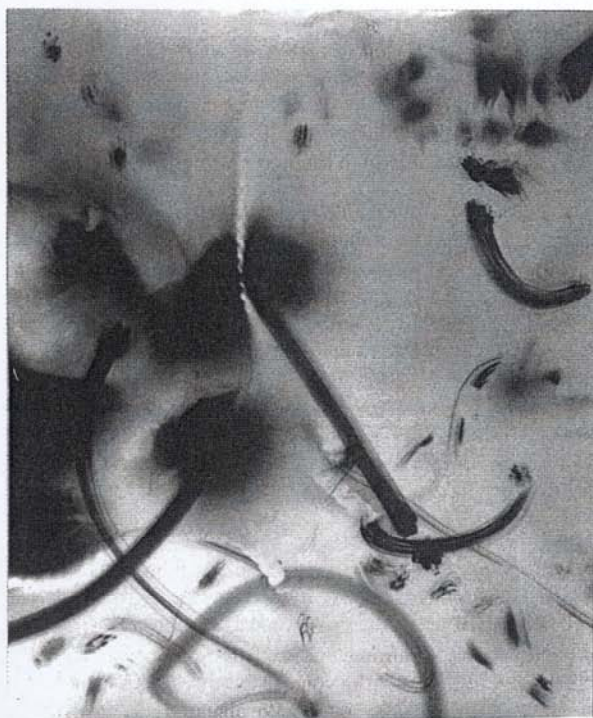
We have to be clear that we can't work just with the voice itself in order to improve it. Instead, it's a good strategy to teach an ATM lesson not just focused on the use of the voice. At the end the student will notice a change at many levels and also in the sound of his own voice. This can be explored in many ways: all the lessons that bring the attention to breathing have an effect on the voice. But the unique richness of the Method offers many different ways to approach the same function.

Another way can be explored by speaking a sentence and moving with and without effort. For example:

While speaking a sentence the student is asked to do a fluid movement and notice how that is. Then he is asked to repeat the same sentence while doing a jerky or strained movement or just contracting one part of himself.

The difference between the two performances is easily felt and it will be confirmed by trying the first option again, speaking while moving fluidly. If you try this yourself, you will notice how your whole organization and timing has an influence on your voice and how you speak.

Voice quality belongs paradoxically to the field of non-verbal communication. When speaking, it is not enough to say the right words in the right



way and with the right rhythm. If we are not aware of the path of the sound within the self, and the tensions that can be unnecessary barriers to this path, we may be communicating a meaning contradictory to that of the words being spoken. The expression may be unclear and even communicate the unintended sensations to others. It's like sitting on a chair from standing: we can do it lightly and gracefully, but sometime we may need to be heavy, in order to be clearer in our expression. The problem arises when we have no other choice than to use effort, even when the situation requires ease.

We all know people who have a small range of voice modulation. For these people it can be hard to produce the right voice in order to express a particular emotion, such as sadness, and be able to naturally differentiate other emotions in their voice. This means that different moods will be communicated in the same way, with the same colors to other people. In this case we hear words and give meanings not corresponding to the intention of the speaker.

Thus, we understand that the quality of the natural voice is not controlled locally. It springs from the organization of the whole self, from our emotions, from our thoughts, and it is particularly shaped by the action we are doing as we speak. Resonance and internal volumes become greater as we reduce the interference of our habits.

Let's now consider an action: reaching for an object. The actor can speak before, after, or during the gesture of reaching. This allows a short dissonance between actions and words to communicate different sensations to the public.

He gives you a book. You reach for it, take it, and say, "I want this book." Your gesture comes before, after, or at exactly the same time as the sentence. Notice how different the meaning of this gesture can be, and the variations in your voice. Do you find that one option is more incisive?

There are also situations where the sentence doesn't fit what we are thinking. In these cases there is an interference similar to that caused when we change our intention while moving.

Try saying a sentence while making a contradictory internal comment to sense this dissonance for yourself.

This review of some of the ideas and experiments of my Feldenkrais practice with actors can give the reader insight into how the Feldenkrais Method can be applied to the diverse situations that the actor needs to master in his training, in order to present a convincing and moving performance. Whether it is how we act in life or how we play life, there is a variety and richness of roles we embody at different times in different situations. The challenge and potential for all of us is to better embody the intended role at the right moment and to enjoy the incredible richness of all these roles we are luckily called to play.