

Acting for the Twenty-first Century: A Somatic Approach to Contemporary Actor Training

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Disciplines such as Alexander Technique or the Feldenkrais Method are examples of the numerous somatic movement practices to emerge during the early years of the Twentieth Century and which are widely employed in actor training. More recent practices that emanated from these early pioneers in somatic movement are less well known but are increasingly being applied to theatre. In this article I will introduce one of these practices, the somatic approach of Body-Mind Centering® and briefly locate its development in the lineage of somatic movement techniques. I will then offer two examples of specific somatic exercises that I employ in my work training actors, which are drawn from the principles of Body-Mind Centering. These are necessarily very concise segments of a large and comprehensive body of work, but will offer a window into the application of these techniques.

Somatics and Somatic Movement are umbrella terms for various movement education and therapeutic approaches or techniques that work with the whole body. The term Somatic refers to the body, as distinct from some other entity like the mind, and comes from the Greek *somatikòs* which means ‘of the body’. The term was put forward in 1976 by Thomas Hanna PhD. (1928-1990), a philosopher and practitioner of Feldenkrais’ Functional Integration, who developed Hanna Somatic Education and published the *Somatics Magazine*-

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*Journal of the Mind/Body Arts and Sciences.*² Commonly, the term somatic is defined as the ‘experienced body’ as in the following quote by somatic practitioner Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen: ‘I derived this word “somatisation” from Thomas Hanna’s use of the word “soma” to designate the experienced body in contrast to the objectified body’ (Cohen 1993: 1).

Somatic practices have been widely embraced by the world of dance training and performance and much of the history is told by teachers and performers from this field. Martha Eddy, Director of the Center for Kinesthetic Education, asserts the history of somatics has largely been an oral tradition in the article ‘A Brief History of Somatic Practices and Dance: Historical Development of the Field of Somatic Education and its Relationship to Dance’. In the article, Eddy chronicles the history of somatic practice from its origins and seeks to place ‘somatic dance’ in a global schema. Regarding the original application of the word somatic, Eddy suggests that Hanna ‘saw the common features in the “methods” of Gerda Alexander, F.M. Alexander, Feldenkrais, Gindler, Laban, Mesendieck, Middendorf, Mézieres, Rolf, Todd, and Trager’ (Eddy 2009: 6) in the beginning of the Twentieth Century and sought to unite these disparate methodologies under their commonality of moving from a deep listening to the body.

Eddy goes on to describe the emergence of three distinct fields within somatic practice as Somatic Psychology, Somatic Bodywork and Somatic Movement, which are further described as Somatic Movement Education and Therapy (SME&T). ‘SME&T involves “listening to the body” and responding to these sensations by consciously altering movement habits and movement choices’ (2009: 7). Eddy chronicles in detail the many contributors to the emergence of somatic movement in the world of dance by what she terms ‘Somatic Pioneers,’ which includes F.M. Alexander, Feldenkrais, Laban, Bartenieff, G. Alexander, Selver, Rolf, Trager and Todd.

From the influence and teaching of these somatic practitioners, Eddy poses that towards the second half of the Twentieth Century, there was an

²See www.somaticsed.com for more information on Hanna and the Navato Institute for Somatic Research and Training which continues to be dedicated to his work.

emergence of what she titles ‘the new generations of somatic leaders: dancers motivated by dance, global exchange and their students’ (2009: 16). This list includes, among others, Anna Halprin, Joan Skinner and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, who founded the School for Body-Mind Centering® (BMC)³ in 1973. Cohen, an occupational therapist, Laban movement analyst and dancer was strongly influenced by the work of several ‘Somatic Pioneers’ of the previous generation such as Mabel Todd and Irmgard Bartenieff, and also by numerous eastern practices such as yoga and Aikido. Cohen continues to work as a therapist and teacher today and has directly influenced many somatic educators including Martha Eddy who began studying with Cohen in the 1970s.

Later, towards the end of the previous century, dozens of new approaches emerged that were inspired by the work of this ‘new generation’ of somatic theorists and practitioners. One of these is Eddy’s own Dynamic Embodiment - Somatic Movement Therapy Training (DE-SMTT) founded in 1990 which is an integration of BMC and Laban/ Bartenieff (I am a graduate of this program). Eddy draws the conclusion that the very nature of somatics allows for and even encourages the emergence of new somatic movement disciplines because there is no one single way to access the experienced body. Each mover must experience his or her own unique somatic process and response to the theoretical principles, and often then goes on to codify a methodology in order to share their experience and findings with the next generation.

In 1988, The International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA) was formed to provide a common definition and articulated scope of practices for somatic movement education and therapy. This organization continues to offer a unified identity for the many disparate forms of SME&T applied today, including Alexander Technique, Laban,

³ Body-Mind Centering is a registered service mark and BMC, Embodied Anatomy, and Developmental Movement are service marks of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. Body-Mind Centering is an integrated approach to transformative experience through movement re-education and hands-on repatterning. Developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, it is an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind. Excerpt from: www.bodymindcentering.com

BMC, Tamalpa, DE-SMTT, and Integrated Movement Studies⁴ to name just a few.

Somatic movement education has been applied to theatre training from the earliest efforts of actor F.M. Alexander in the 1890s to recover his failing voice. There is indeed a long history of application in the theatre, of techniques from the ‘first generation’ teachers of somatic movement. Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method and Laban particularly have been frequently employed in actor training. However, the application of work from the ‘new generation’ of teachers of somatic practices is a more recent and lesser known phenomenon. Wendell Beavers is a pioneer in applying the principles of Body-Mind Centering to actor training. Beavers, one of the founders of New York University’s Experimental Theater Wing in 1978, and now founder and Chair of Naropa University’s MFA in Contemporary Performance began studying with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in the 1980s and her work greatly influenced his teaching and performance. Beavers was also a founding member and early director of Movement Research in New York City, a laboratory for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms, and has long been a passionate investigator of somatic movement forms applied to dance and theatre.

Beavers writes about employing a somatic approach to training performers in the article ‘Relocating Technique’ in *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*. In describing his reason for teaching the BMC principles of Developmental Technique and Experiential Anatomy to undergraduate and now graduate actors, Beavers’ states:

A foundation performance training would familiarize students with the complete pallet of the performer without reference to the technical lines traditionally drawn between acting and dancing. The sources of space, time, shape and line, kinesthesia, image and story worlds, and emotion would all be treated inherently as equal and available...Somatic work provides the means for students to experientially thoroughly investigate the anatomical systems of the body, their roles in movement and generating forms. It is essential, at long last, to redress the muscle-bone bias of western dance forms by opening up the whole body as a medium and generator of form (Beavers 2008: 131).

⁴ See www.ismeta.org for a complete listing.

Beavers work incorporates original choreographic vocabulary based in developmental or evolutionary principles with the stated goal of ‘whole body integration, differentiation, and synchronization (2008: 129). Beavers’ application of the BMC principles is unique in that he teaches Developmental and Experiential Anatomy principles initially through form or improvisational choreography, as a way to access deeper sensation. Beavers moves away from working with the traditional therapeutic model of using hands-on or voice prompted direction in response to the students’ exploration of sensation and experience, and chooses instead to lead students through a series of movement explorations or sequences generated from the Developmental Movement principles. The sequences are not prescribed in advance but created by Beavers in response to the moment to moment movement experiences of the group.⁵ On the intention of this work, Beavers states, ‘I consider that the basis of technique is practicing de-evolution or repatterning as a means to develop further mind-body response and coordination, balanced flexion and extension and full integration of all six limbs (head, hands, feet and tail) and equal initiation and support through all the surfaces of the body’ (2008: 130).

In addition to Beavers there are numerous other teachers and performers currently applying BMC principles to theatre training and performance. While this is not by any means a comprehensive list, teachers I have studied with, come into contact with, or who I am aware are working directly with BMC principles in theatre training programs in the United States include: Erika Berland, a Certified BMC teacher at Naropa University; Cheryl Clark, a Certified BMC practitioner and Certified Laban Movement Analyst teaching at Drew University; K.J Homes, also a Certified BMC practitioner teaching at NYU’s Experimental Theater Wing; Karen Beaumont, a student of Martha Eddy’s DE-SMTT program who teaches actors at Bard College at Simons Rock, and myself teaching in the BFA in Acting program at Salem

⁵ I have trained with Wendell Beavers both in New York and at Naropa University and his approach to applying BMC principles to actor training is a strong influence on my work described in this article.

State College in Massachusetts. As this field grows, I hope to learn more about others applying this work to theatre training.

Developmental Movement Theory Applied to Actor Training

Training the actor customarily includes work to repattern habits in the body-mind that limit the students' ability to fully embody a role. Repatterning is defined as altering a habitual neuromuscular response through repetition from a less efficient to a more efficient response. The Developmental Movement Patterns of Body-Mind Centering are a series of movements recognized and articulated by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. These movement patterns, known as the *Basic Neurological Patterns* (BNP), represent the sequence of organized movement from conception to walking in an individual human being. They also recapitulate the evolutionary sequence of development of the species. According to Cohen, these deeply embedded patterns emerge in each individual's development, however biological and environmental factors affect the fulfilment of each stage of development, creating the unique movement profile of each person. The work of BMC proposes that working through the basic patterns offers a deep and effective way to repattern habits in the body.

The BNP consist of Cellular Breathing (expanding and contracting of cells); Navel Radiation (movement initiated by the centre); Mouthing (initiated by the mouth); Pre-spinal (sequential movement along the spinal cord and digestive track); Spinal (organized along the spine connecting head and tail); Homologous (upper body or lower body initiation); Homolateral (body half or side to side initiation); and Contralateral (diagonal initiation).⁶ An example of working with the BNP could include repeatedly sequencing through the transition from a Homolateral pattern to a Contralateral pattern as a means to uncover and repattern the movement habit of an actor who is right side dominant in the use of her hands.

In my experience, the practice of sequencing through the BNP can not only bring to consciousness unconscious patterns, expression and thinking in

⁶ Please refer to *Sensing, Feeling, and Action* by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, pg. 5 for full description of the BNP of Body-Mind Centering™.

the body that have accumulated, but can also begin the process of neuromuscular repatterning. According to Cohen, 'If we're even close to the efficient pattern, the body will push through on that evolutionary path, because it's such an old channel. Whatever we do in our lifetime has not near the influence of the evolutionary path; it can't compare to the strength of those ancient pathways' (Cohen 1993: 59). In an interview on the subject, Martha Eddy adds that:

According to evolutionary biology the body tends to resonate with the lowest common denominator. Change amasses at a culmination that leaps to the next level but not to the most efficient pattern *unaided*. The body needs motivation and consciousness to find its way to the efficient pattern (Eddy 2008).

The body knows and is seeking the efficient pathway for movement and will repattern to it if motivated towards that change through conscious effort and external support. Therefore sequencing though the patterns consciously will allow for greater range of movement and impulse. It is repatterning at the deepest level.

I suggest that practicing the Developmental Movement Patterns consistently over time can allow for an expanded range and efficiency of movement in the body. This practice has a long history of successful application in the fields of occupational, physical and movement therapies and even in dance training but, as stated earlier, is only newly growing in application to actor training. The freedom of choice this efficiency offers is valuable to the performer in and of itself, and due to the psychophysical or body-mind nature of performance it is also a useful method for mining the wisdom of the body directly for creative material in the generation of physical character and psycho-emotional content.

Somatic Movement asserts that support precedes movement, which translates into something all movers know intuitively: 'One must go down to go up'. I begin an exploration of the early patterns of development with yielding and releasing into the floor to find a connection through sensation with the supporting surface. Yielding in Developmental Movement refers to actively giving way to the force of gravity. A deep experience of yielding into the

supporting surface lays the groundwork for locating support in the latter patterns and higher levels. According to Martha Eddy, ‘Yielding provides contact for relationship that gives the mover the choice to move towards or away from the contact’ (2008). I have found that a deep and sustained experience of yielding at the start of the training will allow for profound experiences of support and flexion moving through the patterns which will support both physical reaching and emotional risk-taking later in working with text and performance.

The Starfish Exercise: One example of applying the Developmental Movement pattern of navel radiation to actor training with my students is called the ‘Starfish’ exercise⁷. This exercise explores one of the earliest and deepest patterns. Navel radiation is a pre-birth pattern where movement initiates from the centre (proximal) or navel and moves through to the ends (distal). BMC teacher Erika Berland writes about her work with dancers on locating support for movement, which reaches out into space, through working with the navel radiation pattern: ‘Whole body flexion or “physiological flexion,” where the limbs fold in around the navel and the front of the body compresses, is the developmental forerunner of whole body extension (where the limbs extend out from the navel and the back of the body condenses).’ And ‘Stimulating this flexor tone is the antidote for stressed unsupported limbs and spine’ (Berland 2001: 3).

The Starfish exercise begins with the student imagining s/he is a starfish lying on a warm beach in a tide pool. This allows poetic imagery to lead to anatomical imagery and then to sensation. The students begin by lying down in a ‘starfish’ shape on their back. There is a period of deep yielding and releasing into the floor followed by an extended period of folding or flexion (on one’s side) and unfolding or extension (on one’s back) around the centre. I use the image of a wave washing over them to help with releasing tension while folding and unfolding. First, the focus is on releasing into the floor while

⁷ To my knowledge, the specific application of this exercise to actor training was originated by Karen Beaumont at Shakespeare and Company

working to bring all 'six' limbs (head, tail, arms and legs) folding into the navel centre simultaneously from proximal to distal initiation with as little effort as possible. I use verbal cues to encourage the student to work with the idea of the breath coming directly into the body through the centre nourishing all the cells of the body moving out to the distal ends.

After some time simply experiencing the navel radiation pattern of six limbed organization folding and unfolding simultaneously we gradually move towards observing habits of initiation and resistance in this simple movement. I ask the students to notice if they tend towards leading with the upper limbs, lower limbs, or one side of the body. Which feels more familiar and which most awkward? We specifically focus for some time on the head and tail connection, looking for where the head may either initiate or become lost and trail behind. Eventually, over a week of exploration, we move towards verticality, experiencing how changing levels can instigate a reversion to an earlier habit that has been brought to consciousness and repatterned at a lower level. We slowly work through all the developmental patterns looking for the six-limbed support as an underlying foundation.

In describing her work with the Navel Radiation Pattern, BMC teacher Linda Hartley notes, 'Often developmental problems in children or adults can be traced back to an inhibition in cellular breathing and a lack of integration of the limbs into the navel at this stage' (Hartley 1995: 33). In my teaching, I find this simple exercise extremely effective in addressing many common issues for actors such as upper-lower connectivity, core-distal connectivity or allowing impulse to travel to the ends of the limbs - the 'I do not know what to do with my hands' problem - grounding or connecting to the floor through the experience of yielding, head and tail disconnection which leads to thrusting of the chin or collapsing in the chest. The list is potentially endless because this is such a fundamental pattern in the body, and a lack of connectivity in this centre to periphery pattern underlies many inefficient habits that students of acting have acquired in their everyday lives.

The Body Systems as Source for Character

Another major area of application in my somatic approach to training actors is in harnessing the principles of experiential anatomy or Body Systems of BMC to working with text and creating character. The Body Systems serve as a potent source for imagery when building character because the imagery is derived from the actual anatomy of the body and is deeply connected to the actor's own experience of sensation and perception. In the article, 'Body-Mind Centering as Somatic Education for Students and Practitioners of Voice' Berland writes on using experiential anatomy with students of vocal training: 'The technique for this has been to work with experiential anatomy that encourages direct perception of anatomical structures through imagery, touch and movement' (Berland 2003: 1). She goes on to argue that through this work the student can attain a heightened body awareness which allows for the repatterning of physical responses lacking support or effective expression.

In my own experience of working with actors, the connection between sensation and anatomical imagery creates a deep resonance in the body-mind of the performer. This allows for character choices to be repeated and rediscovered authentically in the body in each new moment. For example, working with a student to create a character who has a specific physical challenge, such as a limp, through a Body Systems approach will support the actor in maintaining that trait without superficiality or injury. Students have reported that it feels like they are expressing an aspect of themselves rather than an exterior choice when they arrive at the physical embodiment of that character through a combination of anatomical understanding and inner sensation.

Experiential Anatomy is an approach to the study of the major systems of the body that incorporates scientific knowledge with the experience of sensation and movement. The Body Systems are muscles, organs, glands, nervous system, fluids, and skin. Experiential Anatomy includes exploration of each system and its components such as an individual organ or gland. According to Linda Hartley, BMC practitioner and writer,

Each Body System expresses a different quality of movement and stimulates an identifiable change in feeling, perception, and state of awareness [...] When we experience directly the anatomical systems and structures of the body, they might be felt to embody inner ‘characters,’ the sub-personalities or constellations of energy that coexist within us, acting and interacting with each other in patterns unique to every individual (Hartley 1995: xxxiii).

Within the BMC approach to experiential anatomy, there are a number of ways to access the sensation and mind of each system and its elements. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the entire body of work dedicated to this practice of exploration. I will go on to mention and contextualize a few terms that emerge from the approach. When working with individual elements of a system in the body, we look for ways that the experience might connect to the quality of movement, feeling, sensation and perception of that part of the body. Having had an authentic experience of that body system or part of a system through initial exploration, it is common to refer to ‘touching in’ or connecting to the experience in a later exploration. The word ‘mind’ is used, as in the mind of the organ, to refer to a psychophysical state or sensory perception that is experienced when one is connecting to that part of the body (1995: xxvi).

One of the challenges of exploring this very complex and deeply experiential work in undergraduate actor training programs is in making the material accessible to the student. Given the limited time and space for deep personal exploration as well as the often new, and perhaps, seemingly obscure ideas and language of the work, I find making bridges to the material essential. One of the ways I have approached this is through popular music and dance. In exploring the Fluid System of the body I use varieties of music to help discover sensation, rhythm and tempo essential to exploring the fluids of the body.⁸ Work with the Fluid System consists of an exploration of the anatomic location and function as well as the inherent movement and rhythmic qualities of each fluid. These include arterial blood, venous blood, lymph, synovial fluid,

⁸ Erika Berland applies music in teaching the fluid system in actor training. Also, Martha Eddy created the ‘Fluid Dance’ in her technique called ‘Body-Mind Dancing’. I have been directly influenced by the work of both of these teachers in the following exploration.

cellular fluid, interstitial fluid and cerebrospinal fluid, and also connective tissue and fat though I rarely work with these directly. The fluid system of the body is emotional by nature because we feel ourselves through it. The chemicals which create our emotional states are carried through the fluid vessels of the body. All the fluids in the body participate in the cyclical nature of the fluid system as each becomes one and then transform to another and back again. Cohen suggests that ‘All the fluids in the body are essentially one fluid - largely made up of water - that changes properties and characteristics as it passes through different membranes, flows through different channels and interacts with different substances’ (Cohen 1993: 67). Each fluid state has a movement quality and rhythm which can be expressed externally.

Through my practice, I have found that ‘touching into’ the various fluid qualities in the body facilitates ease in transformation in both warming up and working with character and text. It helps the actor to remain fluid in the work, allowing the impulses to move easily from one stimulus to the next in a natural progression. I have also found that when a student is somewhat habituated towards a particular rhythm, that just suggesting an exploration of the fluid states will open up new possibilities of movement quality and relationship to tempo and rhythm. Linda Hartley suggests that ‘Our aim in working with the fluids is to bring each one in turn up into conscious expression so that all of their qualities are available; most importantly, to work with the easy transitioning from one to another, for it is in the ability to make transitions that many of us become blocked’ (1995: 270).

The Fluid Dance: In the Fluid Systems exercise, I first lead the students through a movement exploration of the quality, direction, rhythm and tempo of each fluid. I typically begin with arterial blood flow as this is the most easily accessible. Most students are quick to locate through touch and sensation the pulse of oxygenated blood flowing away from the heart. While the students are exploring with the qualities and efforts of movement in each fluid, I verbally drop in anatomical information including location, direction of flow and

function of each fluid. In this process, I offer the anatomical information as an additional gateway to sensation and experience. When the students have essentially connected to the nature and movement quality of each fluid, I then lead them to vocalize characteristics or qualities that describe each state. Eventually, I would encourage them to move on to people, characters or celebrities they know that embody these qualities. The words that the student's vocalize will later serve as markers to connect to the sensation of that system while working with music and then text.

After working rather slowly through each fluid in this way, I will play a medley of songs from many different musical genres, each chosen specifically for its affinity with a fluid. For example, for the synovial or joint fluid I play a bouncy Jazz piano piece, due to the fluid's viscous, shock-absorbing nature which is expressed in an arrhythmic, jiggling, throwaway quality of movement. For arterial blood flow, which is associated with a pulsing, active weighted movement quality, I will play African drumming. While the music is playing I encourage the students to both respond to the rhythm of the music and let that inform their experience of the fluid and also to choose a fluid to connect to and notice what that brings out in the music for them. After some time exploring with the music and the fluid qualities each student will take this physical vocabulary inspired by the fluid system and apply it to two to four lines of already known text, usually Shakespeare. The students will play with both choosing a fluid to explore based on what they know about the text and also by allowing the fluid exploration to inform the text. Sometimes students elect to work with obvious choices where an affinity is clear and sometimes to work in opposition in order to discover something completely new to them in the material. Feedback I have received from students shows that this way of accessing qualities of movement in the body, which are different from their personal habits and typical range of tempo, rhythm and effort, can be profound and lasting even when applied to text.

Conclusion

To conclude, I posit that a somatic foundation to actor training can be effective in creating the opportunity for each student to have an authentic and embodied experience of training and performance. I suggest that applying the principles of BMC to locating perception, sensation and expression in the body-mind serves as an effective ground for actors to create authentic characters and performance. I propose that applying a basic understanding of The Body Systems of BMC fosters the ability to source the contents of the body for character and moment to moment presence in performance.

Two very important transformations can occur for the actor when the training includes the somatic approach of Developmental Movement. The first is that years of habitual, psychophysical patterns stored in the body as physical memory and in the brain as neurological pathways can be brought to consciousness and ultimately repatterned. This allows for a wider range of movement and expression in the actor's body and mind. By opening up the pathways in the body and re-learning the Basic Neurological Patterns of human development, the actor can discover and begin to let go of blockages held in the body and the brain since infancy. I have experienced this in myself as I have continued to apply Developmental Movement techniques to my practice. I have also witnessed significant transformation in my students with deeply ingrained habits, such as knee locking or stopping an impulse at the wrist joints, become more integrated after significant repetition of the more efficient pattern. The student may or may not be conscious of the experience of repatterning perhaps as frustration or even as traumatic imagery or memory. Conscious or not, it will usually generate new material for the actor to apply to his work.

There is a second, and I believe, greater transformation possible when the somatic work is given the time and space to go very deep. I have observed greater emotional connection and willingness to take risks in performance among actors who have worked to consciously access the profound support of yielding and flexion in the early developmental patterns. This experience of yielding into gravity can then lead to more connection to the ground while standing and moving through space. The actor can experience a profound

change in his or her ability to stay embodied and responsive to all that is happening in the present moment of performance with its myriad anxieties and distractions, when the sensation of being held by gravity and being grounded in one's own body-mind is palpable and solidified through identification and repetition.

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