

Contact Improvisation to Scene Study: authenticity in word and deed

This article explores the interplay of movement training and acting training in the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) Acting Program at the University of California Irvine, USA. This often obscure interplay between the disparate areas of actor movement training and traditional scene study is successfully woven through parallel teaching trajectories, emphasizing partnering techniques based on instinctive and personalized response. The resulting theater at its best is in the moment, compelling and teachable.

Movement for Actors is the course I teach for a professional acting training program. This course has a bewildering range of potential definitions: traditionally it has encompassed styles and techniques as divergent as ballet, meditation, stage combat, Suzuki, mime and African dance. In my experience, after finding a good training balance between conditioning and technical skill, the most important aspect of movement training for the actor is to take the physical training directly back to the theatrical stage. We strive for a new physical acting process, using the body as a conduit to the acting impulse. So after developing a training regime that combines fragments stolen over the years from many teachers of the techniques identified above, I have oriented my actor-training process to the development and practice of contact improvisation (CI). A dance improvisation form developed in the 1970's by modern

¹dancer/choreographer/aikido practitioner, Steve Paxton, CI is defined as a partnering form that consists of an energy and weight exchange between two people. Contact emphasizes alert physical “listening”, complicity of weight, and instinctive responses. Basic tumbling, energy exchange exercises, and partnering dance lifts are its fundamental building blocks. A good CI practitioner develops an alertness to physical nuance, an ability to follow through a line of motion, and an unconscious kinetic attentiveness to the “other”.

Contact improvisations are spontaneous physical dialogues that range from stillness to highly energetic exchanges. Alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation, trusting in one’s basic survival instincts. It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened. (*Contact Quarterly*, [online] 1979)

CI spread spontaneously from its roots in NYC via Paxton’s enthusiastic followers; to contact jams in church basements and off-hours dance-studios throughout the US. Inviting trained and untrained dancers and their children to

participate, a joyous spontaneity and playfulness informed the exchanges; 'the ideal of active, reflexive, harmonic, spontaneous, mutual forms.' (Paxton, cited in Baner 1980, p 65). *Contact Quarterly* journal was established in 1975 and continues publication today as 'a vehicle for moving ideas'² and in support of the CI community's dialogue and explorations. The inclusive nature of contact was infectious, and the practice spread into Europe, Eurasia, and South America. Today it continues to be actively practiced and prized as a form of dance exploration for choreographers, and artistic expression for the professional and amateur alike. Although contact has frequently been performed with stream of consciousness dialogue between partners, and inversely, memorized text has been used to inform CI (such as Julyen Hamilton's performances)³ it was never intended for use with traditional theatrical scripts. Movement classes for actors at UC Irvine have used the technique for almost 20 years to create a habit of physical engagement and partner responsiveness. In recent years direct application of CI to scene study has brought unexpected bonuses for the actors: a deepened access to the rhythm in the text, to the rhythm of the exchange, a personal responsiveness to the scene partner, and an almost effortless blocking for the scene.

At its most sophisticated contact improvisation in the acting studio translates directly to scene work, and the impulses developed for acrobatic and dance-like expressions of contact transform into a physically charged realism incorporating

² Subtitle of the journal *Contact Quarterly* established 1975

³ Nancy Stark Smith "About Performance and the Making of Improvised Pieces; A further conversation with Julyen Hamilton" for *Contact Quarterly Vol 36:1 Fall 2011*

text. Ultimately a partnering technique, the physical explorations of balance, coordination, energy and release, are all in service to the ultimate goal - authentic responsiveness to the partner. Webster's Dictionary definitions of "authentic" include 'reliable, trustworthy, genuine, not false or copied'; and my use of the word encompasses these (Webster, 1989). Authentic action, in this article, means a physical listening and responsiveness that is individual, personal, and in the moment, without pre-conceived intent. This is the premise for CI as I use it in actor training.

Movement training: first 10 weeks

Your partner is a wild animal you do not want to scare (Steve Paxton)⁴

Movement Training for the Actor begins with a stretch, strength and alignment conditioning sequence that is practiced daily. I use exercises taken from yoga, modern dance and Pilates. Technique class is based in mime.⁵ Fine motor control is developed through mime isolations, and mime technique using these isolations introduces concepts of causality, tension and release, and energy exchange. Spatial awareness is introduced now, promoting an easy freedom of motion through space and a kinetic group awareness. I use exercises from modern dance construction and martial arts preparation that develop skills in

⁴ Steve Paxton, from a master class, Boston 1982

⁵ Tomaschevski and Decroux mime techniques

perceptiveness, group complicity and co-ordination. So the early work is about developing the individual and the individual complicit with the group.

Now we are ready to focus on a partner.

Movement training: second 10 weeks

Using lessons learned from the last course, we now further develop skills of physical listening and kinetic responsiveness by studying dance partnering lifts and basic tumbling. Then we explore these, finding new complicit points of balance. Searching always for the easiest possible way to explore leverage of another body and to hold one's own weight, we begin to understand what it is to lift and be lifted. Class can become very exciting at this point. Once rudimentary techniques of lifting, supporting, counterbalance and falling are learned, the real point of the exercise is reached - how to explore this unique weight and energy exchange with your unique partner. Perceived "impossible moves" are done with ease, once the basic principles of counter-balance, leverage, and complicit center of gravity are understood and incorporated. Spins, mutual rolls to the ground, counter-balanced bodies leaning away from each other and effortless lifts onto shoulders, hips and backs are all now possible. (See *The Physical Actor* Routledge 2009 for details of exercises).⁶

⁶ Contact Preparatory exercises explicated in the author's book, *The Physical Actor*, Routledge, 2009

Once these partnering techniques have been successfully introduced practitioners return to lessons of spatial awareness and causality. Incorporating these new skills of balance and weight exchange into a complicit causality where every action has a reaction, we find ourselves practicing contact improvisation. An honest, unplanned, and responsive physical partnering unfolds. There are no set goals and no rules, other than to follow honestly the line of energy and weight that appears in front of you. 'You have already begun' is a common contact phrase. In even the most simple of physical relationships (two people standing back to back) there are tiny nuances of an implied relationship that are already present. For instance, two people can begin a contact session leaning against each other's backs. A small breath out in Joe demands a slight roll forward of the spine in Margaret, that demands a slight shift of supporting weight to Joe's shoulder, which in turn creates a tilt that resolves in a spin and new point of balance as Margaret is now facing Joe. Her outstretched arms balance her fully extended body where she leans against Joe's shoulder. Joe puts one hand on her's, effectively stabilizing her hold and slowly backs away, deepening the lean to an impossible angle. Nobody 'created' the movement; it just flowed logically out of the previous one, and with partners listening carefully to each other. This small moment of improvisation was safe and authentic - what Steve Paxton describes as the goal of each participant to find the 'easiest pathways available to their mutually moving masses' (Banes, 1980, p 65)

The 20th century scientist and humanist, R. Buckminster Fuller, once spoke of intuition as being the unconscious summation of the hundreds of small perceptions we receive every day (Author's notes from lecture, St Louis, 1970). The good contact practitioner must be in a constant state of receptivity, and respond without thought to those subtle indications from the partner. Any position, even two practitioners standing 10 feet apart, has an implied trajectory of action. The beginnings of a contact session can be riveting: we witness the absolute focus necessary for the two practitioners to respond to the subtle nuances of implied weight and energy in the other's body. Every action has a reaction. Weight can be direct (one body supports the other) or implied (one head tilts slightly to the right and the partner's left shoulder ten feet away sinks down in response). You have already begun.

How does this relate to an acting class?

Acting class: first 10 weeks

Start from where you're at, and let yourself be
changed ... (Richard Brestoff ⁷)

In the acting studio, Richard Brestoff begins his work in "personalization" an impulse-driven emotion technique derived from the teachings of Peter Kass and

⁷ Richard Brestoff in class UC Irvine 2001

Olympia Dukakis⁸ through which actors learn to react impulsively to their partners, speak from the truth of their feelings, and avoid playing preconceived notions of how dialogue should be spoken.

Here is how Brestoff describes his technique in his book *The Actor's Wheel of Connection* (Brestoff, 2005, pp 38-9)

Guidelines for Personalization Scenes

1. Set up two chairs a short distance apart, open three-quarters to the audience.
2. Sit across from your scene partner with scripts in your hands, but do not look at the script yet. We do not begin with the words.
3. Begin by looking at your partner. You should mostly be looking at your partner's eyes, but you can also look at your partner's clothing, arms, or anything about them that catches your attention. As you do so, let yourself have feelings or make judgments about what you see ('that's a beautiful red sweater, probably showing off a little in class with that. Does she know there is a food stain on it just below her collar?') All this is said in your mind, not out loud.
4. Look at him or her with soft eyes: let your partner see you. How do you feel? Uncomfortable? Nervous? That's OK; do not try to kill the tension you feel. Breathe through it. With each breath you are breathing in the other person. Wait until a strong connection passes between you.

⁸ Master actors and founding faculty members of the New York University Graduate Acting Program

5. When a strong feeling passes between you and connects you, the person who begins the scene says the first words with the feeling he or she is experiencing in that moment. Do not change the feeling after you see the line, and be careful not to change the line. For example, if you are feeling low and depressed because of something that is passing between you and your partner, and you look down to see that your line says, 'I feel so happy', do not put on a happy voice when you say the line. That will defeat the whole purpose of the exercise. Rather, say the line with the feeling of depression you had before you saw the line. In this way you are training yourself to always speak from a truthful place. You are in charge of the lines; they are not in charge of you. Speak truthfully from the feeling you had before you knew what the line was. If the impulse gets past you, reconnect with your partner and let new impulses in.
6. Let your partner see the effect he or she is having on you before you look for your next line. Just get out a phrase at a time when you speak, never saying anything into the page. Resist looking ahead. You are trying to stay in the place of 'not knowing' so that you react to your partner and not to some preconceived idea of how the line should be said.

For this exercise, the actors let themselves speak from the feelings they had before they saw the lines, and they tried to catch and to speak from the first impulses that came up in response to their partner. They are learning to trust

the unknown and even to enjoy it. They did not make up in their heads how the scene should go or how the lines should be read. They played each other and not the lines. They were listening and responding much more to the tone and body language of their partner than they were to the lines on the page. They let themselves be changed. (The above is excerpted with permission from the author of *The Actor's Wheel of Connection* Smith and Kraus, 2005. © Richard Brestoff.)

The receptivity and intimacy of focus of CI is echoed in the impulsive reactions required in Brestoff's personalization exercise. Once the glow of the initial exercise is over, actors often question: what about script analysis? What about character intention?

But such questions are not at all the point - yet. At this juncture in their acting training, the most important aspect of scene work is the honest and immediate response to the "other". The key to the exchange is the personal reaction of one human being to another. This is as true for characters as it is for people.

At the end of the first 10 weeks, the students are usually able to trust the validity of the approach and identify the authenticity or in-authenticity of their responses. They have proof. The class has witnessed work that is vital, immediate and individual and is unimpressed by work that is "performed" or "simulated".

Parallel trajectories

The parallels between movement class and acting class are noted by the students. A sense of immediacy is demanded in the partnering. “Faking it”, “simulating it” no longer work. The class is dissatisfied now with artifice as they watch each other’s scenes. Technically performed scenes as well as technically impressive CI sessions, are boring if partners are not intimately listening. And interestingly, the rest of the class knows right away. It is palpable when contactors are honestly responsive: the entire room holds its breath when contacting partners are “stuck”- and then, honestly, physically negotiate their way out of some impossible impasse to the next move. We live vicariously through the attentive and effortless movements together, the impossible lifts that develop out of spins and end in rolls to the ground. But we are most engaged with the potential disasters. These are points where only fearless listening will bring partners safely back home. Much like an impasse reached in a climactic scripted argument, the danger evoked by potential disaster shows who these characters really are; and we breathe with them.

Movement class: second 10 weeks (cont).

My own opinion is that (performances linger) because the actors....gave you pieces of their lives....You were the witness to a final intimacy....they gave you the genuine thing, the thing that hurt you as it thrilled you. (Kazan, 1988, p146)

And now we move the contact into text. Thrilled by recent physical prowess and the joy of this physical, spontaneous “intimacy,” students are usually ready for the next challenge. Starting with stream of consciousness exchanges, partners now freely speak while contacting. There are only two rules: don’t stop to speak, and don’t talk about what you are doing. For some actors, this duality liberates their movement-- they are no longer “in their head” and “looking” for the next movement. Conversations are playful and often reveal intimate details of childhood indiscretions or elaborate lunch desires. The intimacy of exchange (even about something trivial) often parallels the depth of partnering connection. We are engaged and frequently charmed by a stream-of-consciousness conversation. Once contacting partners are at ease speaking, we are ready to work with scripted text, and the most accessible text choice for early CI is a romantic comedy.

The following is an example of a romantic comedy – Arnold Wesker’s *One More Ride on the Merry-Go-Round* - worked with contact, (Wesker, 1990, Act 1 Scene 1)

Monica and Jason are two academics. They have recently become romantically involved, and are unsure how “serious” it might be. We will be looking at this excerpt of text from the first act.

Monica: Jason, you're a mess. You may have "found" yourself in bed but you've lost yourself in the world. Look at you! You need a shave.

Jason: You're turned on by my intellect, what need to shave?

Monica: Your bright brain may turn me on, but your grey stubble turns me right off again.

Jason: It's not grey!

Here we go now in contact:

Monica is leaning over Jason's prone body, pushing one knee into his chest, and leaning comfortably on his other long leg, which is stretched up into the air. He holds onto the backs of her thighs. The mood is relaxed, playful and intimate as Monica says,

Jason, you're a mess

To address him better, she sinks slowly down to the ground while holding onto one of his legs for support, and he retaliates by slowly closing his legs to cut off her vision. As she continues to berate him, she is slowly tilting, pulled over by his leg.

You may have 'found' yourself in bed but you've lost yourself in the world. Look at you

He turns his back on her, gazing into the studio mirror, and she is pulled back up to sitting entwined in his leg, and following-through the line of energy, ends by leaning against his elongated body. They both look in the mirror.

You need a shave.

He languorously rolls onto his stomach, and she body surfs the momentum of this roll, ending criss-crossed on his back. He lifts his head slightly, saying;

You're turned on by my intellect, what need to shave?

She rolls off his body and onto her back, his limp arm pulled along. His hand has landed on her cheek, and he cradles her head affectionately. She touches his face:

Your bright brain may turn me on, but your grey stubble turns me right off again.

The touch of her hand triggers him to turn his head away from her, and propped up by an arm he suddenly swivels all the way around, pinning her prone body to the ground as he says,

It's not grey.

He quickly rolls back the way he came, pulling her prone legs with him (he has cleverly wrapped his legs around hers and she cannot resist). He flips her around, and they both follow the momentum up to sitting,

This was a classic session of physicalized banter, with power shifts inherent in the text explicated in the physicality. But because the actors were honestly responding to each other (nothing forced to fit) there was also some useful information outside of normal text analysis that was revealed in the exchange. Subtext and shifting dominance of character (who controls the scene, and when) was revealed in this contact session with scripted text. And here we return to our paramount lesson: the primacy of the relationship. At this point in the process, intention of dialogue will (and should) influence the CI session, but it cannot consciously drive it or you lose the delicious immediacy of response to the partner. Relationship to the partner remains of primary importance; the rest will fall into place as the text is now studied in detail.

Scene study: second 10 weeks

To study a character's text, is to study the way he or she thinks.

This is the crucial bridge from yourself to the part. (Brestoff, 2005, p98)

The goal of the second 10 weeks of Richard's acting class is to apply the truthful and impulsive expressiveness gained in the first 10 weeks to the demands of a character; in other words, to personalize in character. We focus on text using Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House* The 19th century play may be seen as an early feminist statement, supporting a woman's right to financial and intellectual independence. Nora and Torvald are an upper-middle-class married couple. Nora is guilty of overspending and forgery and has a secret creditor, Krogstad.

Emphasis is now on the information gleaned from the script, and the students read *A Doll's House* at least 10 times through before the first class. Then they are asked to distill the entire play down to a single sentence without violating its complexity. For example, one might say that *A Doll's House* is the story of a woman who, in telling a lie to hold her world together, discovers a truth that blows her world apart. This interpretation becomes the North Star that will help to guide the actors in each character's journey through the events of the play. In the earlier personalization work the circumstances were less important than the impulsive and spontaneous reactions to the partner. Now the circumstances, as revealed through a close reading, are foregrounded.

Next, the actors personalize a scene from the play. They are told to personalize as themselves and not as the characters. The actors then put the scripts down and improvise the scene in their own words. They are told that they do not have to follow Ibsen's circumstances if other impulses come up. For example, if the scene requires Krogstad to blackmail Nora and the actor doesn't want to go through with it, he does not then proceed with the blackmail. When the scene is over the actors ask two fundamental questions:

- 1) How did our circumstances differ from Ibsen's?
- 2) How did I personally differ from the character?

The actors read the scene to themselves privately to refresh themselves and then answer these two questions. They are beginning to build the bridge from their personal responses to the characters.

The answers they uncover then inform the next improvisation. They are still using their own words and can still violate Ibsen's circumstances, but less so. The second improvisation will be closer to Ibsen's actual scene now, but much will still be left out. They then read the scene again to themselves and answer the two questions. In doing this, the actors are absorbing more and more of the play's circumstances without being told to do so and are beginning to experience the ways in which their character's thoughts and thought patterns differ or correspond to their own. The bridge is being built.

The third improvisation conforms in greater detail to the play's circumstances but the actors are still using their own words. The scene is up on its feet now but

has no prearranged blocking. The actors are still following impulses but those impulses are beginning to be a melding of their own and the characters'. At this point they may no longer know whose is whose. After the improvisation is over, they read the scene to themselves again and answer the same two key questions as identified above.

For the next improvisation they are told to learn the lines. This usually goes very quickly because they have been reading the scene to themselves each time they worked and because they are now hungry for the actual words because they are better than the ones that they have been making up. In this next improvisation, the dialogue no longer sounds like writing, but sounds like two people talking to one another. Dialogue that had previously sounded stilted now sounds perfectly natural. The behavior and thoughts of the actors corresponds much more directly to the characters' without losing a sense of authenticity or personal investment. Two or three more times through the scene and the actors are no longer playing themselves, but using themselves in the service of character.⁹

The primacy of relationship; as stressed in the CI training, gives vitality and personal authenticity to *A Doll's House* scene study. Further illumination of the text and intent of the characters is revealed as *A Doll's House* moves back to the movement studio.

⁹ Richard derived this technique from Appendix 1 of Stanislavsky's book *Creating a Role* as translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood

Movement class: second 10 weeks (continued)

All that has been so far has achieved inner-characterization. Meanwhile the external characterization has appeared of its own accord. (Stanislavski, cited in Hapgood 1989: p 251)

The actors arrive at the movement studio (the Grotowski Barn where I teach on the edge of campus). They have been asked to bring in text, and invariably some are working with Brestoff's Ibsen scenes. The scenes are well memorized and lived in after intensive scene study, and actors are easily speaking in character. The contact is playful and unpressured as the actors respond to each other with ease; and now, a bit more secure in the physical exchange, they challenge their partner in tiny moves and responses that demand a ninja-like attentiveness and accuracy of motion. They are excited. They are about to break the rules and athletically lift, roll, suspend and fall with 19th century drawing room dialogue.

This is an excerpt from *A Doll's House* (Act 1 Scene 6, p 24):

Torvald And my little songbird mustn't ever do a thing like that again. No false notes. Isn't that the way it should be? Yes? Of course it is, so let's not talk about it any more. So snug and cozy in here.

Nora Torvald?

Torvald Yes?

Nora I'm terribly excited about the Stenborg's party the day after
tomorrow.

Torvald And I'm terribly curious to see what you'll surprise me with

Nora Oh that stupid nonsense!

Torvald What is?

Nora It seems so pointless. I can't think of anything to wear. ¹⁰

The group begins contacting - the energy in the room is high and the contact is attentive and safe. The actors are now cued to begin speaking and the room erupts in a torrent of language. This is different from the stream of consciousness text or earlier combinations of CI with text. These scenes have been carefully studied, character intent is now linked to language. Actors are reminded to stay connected to each other's physicality as their primary focus, and not try to make the movement "make sense" with these well-rehearsed emotional exchanges. One couple is asked to stay contacting, and the others sit down to watch.

¹⁰ Students modified/edited the script slightly

The partners are nicely warmed up and invested in the contact: the action is quick, responsive and intent. They do not look at each other. We are not sure if they are playing or struggling. In the midst of rolling and gently colliding, Torvald guides Nora into an unexpected back roll over his prone body. We see now that it is a struggle.

And my little songbird must never do a thing like that again. he says with urgency. *No false notes.*

Nora quickly tries to roll away, stopped by his gentle arm, she twists into an aborted shoulder stand. His arm responding to her action braces her shoulder stand, effectively also pinning her in place.

Isn't that the way it should be? he continues.

She slowly rolls back down and he sits up in response. She has unwittingly rolled onto his lap. She looks directly at him for the first time, and puts an arm around his neck. Emboldened, he picks up her legs and boldly swivels around into a classic position of protective love, cradling her in his strong arms.

She nods "yes" reluctantly, their heads are almost touching. Yes he encourages her, smiling. The mood has suddenly become complicit and passionate.

The audience laughs in agreement. This exchange has taken place over the space of 10 seconds and two lines, and we are already vicariously eager to experience the next moment in the life of these two characters.

Now he twists away from her and back around suddenly leaning his weight into her hips, raised now in a low bridge. She is stronger than we think and supports his weight with ease. He enjoys testing her strength, and she watches as he circles around her, always leaning up against her body, until he is fully supported by her strong legs wrapped around his waist. He leans back and mumbles

Yes of course it is, so let's not talk about it anymore. Ah it's so snug and cozy in here

Suddenly the momentum of their mutual weight bowls them over to the side, and he rolls away, grappling one of her legs. There is a pause and they lift heads to look at one another and she suddenly curls submissively around his body, as he once again cradles her. When he cradles her, confining her, she frantically tries to twist away. He kneels in a sturdy tri-pod position, her leg now hooked over his shoulder, her body draped upside-down, one hand in contact with the floor.

She speaks from this precarious position, once again an unwary victim, her strong body unexpectedly manipulated.

Torvald

Yes

I'm terribly excited about the Stenborg's party the day after tomorrow.

She extends her leg as she speaks, reaching for the floor without success. He refuses to put her down, although the position also becomes precarious for him, as he struggles to keep balance saying

And I'm terribly curious to see what you'll surprise me with.

She arches her body, straining for release, and suddenly twists around, knees bent in a little ball, clinging to his neck saying

Oh that stupid nonsense

What?

And with the line he loses his balance and they topple to the ground. They relax into the fall, and roll, pausing for a moment head to head to look at each other, and then roll against and away from each other. He stops six feet away from her, prone on his stomach, and she lies on her back turning her head to speak to him,

It seems so pointless. I can't think of anything to wear.

Technically, this was a good CI session. Even in the “conflict” displayed in their exaggerated opposing forces, the two partners have remained intimately sensitive to each other, testing weight, guiding momentum, and cushioning each other in contact with the floor. They were physically safe and relaxed, despite the driving tension of the scene. The actress playing Nora was surprised to discover that Nora was so deeply conflicted between submission and rebellion (she noted the repeated submissive curling into Torvald’s arms juxtaposed to the struggle for release). Both actors agreed that the physical responses contacting the scene were honest, instinctive, and surprising, so she will further explore these conflicting emotions/reactions in character study. The actor playing Torvald was intrigued to find significant love for Nora expressed in his movement, (in addition to the hierarchical superiority he expected from text analysis), and plans to further explore that facet of the character’s emotional palette. The information gleaned from contacting a scene is useful in fleshing out the characters, and in finding beats and possible blocking for the scene. In further exploration, the use of contact to animate text can remain a rehearsal device or be developed as a way of performing *A Doll’s House*. A clever director can use the discoveries made by actors trained in CI, to illuminate relationships and create a visceral staging.

The actors now return to Brestoff’s class having contacted their Ibsen scenes. There is a physical availability and fearlessness that residually remains with them after the contact session. Now in the acting studio, scene partners incorporate

character analysis and recent CI experience into the next exploration of these scenes. Actors are more able now to break out of static relationships: honest emotional responses are connected to physical responses. Nora walks away, and spins around suddenly to confront Torvald; spontaneous embraces or subtle stalking emerge with the dialogue. Physically alert to the other, students have now given themselves permission to instinctively respond within a scene without planning or following externally imposed blocking. Once the body has experienced something, it can go there again. One honest contact session with dialogue can create a bridge, and begin the habit of physical/emotional honesty in a scene.

Synopsis

The parallel trajectories of CI for actors and personalization acting exercises are clearly valuable in tandem in actor training. In addition to developing physical skills of counterbalance, weight and energy exchange, contact demands the same authentic responsiveness as a good acting scene. So the basic acting lesson of listening and emotional responsiveness in personalization parallels the physical listening and kinetic responsiveness of contact improvisation. The unique weight and energy exchange with your partner parallels the premise of a personalization exercise- that the same scene will be different with someone else.

Contact practice taken into text can bridge the gap between actor movement training and acting training. The spontaneity, complicity and responsiveness of a

good CI encourage an honest exchange of dialogue. Intimately attentive to his/her partner, the contacting actor speaking text is compelling in action and words; and when character analysis is next integrated into the training sequence, authenticity of response is informed with the richness of analysis. Authenticity enforced by contact and personalization is a strong foundation for an exchange between scene partners. Deeply analyzed dialogue worked in the movement studio and then returned to the rehearsal hall shows heightened physical responsiveness and a re-enforced connection between fully explored characters.

CI preparation in weight, counterbalance and causality, give firm grounding in principles and practice to “follow the impulse.” The body does not lie; and a physical partnering that is not mutually responsive, is simply wrong within the language and rules of contact. In this sense, impulse is visceral and technical.

For Brestoff, the repetition of truthful responses at the beginning of the training sequence is key. The training actors are making a habit out of responding truthfully to each other without pre-conceived ideas. His guidelines for personalized scene-work establish a structured approach for playing impulse. As in contact, you play each other.

The symbiotic relationship of these movement and acting trajectories re-enforces a habit of emotional and physical honesty. Actors leave the movement studio with the physical tools for easeful and acrobatic interaction; and by the very nature of CI study, they are receptive, responsive and deeply attentive to their partner. For the actor using contact improvisation as the way into a dramatic

scene, the physical relationship between two characters is the primary reality and the ensuing dialogue is the secondary expression of that reality. The actors leaving Brestoff's class are more spontaneous, receptive and flexible and have a deeply considered character's point of view - they are ready now, to be directed.

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