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Contemplation, Reflection, Action: A Somatic Approach to Acting

This class uses Stanislavski's concept of physical action as a starting point to investigate non-realistic scripts. Our definition of physical action is taken from Stanislavski's guide to the actor from *Creating a Role*: "In every physical action, unless it is purely mechanical, there is concealed some inner action, some feelings. This is how the two levels of life in a part (dramatic role) are created, the inner and the outer. They are intertwined. A common purpose brings them together and reinforces the unbreakable bond." A definition that was heavily influenced by Stanislavski's study of yoga.

Uniting the mind and the body as a unit, Stanislavski has provided us a starting point from which to use our imaginations to consider the actions of characters and their related energy states. Within each action, there are three distinct segments--sensing, feeling, and reacting or contemplation, reflection, and action. To comprehend the deeper levels of body knowing of these three aspects of physical action, we will incorporate concepts and techniques from meditative practice, t'ai chi and yoga to expand our awareness of our body's energy system and use this awareness to create three-dimensional characters and enhance the physical life of a scene. Concepts with which we will be working include:

1. Dynamic alignment: internal relationship between kinetic interdependence, opposition and circularity. Primary phrase: let go, lie down, and link up.
2. Areas of Yi (mind/thought): the distinction between the primal mind or brain stem and forebrain and culture.
3. Jing or the energy states of the body that are the result of the combination of breath and imagery.
4. Xiu or emptiness and its relationship to stillness and transformation or from action to stillness (Liang Xiang) and stillness to action (Qi Fa).
5. The five elements in nature--water, fire, wood, metal and earth and their correspondence to the body's energy system and their use as movement metaphors.
6. Yin and yang as a method of balancing the body's energies and as a key to character development.

We will be learning these somatic techniques in relationship to particular performance issues for each script:

Scripts:

Beckett's	Act Without Words	Embodiment/Stillness
Brecht's	Mother Courage	Characterization/Imagery
Mee's	Big Love	Phrasing
Izouka	Tattoo Girl	Transitions

Associated texts:

Dennis Lewis The Tao of Natural Breathing
Shi Ming Mind Over Matter: Higher Martial Arts
Donald Reid Harnessing the Power of the Universe

Clothes: Loose fitting comfortable clothes.

BODY STATES, CHARACTER, ACTION**I. Neutral body or wu chi**

This is a dynamic alignment of your essence (jing), energy (chi) and spirit (shen) through the internal relationship between kinetic interdependence, opposition and circularity that helps to create a state of being open, released, relaxed, focused, centered, and grounded. It culminates in a state of emptiness/stillness (Xiu) that is the preparation to move between the opposites-- action to stillness (Liang Xiang) and stillness to action (Qi Fa).

Movement is the foundation of stillness.

Feel, Fuse, and Follow are words that describe the process of somatic concentration. The process can be applied to developing awareness of any sensory mode or the way they work together as a unit. It is a form of shi-chi or drawing energy in.

Feel: In order to attach any image to the workings of the muscular and nervous systems, it is necessary first to give yourself the command to feel the image. This is most often accomplished if you find a connection with the breath/energy system and the image. The image can be a kinesthetic/proprioceptive experience of breath or touch, the visual experience of something or someone in the room, the aural experience of music or sound, the olfactory experience of smell. Any one sensory system can be used to increase awareness. You can listen to your muscles, hear through your feet and smell with your skin. You can experience all sensory modes at the same time. Images can be from the immediate environment or of some past experience. They can be from real experience that is direct or stated in the form of a metaphor. All images ultimately integrate deeply into our sub-conscious via our mind which is a unification of all bodily systems.

Fuse: This is focusing your soma to fuse yourself with a stimulus. It is a sense of at oneness with the stimulus. These stimuli can be your own breath, the touch of another individual, the feel of the vibrations of your own or another's voice as well as the sounds of the environment, the visual focus on an object or another person in the room, the smells that surround you.

Follow: This is following and thus allowing the subtle adjustments of your kinesthetic/proprioceptive and other sensory systems as it responds to the sensory aspects of the environment. Dramatic or Physical Actions are the consequences of feeling, fusing and following. Ultimately, you increase the dramatic potential of a moment by fully committing to sensing (sometimes referred to listening) to the situation and responding from this deep level of commitment.

II. Basic method of discovering wu chi

Let Go, Lie Down, Link Up is the mental physical process for achieving wu chi. This is the beginning of refining your internal landscape and creating vitality or as Shi Ming says "Refining vitality into energy, refining energy into spirit, spirit into openness, refining openness to merge with the Tao."

1. Let Go and Lie Down (releasing and opening): This refers to letting go of your everyday concerns and habitual body. It implies a concentration on a state of release often referred to by Barba and other non-realist directors as 'nothingness' or 'no-mind.' Methods that can be used to let go can be derived from a focus on the breath and related chi gong exercises, various forms of shaking out the joints that can be done both lying and standing, and yoga poses or other stretches that open up the body.

Place breath – body scan, focused breath, energy breath, breath of fire, hara breathing, modifications on sun salute, chakra sounding.

(Transition movements of yawning, stretching and jiggling to help maintain focus)

Release the joints—neck release, rolls and manipulations of the joints as individual units and together, jiggling and breath the joints, humming from the chakras and sending the hum through the joints.

2. Link Up (grounding): Linking Up is finding the connection between the bones, dynamic alignment, and your body's internal energy system. This is achieved when you release the coccyx or tail bone down and the head at the atlas joint stretches up as the ribs release down and the clavicle reaches up. The pelvis becomes a water wheel and revolves up and toward the back with each exhalation of breath. The energy created by the breath's interaction with the pelvis reaches up the spine and down through the sides of the legs and into the surface of the earth through the heels.

Discover pelvis—pelvic clock, rock and roll, child's pose, downward dog, butterfly pose, chakra sounding for first two chakras, pelvic isolations.

Expand/lengthen spine—spinal twist, triangle pose, runner's pose, six movements for the spine, lateral stretch, cobra pose, plough pose, sounding for chakras one through seven.

Stretch and connect with the appendages—hang over pose, downward dog, forward reach from sitting, warrior pose, reverse triangle, sound from any chakra center through the external point of an appendage.

Ground energy—straddle jumps or pulses, parallel demi-plies, chi-gong pose of standing tree, integrate chakra sounding or other sound as relevant.

Find balance—tree pose, dancer's pose, swings into balance, integrate chakra sounding or other sound as relevant. Distinguishing between substantial and insubstantial stances helps you to note the movement of energy.

Standing Body Scan: Harmonize the upper and lower parts of the body and coordinate the internal and external parts. The feet are the roots. The pelvis the point of fluid action. The head and arms the means of communication.

1. Release the tail bone and sternum downward
2. Release the head at atlas joint upward
3. Release the front of the pelvis towards the spine
4. Release the shoulder blades away from each other
5. Feel the connection between the lumbar region in your pelvis, your shoulder girdle, your elbow and your hand.
6. Feel the connection between the center of your hip joint, your knee and your ankle
7. Feel the length and width of your foot on the floor through the inside of the heel and the small toe and between the outside of the heel and the big toe.
8. Release eyes to center of your head

Dynamic Movement: short style Yang form done at various speeds

Exploring space and relationships: push hands, melting, penetrating, kinesthetic connections

III. Using wu chi as basis for discovering character's physicality and related energy state:

Energy is a combination breath and thought. Images are a both a site of sensory play and a refinement of thought. Begin with the appropriate image for you:

place breath—all incorporate feel, fuse and follow, body scan, focused breath, energy breath, breath of fire, hara breathing, modifications on sun salute, chakra sounding place the breath for character.

discover pelvis—pelvic clock, rock and roll, child's pose, downward dog, butterfly pose, chakra sounding for first two chakras.

expand spine—spinal twist, triangle pose, runner's pose, six movements for the spine, lateral stretch, cobra pose, plough pose, sounding for chakras one through seven. Position and expand the spine

In Relationship to Appendages:

stretch the appendages—hang over pose, downward dog, forward reach from sitting, warrior pose, reverse triangle, sound from any chakra center through the out most point of the appendage stretch and send energy into the appendage.

release the joints—neck release, rolls and manipulations of the joints as individual units and together, jiggling of the joints, humming from the chakras and sending the hum through the joints.

release the joints by playing around with gestures.

ground energy—straddle jumps or pulses, parallel demi-plies, chi-gong pose of standing tree, integrate chakra sounding or other sound as relevant.

round the energy from the new posture.

find balance—tree pose, dancer's pose, swings into balance, integrate chakra sounding or other sound as relevant find the balance of the character's life.

In relationship to total body:

Standing body scan
total metaphor for the character

IV. Dramatic actions and scenes

The mind directs the movements of the body.

Collection of internal energy can be similar to bending a bow. Releasing energy is comparable to shooting an arrow. You concentrate the energy then you direct it. The strength of power is released from the spine of the back.

Contemplation/Reflection:

Listening/Contemplation refers to your perception of the other actor's chi. The more chi is circulating freely within you the better will be your ability to listen.

Knowledge is the intuitive understanding of another character's intention from listening to or contemplating their responses to the situation. This form of listening/contemplation requires you note their total energy state as you take it in through all your senses. When you understand what the other character is doing you can respond accordingly. This is a skill that unifies internal and external awareness. It is developed via practice.

The energy is sometimes broken off, but it must be immediately reconnected.

Actions: When you release internal energy (jing) you must be calm, relaxed and focused towards one direction.

Three forms of action:

1. Yielding is a strategy that allows you to prepare for the next moment. It is a time to gather energy and also information by how the other character responds to your yielding. Relax, Release, Ease off, Surrender.
2. Neutralizing takes place when you use the strategy of the other character to prevent him/her from taking action. Deflect, Offset, Counterbalance, Compensate, Cancel.
3. Leading engages the other character to go willing in your desired direction. Guide, Direct, Command, Escort.