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Actors in Motion

BY LUCIA MAURO Perhaps the dramatic profession's inextricable link to a script keeps actors solidly rooted in their heads. A focus on words may prompt them to flex their cerebral muscles more so than their physical sinews. That's why most thespians, at some point in their careers, will be advised to stop acting from their necks up.

Help is on the way. Several acting training centers and universities offer movement classes, and dance studios certainly give actors a chance to get in touch with their bodies. Yet beyond gaining a facility for moving comfortably in space, movement training allows actors to tap into character development and motivation. **PerformInk** explored four movement-related programs that take a holistic approach to the mind-body dynamic.

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Professional performers come to **The Actors Gymnasium** to add the circus arts, stage combat, puppetry, dance, drumming, mime or physical comedy to their repertoire of skills. Classes are structured to help performers gain control of an essential instrument—their bodies. Located at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in Evanston, The Actors Gymnasium was founded in 1995 by arts journalist Anthony Adler, circus artist/choreographer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and Lookingglass ensemble member Lawrence DiStasi. Classes are also taught at the Lookingglass Studio, 2936 N. Southport, Chicago.

"What you do in any movement class," says DiStasi, director of programming, "is gain command of your body and confidence. You also overcome fears and are willing to take more risks. Our circus arts and stage combat classes are among our most popular. You learn trust and teamwork." DiStasi summarizes the school's concept as a "wide-ranging, inter-disciplinary institute of study." As an actor himself, he finds that he can "pull out these random tricks"—like incorporate mime, clowning, acrobatics or vaudevillian routines into his performance. "It's very freeing," he continues. "Through my own experience taking movement classes, I've found that I don't have to be an emotional wreck before I go on stage. They allow me to be as vulnerable, open and big as possible. This really gets you out of your head and into the audience." Fall classes include acro-dance, combining dance and gymnastics; drum performance; circus arts, such as unicycling, juggling and stilt-walking; adaptation for the stage, an interdisciplinary course that results in an original performance; commedia dell'arte, with mask and make-up work; movement for actors/acting for movers, exploring physical choices to create a detailed "movement script;" scene study, rooted in improvisation; stage combat; and viewpoints (see page 13), which increases the sense of ensemble, promotes spontaneity and encourages stronger physical choices in performance.

While it may initially appear to be more about dance than acting, **InterPlay** offers a safe, long-term creative environment for participants to connect with their movement potential. It provides an incremental process for accessing movement, voice and stories,

with emphasis on promoting community spirit. InterPlay was created by Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, who have worked together as teachers, performers and philosophers for 20 years. Strong regional programs exist in Chicago, Seattle, Minneapolis, Raleigh and Sydney, Australia.

Dancer-choreographer Jane Siarny directs the Chicago InterPlay branch—conducting classes at Evanston's Wheadon United Methodist Church. She describes InterPlay as "a system of both practices and ideas." It's a way of discovering more about ourselves individually and in community; a way to access the inherent wisdom of our bodies; a new "folk art" for performance; a powerful community builder; and a non-sectarian, non-denominational, interfaith approach to joining our bodies and spirits. "InterPlay is an integrative technique," says Siarny. "It really blows open the performance picture. It's a way for actors to tap into new places within themselves. It's therapeutic and plays with autobiographical stuff. "I got into InterPlay because I had started to get injuries. I can see it helping actors who are feeling dissatisfied with their roles or actors who are going through a dark period of the soul." Siarny assures that the movement classes are conducted in a supportive, affirmation-based environment. Classes begin with a warm-up and progress toward physical free-association exercises, improvisation, creation of an original work and performance. "It's empowering to incorporate story, dancing and singing," says Siarny, "I've improvised with a theatre artist. We danced what our bodies were telling us to dance. But we weren't throwing away technique. InterPlay has allowed me to reclaim my voice." Participant Marti Szalai-Raymond, who is an actor/director, points out that actors learn how to tell stories with their bodies. For the fall, Siarny will be conducting the Art of InterPlay, a 10-week series that meets on Thursday nights from Sept. 28 to early December. It culminates in two participant-generated performances. For those wishing to quickly familiarize themselves with the InterPlay process, a free workshop (3-5 p.m.) and Body/Spirit Celebration (7 p.m.) will be held on Sept. 30. Individuals of all levels can attend and create a performance piece together. InterPlay also offers Leadership Programs, retreats and Body/Wisdom workshops at Chicago's Independence Park, Irving and Pulaski.

Links Hall, 3435 N. Sheffield, gives actors a plethora of movement workshops from which to choose. Dancer-choreographer Lisa Wymore, who is managing director of Hedwig Dances, teaches a contemporary dance class here. She cites classes in contact improvisation, butoh, yoga and world and interdisciplinary movement as being particularly beneficial for actors.

"Anything you can do to be present in your body will help you as an actor," says Wymore. "It's easy to almost be a head talking on a body. Movement gives you an ease with character development. Just keeping the joints moving and the body flexible makes the body more supple and alert and ready for change. You can be present in the moment all the time." This season, Links Hall is teaming up with guest artists participating in the Dance Center of Columbia College's performances—including pioneering performance artist Simone Forti and improv-theatre dancer Joe Goode. Ask Dexter Bullard about his approach to movement for actors, and he becomes a bit good-naturedly peeved.

"I hate the term movement theatre," says the co-founder/artistic director of **Plasticene Physical Theatre Company**. "It implies that movement is tacked onto theatre. We teach a physical way of looking at acting. Human response has physical elements to it. We want actors to gain control of their own instrument; to open up the realm of possibility of expression."

Plasticene, formed five years ago, experiments with contact improvisation and object encounters to develop non-text based action and situation. Ensemble members, for instance, will build a set then create a completely physicalized play inspired by it. Its tools are the human body, objects, light and sound. The company has announced the opening of a professional training program for actors and improvisers called The Plasticene Studio, offering classes in physical acting, ensemble creation and experimental sound. Classes take place at the ACM Chicago Arts Program, 3340 N. Clark.

Courses are as follows.

Level 1: Physical Acting (Sept. 5-Oct. 24) is an entirely physical exploration of acting from self to scene. It emphasizes body awareness, released impulse, strong action, self-creation, physical listening and partnering as an exciting and present dialogue. Level II: Physical Processing in Scene Work (Sept. 2-Oct. 21) applies physical acting and training to contemporary scene work by linking sub-action to text. The class emphasizes creative, personalized and active approaches that turn personal text and play scripts into fully physicalized human interaction. New Sound Sources and Audio Constructs (Sept. 3-Oct. 1), taught by Eric Leonardson, focuses on creating unusual sonic material through acoustic and electronic media. New sound sources explored are invented instruments, improvisation and audio art. It's open to musicians and non-musicians. "Acting is a full-body system practice," states Bullard. "Its objective—what are we going to do?—is an active verb. A lot of actors act not only from a stiff body. They act outside their bodies. With Plasticene, actors take their own pulse. It's just like an athlete tuning up for a race." Bullard adds, "Any form of physical activity will benefit an actor. Tennis can teach you more about acting than sitting around and contemplating your navel."

The Actors Gymnasium

Contact Anthony Adler
Noyes Cultural Arts Center
927 Noyes St., Evanston
Tel. 847/328-2795
Fax. 847/328-3495
www.actorsgymnasium.com

InterPlay

Contact Jane Siarny
Wheadon United Methodist Church
2216 Ridge, Evanston
Tel. 630/860-0605
OPC@clearnet.org

Links Hall

Contact Selene Carter
3435 N. Sheffield, Chicago
Tel. 773-281-0824

Plasticene

Contact Dexter Bullard
3340 N. Clark, 3rd Floor, Chicago
Tel. 312/409-0400
www.plasticene.com
