



Embodiment, hybridity, and habit: the stick as an actor training tool

Renato Musolino

To cite this article: Renato Musolino (2025) Embodiment, hybridity, and habit: the stick as an actor training tool, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 16:1, 65-81, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2024.2444634](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2024.2444634)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2024.2444634>



Published online: 28 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 48



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Embodiment, hybridity, and habit: the stick as an actor training tool

Renato Musolino 

This article examines how the concepts of hybridity and habit can work interdependently to support embodied learning via an object which has long been associated with the training and development of the actor: the humble stick. Whether in actor training institutions, or within post-training rehearsal rooms, the stick has played an important role in ensemble building, and in the actor's development of awareness and psycho-physicality. Insight into its lineage can be grasped via the theatre and actor-training practitioners that are pertinent to the stick-inspired work explored at Flinders University Drama Centre: ¹ Vsevolod Meyerhold, David Zinder,² and Jacques Lecoq. This article offers insight into how balancing and throwing stick tasks, inspired by the aforementioned practitioners, are being explored at Drama Centre to assist students with their embodied learning. This article examines how the stick brings together training concepts from Bartenieff Fundamentals and the Alexander Technique, detailing how habitual stick tasks facilitate hybrid learning and assist to remove obstacles that have traditionally blurred the interdependent nature of the key actor training strands of Voice, Movement and Acting within western actor training institutions.

¹ Flinders Drama Centre, part of Flinders University, is South Australia's leading centre for performance training. It offers intensive, full-time practical training in acting and directing alongside classes in performance theory and research.

² David Zinder is an acclaimed actor trainer and director. His main focus of teaching is on the development of the actor's instrument (body, voice, and imagination), and how this supports the Chekhov Technique. He was a founding member of the Michael Chekhov Association.

Keywords: sticks, Alexander Technique, Bartenieff Fundamentals, habit, hybridity

1. Introduction

This article will examine the use of stick tasks as a tool for hybridity and habit within an actor-training context. I argue that the concept of hybridity is an essential element in assisting students to bring together the various strands of their embodied learning, a process where discrete elements come together to become a 'distinct other' (Camilleri 2020, 17). Habit is equally essential, the ingredient that paves the way for the student to slowly make the distinct other their own. I will detail my observations of the impact that stick tasks have had on student learning in 2024, and how these habitual tasks have facilitated a process of the

student developing an embodied otherness. I (re)developed the balancing and throwing tasks that are central to this article, and I introduced them to the Drama Centre Movement and Acting curriculums. Qualitative data spans a twelve-week period, from the start of Semester One (March), to the second week of Semester Two (August). In total, First Year actors explored stick tasks four times a week, between twenty-five to thirty hours in total. I will detail how these tasks have had a positive impact on student learning, and I invite actor-training practitioners to consider how they can use sticks to develop hybrid forms of training, and to assist students with their psycho-physical development.

The stick is a tool/object/prop that has long been associated with actor training pedagogy and practice, 'although it is not one that is much mentioned in books' (McCaw 2018, 95). The knowledge that we do have tells a story of hybridity, a coming together of east and west, a mash up of sport, combat and theatre, of interculturalism, of transmission from master to student.

Sticks are often associated with theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and his work with biomechanics, the study of the 'mechanics of [the actor's] body' (Meyerhold 1969, 199).³ Meyerhold's experiments with sticks, or wands (Pitches 2007, 99), have been extensively documented and taught by Jonathan Pitches (2003). Pitches, inspired by 'biomechanics master and magician of the stick' Alexei Levinsky (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 363), writes that 'the stick [...] brings together a number of Meyerhold's training sources – sport (the javelin, the foil), circus (the baton, the juggling club), *commedia* (the slapstick), silent comedy (Chaplin's cane)' (italics original, Pitches 2007, 99). Like Meyerhold, Eugenio Barba's work at Odin Teatret was much influenced by eastern theatre traditions, and it was a member of Odin, Tony Cots, who inspired teacher and director David Zinder and his acclaimed *Danger Works*⁴ pedagogy with sticks (Zinder 2009, 52). Sticks were used as a training tool by Jacques Lecoq (Murray 2018, 136–137) at his acclaimed *École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq*, and they reappear in the teachings of some of his most acclaimed student/teachers such as internationally renowned theatre company *Complicité*⁵ (Alexander 2001, 6), and Monika Pagneux (Yen and Battersby 2015, 252–253). Pagneux, who would go on to teach movement at Lecoq's school for fifteen years (M. Evans 2020, 325), had a significant working relationship with director Peter Brook who, along with renowned actor trainer, director and researcher Phillip B. Zarrilli, also used bamboo poles in his work with actors.

There is no one stick that can be seen as the right stick to use in the training of the actor. Each influence brings with it variations in length, width, weight and type. From bamboo canes, to shortened broom handles, each choice is a reflection on the teacher or practitioner, and the tasks. Kapsali observes that there is 'a pre-occupation with the objects materiality even before the training begins, and this involves active selection, possibly changes to the object itself, and certainly changes in the function it is expected to serve' (Kapsali 2021, 107). Meyerhold encouraged a stick '3/4 in diameter by 4" (Kubik 2002, 10). Pitches suggests that the stick needs to be strong, and 'that the length of the stick is important': 1 m (Pitches 2003, 118). This is pertinent to a range of exercises

3 An actor training device 'invented by Meyerhold roughly between 1913 and 1922 [to develop] the actor's underlying technical discipline' (Pitches 2003, 67).

4 A term used by Zinder to prepare actors, to 'use themselves as the material of their art, to develop the kind of openness needed for spontaneity and creativity, and to experience the heightened sensitivities that are required for seizing the creative moment, they must be prepared to render themselves vulnerable, to take risks – in other words, to place themselves in some form of danger' (Zinder 2009, 42).

5 *Complicité* was founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Fiona Gordon, Marcello Magni, and Simon McBurney, "several of whom studied or taught with Lecoq, Pagneux" CITATION Com24 \l 3081 (Complicité n.d.).

that are specific to his variation on Meyerhold's work, in particular where the stick is tossed by the actor 'so that it spins through 180 degrees and you can catch it at the other end' (Pitches 2003, 122). The distance of the stick from the front of the torso is paramount, with the spin and low-level catch (the hand does not move up to catch) made possible if the stick is of the appropriate length (Pitches 2003, 122).

Zinder's exercises, with a focus on ensemble throwing and catching at varying degrees of complexity and risk, require that sticks:

should be made of smooth, splinterless wood about 2 centimetres in diameter, with rounded ends, and should not exceed 120 centimetres in length – about the size and shape of a broomstick. They should be as light as possible, but, in order of priority, resistance to breakage is much more important than weight. Pinewood, for example, breaks easily and should not be used (Zinder 2009, 54).

Zinder's sticks, robust and nimble, are designed for tasks that dynamically flow, which allow 'the actors to move freely, on the run, through the work space' (Zinder 2009, 63). Simon Murray used a 'two-metre bamboo cane' when working with both Pagneux and Gaulier (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 364). The length here is pertinent to the task of partners balancing the stick between two fingers, or indeed in groupings of more than two coming together. The bamboo-like sticks used by *Complicité* seem to vary in length and width, some well over two meters, and some (balanced between fingers), close to two, or just under (*Complicité* n.d.).

II. Learning tool

So, what does the stick offer in the training and development of the actor? Why has this simple object survived and why do actor trainers all over the world (still) make it part of their teaching tool kit? To start with the practicalities, it is easily accessible and inexpensive. If they are used and maintained in a responsible way, sticks can last a lifetime. There is a certain romanticism associated with the same sticks being passed on from one generation of students to another, a passing of the baton if you will. In the movement studio at Drama Centre where I teach, they stand in a corner, 120 cm in length, taking up little space, unintrusive and always ready.

As for the aspects of pedagogy and practice, I suggest that the utilisation of the stick revolves around two concepts that I argue are fundamental in the process of embodied learning: habit and hybridity. The stick becomes a practical tool that brings together different elements to create another: the coming together of student and object, student and student, student and the self, the body-mind, sound and movement, and so on, 'where the mixing elements transition from the multiplicity of 'coming together' to the entwined singularity of 'becoming' (Camilleri 2020, 17). This hybridity gradually facilitates a process of psycho-physical change in the learner, or what Camilleri describes as an alteration or adjustment (Camilleri 2020, 22). For optimum psycho-physical development, the adjustment must be repeated via specific tasks, through the implementation of positive learning habits.

Camilleri argues for ‘a more nuanced appreciation’ of the term habit (Camilleri 2018, 49). Within the context of theatre and performance, the term is often maligned, associated with repetitive behaviour that stifles learning. This article proposes that positive learning habits are important within actor training, and that hybridity and habit can, via the stick, work interdependently to assist students with their embodied learning. Habitual, repetitive tasks are deployed to, for example, build ensembles. They assist students with developing an embodied understanding of how the tripartite qualities of awareness – interoception (inner awareness); exteroception (outer awareness); and proprioception (awareness of your body in space) – work interdependently, or indeed as one. As for the key practitioners that are pertinent to this study, habit and hybridity are key. Pitches suggests that the stick can be used to ‘generate a strong feeling of ensemble’ and that it can develop ‘precision, balance, coordination, rhythm, discipline and responsiveness’ in the actor (Pitches 2003, 122), qualities that require constant, repetitive work to develop. Soft focus is a key concept for Zinder, an ‘absolutely necessary’ prerequisite to tackle his stick exercises, a concept that assists the actor in ‘making their peripheral vision as effective as frontal vision’ (Zinder 2009, 53). Zinder places great emphasis on how the stick is physically held, with the actor having to develop an awareness of how to hold and angle the stick for optimum trajectory. This of course requires the actor to become one with the stick, to be aware of the placement and flow of body parts without superfluous effort, of developing an awareness that allows them to consistently throw the stick in a way that allows the receiver to ‘catch the stick easily’ (Zinder 2009, 56). Zinder suggests that ‘[s]ticks provide actors with multiple possibilities for enhancing their physical coordination, their sense of precision, and their concept of risk taking as a critical aspect of the creative moment’ (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 364). Pagneux and Gaulier, after Lecoq, use sticks as ‘an exploration of the intelligence which comes with touch’, with ‘eyes in fingers’ to find ‘complicité’ (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 364). Lecoq’s stick/partner work invites ‘actors try to subtly read each other’s intention and move accordingly’ (Tunstall 2012, 478).

Stick work demands, and indeed sets out to develop, a heightened sense of psycho-physical listening, thinking, and feeling, skills which pave the way for the student’s embodied journey through the task, and subsequent interrelated tasks. Kapsali reminds that the stick becomes a tool to consider ‘embodied interactions within bodies, between bodies, and between bodies and objects’ (Kapsali 2021, 91); that is, it becomes the catalyst for the levels of awareness to work together. As Phillip Brey, cited by Kapsali, suggests, an object such as the stick becomes ‘a medium positioned between individual and world *through* which the individual perceives his or her [sic] world’ (*italics original*, Kapsali 2021, 98). Kapsali speaks to the concept of hybridity, noting that the ‘artefact becomes part of the user’s embodiment, so that it no longer needs attention and the user can direct her efforts to the particular action the artefact is expected to facilitate’ (Kapsali 2021, 98).

The student’s control and ease of handling the stick, and their gradual focus away from it, is key to the two tasks that will be the focus of the

next section: balancing and throwing. First, I will provide context on their traditional frameworks, and two, I will detail how I have adapted them at Drama Centre to provide students with new pathways to develop awareness, psycho-physicality, and to assist with disciplinary integration. At the core of my work is how I have used the stick to assist students with their embodied learning of Movement studies principles taken from Bartenieff Fundamentals and the Alexander Technique, and how the stick brings these strands together, and transposes them into tasks associated with Acting. Bartenieff Fundamentals and Alexander principles are compatible. They both aim to make the student aware of psycho-physical habits, and to pave the way for new, more productive ones. They have, to use a common actor training term, the same objective, albeit via different learning pathways and frameworks, each with their own unique nomenclature. From my experience, finding embodied compatibility within these different pathways and entry points is not always easy for the student, in particular for First Year students. Despite their overarching connections, there is an initial tension between Bartenieff and Alexander tasks, a tension that has inspired my work with sticks. As will be addressed below, the stick becomes a tool for hybridity and habituation.

III. Sticks at Flinders University Drama Centre

I. Balancing

The first stick balancing exercise explored at Drama Centre is inspired by the work of Meyerhold. Each student, working solo to begin with, takes a stick and finds a place on the studio floor. The student is then tasked with balancing it. Pitches, via Levinsky, details the process:

Place the lower end of the vertical stick on the palm of your right hand, keeping your hand flat. Make sure that your knees are soft and ready, not locked out. Let go of the stick with your left hand and begin to balance it with your right. Focus all your attention on the top of the stick. You will need at first, perhaps, to move your feet to compensate for its movements, so be led by the stick and dance with it. Work to bring the stick under control but enjoy also where it leads you. Don't forget that others are in the same space, trying to do the same as you. [repeat] on your left, ensuring once again that all the steps are in place: flat palm, soft knees, attention on top of the stick (Pitches 2007, 99–100).

From the outside eye, the task looks deceptively simple. On the floor, however, the embodied experience of keeping the stick vertical and under control is far more complex. The stick becomes a mirror of the student's psycho-physicality. Any hint of excessive tension or hesitation in the student is immediately communicated back to them by the stick. It reflects what is happening below it, becoming not only a dance partner but a teacher (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 365). As Pitches notes, 'the stick is acting as an index of your own balance as a performer, it is reading you and reflecting back your centre of balance' (Pitches 2007, 100).

To keep the stick balanced and composed, the student must find the very same qualities within themselves. It is a quest to find moment-to-moment awareness, and inner and outer ease.

At Drama Centre, I introduced the stick as a learning tool to assist the student in developing an embodied understanding of select training principles that develop the aforementioned qualities that are required to keep it balanced. Some of these principles are taken from Bartenieff Fundamentals, as developed by Irmgard Bartenieff, a former student of dance and movement pioneer Rudolf Laban.⁶ Bartenieff Fundamentals can be viewed as the development of the student's invisible work. Tom Casciero elucidates by suggesting that the Fundamentals:

are the building blocks of more complex movement patterns [...] They are not the tennis serve itself, for example, but the ability of the player to be *grounded*, use *breath* to *initiate* and *support* the movement, and to have an *intention* in space that *organizes* the body to complete the task (italics original, Casciero 2018, 8).

One of the Bartenieff building blocks that is explored at Drama Centre via the stick is drawn from her Six Fundamental Patterns of Total Connectivity:⁷ Breath (whole body breath support). Within the context of Bartenieff's Patterns of Total Body Connectivity, Breath 'includes both cellular and lung respiration and is a key to fluidity of movement, internal shaping, the experience of inner space as three dimensional, and a basic sense of trust in Being' (Hackney 2002, 218). In simple terms, Bartenieff's concept of Breath assists the student in discovering breath support from head to toe, paving the way for them to move and think as an embodied, coordinated whole.

Having explored Breath in Movement class while in supine position, I introduced the stick in Acting class as the next phase of the student's embodied learning, tasking them with bringing their whole-body breath to its feet while engaging in a task, to balance the stick. The stick now provides the student with an immediate visual and tactile indicator of their breath support and connection, an opportunity for them to 'see' their breath. For example, when breathing remains shallow or blocked due to excessive physical tension, the stick will commonly wobble or fall. One of the first stick balancing tasks that I have the students explore is to attempt to balance the stick while holding their breath. Second, they repeat the task but this time with blocked breath, that is by attempting to balance the stick while over tensing particular parts of the body such as the shoulders or locking their knees. Finally, they attempt to balance the stick by finding their whole-body breath, feeling their three-dimensional breath connect the axial and appendicular parts of their body. Through this progression of various stages of tension, the student is invited to observe changes in the stick. As they find release and connection through whole-body breath, the sound of the stick falling to the ground decreases. It begins to stabilise. There is a marked change in the atmosphere of the room as the students, and the sticks, find composure and centre. Indeed, as the student makes a conscious choice to focus on their whole-body breath support, they are laying the foundations 'to whole-body coordination and virtuosity in movement

6 Bartenieff fundamentals are inspired by the theories set-forth by Laban that promulgated his 'recognition that movement is a psychophysical phenomenon in which volition and intention play key roles' (Moore 2014, 49).

7 As furthered by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen and Peggy Hackney (B. Evans 2023, 189). The Six Patterns of Total Connectivity are: Breath (whole body breath support); Core-distal connectivity (core support); Head-tail connectivity (internal vertical connection); Upper-lower connectivity (grounding, power); Body-half connectivity (stabilising one side whilst moving the other); Cross-lateral connectivity (diagonal connections through the body, complexity).

[...] as breath allows the entire body to be supported from within in complex coordination' (Wahl 2019, 35–36). The task is repeated, and repeated again, becoming part of the student's training routine. At Drama Centre there was a marked difference in the students' stick work from the beginning of their learning in Semester One to the start of Semester Two (twelve weeks). It becomes a marker to show them how far they have travelled in their embodied, invisible learning. Pitches suggests that with repetition, the 'movement needed to keep the stick vertical is reduced and the object develops a haunting sense of stasis. This is a sign of developing a hidden 'technique' (Pitches 2007, 100). Through this repetition, I encourage the students to make stick tasks a habit, to explore them, for example, as part of their autonomous daily warm-ups. As I will detail in select examples that follow, the habit of working with the stick can assist in highlighting non-productive psycho-physical habits, paving the way for the development of new, productive ones. As Camilleri elucidates, 'reconditioning partakes of the same phenomenon that is being countered [...]' (ibid).

In addition to Bartenieff Fundamentals, I use the balancing task to assist my students with their embodied understanding of principles from the Alexander Technique, as developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander. Alexander Technique is a psycho-physical technique that sets out to develop awareness, a process that explores 'the possibility of making changes in the process of action' (Rodrigue and Weintraub 2023, 4). These changes are made by the gradual re-education of the students' primary control, that is the relationship of the head to the spine, 'and a releasing and lengthening of the spine, which result in ease of function and movement' (ibid). As Rodrigue and Weintraub note:

The key tenet of primary control is that the most efficient way of moving is with the head leading upward and the spine following, thereby lengthening and widening your body [...] in our everyday lives, whenever we move, we habitually compress and apply pressure to our spines by pulling our heads back and down, pressing down on the joints through our hips, and ankles. This results in tight, inefficient, heavy movements when standing, sitting, and walking (Rodrigue and Weintraub 2023, 20).

To achieve this re-education of the primary control, the Alexander Technique proposes that the student activates two key principles: Inhibition and Direction. Simply put, Inhibition 'is a moment of withholding consent to an automatic reaction or habit' (Brennan 2022, 49). It empowers the student to choose how they will behave in the moment between stimulus and response. Direction is an experience where a thought is generated by the self to direct certain parts of the body to behave in a particular way. Rodrigue and Weintraub note that:

Direction enables you to prepare your mind and body to go into action. To help you evenly distribute your effort along the whole of your body, Alexander developed a sequence of directions. This sequence of directions is constant and fluid, like breathing. Alexander's directions are a way of thinking in action (2023, 27).

Inspired by traditional Alexander directions, the students at Drama Centre use the following: Allow the neck to be free, so that the head can go forward and up, so that the back can widen and lengthen, so that (point of focus inserted here). Enter the stick.

Like their work with Bartenieff Fundamentals, I invite the students to apply the Alexander Technique to the balancing task after they have explored it independently. For example, having explored constructive rest in Movement class—a common Alexander foundational task that develops awareness⁸—the students are then asked to transfer their embodied experience of that task to balancing in their Acting class warm-up. With the introduction of the stick, the students are asked to become aware of what their habitual reaction is when tasked with attempting to keep it vertical. As they do in constructive rest, the students are invited to notice. For example, do they panic? Do they lock their knees? Do they clench their jaw? Do they hold their breath? As previously observed, the stick once again responds to the student's psycho-physicality, with their engagement of any of the aforementioned habits reflected back to them by the stick. As the stick speaks to them, I invite the students to become aware of their psycho-physical habits. From here, they are then asked to deploy their Alexander learning to the balancing task. For example, if the student habitually clenches their jaw when attempting to keep the stick vertical, then they have the option of inhibiting that habitual state/action. They are invited to 'take time to choose the manner in which [they] respond' (Rodrigue and Weintraub 2023, 12). This may be achieved by simply unclenching the jaw, and potentially noticing a change in them that is reflected in the stick. More, they have the option of fulfilling the task by applying the concept of Direction. This takes on the form of the student taking a breath and thinking through their Alexander directions as established in previous Movement classes not involving the stick. For the clenched jaw example, the direction would be: I will allow my neck to be free, so that my head can go forward and up, so that my back can widen and lengthen, so that I can release my jaw, so that I can activate my whole-body breath, so that I can keep the stick vertical. Overtime, and with daily repetition, the students develop an embodied sensation of the adjustment. Indeed, the adjustment becomes the new habit, an example of habit as a 'fluctuating quality' deployed to highlight the old and to pave way for the new (Camilleri 2018, 48). When they attempt to balance the stick, they no longer need to deploy the direction, but rather they are able to immediately summon the released state that the direction, and the task, allowed them to cultivate.

The aforementioned Bartenieff and Alexander concepts are deployed by the students when exploring another balancing exercise: balancing the stick with a partner. Inspired by the work of Lecoq, it goes something like this:

Two actors face each other, balancing horizontally a [stick] between them using the palms of their hands or the tips of their index fingers. Their task is to move, and to keep the stick in balance [...] The stick is then balanced between other parts of the body [...] (Tunstall 2012, 478).

8 Constructive rest 'is one of Alexander's fundamental, simple procedures to connect with yourself, rid yourself of unnecessary tensions, and organize yourself' (Rodrigue and Weintraub 2023, 6). Practiced on the floor in semi-supine, the aim of the posture is to assist in viewing 'yourself as a physical map as you calmly and clearly explore your body's geography' (ibid).

Like the previous balancing task, from the outside eye the partner task looks deceptively easy. On the floor however, the students need to negotiate more complex obstacles. As the weeks go by, the task becomes more challenging, with students asked to balance the stick between themselves as they explore levels and move through and around other groupings. They are also encouraged to form larger groups, and to swap partners during the task itself, all while keeping the stick suspended in the air. With these added levels of difficulties, the students are, once again, asked to activate their embodied Bartenieff and Alexander learning as a base of psycho-physical support.

Before they begin to move around the space, I invite the students to simply hold the stick between themselves and find their whole-body breath. They seek to find a breath that connects them from head to toe, but also one that travels through the stick to their partner. I often suggest to the students that the stick connects them, turning them into one living cell, allowing them to breathe as one. As they make eye contact (the students focus on each other, not the stick), they are asked to become aware of their habits: Do they clench their jaw? Do they crunch their toes? Does fear of failure generate a downward pull of the skull and shortening of the spine? Once these habits are observed, either during stillness or in action, they are invited to Inhibit and Direct. At the start of Semester One (March 2024), the task was met with frequent sounds of the stick falling, 'the rattle and clatter [which] shows us that we have failed and that failure is not so bad' (Crook, Pitches, et al. 2015, 363). By the commencement of Semester Two (August 2024), the sound of the stick falling was almost non-existent, with hesitation replaced with ease, heightened awareness, and confidence. The students were now ready for a greater stick challenge.



Kit Erhart-Bruce (left) and Oscar Baldwin (right), First Year Actors, Flinders University Drama Centre: Balancing. Photo by Renato Musolino



Sienna Druce, First year Actor, Flinders University Drama Centre: Balancing. Photo by Renato Musolino

2. Throwing

The throwing tasks explored at Drama Centre are inspired by the work of David Zinder and Meyerhold. Following on from the balancing tasks, throwing (and catching) the stick involves more risk, unpredictability, and, as Zinder observes, danger (Zinder 2009, 52). To begin, the students simply face each other, about one to two meters apart, and throw the stick back and forth. As they become more comfortable and confident, the distance between them increases. Next, they are asked to throw the stick while milling and seething⁹ around the space, maintaining, at first, a distance of one to two meters between the thrower and the catcher. Finally, the group attempts the task while running around the space, with the gap between thrower and catcher gradually becoming bigger.¹⁰ Zinder offers a snapshot of this task in action:

⁹ A way of moving around space that assists students with developing spatial awareness, and connection with their ensemble.

¹⁰ When first attempting this stage, I divide the

class into two. That is, half working, and half watching, before they swap. This assists in creating a safe space and allowing the students to grow in confidence as the task gradually becomes more complex.

Moving [...] into this barely controlled chaos is like moving from Tic-Tac-Toe to Rubik's Cube. All-around alertness, at a much higher level than before, is the name of the game. Multiplex information-processing on the run is what's happening. For sheer exhilaration there is hardly anything that compares to a group of actors 'in the zone' of this exercise, controlling space, time, movement, and the seeming chaos of multiple sticks flying in the air – and all with consummate ease! (Zinder 2009, 64).

The added complexity and risk associated with throwing tasks makes it more difficult for the students to achieve the consummate ease that Zinder flags. While they may have found it after weeks of balancing, the risk associated with this new task brings with it a heightened sense of fear that, from my observation, does two things. Firstly, it generates excessive muscular tension and as a result of that it, two, reduces the students' ability to activate their three levels of awareness: interoception, exteroception, and proprioception. In the Alexander Technique, this domino effect is described as an event that interferes with the primary control, 'a kind of pressure that compresses the spine and surrounding parts [...] limits breathing [and] impedes potential action' (Madden 2014, 21). Madden observes that excessive tension and tightening results in the actor overconcentrating on one of the three points of awareness, that it splits 'thinking into isolated parts rather than an integrated whole' (Madden 2014, 63). My observations from the throwing tasks support Madden's, with fear of injury or of dropping the stick resulting in an enhanced preoccupation and focus on the self, on the other student, or on the stick.

To assist the students in (re)gaining ease, they are once again invited to deploy their Bartenieff and Alexander work. First, the actors are asked to hold the stick and face each other, about one to two metres apart. From here, they are invited to find their whole-body cellular breathing, making eye contact with their partner, and breathing together as one cell. Second, they are prompted to become aware of their three levels of awareness, in a stage of work that Madden refers to as gathering information (Madden 2014, 108). Information about themselves (Am I breathing? Am I locking my knees? Am I clenching my jaw?), information about their surroundings (What can I see? What is happening behind me? How far away is my partner?), and information about the stick (How am I holding it? How heavy is it?). At this stage, I encourage the students to gently vocalise what they notice, to identify and to release their observations on voice. Not only does this ensure that they are gathering moment-to-moment data, but it ensures that they are indeed breathing. Next, the students enter the third stage, what Madden describes as creating a plan (Madden 2014). This is where they make a conscious choice to inhibit and/or direct. To, for example, hold the stick with less force rather than their habitual gripping of it. To allow the neck to be free, so that the head can go forward and up, so that the back can widen and lengthen, so that they can unlock their knees, so that they can activate whole-body breath, so that they can throw the stick with a released body, etc. These stages continue throughout each throwing task, with the stick once again becoming a mirror of the students' psycho-physicality. Too much muscular effort and the stick crashes into the students' partner, or crashes to the ground. There is a distinctive clattering sound that a tensely thrown stick makes when it crashes into a (tense) hand. Once the

student becomes sensitive to how much force is needed within any given moment of throwing and catching, the sound of the stick landing into soft hands heralds a shift in their psycho-physicality. This new 'habit' then becomes the norm. Like the balancing task, the difference from the beginning of Semester One to the beginning of Semester Two was significant, with a reduced number of sticks falling to the ground. Gasps of fear are replaced by free-flowing sounds of inhaling and exhaling, with Bartenieff and Alexander principles complimenting each other, coming together via the stick. In this next section, I will offer insight into another layer of hybridity, detailing how stick work is then synthesised into Acting tasks to support disciplinary integration.



Maise Juett, First Year Actor, Flinders University Drama Centre: Throwing. Photo by Renato Musolino

3. Hybridity and integration

In western actor-training institutions, the concept of disciplinary integration, mainly through the three key strands of Voice, Movement, and Acting, is standard practice. Learning from one strand works interdependently with the other, and vice versa. This is the aim of the training, and the challenge to the student: to connect the dots. However, this integration is not always easy to achieve. As Rick Kemp notes:

While many training programs include movement classes, or activities such as Alexander Technique, yoga, or dance, these are generally separate from 'acting' classes, and offer the student little information on how to synthesise the two. On the other hand, physically based approaches tend to neglect textual analysis, again leaving the student without linking information (Kemp 2012, xv).

At Drama Centre, I introduced the stick as a learning tool to assist the students with two key concepts. One, with their embodied learning of the Bartenieff and Alexander principles mentioned in the above sections, and two, to assist them to transfer this into tasks explored in the strand of Acting. What follows is taken from my observations of tasks explored in Semester One and Two in First Year Acting. I will detail how the stick has facilitated a process for hybrid learning, assisting the student to more readily and easily transfer embodied knowledge of Bartenieff and Alexander principles (Movement), into Stanislavski's concept of circles of attention, and text/scene work (Acting).

I introduce circles of attention work to the students in Semester One. Stanislavski's tasks in circles of attention 'were devised to help the actor cope with the problem of the audience' (Whyman 2013, 26). To achieve this, the exercises aim to assist the student in developing heightened concentration and awareness by focusing on a series of imagined circles. One circle encompasses the self, which connects with the concepts of interoception and proprioception. The next expands out to the immediate surroundings, and the next out to the outside world, both connecting to the concept of exteroception. Within the context of a scene, the circles might look something like this: I focus on myself, I focus on the objects immediately around me which may include my scene partner, and I focus on the periphery of the space or the outside of the room. The students' focus shifts from one circle to another, assisting them with 'relaxing the monkey-mind that leaps about furiously when we're under stress' (Merlin 2018, 52). In a nutshell, circles of attention seek to achieve the same objective of stick work, that is to facilitate a process where the student can work with consummate ease under pressure.

I introduce students to circles of attention via stick tasks. In task one, the student takes the stick and, once again, attempts to balance it vertically while others attempt to do the same around them. First, in the first circle, they are invited to collect information about themselves. They scan for tension, ensure that they are breathing, inhibit old habits and direct themselves to activate new ones, directions which will serve the overall objective of the task, to keep the stick balanced. They then begin to balance, with their

first circle expanding ever so slightly to include the stick, an extension of themselves. Once the stick is stable, the students expand the circle once again. The second circle includes their immediate surroundings, with the students simultaneously focusing on the top of the stick and turning on their peripheral, soft focus to take in their immediate surroundings. They begin to walk around the space, becoming aware of who is next to them at any given moment. Dodging them, shifting around them, all of this happening while keeping their stick balanced and as vertical as possible. Next, they move into the third circle. As they continue to balance and move around the space, they now focus on the sounds outside the studio: distant voices, the sounds of birds, doors opening and closing. Perhaps a dilemma that they need to resolve when they return home. As the task progresses, the students move from one circle of attention to the other, all while trying to achieve the objective of keeping the stick vertical.

Throwing is once again introduced after balancing. Each student holds a stick. The students pair up, and they begin to focus on themselves and the stick (first circle), and then each other (second circle). Then, the entire group is tasked with throwing the stick at the same time, sticks flying through the air and landing in hands in rhythmic harmony. In the third circle, the students must turn on their peripheral vision and be aware of their distant surroundings to make the task work. They need to listen with their whole body. The three circles, like the three levels of awareness, working interdependently with each other. If a stick falls, or if the group loses unison (third circle attention), the task is stopped, and the students are asked to immediately re-group and start again. With this added pressure, the concepts of Inhibition, Direction, and Breath are to be activated immediately. With daily repetition, the students grow in confidence, with the stick staying in the air, and the rhythm of throwing and catching in unison creating an atmosphere of harmony. They are now ready for the next step.

The next challenge for the students is to transfer the aforementioned embodied awareness and soft focus into their scene work. Keeping the same partner, the students are given text, along with succinct given circumstances. Working without the stick, they are asked to infuse into the scene the very qualities that the stick assisted them in developing. Having set up the space with the required furniture and props, the students take a moment to focus on themselves (breath, mind chatter, their emotional response to the circumstances of the scene). Next, they connect with their scene partner or their immediate imagined location (a restaurant, a bedroom, the park), and then with the facts of the scene that are governing their behaviour from the outside world (other characters, places, sounds). While the stick may have been removed, the embodied sensation of moving from circle to circle remains. Trace patterns of physical ease emerge.

Scene work is also explored using the partner balancing task. Having activated their pre-task gathering of information (Breath, Inhibition, Direction, circles of attention), the students (working in pairs), balance the stick between two hands or other parts of the body and move around the room, now speaking their text to each other as they do so. The stick acts as a conduit of intention, with a push and pull quality evident throughout the task. The stick is then removed, and the students continue to move

around the space speaking their text, imagining that they are connected by the stick. In one example from our work, students moved around the space, unprompted, with arms extended, imagining that the stick was present as they moved around the space, an example of the student using their embodied memory of the sensation of working with the stick to summon the quality of the connection that it helped generate. Even when the students turn their back to each other, they are encouraged to feel the imagined conduit between them. Finally, the students are asked to transfer this focus and connection to the scene within its staged setting. The stick may now be absent, but the foundations that it helped lay are very much present. Tunstall, who explores an almost identical task (inspired by Lecoq), notes that the final stage 'bears the traces' of the previous, more improvisational stage with the stick (Tunstall 2012, 478). Again, the stick has facilitated a process for the student to consciously and unconsciously transfer embodied knowledge from one task to another, from learning strand to learning strand. One of the obstacles that I encountered while exploring text and balancing was having multiple groups working at the same time. As an initial introduction to the task, all the actors worked together, creating a mass of sound that added a level of distraction that was insurmountable.

The introduction of the stick as tool to explore Bartenieff and Alexander principles, along with disciplinary integration has been highly successful. Compared to when the work was explored without the stick, I have noticed a marked difference in the students' ability to, one, retain their embodied experience, two, to elicit their sense of awareness and ease, and three, to articulate their embodied experience of working with the stick and/or their psycho-physical journey through the scene. This is also partly due to the repetitive nature of the stick tasks, with each Acting session commencing with up to an hour of balancing and/or throwing. As Zarrilli argues, and in light of the significance of habit to the use of sticks, 'daily repetition allows the actor time to explore ever-subtler dimensions of the body, mind, and their relationship-in-action' (Zarrilli 2008, 29). The stick ensures that the student remains present in their pre-performative psycho-physical development. Tasks often associated with Movement or Voice that prepare the students' instrument are often repetitive in nature. They 'can too easily become empty and habitual – like the mind-less way in which some people work out in a sports center through repetition of exercises while watching television or listening to the radio' (Zarrilli 2008, 30). The stick, responding live to the psycho-physical state of the students, facilitates a process that, while repeated daily, is (re)experienced new, a habit that is everchanging, one that responds to the here, today, now. I have also noticed that there is a certain degree of fun associated with the task. The students enjoy the challenge that the stick offers. Each day brings with it a new challenge, one that can be conquered if they engage with the principles that the stick is setting out to develop.

To end this section, I would like to mention one example that further speaks to the success of our stick work at Drama Centre. During an Acting text task, one student was finding it difficult to navigate a highly emotional scene without using excessive tension. Rather than address the specifics of what I could identify in their work (blocked breath and the head pressing back and down into their spine), I simply prompted them with the word

'stick'. Immediately, they exhaled, discovered their whole-body breath, followed by a marked increase in the length of their neck. They were able to then continue the scene from a place of greater psycho-physical ease and freedom. The stick had become a mnemonic for the student to activate their sense of psycho-physical ease. In that brief moment the student was able to immediately deploy their Bartenieff and Alexander work, finding an embodied compatibility between the two to assist them in their scene work.

IV. Conclusion

This article has examined how the humble stick has been used at Flinders University Drama Centre as a learning tool to develop psycho-physical skills, and to assist the student with disciplinary integration. The stick was introduced to assist the student with their embodied learning of knowledge associated with two key principles commonly associated with Movement studies: Bartenieff Fundamentals and the Alexander Technique. The stick was then used transpose knowledge from one learning strand to another, from Movement Studies to Acting. It has become a tool of hybridity, and through its habitual deployment it has facilitated a process where learning objectives have been achieved. It has served as a tool that develops both awareness, and the ability to immediately transfer embodied knowledge from one task to another, from strand to strand. This article has detailed new avenues of how the stick can be deployed to develop awareness and consummate ease while working under pressure, along with new ways to develop the psycho-physical actor.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Renato Musolino  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6918-814X>

References

- Alexander, Catherine. 2001. *Complicite: Teachers Notes: Devising*. London: Complicite.
- Brennan, Richard. 2022. *The Alexander Technique Workbook: The Complete Guide to Health, Poise and Fitness*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Camilleri, Frank. 2018. "On Habit and Performer Training." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 9 (1): 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2017.1390494>.
- Camilleri, Frank. 2020. "A Hybridity Continuum." *Performance Research* 25 (4): 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1842024>.
- Casciero, Tom. 2018. "A Physical Foundation for the Actor." In *The Laban Workbook for Actors: A Practical Training Guide with Video*, edited by Katya Bloom, Barbara Adrian, Tom Casciero, Jennifer Mizenko and Claire Porter, 7–43. London: Methuen Drama.
- Complicite. n.d. Accessed April 13, 2024. <http://www.complicite.org>.

- Crook, Andy, Jonathan Pitches, Dick McCaw, Anna Furse, David Zinder, Simon Murray, and Thomas Wilson. 2015. "Training and ... Sticks." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 6 (3): 363–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2015.1087220>.
- Evans, Bill. 2023. *Teaching What You Want To Learn: A Guidebook for Dance and Movement Teachers*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Evans, Mark. 2020. "Monika Pagneux." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 11 (3): 324–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2020.1788275>.
- Hackney, Peggy. 2002. *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Kapsali, Maria. 2021. *Performer Training and Technology*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Kemp, Rick. 2012. *Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells us about Performance*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Kubik, Marianne. 2002. "Biomechanics: Understanding Meyerhold's System of Actor Training." In *Movement for Actors*, edited by Nicole Potter, 3–15. New York: Allworth Press.
- Madden, Cathy. 2014. *Integrative Alexander Technique Practice for Performing Artists: Onstage Synergy*. Bristol: Intellect.
- McCaw, Dick. 2018. *Training the Actor's Body: A Guide*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Merlin, Bella. 2018. *Konstantin Stanislavsky*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Meyerhold, Vsevolod. 1969. *Meyerhold on Theatre*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Moore, Carol-Lynne. 2014. *Meaning in Motion: Introducing Laban Movement Analysis*. Denver: MoveScape Center.
- Murray, Simon. 2018. *Jacques Lecoq*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Pitches, Jonathan. 2003. *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Pitches, Jonathan. 2007. "Tracing/Training Rebellion: Object Work in Meyerhold's Biomechanics." *Performance Research* 12 (4): 97–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160701822692>.
- Rodrigue, Jean-Louis, and Scott Weintraub. 2023. *Back to the Body: Infusing Physical Life into Characters in Theatre and Film*. California, USA: Alexander Techworks.
- Tunstall, Darren. 2012. "Shakespeare and the Lecoq Tradition." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 30 (4): 469–484. <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2012.0092>.
- Wahl, Colleen. 2019. *Laban/Bartenieff Movement Studies: Contemporary Applications*. Champaign: Human Kinetics.
- Whyman, Rose. 2013. *Stanislavski: The Basics*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Yen, Anna, and Fiona Battersby. 2015. "Essais (French: 'test', 'Attempt', 'Trial', 'Tryout')." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 6 (2): 250–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2015.1047121>.
- Zarrilli, Phillip B. 2008. *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Zinder, David. 2009. *Body Voice Imagination: Image Work Training and the Chekhov Technique*. Oxon: Routledge.

Dr. Renato Musolino is one of South Australia's most respected and experienced actors and actor trainers. He has worked nationally and internationally with leading companies including State Theatre Company South Australia, Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir Theatre, Bell Shakespeare Company, Griffin Theatre Company, Windmill Theatre Company, ABC Radio National, and the South Australian Film Corporation.

As an actor trainer/lecturer, Renato has worked at tertiary level for over twenty years, specializing in Laban Movement Analysis, movement for actors, and psycho-physical acting. He is currently Lecturer in Drama at Flinders University Drama Centre.