The Early Modern Physical Theatre

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Working at the New Globe in London and the reconstructed Blackfriars in Staunton, Virginia has taught me that performance is a holistic activity, and the actor’s voice is a physical instrument. To remain theatrically “alive” on an exposed, reconstructed Early Modern stage, the actor must draw as much on somatic storytelling techniques as on good diction and a grounding in rhetoric. The techniques required of actors performing at the Globe and Blackfriars reconstructions include a high level of skill and specificity in physical storytelling. Though very different in many respects, especially in scale, both spaces have inherent similarities, not least of which are the playing conditions imposed by universal lighting. This element alone requires great technical precision in creating the physical lives of characters on stage. We believe that similar performance conditions were to be found in the original playhouses, so we might also wish to speculate about a corresponding level of visual complexity in the original performances of these plays.
The choreographer and movement specialist Dymphna Callery describes physical theatre using language that could function as a compelling artistic manifesto for the reconstructed Globe and Blackfriars theatres:

Physical theatre acknowledges the relationship between the stage and spectator in a way that, for example, film does not – and cannot even though film can represent reality – and that fourth-wall naturalistic theatre does not because its very nature is to pretend that the audience is not there...In physical theatre the two-way current between stage and spectator does not operate merely at the level of suspense and empathy, but embraces the visual and visceral. Watching becomes a sensory experience, the magical and illusory qualities of the experience are paramount.ii

Callery describes a potent atmospheric performance environment of the kind found on Bankside today, and very likely in the same approximate location 400 years ago. Moreover, a look at the resumes of actors performing at the Globe since the late 1990s will confirm that actors with a physical theatre background perform most effectively in this space, one not
suited to the typical skill set of the kind of movie or TV stars we see making appearances at larger regional theatres in Britain and America.

It is unfortunate perhaps, for the purposes of this essay, that the quote from Callery’s book does not include the text as part of this performance equation. Shakespeare’s text is the medium through which the “two way current” she describes, passes. Perhaps because Shakespeare’s language itself is heightened and potent, we imagine that to create physicality and gesture operating on the same scale as the rhetoric would be to over-egg the pudding. If we adjust our thinking and pay more attention to the connection between physicality and language, we find it easier to imagine how strong physical choices might be necessary to underpin the mighty iamb. Sian Williams, a dancer, choreographer and actor who has been involved with productions at the Globe over the past 11 seasons, has had time to consider the connection between text and physical storytelling. She has collaborated many times with the director Tim Carroll, whose rehearsal processes include extensive, thorough, and detailed work on scansion, rhythm, rhetoric, and other elements of verse speaking. These collaborations have refined her perceptions about the relationship between verbal and physical storytelling, as she explains:
At the Globe, the rapport between actors and audience is sensitized by the environment – open air, audience sharing the same light, actors moving amongst the audience – [and] the communication of intention is clarified by the body when the actor is 'in tune'; when they are not, the lines of communication break down. This physicality includes stylization - heightening our physical expression to drive home the intention or feeling - and the orchestration of movement with meter... I am of the opinion that it is most effective to use Shakespeare's language as a score and choreograph or extemporize movement within the strict boundaries of the language phrase; this is liberating. When a scene is protracted in order to indulge in a visual treat we may be in danger of losing control of what propels an audience to stay involved. Equally, the suppression of physical expression can dilute the power of the play; I think it would be a mistake to assume that movement must always be kept to the minimum, treating speech with reverence, isolating it from the body as a whole. iv

Training and technique are required to achieve this liberation through language. Productions at the reconstructed Globe since 1999 have shown
that somatic, contemporary actor training techniques work effectively in partnership with experiments with original stage practices. Supported by a team of coaches in movement, voice and verse, actors at the reconstructed Globe sought strength and clarity in gestures that resonated with the text, and pursued a holistic approach to verse speaking that often resulted in a compelling visual spectacle, as well as a treat for the ear and the imagination.

I first became interested in physical theatre while serving as Head of Research at Shakespeare’s Globe in London. From 1999-2002 I watched and worked with several successive companies of actors as they negotiated the technical and physical demands of that unique and difficult space. The artistic director at that time, Mark Rylance, instituted an unorthodox hierarchy in the creative teams supporting each production: the director would be referred to as the “Master of Play”, and actors enjoyed support from a “Master of Movement” (choreographer), “Master of Voice” (vocal coach) and “Master of Verse” (text coach). That the actors were able to perform confidently for very long runs of demanding shows and repertories (typically, 8 shows a week from May through the end of September) was in large part thanks to the continuing efforts of the Masters of Movement,
Voice and Verse respectively, in their efforts to keep the actors’ minds, bodies and voices conditioned and working at peak capacity. Over the course of four seasons from 1999-2002 a total of six movement specialists (excluding fight choreographers) supported the work of the acting companies at the Globe, compared with two voice coaches and one verse specialist. Each production rehearsed for a minimum of six weeks, and the support work in voice, verse and movement continued throughout the rehearsal period and into the run, until the end of the season. Whether this investment in the ensemble’s continued training and professional development represented an experiment in “original practices” – replicating in some way the apprentice system of Shakespeare’s era – or a financial and strategic commitment to the artist at forefront of the organization, the results were positive, and plain to see, as well as hear.

Certain approaches or methods common to many actor training programs proved useful to practitioners experimenting with the more technical storytelling demands of the reconstructed Globe in its first few seasons. Directors such as Mike Alfreeds and Katherine Hunter responded to the Globe space by emphasizing physical storytelling techniques with their respective ensembles. In 1999, Ms. Hunter worked with Marcello
Magni (who, like Ms. Hunter, was one of the co-founders of the U.K.’s best-known physical theatre company, Théâtre de Complicité) and an ensemble of actors with impressive physical theatre skills, to devise a production of *The Comedy of Errors*, rehearsed in a collaborative and somatic way.

Elaborate and acrobatic physical routines, extensive and imaginative use of puppets, “animated clothing” and other props, combined with a holistic, choral approach to storytelling, developed over the course of full-company rehearsals, resulting in a production that physically expanded, rather than merely served, the text. Ms. Hunter’s celebrated performance as the eponymous anti-hero of *Richard III* in 2003 showed a similar attention to physical detail. Mike Alfreds’ productions of *Cymbeline* (2001) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2002) varied radically in terms of cast size (5 actors for *Cymbeline*, and 15 for *MND*) but shared a common, systematic and thorough approach to rehearsals, combining 20th century actor training techniques that fused Stanislavski-based text work with physical approaches to the text; these physical approaches included Laban technique (described below) and animal work\(^{vii}\). Both productions shared a desire to match the muscularity of Shakespeare’s language with a physical rigor and clarity in storytelling.
These productions, and others that have followed in the same vein since, impressed upon me the importance of what we might call expansive physical storytelling with Shakespeare. In my own work as a director and acting teacher, using the more intimate Blackfriars reconstruction, I continue to investigate ways in which the actors’ bodies can respond to and amplify the shifting dynamics in Shakespeare’s narratives. Working within the parameters presented by the Blackfriars’ space in this way naturally invites us to speculate about the performance style favored by the first companies of players in the original Globe and Blackfriars, but we do so with caution, understanding that in analyzing performance, the most compelling evidence is that of our own eyes. As such, we need to continue investigating the reconstructed spaces with actors drawing on contemporary approaches to performance. That is, theatre practitioners working at the new Globe and new Blackfriars must continue to do as Mark Rylance, Katherine Hunter, Mike Alfrëds, Sian Williams and others since the late 1990s have done, and ask how, without the help of contemporary stage lighting and other recognizable technical supports, can the performances achieve shape, change pace and tempo, pull and switch focus, and guide the audience’s eyes as well as ears?
It would be unfair to imply that scholars of the Early Modern drama share a common disinterest in physical storytelling techniques. In his *The Shakespearean Stage*, Andrew Gurr suggests that a series of stock gestures was a helpful tool for an Early Modern actor with an entire repertory of plays to perform, and a finite memory with which to do that. Gurr points to evidence of theatrical gestures recognizable to Early Modern audiences, and shows how portraits from the time used certain poses to indicate certain emotional qualities or states. He also indicates that differences in acting styles may have existed between the boy companies and the adult professionals, with the latter espousing a more naturalistic and less expansive physical language than the former. For many practical reasons relating to access and facilities, the rehearsal processes of contemporary companies working in the reconstructed Early Modern theatres have received comparatively little scholarly attention, compared with the products of those processes, the public performances.

The remainder of this essay shows how certain contemporary actor training techniques may be applied to physicalize the text. The performance context to bear in mind throughout is the universally-lit, reconstructed Early Modern stage. I have discovered that it is difficult to
articulate a cumulative, somewhat intuitive set of processes in the form of an essay, and the reader will notice that on occasion, this essay asks the reader to put themselves in an imagined rehearsal room, in the shoes of the actor, so to speak.

**Gesture**

Gestural language underpins the work of many physical theatre companies whose devised work is not necessarily dependent on an existing text. Companies such as Théâtre de Complicité and Théâtre de la Jeune Lune ix whose work has influenced mainstream theatres in Britain and America (including the reconstructed Globe) were formed by graduates of the Ecole Jacques LeCoq in Paris. LeCoq’s insights into the gestural mode of communication remind us that our physical connection to meaning is elemental and instinctive.

LeCoq perceives a language of gesture born out of the necessity to express the most basic human needs and emotions with the greatest economy of effort. This language is universal and immediate, which is why it survives in theatrical performance:
When we go to the theatre to see a performance in a foreign language, we understand and recognize this language of gesture consisting of movements, of music and of sounds. We are responding to a language that is universal. It is the same for all physical gestures that tend towards that economy of movement needed for the completion of any given action. The body learns by adapting itself to the effort required by a given gesture. When repeated, any gesture becomes selective, eliminating whatever is superfluous. These dynamics of gesture and movement appear as universal because they are organically inscribed within our bodies and belong to the laws of gravity. Gradually, they are shaped, transposed, deviated, hidden or opposed by education or by tactical or diplomatic considerations which are peculiar to each individual, to each country or to each historical period.\textsuperscript{x}

Though LeCoq’s notion of an organic universal language of gesture suggests a timeless quality that invites us to make connections between performers today and their Early Modern counterparts, we may have to concede that the historically separated socialization processes he also describes might leave us with fewer gestural legacies than we might wish for. While
scholars cannot necessarily unearth the Early Modern physical theatre’s language of gesture through LeCoq’s theory, his approach offers actors today a valuable and practical specificity of gestural communication. Collaborations with performers of different nationalities are made possible for companies like Théâtre de Complicité and Théâtre de la Jeune Lune through this somatic approach to storytelling. Peter Brook’s extensive record of work with international, multi-lingual companies must depend to an extent on similar universal, non-verbal forms. We may not all use mime as our principal currency, but it is since LeCoq’s methods have been so widely disseminated and practiced worldwide that the whole area of physical storytelling and the genre of “physical theatre” has emerged as a valid field of inquiry and practice.

Gesture is very much *lingua franca* for American theatre practitioners like Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. Their Viewpoints methodology is arguably the most pervasive to have emerged in recent decades. Bogart and Landau identify Gesture as one of the Viewpoints, and ask theatre artists to investigate gestures as creative building blocks in composition and rehearsal. In their *Viewpoints* book, Bogart and Landau define and subdivide the notion of Gesture, identifying both behavioral
gestures (those part of recognizable everyday human life) and expressive
gestures (those which make explicit those otherwise implicit feelings or
meanings).

Bogart and Landau typically encourage actors to explore the
importance of gesture in an experiential manner. The Viewpoints approach
works by combining a number of components, each reflecting on and
informing the other. For instance, if we consider two of the other
viewpoints, *tempo* and *duration*, we understand that any common gesture
can reasonably be performed at a slow tempo, or a fast tempo. Likewise,
we can expand or contract the duration of the gesture. Further, we can
perform a fast-tempo gesture for an extended duration, or a slow-tempo
gesture for a short duration, and so on. Participants with little or no
theatre training will recognize that, for instance, the gesture of raising a
hand to someone’s face changes its meaning when performed very slowly
(a caress, perhaps?) when compared to the same motion or gesture
performed at speed (a slap, perhaps?). Such an approach avoids the
language of psychologically-based intention common to many other
popular methods of actor training, and relies on meaning to be
communicated by external, technical means alone. For some, part of the
appeal of Viewpoints lies in its gentle philosophical opposition to psychologically-based training, in that it offers performers a way to outwardly express emotional gestures without relying on inwardly generated emotion within.

The Viewpoints are so frequently used today in contemporary, devised physical theatre, that we might overlook their usefulness in approaching Early Modern texts. This is a shame, because none of the components contained in the approach are culturally or historically exclusive. In fact, so many actor training programs use the Viewpoints methodology in their movement classes, that it is inevitable that actors bring this work to their professional endeavors, one way or another. My directing work at the Blackfriars, especially my production of Love’s Labour’s Lost (2007) made extensive use of Viewpoints technique. The choreographer for that production, Doreen Bechtol, has worked closely with Bogart’s SITI Company over the past few years. Ms. Bechtol’s facility with the Viewpoints approach, and the actors’ familiarity with the vocabulary of Viewpoints meant that seemingly complex and nuanced choreography could be achieved in a very short space of time. As the American Shakespeare Center typically allows only three and a half weeks
of rehearsal for each production in its Summer/Fall season, the benefits of this kind of shorthand are obvious. As scholars and practitioners collaborate to re-imagine the Early Modern theatre through reconstructions like the Globe and Blackfriars we might remind ourselves that actors continue by necessity to draw on what they know to be effective tools, regardless of what performance tradition those tools come from.

**Gestures embedded in the text: when words fall short**

For many scholars, the presence of embedded stage directions and patterns of punctuation hold the key to visualizing the body and performance language of the players in Shakespeare’s company and others, and theories on how to read these clues vary depending on whose book you read. Countless references exist to various gaits, postures and gestures, and these are valuable to anyone involved in close textual study with an interest in performance. Maurice Charney and others have recognized instances of important gestural language in various scholarly editions of the plays, but another more fluid category of embedded stage directions exists, pointing to those rare moments when the text becomes
secondary to the actor’s physical choice. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony’s ‘The nobleness of life/ Is to do thus’ \( ^{xiv} \) (1.1, 38-39, italics mine) and many other moments like this demand gestural choices of the actor that dictate, rather than clarify or strengthen, meaning. Appendix 1 of this essay contains a few selected excerpts of this kind, with a brief description of some possible gestural choices. Open-ended textual moments like these are, and were, finalized in the moment of performance. We can say that the thought is finished only in the synergy of spoken word and action.

Gesture-dependent moments present actors and directors with the opportunity for whimsical choices that may or may not have anything to do with the text. As a result these moments are awkward for scholars, as personal performance style, popular cultural resonance and pure inspiration can sometimes play as great a role in storytelling in the moment as the text itself. What is of course fascinating is the idea that the same was true 400 years ago.

Audiences today still recognize and rely on gestures to communicate what/when words cannot. Though finding the right gesture to physically underscore or amplify the line you speak is crucial in a space like the Globe, finding the right gesture with which to listen is equally vital. The sightlines
are such that no single position on the stage allows an actor to be seen by all sections of the audience at the same time. From time to time each section of the Globe audience must rely on their own ears and the visible reactions of non-speaking or listening actors in order to follow the story. The task of engaging the audience without speaking is made easier for these actors, because their reactions from the stage find a natural connection with the visible audience. Gestures can be stock, universal, personal, political or emotional in nature, but they must hold and convey meaning for the performer and the audience. I would argue that the same must have held true for performers and audiences in the Early Modern theatre.

**Laban Effort Actions**

We could say that a gesture is a physical “event”, an action that punctuates the text, rather than underscoring it in a sustained way. To speak of sustained physical energy is to use language brought to our attention by Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), whose theories and practices have influenced how dance, voice and movement is taught in many conservatories today. Inspired perhaps by the pleasing specificity of ballet choreography in
notation, Rudolf Laban developed a system of notation for the way in which the body and voice travels through space and time.

A complete analysis of Laban technique can be found elsewhere, so I will limit myself here to a description of the eight “effort actions” Laban identified, and which are most commonly used by actors and dancers from otherwise diverse training and performance backgrounds. In the passage that follows, the reader may detect the difficulty I have in translating the work of the rehearsal room to the page. The work I describe happens through the body, and the results are easier to see and hear than they are to articulate in a scholarly manner.

Effort actions are made of three components, each containing two opposing polarities. The three components are: Space, (we distinguish between direct and indirect actions), Weight (we distinguish between strong and light actions), and Time (we distinguish between sudden and sustained actions).

To distinguish between a direct and indirect action, we can say in general terms that direct actions have an “I make things happen” intentional quality to them. Indirect actions reflect an “I respond to outside stimuli” quality to them. Actors experimenting with the weight component
sometimes use the idea of working against resistance (strong effort needed, as in walking through water or sand) or working against no resistance (light effort needed, as in walking normally). The component of time equates to the sudden effort as an on/off impulse, while the sustained effort is continuous. When we combine these three pairs of components, a total of eight combinations described as Float, Punch, Glide, Slash, Dab, Wring, Flick, and Press emerge:

- Float = Indirect, Light, Sustained
- Flick = Indirect, Light, Sudden
- Wring = Indirect, Strong, Sustained
- Slash = Indirect, Strong, Sudden
- Glide = Direct, Light, Sustained
- Dab = Direct, Light, Sudden
- Press = Direct, Strong, Sustained
- Punch = Direct, Strong, Sudden

Laban effort actions are particularly effective in changing habitual physical rhythms and patterns of movement or speech. Orchestrating a performance using the effort actions also allows an actor to move quickly between tangible manifestations of emotion. Since the effort actions connect the physical and vocal elements of performance, they have proved a popular tool in many actor training programs. Shifts in dynamics may be negotiated quickly and without fundamental changes to intention or motivation.
Appendix 2 demonstrates how an actor playing Othello might use Laban effort actions to orchestrate different performance choices for a particular speech (3.3, 388-395) If a performer chooses effort actions that are *indirect*, and share a responsive, rather than pro-active quality to them, Othello’s language seems to respond physically, and violently to his situation, but without strategy or premeditation. If, on the other hand, the performer uses *direct* effort actions of corresponding weight and time, the result is that the language seems to respond to the situation with focus and agency. Put bluntly, punching is controlled, whereas slashing is not. The point is not which represents a better set of performance choices, but that very different choices can be achieved in the moment of performance, as a result of thinking about a maximum of eight things. Such a narrow technical focus is a considerable advantage to performers, who might need to negotiate and deliver complex shifts in thought and emotion, without losing momentum, in mid-flow, so to speak.

The scope of the effort action needs to be considered. In rehearsal or in the classroom we will often engage our whole bodies and fullest extent of our voices as we experiment with each effort action. Rarely in performance do we go to such extremes. More often, the performer
internalizes the effort actions s/he uses, using them to give color and
richness to movement and the voice. It should be noted that the extent to
which an actor externalizes or internalizes the effort action would dictate
how “theatrical” the action appears. Put another way, a more externalized
effort action might be needed if the action is to “read” in a space of the
Globe’s size, whereas an intimate space like the Blackfriars might require
the same action to be internalized. This, like everything else I address here,
is a choice made by the actor, and is both negotiable and flexible.

Using aspects of Laban theory to physicalize the text creates
opportunities for audiences in any theatre, but especially one using
universal lighting, to engage with the story on an immediate and
fundamental level. This keeps the physical communication between actor
and audience fluid and meaningful.

**Emotional/Physical Subtext: Head, Heart, Guts and Groin**

At this point, we can make a transition from the text, to thinking
about subtext. Subtext is a term more associated with contemporary plays
than with those from the Early Modern period, and contemporary acting
exercises often use commonplace physical metaphors to help actors
connect their voices and bodies to the text and subtext of the scene.

Practitioners like Scott Kaiser and others have published exercises for actors in various forms of spoken subtext\textsuperscript{xvii}, specifically the subtext of Shakespeare’s plays. In doing so, Kaiser connects the language of contemporary acting technique directly to the language of Shakespeare. Appendix 3 examines one of Kaiser’s exercises in detail, one he calls \textit{head, heart, guts and groin}. The physical storytelling in this instance relies not so much on conventional gesture, but on a conventional understanding of the body’s relationship to the emotional state. We commonly refer to the idea of the “head” saying one thing, while the “heart” says another. We also understand what we mean by “gut instinct” or persons “thinking with their groin” rather than with their “head”. These common physical metaphors provide a useful platform for actors seeking to differentiate between specific moments in a passage of text.

Actors connecting to “head” impulses connect perhaps to the intellectual, rational, imaginative or reasonable impulses they perceive in the language. Connecting to “heart” might be connecting to a notion of the integrity or honesty in what we say, or perhaps the love or emotional content of the language. When we access the “guts”, we connect to our
appetites, ambition, aggression or anger. “Groin” of course connects with sexual imagery, but might also be useful to an actor dealing with manipulation of language (certain kinds of wit, perhaps, come from the groin as much as from the head). Groin may also be the seat of our survival or animal instincts, and this might be what is suggested to us in the language.

This work is important because it straddles the perceived divide between the traditions of somatic versus psychological storytelling techniques. Even more significantly, Kaiser’s roots in the Stanislavski tradition might seem directly at odds with certain elements of physical theatre, which can be generally said to challenge naturalism as a theatrical form, were it not for the fact that these two traditions can find some common ground in Shakespeare’s visceral language with its strong emotional subtext. Kaiser proposes an essentially somatic, technical approach to navigating the complex emotional territory of Shakespeare’s language. Understanding this connection is exciting. An equivalent, playable connection might ultimately be found between, say, Early Modern humeral theories and a kind of “Shakespearean subtext”. However tantalizing that prospect might be, for now, the approach offers another
useful shorthand for practitioners working on verse plays in reconstructed Early Modern theatres, where the text is communicated by the actor’s physical instrument alone.

In particular, shifting between head, heart, guts and groin can help an actor trying to distinguish between a character’s conflicting internal emotions and motivations at speed. Very often, actors can get caught up in the idea of the conflict itself as they try (to use the same example from *Othello*, above) to play both Othello’s love for Desdemona and his sense of her betrayal of him at the same time. In those instances, the resulting effect for the audience is one of muddied emotion, and a performance that is blocked, without momentum. If an audience is to understand the theatrical idea of an internal, ongoing struggle, the performer might find it best to deliver a rapid succession of radically changing actions or impulses. Each impulse is in fact distinct, and the sense of dilemma is created by the speed with which an actor moves from one action to the next. Switching quickly from, say, heart, to guts, can define and shape the spoken text, while connecting the actor’s body to the shifts in the character’s emotions at the same time. The story thus becomes clear to the eye and to the ear.
This kind of exercise works particularly well when combined with Laban technique. I have found that actors in my classes and in my productions at the Blackfriars have no difficulty orchestrating performances of difficult texts with complex dynamic shifts, when focusing on the Laban’s effort actions and connecting to either head, heart, gut or groin. Indeed, many Laban practitioners will argue for a necessary association between the “strong” effort actions and the actor’s physical core; likewise, a connection between the “weaker” effort actions and the upper body may be useful for many. We might easily imagine “wringing” to have more of a connection to “guts” than to “head”, for example. Likewise, “floating” would seem to some a natural effort action to stem from “heart”, but not from “guts”. How an actor interprets the effort action, or the relationship between it and the moment in the text, will be key in choosing how the effort action is combined with the head, heart, guts or groin-led subtext of the moment in question.

Appendix 4 illustrates how the effort actions connected with head, heart, gut and groin to orchestrate a particular performance by Seattle-based actor Patrick Bentley. Mr. Bentley played the title role in an M.F.A. showcase production of King Lear that I directed, which was performed at
the American Shakespeare Center’s Blackfriars Playhouse in March 2008.

All of the student actors involved in the production were familiar with the particular challenges of the Blackfriars space, many of which seemed best addressed by using techniques described in this essay. In the difficult scene in which the “mad” Lear encounters the recently blinded Gloucester, Lear enters in the middle of a dialogue with himself, the audience, or perhaps both by turns. One of the many acting challenges of this scene lies in the rapid succession of visions Lear articulates into fragmented phrases. In instances like these when the text does not offer a coherent train of thought, we must delve into the subtext, and pay close attention to shifting dynamics in the language, to find a playable solution. For this reason, Mr. Bentley orchestrated his performance of this scene using the Laban effort actions in combination with the head, heart, guts and groin exercise described above. In his M.F.A. thesis paper, he describes this process of orchestration:

…Lear here displays a mental state ranging from manic to anxious to completely lucid in quick succession. For instance, soon after entering, Lear sees, or thinks he sees, a mouse. After trying to catch the mouse, without interval or explanation, Lear boastfully
challenges someone (Edgar? Gloucester? The audience? The mouse?)
to a duel...I chose to employ mostly indirect and sustained Laban
effort actions and to speak from the head and heart for the entire
speech up until “There’s my gauntlet” to suggest the mad king’s calm
delight at finding the creature, but to switch rapidly to a direct effort
action and to speak from the gut for the gallant challenge that
follows. I carefully mapped the entire sequence of Lear’s lunacy in
this fashion, in an effort to produce a compelling and tactically
specific performance. xix

The script excerpt reprinted in Appendix 4 represents Mr. Bentley’s chosen
orchestration, plus a series of findings in rehearsal for the part. It cannot of
course show choices made or modified in the moment of performance, to
incorporate information or responses from the visible Blackfriars audience,
or from his scene partners. These important elements cannot be assessed
prior to the performance experience; orchestrating the basic tenor of one’s
performance in advance, and focusing primarily on the Laban effort actions
and head/heart/guts/groin components can help an actor negotiate a
challenging scene in a technical way.
Working with these different somatic approaches offers the actor and director a diverse and exciting range of staging possibilities, without recourse to “high” production values like sophisticated lighting instruments or an adjustable musical soundtrack to underscore the action on stage. This is useful in any theatrical context, but in the reconstructed Early Modern theatres, such reliance on the actor’s physical instrument alone is essential. We can affect dynamic changes in pace, tempo, rhythm, shape and spatial relationships to clarify the story we want to tell. We can use these simple techniques in orchestrated combinations to respond not only to dynamic shifts within the text, but to dynamic shift in theatrical dimension (from the meteorological storm to that in Lear’s mind, for example), physically establishing and then breaking conventions to present a nuanced story full of playable theatrical metaphor and resonance.

**Creating the inner/other storm**

Combining these techniques helped the same *King Lear* company of student actors to visualize in a playable sense the time-honored metaphor of the storm in Lear’s mind. First we created the aural and visual staging elements of the storm – in our case, very loud thunder sheets and other
percussive effects producing high volume from inside the tiring house and elsewhere back stage, and a heightened level of physicality in the performers onstage. Everyone on stage began using strong and sustained Laban effort actions (pressing, wringing) to communicate the idea of moving against the resistance of wind and rain. To show changes in the direction of the wind, or the effect of sudden events like lightning bolts, sections of movement involving sustained effort actions had to be punctuated with sudden effort actions (slashing, punching). This kind of physical activity underscored the text of the scenes in the storm, and the same effort actions provided the vocal foundation for the lines spoken by Robert Bowen Smith and Andrew Blasenak (the actors playing the Fool and Kent) whose characters were physically and visibly affected by the storm.

Mr. Bentley’s Lear, by contrast, remained motionless as he whispered the “Blow winds...” speech from a kneeling position down stage center. He used the same range of effort actions “in miniature” – massive effort exerted at almost zero volume, with little exterior movement to detract from the cacophony in his mind. As Lear spoke these lines, the Fool and Kent seemed to be separated from Lear by an invisible bubble, as they strained silently against the elements of the storm in their effort to reach
him. Too, the sound effects backstage cut out dramatically for Lear’s lines, except for one very high, sustained note on the bowed psaltery. The thunder sheets and drums came in equally quickly to underscore the sections of text spoken (in our case, yelled) by either Kent or the Fool. Careening rapidly and without transition time between the quiet agony of Lear’s inner monologue and the external, physically expansive chaos of the storm on the heath provided a strong, contrapuntal storm theme. In the intimate Blackfriars space, the whispered text rang clearly and produced a tangible shudder amongst the audience on several occasions. I doubt whether the same technique would prove effective in the outdoor space at the Globe, but we found it a great alternative to the tiresome prospect of several actors screeching over loud, sustained sound effects emanating from the tiring house.

**Experiments for the future**

When we consider the scholarly significance of the reconstructed Globe and Blackfriars, it is hardly surprising that in embracing the reinvention of the spaces themselves, we are tempted to reinvent our thinking about how performances are created in those spaces. In casting
aside our contemporary regard for technical innovations in set design and lighting, we should think twice about casting aside contemporary approaches to actor training favored by performers in these reconstructed theatres. If this generation of physical theatre artists continues to use the reconstructed Globe as their very public laboratory, the quest to visualize the conditions of Early Modern performances will doubtless include more academic inquiry into the aspect of physical storytelling.

By contrast, the American Shakespeare Center’s reconstructed Blackfriars showcased the work of more actors with physical theatre backgrounds when it opened in 2001, than it does today. The most celebrated A.S.C. productions in academic circles are those in the Actor’s Renaissance Season, an ongoing experiment in mounting a series of plays, each with no director and one week of rehearsals. The idea of “process” seems strangely anachronistic at the Blackfriars, which puts it at odds with its older, richer sister, the Globe. As this essay suggests, it takes time and considerable human resources to achieve nuanced and detailed physical storytelling. One could argue that a contemporary acting company’s collective training – with the shared technical vocabulary or shorthand borne out of that training - is the modern equivalent of the Early Modern
players’ apprenticeships and clearly delineated typecasting system, as described by Tiffany Stern and others. As the Globe’s second artistic directorate embraces ever more elaborate visual elements in staging the plays, and actors with physical theatre training find more and more work there, we can expect to find the stylistic differences between the two reconstructed theatres to become increasingly evident. We should also anticipate the scholarly emphasis on the auditory experience of Early Modern playgoers to be balanced with an equal emphasis on the visual.

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Appendix 1: Gestures defining textual meaning:

Boyet, from Love’s Labour’s Lost: ‘Action and Accent did they teach him there, /Thus thou must speak,’ and ‘thus thy body bear’.’ (5.2, 99-100)

Boyet is presumably lampooning the efforts of Berowne and his associates as they coach Moth. “Thus” in both instances requires a clear physical choice, but the text leaves that choice up to the actor playing Boyet. What is interesting here is the question of how Boyet’s physical choices might dictate Moth’s, once he appears to perform his part before the Princess and other ladies. Conventional continuity would require the two actors to
confer with each other, and some collaboration in choosing appropriate
vocal tone and gait would be helpful. Alternatively, a negative judgment on
Moth’s performance as part of the “Muscovites” entertainments might
depend on Boyet’s demonstration being radically different from Moth’s
later efforts.

**Antony, from *Antony and Cleopatra*: ‘Here is my space’ (1.1, 36) ;
‘The nobleness of life of life/ Is to do thus’ (1.1, 38-39), and ‘Were we before
our armies, and to fight/I should do thus. (2.2, 27)

In the first instance – ‘Here is my space’ - the actor playing Antony has the
choice to mark his territory in the geographic or erotic sense, depending on
whether “here” refers to Egypt or to Cleopatra’s body. From the same
speech: ‘the nobleness of life/ Is to do thus’ has excited editors since Pope,
who began a tradition of visualizing this moment as an embrace between
the lovers. Richard Madelaine and others have documented various more
or less acrobatic responses to this line in recent productions.xxix

What Antony chooses as a gesture here may or may not be echoed in the
later line, ‘Were we before our armies, and to fight/I should do thus. (2.2,
27). I rather like the idea of Antony embracing Caesar in a cheeky reprise of his earlier clinch with Cleopatra, but the text does not dictate this. What is important to remember is how this moment can define our idea of Antony’s relationship with Caesar at this point in the play.

**Hamlet, from *Hamlet*: ‘Take this from this, if this be otherwise** (2.2, 157)

Editors have long insisted on Polonius pointing first to his head, then to his shoulders, to make sense of this line. Though this gestural reading is certainly persuasive, playable and clear, the possibilities do not end there. Polonius might point to a badge of office, indicating his willingness to lose it if proved wrong. Gestures towards the heart and trunk might be just as appropriate as those to head and shoulders. What is wonderful about this line is that it makes absolutely no sense on the page, without a gestural choice of some kind.

**King Lear, from *King Lear* (Conflated Text): ‘And as a stranger to my heart and me/Hold thee, from this, for ever.’** (1.1, 115-116)

Editors often become silent directors during the early “table work” phase of rehearsals. Various editors have noted that “this” might not require a
gesture (that is may refer to “this time”), but R. A. Foakes agrees with Jay L. Halio that “this” could mark a gesture towards Lear’s heart. Foakes also allows the possibility of Lear pointing out the map of the kingdom or the coronet in this moment. I think all three gestures have equal merit, and a non-gestural choice misses a very dramatic opportunity.

Appendix 2: Laban Effort Actions

The passage that follows demonstrates how Laban effort actions might be used to orchestrate different performance choices for a given text. In the first instance, I have suggested an orchestration that amplifies and underscores certain emotional qualities in the text. In the second instance, the orchestration uses opposing effort actions, and offers a quite different reading of the text.

Othello, from Othello (3.3, 388-395)

By the world,

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.

I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

I’ll have some proof. My name, that was as fresh

As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face. If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I’ll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!

Version 1: Indirect Effort Actions

[Wring] By the world,

[Flick] I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.

I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

[Slash] I’ll have some proof.

[Float] My name, that was as fresh

As Dian’s visage,

[Wring] is now begrimed and black

As mine own face.

[Slash] If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I’ll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!

Version 2: Direct Effort Actions
[Press] By the world,

[Dab] I think my wife be honest, and think she is not.

I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

[Press] I’ll have some proof.

[Glide] My name, that was as fresh

As Dian’s visage,

[Press] is now begrimed and black

As mine own face.

[Punch] If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I’ll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!

Appendix 3: Head, heart, guts and groin

If we break the same Othello speech into measures once more, and make the following choices in terms of head, heart, guts and groin, we find we can point up the antithetical ideas in the verse, and give a strong sense of the conflict within Othello’s psyche, in an orchestrated fashion – rather than relying on inspiration or “real” emotional connection in the moment. Inspiration or actual felt emotion is often difficult to marry with the
structure of the verse, and so clarity can sometimes be the unintended casualty.

Using switches between head, heart, guts and groin in an orchestrated fashion, the speech might run thus:

[Guts] By the world,

[Heart] I think my wife be honest,

[Groin] and think she is not.

[Head] I think that thou art just,

[Groin] and think thou art not.

[Guts] I’ll have some proof.

[Heart] My name, that was as fresh

As Dian’s visage,

[Groin] is now begrimed and black

As mine own face.

[Head] If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I’ll not endure it.

[Guts] Would I were satisfied!
Different orchestrations will, of course, provide different readings of the same text. What is exciting is that these shifts can be orchestrated in the moment of performance.

Appendix 4: Orchestrating using Laban Effort Actions and Head, Heart, Guts and Groin.

The text that follows represents orchestrated performance choices made by Patrick Bentley (playing Lear) over the course of rehearsals for an M.F.A. showcase production of King Lear, which I directed, and which performed at the American Shakespeare Center’s Blackfriars Playhouse in March 2008. In this format, I have broken the actor’s performance script into speech measures and inserted the relevant combination of Head/Heart/Guts/Groin and Laban effort action in brackets immediately prior to the spoken line of text. The performance script was taken from the Folio version of the text (corresponding to 4.5, 84-104 in the Norton)

Lear: [Heart /Float] No, they cannot touch me for crying.

[Head/Float] I am the King himself.

Edgar: O thou side-piercing-sight!
Lear: [Head/Dab] Nature’s above art, in that respect.

[Heart/Glide] Look, look, a Mouse! Peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do’t.

[Guts/Punch] There’s my gauntlet. I’ll prove it on a giant.

[Guts/Press] Give the word.

Edgar: Sweet marjoram.

Lear: [Heart/Float] Pass.

Gloucester: I know that voice.

Lear: [Guts/Punch] Ha!

[Head/Float] Goneril with a white beard?

[Guts/Slash] They flattered me like a dog. To say ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to everything that I said

[Groin/Slash] ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to, was no good divinity.

[Heart/Float] When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter;

[Guts/Punch] when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found ‘em, there I smelt ‘em out.

[Guts/Press] Go to, they are not men of their words.

[Heart/Float] They told me I was everything;
‘tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.

*Gloucester:* The trick of that voice I do well remember.

Is’t not the King?

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1 I discovered this word shortly after beginning work on this essay, and I love it. I should apologize for using it 8 times over the course of the essay.


3 The contracts offered at Shakespeare’s Globe in London are in fact categorized as West End contracts, as the Globe is not publicly funded. Founding and former members of physical theatres such as Théâtre de Complicité, Told by an Idiot, Shared Experience and others routinely find work at the Globe. Few of them work regularly at other West End theatres, which often rely on the box office appeal of TV celebrities or movie stars from an entirely different performance tradition.

4 Email interview with Sian Williams, September 2008


6 This title was later amended to “Master of the Words.”

7 For details of Mike Alfreds’ rehearsal process for this production, see the *Globe Research Bulletin* on the 2001 production of *Cymbeline*,
viii See Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642: Third Edition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 95-103. Also reprinted in Gurr’s chapter on styles of acting is a chart from John Bulwer’s *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* (1644), which offers visual information about how certain emotional states may have been communicated with the hands, to enhance an orator’s delivery.

ix The list of smaller physical theatre companies whose work has influenced that of larger mainstream theatre in Britain and America includes: Told By An Idiot, Volcano, The Kosh, Boilerhouse, and many others.


xi Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 49

xii Michael Chekhov’s approach to actor training, though very much rooted in the Stanislavski tradition, features the key concept of the “psychological gesture”, which in many respects links the psychological and somatic impulses of the actor to the text. A thorough analysis of his important work is outside the bounds of this essay, but I urge readers with an interest in the psychological gesture to read Chekhov’s *To The Actor* (London, Routledge, 2002), and *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, ed. Deirdre Hurst du Prey (New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985).


Flow is a fourth element in Laban notation, related to the continuity of actions, but a full analysis of flow is not necessary to the purposes of this paper.


Again, the work of Michael Chekhov might also be described in similar terms. See note above.

Patrick Bentley, unpublished Master of Fine Arts thesis (Mary Baldwin College, 2008), 9


