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Aspects on Improving Body Expression in Acting Students

Cristina-Elena Moraru\textsuperscript{a,\ast}, Liliana Croitoru\textsuperscript{b}, Emilia Florina Grosu\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}University “Al.I.Cuza” Iasi, 3 Toma Cozma street, Iasi 700554, Romania
\textsuperscript{b}University “Al.I.Cuza” Iasi, 3 Toma Cozma street, Iasi 700554, Romania
\textsuperscript{c}University ”Babes-Bolyai”, 1 Mihail Kogălniceanu street, Cluj-Napoca,400084, Romania

Abstract

The improvement of body expressiveness in students majoring in acting is closely connected to the means used. This fact contributes to the acknowledgement of their own body and of its possibilities of expression in various scenic situations. In this paper, we argue the necessity of introducing certain exercises, specific to physical training, and their efficiency in educating the bodily plasticity of the students. The paper aims at presenting the conceiving and applicability of a system of means and their use in the bodily expressiveness classes. The intention of the program is to propose a diverse palette of exercise structures specific to physical education, by taking into account a series of objectives: the development and improvement of motor qualities such as joint mobility and muscle elasticity, skill, speed of execution, specific resistance, coordination and well-balanced physical development. The aforementioned propositions have led to the following conclusions: the valorisation of the knowledge and methodology of sports training contributes to the bodily education of these students; the general specific physical training contributes to achieving the purpose of theatrical teaching process; by means of exercise, bodily expressiveness can be improved; a better motor capacity leads to approaching various forms of scenic expression.

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1. Introduction

Preoccupations in the sphere of body aesthetics have existed since time immemorial; throughout history, artists

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-074-493-3133; fax: +4-032-201-027.
\textit{E-mail address:} gimcristinamoraru@yahoo.com
have developed chronologically the interest for the human body, followed by contempt during the Middle Ages, then passing to the triumph of bodily and spiritual expressiveness during Renaissance.

Throughout history, human beings have been preoccupied with their looks; this is confirmed by the sculptures or writings of the various periods. They depict the beauty, the bodily expressiveness of athletes and gods, as effects of the exercise executed in the palestre. Another hypothesis exists in this case: the imagery of Greeks’ art is the ideal representation of man, as an expression of people’s pride; it can also be stated that deities and heroes could be nothing short of perfect. In Greek mythology, the three daughters of Zeus – who personify, as group, beauty, grace and female charm – were represented as part of Aphrodite’s or Apollo’s suite. In the same line, the Discobolus highlights the athlete’s bodily expressiveness, in that period. (Kernbach, 1996)

Beauty is an individual and unique harmony. Leonardo da Vinci proposes an ideal pattern of body proportions, where bodily expressiveness is pinpointed and depicted by the artist in a unique manner. In some directions, Renaissance has taken over the ideal of the well-balanced, beautiful and good man of the Antiquity, by translating bodily and spiritual expressiveness into specific expressions. This period also involved the return to Antiquity’s culture of beauty and balance.

Modern imagery – through the art of photos and videos – allows us to understand, by the intimate mechanisms of movements, their beauty, elegance and perfect adaptation to the task proposed by the individual, that is the characteristics “of the kinetic song of motion”, the beautiful and well-balanced movement translated into bodily expressiveness.

The author of the “Kalokagathon” monograph states, “in autoplastic bodily activities, self-image and self-imaging are phenomena that belong to human personality” (Comarnescu, 1985). Psychologists believe that self-image is the most important structural element of the personality.

From another perspective, bodily expressiveness can be seen as a communication way, as part of the canonical scheme of human expressiveness, where the layer of desires, motivations or values is primordial. It lays at the foundation of all systems of expressiveness. Each expressiveness level lays at the foundation of the subsequent one. The expression palette of each concretization level increases compared to the preceding one.

2. Material and method

In this paper, we have started from the belief that the human body and mind influence each other and that they are in permanent interaction. “A body – whether or not developed physically – can easily interfere with the activity of the mind; it can weaken the will or it can destroy the feelings.” (Dodin, 2006)

However, we can only seldom establish a permanent balance between our body and our mind. More than any other profession, acting forces the individual to see his body as an instrument for the experimentation of creative ideas on stage. The individual must try to find a balance between body and mind. There are actors who manage to feel their roles on a deep level, who can understand them, but they do not manage to express and to produce on stage – before the public – this tremendous richness of experiences, by using their own means. For this purpose, the actor has to practice daily a set of exercises specific to his profession, meant to train his body and his mind. The original contribution of the author was precisely the introduction of physical education techniques within the students’ training.

In the current education system, school prepares you for a cult of reply and of thought; as if you were automatically suitable for any role once you learnt the “inside” phrases. This is why it is important for the actor to focus – in his artistic formation – on the scenic behaviour, on the plastics of his artistic and suggestive movements, for which he will have to use consciously the unfolding possibilities provided by the scenic format, as well as his own possibilities.

This paper aims at supporting the future actors by proposing means specific to physical education, combined with those of acting art, in order to help the student during the training process; the purpose is for them to execute on stage the most diverse movements within a normal, regular motion sequence of the human body. The twofold exercises – technical and artistic – prepare the body for acquiring flexibility, agility and muscle force, within a bodily expression as veridical as possible.
3. Design of the paper

The improvement of body expressiveness in students majoring in acting is closely connected to the means used. This fact contributes to the acknowledgement of their body and of its possibilities of expression in various scenic situations. In this paper, we argue the necessity of introducing certain exercises, specific to physical training, and their efficiency in educating the bodily plasticity of the students.

In the elaboration of this paper, we have started from the hypothesis that, by using means specific to physical education, the bodily expression of the practitioners can be improved.

The purpose of this paper is, first, the development and improvement of specific motor qualities, such as mobility, flexibility, elasticity, skill, and second, the other known motor qualities, by the means of physical education, within the classes of bodily expressiveness of students majoring in Art of the Actor. The paper aims at presenting the conceiving and applicability of a system of means and their use in the bodily expressiveness classes. This system of means, which belongs to physical education, represents an original approach to these students’ training. In this sense, the categories of means introduced in the syllabus of acting students in order to influence the bodily expression were the following:

- **Self-shaping**
  
  The positive effects of self-shaping efforts can be resumed as follows: forming a real image, doubled by a wish to get close to the ideal image; improving self-image; increasing self-esteem; becoming aware of one’s body and achieving an effective model; improving the social self-conscience; extending the use of nonverbal language on the body level; increasing the capacity to adjust to life challenges by stimulating the adaptation energy.

  The self-shaping is the action of modelling one’s own being – mostly the body – through specific activities. Whereas, psychologically speaking, self-education means that the individual takes charge of his own fate, in the words of L.S. Vygotsky, from the perspective of bodily activities practice, the individual models mainly his bodily being. (Vigotski, 1973). The self-shaping characteristic comes from the individual’s motivation, from his intention to develop harmoniously one’s body and, this way, to acquire a better self-image and an outstanding physical expressiveness. This is apparent in gymnastic activities (callisthenic and rhythmic exercises, exercises for body formation and expression, bodybuilding) and rather visible in sports performance training (physical training and fitness), in compensatory activities and even in leisure and recreational activities.

  The general significance of the self-shaping characteristic of bodily activities contributes to the development of the ability to adjust to new situations promptly and flexibly. Even if this additional element of bodily activities is not explicit or visibly expressed in the psychopedagogy of exercise, it is a permanent part of life and it lays at the foundation of educating body plasticity and movements in certain sports branches of bodily expression, such as rhythmic gymnastics, ice skating, synchronized swimming, dance, bodybuilding and fitness.

- **Gymnastics**
  
  Gymnastics comprises a system of exercises applied analytically or globally, which influence selectively and cumulatively the locomotor system, in order to improve and balance the body motions and in order to form a correct posture. (Grigore, 2003)

  Within the bodily expressiveness classes, from basic gymnastics we can use a diverse set of exercises, as follows: addressing the main muscle groups, executed individually, in pairs or in group; passive, active and with resistance; exercises shaped as a game and as circuits. Students can execute drills with objects (canes, balls, rope and circle), drills using the wall rod and drills involving gymnastics apparatuses: fixed ladder, gymnastics bench, plinth, etc.

  Acrobatic gymnastics is also useful, through the use of its accessible elements, such as: rotation and rolling, shoulder stand, hand or forearm stand, head to the chest, headstand, cylinder, turning upside down and various combinations of elements. More difficult acrobatic elements can be executed, too, such as back flip, flick, leaps, etc. The means of corrective (medical) gymnastics focus on toning the posterior muscles in order to acquire a correct body posture. These exercises can correct wrong postures such as round back, kyphosis or scoliosis, knock-knee or flat feet. From aerobic gymnastics, we can use the basic steps and the specific connection steps, floor routines for the toning of the main muscle groups and stretching drills; all of them influence favourably the cardiorespiratory system and the development or improvement of certain motor qualities.
**Sports rhythmic gymnastics** has the same basic objectives as physical education, but it uses specific, expressive and artistic means; drills are executed on musical background, which influences the rhythm and shape of the movement, so important in bodily expressiveness. (Moraru, 2007)

Bodily expressiveness transfers from this type of gymnastics mainly elements of body technique, such as specific running and walking steps (slit leap, pike, ring leap, etc), body wave and swing drills, tense-release exercises, balance drills, turns and pirouettes, jumps, coordination drills, semiacrobatic elements, etc.

- **Eurhythmy**

Bodily expressiveness through eurhythmy involves the transposition of states, ideas or feelings through artistic expressions of the body in motion, corresponding to a literary or musical theme, by using movements that are well balanced in space, time and musical context. (Stoenescu, 1985).

Poetic eurhythmy is *speech visible in space*. Musical eurhythmy is *singing visible in time*. Speaking and singing are two possibilities of expression for the human soul. In this sense, eurhythmy is the revelation of human soul, but also of the body through its expression in space. (Dobrescu, 2006)

Its expression instrument is the human body, the musical instrument of the soul; the entire body becomes a mediator of artistic expression. Each vowel, consonant and nuance of the word, of the speech, each musical note, interval and chord has an intrinsic movement revealed by a eurhythmic gesture. The focus is on the formative side of learning, on creativity, by combining the constitutive elements of eurhythmy, specific to theatre, poetry, music, dance, with motor actions specific to artistic and rhythmic gymnastics in a creative and original manner, in order to express certain themes through the human body.

- **Exercises of body plastics**

The study begins with self-knowledge exercises, where students have to educate their mental and physical reactions in order to master – as well as they can – their artistic means. The purpose is twofold: improvement of physical plastics and expressiveness, in order to obtain a nuanced and better-motivated interpretation.

**Conclusions and discussions**

An expressive and well-shaped body to transmit to the public the expressiveness of the gesture and its beauty is the ideal of all actors. The technique of motion is one of the basic elements of the development of artistic expression and of the actor’s involvement in this process. This is why it is necessary to introduce a differentiated physical training, able to optimize the expression capacity of the entire physical system.

In the practices with students, we have noticed that simple exercises, which respect the natural motion axes, can give the impression of a scenic relation: head, flexion, extension, side bending can suggest obedience, reflexivity, fear or indecision. Few are the students or actors who master this language well enough to turn it into a means of theatrical expression and to manage to get – at the same time – out of the narrow circle of profane gestures with random significance.

This is why, when working with bodily expression, it is important to take into account the following aspects:
- the position of the body and of its segments, with an emphasis on posture, barycentre, perception of weight and energy points, control of breathing;
- movements in space, in different planes and levels, with all intermediary passages of motion, unbalances, rhythm of execution, intensity, pauses.

The general objective must be approached from a pedagogical perspective; hence, the practice of bodily expression allows adding the formative activity, by stimulating a series of behavioural aspects, such as emotional availability, cognitive and affective openness and flexibility, consciousness of the events experienced, acceptance of the other by embracing diversity.

The finality is for the person who creates something to create oneself; this self-formation allows regaining the harmony with one’s own body, thus providing the possibility of authentic encounters with others.

Training is mainly oriented towards the belief that one’s own body can develop a particular language, able to communicate. The person is helped to define oneself as an individual, by discovering the dynamism and limits of the body, the possibilities of diversion, of rephrasing the image of one’s body.

After the study conducted with the students majoring in “art of the actor”, we can underline several conclusions and recommendations:
Students do not get enough physical training and they lack several motor skills;

The valorisation of the knowledge and methodology of sports training can support the bodily education of acting students;

General and specific physical training helps achieving the purpose of the theatrical learning process;

Exercise can improve the bodily expressiveness of students;

The improvement of motor skills leads to an easiness of scenic expression of the acting students and to them approaching a wide palette of movements;

In order to detail certain acrobatic elements and to prepare the students for the execution of certain motor actions, the classes of bodily expressiveness can solve this task under the guidance of the specialized teacher;

Performing various types of exercise, also after graduation;

The actor needs not only general physical training, but he must also understand deeply the principles and methodology of physical education and sports training, in order to execute correctly the exercises proposed.

The actor lends his body; he uses his spirit to the benefit of the character and he presents a troubling and convincing scenic existence, insofar as the mystery of the being, hidden in any of us, can be deciphered by words or body motion. However, this requires long-term exercise and changing the perception according to which an actor no longer needs bodily training after graduation.

References


