

Below are some tasters of the kind of work in Starters 1

You are introducing a new bunch of students to unfamiliar territory. How do you proceed?

This was my starting-point with this resource. We don't always have time for the kind of research we would like to do in preparation for teaching. Nowadays, timetables and teachers' lives are so busy that it's easier to fly to something you know and have done before than to branch out into something different. I hope the three Starters resources may make this easier for you, helping you to keep fresh yourselves as you teach your students with new material.

Until ten years ago I travelled around the whole of the UK giving workshops, many of them on practitioners. Very few of these exercises are in any of my other resources as I was careful to separate the written resources on practitioners from what I might do in a workshop. Now that I no longer do workshops it struck me that those exercises and the abbreviated approaches in which, in a few sessions, all the main points about a practitioner's theories are introduced, might be useful to busy teachers.

Each of the practitioners explored in this concise way means that if a group don't respond with excitement to one practitioner's ideas, there is still time to try them with another.

Of course, you may not be able to get through all of my suggestions in one period. But you can pick it up and carry through for maybe another couple of periods. All of the suggestions are designed for three or four hours of practical work. And of course you can pick and choose out of a number of examples which exercises in a particular section might go down best with your students. You DON'T have to accomplish them all but can select what you think will work best with your group.

All my work, always, is 'through practice'. I believe that learning is a mixture of listening to teachers and others, finding out through individual research, - and practice. For me this is the most important of all. It is by trying things out that you experience something of what the practitioner intended. And 'doing' will seed a physical, body memory in you. Trying something out practically for yourself is memorable and tends to stick there even more than listening and researching.

From the practical work on Stanislavski

INNER FEELING/ EMOTION MEMORY

2] Have chairs scattered around the studio, one or two more than the number of students, so that there are always a couple of empty chairs.

Below are a number of moods the teacher can use. **The students start by sitting and a mood is announced. The students, in their own time, stand, walk and find another chair to sit in, under the influence of that mood.**

Here are some moods you can try: self-confident pre-occupied aggressive shy happy

Before they begin tell them that characters in a play [and in real life] respond to whatever mood they are in both inside and outside their bodies. A feeling of depression, for example, will build up inside and affect the way you feel, move, and speak outwardly.

The exercise cannot be hurried. Time must be given to create the mood inwardly. The students should try to remember a time when they felt this mood and what brought it about.

Sometimes I find it best to have the students in chairs where they're facing all sorts of directions away from each other, so they are not distracted. **They should try to allow the memory [Stanislavski calls it Emotion Memory] to grow inside them until they are genuinely feeling whatever mood you have suggested. When they have [and some honest members may not have succeeded yet] they stand up and walk towards an empty chair where they sit. Always in the mood they have worked on.** Others will have moved, of course, because they don't want to feel different, to stand out or 'fail'. This is understandable and acknowledge it with those concerned. Perhaps ask how many moved for pressure reasons rather than because they really felt their emotion.

Since it is difficult not to feel distracted, perhaps encourage the group to try this at home too, in the privacy of their own bedroom. A more genuine response might occur which they can describe later.

It's best to take time over Inner Feeling and Emotion Memory. Those that are willing can share with the group the memory that triggered this mood for them. Allow those who never moved, because they had not yet felt the mood taking them over, the ability to talk about it and explain how difficult and how important to his acting system Stanislavski found true memories.

To see the difference, try all the moods [including depressed] as an instant 'coat' that the student has donned and compare this approach with the inward one just used.

Everything that Stanislavski encourages works from inside to outside. Other practitioners, such as Brecht, might use the instant donning of the mood as if it is a coat that can quickly and easily be shed. Discuss the differences they felt. What might be the problem, if building a realistic character a la Stanislavski, with the quick fix of the 'coat'?

It would be great if one of the group realised that to don a mood as if it were a coat will mean that there will be little variation. It will be a stereotype of a depressed

person , an aggressive person, or whatever. Stereotypes have no place in Stanislavski.

From the practical work on Brecht

To sum up, here are the most important three points:

- 1] Brecht is about telling a story. Character is not important except as it furthers the story.
- 2] A true Brechtian story has a message.
- 3]. The way the story is told is through demonstration/ narration, dropping in and out of character and **not** by being that character.

Let's try some of his ideas out practically. Often Brecht sounds far more difficult than he is in practice. That's why it is important to have a go at these exercises.

CLARITY/ GESTUS

In pairs, one is inside the shop and the other outside. There is a window separating the pair. The one on the outside thinks of something s/he wants their partner to buy. There's no point in shouting; there is traffic going up and down the street and the glass is thick... Miming what it is you want is the only way forward. You will need large bold and clear gestures.

After a couple of minutes have everyone sit down facing their partner. All the ones that were inside the shop announce, in turn, what their partner had asked them to buy. How many have got it right? Whether it's a banana, a sunhat or a bicycle, the results can be hilarious.

Finally swap sides to see how successful the communication is for the other member of the pair.

Here you have used Clarity and Exaggeration. You will have learned that woolly mimes do not work. Every gesture must be clearly defined.

Now let's add Attitude to the mix. **Line up in pairs, facing each other, with enough space in between for other pairs to process down. Still in pairs, start one end of the studio and come down in pairs, using the waiting pairs to each side as an audience. Use your whole body, face and gesture to create your idea of the following stereotypes. As one pair reaches the bottom of the lines and takes their own place there the pair at the top peel away and process down with the next pair of characters.** Make the gestus super-clear; **exaggerate**. It's important to portray your gestus/attitude to the character: Is the thief a victim of society or out for

what he can get? Is the aristocrat an unlikeable pompous so-and-so or is he trying to use his riches to help the poor? The way these character-types pass through the lines of the rest of the students will allow your chosen gestus to be evident.

Try out the following:

Aristocrats

Policemen

Journalists

Homeless people

Famous rockstars

Heros

Cowards

Criminals

Market stallholders

From the practical work on Peter Brook

THE TIGHTROPE

Finish with an exercise that Brook developed right near the end of his life. I remember watching a master class about it on television and being transfixed. This exercise is NOT referred to in my earlier work on Brook, in *Styletasters 2*, because I didn't know about it then. It involves the whole group.

A chalk line, or if that is difficult a long narrow piece of cloth, or even actual rope, is all you need. This is a tightrope and is imagined to be high above the ground. Peter Brook had the floor covered in carpets and used the edge of a carpet for the exercise.

Each student in turn crosses the tightrope. They will approach it with caution and need to advance along it realistically. It requires the student to believe that what they are doing is real. Playing with balance will be an important factor to help belief. You need to convince the audience of waiting students of the difficulty of what they are doing. Brook said that the exercise was designed to emphasise the fact that the whole body and mind must remain sensitive at all times. The exercise will 'increase sensitivity as if your feet had eyes.'

This is an excellent exercise and demands a lot from your students. Silence is important, because they should be sensible of the concentration of the person who is currently crossing the tightrope and that they must not be disturbed for they could

fall. After a while, you should notice that those watching are totally immersed and concerned at every wobble and sway.

The tightrope exercise is a metaphor for the whole experience of acting. There is always the possibility of falling, of failure, but there is nothing wrong with that. We learn from failures. Brook feels that acting should be a joyful experience. Joy gives the body and spirit lightness and makes us less fearful and more willing to try and try again.

From the practical work on Rudolf Laban

The effort actions are useful in establishing character types, for such broad characterisations as are required by Commedia'dell Arte, clowning and many other forms of largely physical theatre. But it can be useful for realistic characterisation too. 'Real' people on stage will undergo many changes of mood during the course of a play and each change can be under-pinned by one of these effort actions, while their basic character may be over all based on one effort action. For instance, someone using the effort action of 'thrust' might be a bullying type, used to getting his way. It suggests ways that that person might move, if to thrust is their mind set. When you get to the effort actions in this resource, try to picture the kind of person suggested by each and how that might help an actor.

Next is effort with weight, where the two ends of the scale from 1-10 are light and strong, the lowest being the lightest.

An example of using a light movement is to imagine you are on a sandy beach on a hot day. The sand burns when you step on it, so make your way to your beach-towel in the shade with minimum pressure of the foot to the sand.

And here's a heavy or strong one: use the whole group to lift an imaginary very heavy metal girder. This needs care to watch down the group line – a metal girder cannot bend! Lift it until it settles on your right or left shoulder and walk a few steps before you let it fall back onto the ground. Don't forget to believe in its presence and to jump out of the way when you drop it. Work together throughout as one. An onlooker must believe in the weight of the thing as well as its solidity – which will be demonstrated by the way you grasp it.

Characters can be found by playing with the idea of weight and where in your body that weight is situated. Some fun ideas can emerge from such experimentation.

Here are some to try:

What kind of character emerges if the heaviness of your body is in your hands? Your head? Your bottom? Your chest?

Play with this idea a little and see what character might emerge from any of these when you walk around, sit down, stand or speak.

Now try the opposite, where your head wants to float off, or your hands keep moving upwards as if they have a life of their own.

Ignore Laban's ideas at your peril! Don't dismiss him as 'just' a dance guru.

By the way, many Physical Theatre groups use the 1-10 scale invented by Laban. It is a very useful tool.