The Moving Voice
The Integration of Voice and Movement Studies

Edited by Rena Cook

Presented by the Voice and Speech Review
The official Journal of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association

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VASTA is poised to become an exciting international organization and is actively planting seeds for global networking, other cultural involvement and resource-sharing.

Our mission is to:
- Practice and encourage the highest standards of voice and speech use and artistry in all professional arenas.
- Serve the needs of voice and speech teachers and students in training and practice.
- Promote the concept that the art of the voice and speech specialist is integral to the successful teaching of acting and to the development of all professional voice users.
- Encourage and facilitate opportunities for ongoing education and the exchanging of knowledge and information among professionals in the field.

VASTA is all about:
- Vision
- Artistry
- Standards of conduct
- Training enhancement and
- Advocacy for our profession.

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**Voice Related Movement Studies** Sheila Gordon and Dana McConnell, Associate Editors

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The Voice Related Movement Section of the *The Moving Voice: The Integration of Voice and Movement Studies* brings together an international community of researchers, educators and performers who strongly prefer not to separate voice production from kinesthetic exploration—in concept or practice. While coming from diverse disciplines, all the authors lead us toward the experiential discovery of voice, and reaffirm the somatic principle that the body in space is the site of learning, feeling, expression and creativity. The articles and essays that follow probe the “how” of a largely elusive experience for most young performers and an extremely delicate station for professional voice users: the experience of flow, balance and power. Such focus is given to relationships of human sensation through movement, breath and voicing, that even a spot read of one essay or article will create a change of breath in the reader. You may find it difficult not to read silently—humming encouraged!

Michael Lugering provides the reader with a navigable system of abstract movement and sound lessons. David Garfinkle outlines the use of breath-based pranayama yoga bandhas in actor training. Alexander practitioner Connie de Veer provides an introduction to the Technique and practical tools for freeing the actor’s voice. In “The Actor’s Ecology” co-authors Leslie Bennett and Paul Meier add their voices to the training conversation as they explore how all centers of the body work together in an integrative relationship. Nancy Saklad’s essay discusses synthesizing acting and voice training in a fusion of Chekhov and Fitzmaurice techniques.

Jeff Morrison’s article is an in-depth discussion of the relationship between contact improvisation, brain functioning, and Fitzmaurice restructuring work. Acknowledging the sometimes competing demands placed upon musical theatre performers, Rene Pulliam outlines a cohesive approach to finding a “unified breath.” Greek messenger speeches are the foundation of Erica Tobolski and Sarah Barker’s explorations of performing heightened text with scale and truth. Irene Pauzer’s essay with keys to understanding the voice/breath development of the trained dancer.

Andrew Kimbrough considers the significance of Rudolf Steiner’s *Speech and Drama* on acting pedagogy. Elizabeth van den Berg details a fascinating collaboration with Synetic Theatre, a cross-cultural and multilingual company. And finally Simon Ratcliffe chronicles his response to the integration of the work of master teachers Kristin Linklater and Lorna Marshall.

Our thanks to the many people who contributed to the section, including the authors, peer reviewers, and those who offered support in less structured but equally significant ways. We are hopeful that this section will nourish engage and stimulate all who partake of the contents and we look forward to the discussions to follow.
February, 2007. 2:37 pm. London. Bank of the Thames River. Tate Modern. Level 3. Room 7. I am looking at a large oil on canvas—two large blocks in different shades of yellow sit above a bluish block below. The Tate Modern website describes the work as follows: “hazy, pulsating rectangles float within a vertical format.”

The painting is by Mark Rothko (1903-1970), one of America's most important and iconic post-war abstract expressionistic painters. A young student next to me looks with curiosity and murmurs, “I don’t do abstraction.”

One month later. 8:30 am. Las Vegas. UNLV. Studio Theatre HFA 104. I am teaching our new freshman class. We begin with a seemingly simple improvisation. I ask each student to move any part of their body in anyway, direction or manner that they choose. After giving the students a few minutes to explore the movement, I ask them to allow the body to make a sound that accompanies the movement. The exercise is not altogether successful. It seems they don’t do abstraction either.

The young student at the Tate Modern and the students in my class are not to be criticized for their struggle in finding meaning and purpose in their different, yet surprisingly similar frustrating experience with abstraction. I struggled long and hard with it myself.

What is this strange type of sound and movement work I am asking my students to explore? I suggest that the most useful type of sound and movement work is at its core a type of abstraction of the physical life of a thought and feeling experienced directly in the voice and body. This is a unique, special, important under celebrated and misunderstood type of improvisation. The example above with my freshman class is only one variation of a whole host of varied and flexible sound and movement exercises that are common practice in acting studios across the country. Sound and movement improvisations universally involve a full-bodied and integrated exploration of the voice and body without the recourse to the spoken word. The actor moves and sounds—in the abstract. Almost any pattern of movement is acceptable as well as the whole host of vowel sounds—ooh, ahh, ohh, ee and other buzzing, popping, murmuring and hissing sounds (consonants) are welcome addition to the exploration. The aim is integration—a moving voice and a sounding body without the use of words.

Most voice teachers agree that sound and movement work is a liberating, informative and essential experience for the student. However, very little has been written about why this is so. I suggest that in both training and the maintaining of the actor's instrument sound and movement work is more important than we think and more time should be devoted to it. Much has been written explaining the importance of breathing, resonance, range and articulation. Less is written about this important, yet mysterious part of our practice. Over the years, sound and movement work has become an essential part of my teaching. The more I do the greater my commitment to do more of it. However, I would like to suggest that while every sound and movement exercise has unquestionable pedagogical value some types are more useful for actors than others. Let me state unequivocally that as a voice and movement teacher I find any sound and movement exploration useful and valid—at the very least the body and voice are exercised in a non-traditional manner that has implications for new possibilities of expression that transcend the literal and often confound the
intellect. This in and of itself is a sound justification for almost any type of sound and movement exploration. Nonetheless, I would like to describe a specialized type of sound and movement work that I have developed that provides an essential link that bridges the gap between voice and body training and actor training.

**Abstraction Defined**

First things first. All sound and movement work is at its very core a type of abstraction. Abstraction is a term that casts a rather large shadow. The word is used in a variety of disciplines including philosophy, linguistics, psychology, logic, mathematics, neurology, art and even object-oriented computer programming. Allow me to draw parallels and to intermingle the disparate fields of abstraction somewhat indiscriminately. One of my goals is to illuminate the importance and purpose of sound and movement work within the larger framework of abstraction.

*Abstraction* comes from the Latin *abs*, meaning *away from*, *tractum* meaning *to draw* and *ion* meaning *a state of being*. In English the literal translation is something like *to draw a way from.*

The goal of all abstraction is to strip away all non-essential details and to retain only the essential information that is most relevant or important. "It is a process of generalization by reducing the information content…in order to retain only the information which is relevant for a particular purpose."

For example, if you and I are searching for someone in a crowded mall during the Holiday Season, the process of locating the person we are searching for involves a type of abstraction. To find the person that we are looking for requires some *drawing away* of certain non-essential details. If you are looking for your two-year old brown-haired niece, you search the crowd for short persons with brown hair—children only. If I’m looking for Santa, I am scanning the crowd for a fat, old man in bright red colored clothing. Again, to help us find who we are looking for certain unnecessary and non-essential facts about the person we are looking for are *drawn away*. For example, the fact that your niece was born in Orlando and just had a birthday will not help you find her in the crowd.

Similarly, when improvising in the abstract something has to be *drawn away*. Obviously, in sound and movement work language is omitted from the exploration. But what remains when we express ourselves without words? My student’s struggle is a little like searching for someone in a large crowd, when they are not really sure whom they are searching for. If you don’t know what you are abstracting, it is hard to see the forest for the trees. Consequently, they are not sure how to proceed. The students clearly understand that language has been “drawn away,” but they are hard pressed to explain what exactly is left for them to work with. I have found some clarification of objective, purpose and desired outcomes paves the way for rewarding and successful sound and movement work.

**Expressive Action**

Specifically, what I desired to be abstracted is a non-intellectual, non-verbal exploration of the *seemingly unknowable* world of human feeling. However, I am not looking for a generalized and illogical sea of undifferentiated emotional

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2. [www2.northampton.ac.uk/portal/page/portal/0E7A5951ED816A32F0440003BA7723F7](http://www2.northampton.ac.uk/portal/page/portal/0E7A5951ED816A32F0440003BA7723F7)


sensation. To the contrary, I am looking for a very specific abstraction that presents the semblance of a specific and universally recognizable expression of human feeling. This brings us to a discussion of expressive action, which forms the foundation of all the sound and movement work described. Expressive action is not possible without movement and activity. “An expressive action is any physical action that simultaneously contains and reveals thought and feeling.”

When sound and movement exercises are structured based on the principles of expressive action, the student is acting in the abstract while simultaneously placing a special emphasis on the physical and vocal sensorial properties of the expressive action without recourse to the intellectual/verbal component. Unique to this type of improvisation is the belief that while each feeling is unique and different, all feelings share a common means and method of expression that can be observed and classified through a detailed study of the movements of the voice and body. To this end, all expressive actions have a shared set of physical and sensorial properties that are directly felt and can be witnessed by the trained observer.

With the help of the writings of numerous somatic psychologists (Keleman, Kepner, Smith) and the legendary work of Rudolf Laban, I define the physical and sensorial properties that comprise an expressive action as follows:

**MAJOR PHYSICAL PROPERTIES OF AN EXPRESSIVE ACTION**

**Energy: Charge/Release**
Charge refers to the build up of mental, emotional and physical energy in the body. Release is the corresponding letting go or diminishing of this energy.

**Orientation: Contact/Withdraw**
Contact and withdraw reflect the directional forces that orient the individual in the environment. An individual with an outward/external orientation is identified as being in a state of contact; and an individual with an inward/internal orientation is identified as being in a state of withdraw.

**Size: Expand/Contract**
Size refers to the range or volume of a movement. Changes in the size of the body are made possible by the bending and unbending of the joint. Movements that involve lengthening or elongating the body are labeled as expansive. Movements that involve a folding or recoiling of the body are labeled as a contraction.

**Progression: Center/Periphery**
Progression refers to physical pathway or sequence of a movement through the body. Centered movements initiate in the midsection of the body in the pelvis and belly. Peripheral movements are relegated to those actions occurring away from the midsection of the body—the head, arms, hands, legs and feet.

**Flow: Free/Bound**
Flow refers to the degree of resistance experienced in the body while moving. Free flowing movement patterns are characterized as efficient and economical. Bound flowing movement patterns involve inefficient and uneconomical patterns of muscular holding that inhibit the movement of the body.

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5. ibid. p.1

MINOR PHYSICAL PROPERTIES OF AN EXPRESSIVE ACTION

The minor properties of an expressive action are somewhat self-explanatory.

Direction: Direct/Indirect  
Speed: Fast/Slow  
Weight: Heavy/Light  
Control: Stable/Unstable  
Focus: Sharp/Diffused

Every feeling in the body is expressed through some type of weight-shift that involves a whole series of corresponding shifts in the energy, orientation, size, progression, flow, direction, speed, weight, control and focus of the individual expressing the feeling. “Different feelings are expressed by integrating the physical properties in different ways. For example, the expressive action to mope typically mingles release, indirect, heavy and slow movements. The expressive action to pester, by contrast, typically mingles charge, contact, direct and fast movements.”

To start a sound and movement exercise of this type, the student is initially given a prompt as a point of departure. Most common are simple verbs such as: to intimidate, to scold or to swoon. Often idiomatic expressions like to scream bloody murder, eat your heart out or give someone a evil eye. Other times, simple physical directives like fast, slow, indirect, or unstable might be given. Each student in his or her own way abstracts a unique and different expressive action. There are many ways to do this type of exploration; however, I have found that explorations rooted in expressive action provide an essential link between voice and movement training and actor training. Since the dawn of Modern Acting and the advent of the Stanislavski system action has become a central tenant of many methods of training. When students realize that they have been playing actions in the abstract, there initial resistance softens and in time they begin to see more directly the important role the voice and body play in the expression of feeling and the acting process.

Discursive and Non-Discursive Symbols

A more comprehensive understanding of the communicative power of an expressive action is gained by a discussion of discursive and non-discursive symbols. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else, especially an object representing an abstraction.” Symbolism lies at the very heart of a detailed understanding of abstraction and sound and movement improvisation rooted in expressive action. We live in a complex world of physical and verbal symbols that our mind abstracts into a recognizable semblance of emotional and mental content. The expression of thought and feeling would be all but impossible without the use of symbols. The better we are at this type of emotional and mental symbolism, the better we express ourselves. Suggesting that the expression of thought and feeling is a symbolic activity is in no way meant to diminish its authenticity or integrity. Our current social culture instructs us to be cynical of mere symbolic gestures. Regrettfully, we tend to negatively associate
symbolism with a type of political and commercial branding, while ignoring its most basic and fundamental role in daily communication. The type of symbolism that I speak of references a profound, mysterious and uniquely human practice—the perception of verbal and non-verbal cues that make expression possible. My understanding of discursive and non-discursive symbols is indebted to the philosophical writings of Susanne K. Langer who I will quote extensively.

Discursive symbols are a type of abstraction created though the use of language. “The property of verbal symbolism is known as discursiveness.” Discursive symbols allow us to recognize in both spoken and written form that the word “cat” symbolizes a small feline mammal; and that the word coffee cup symbolizes a container that holds a hot liquid beverage. To a large degree we speak and think in words—using discursive symbols to communicate our thoughts. Discursive forms of expression are fully conscious and decidedly intellectual. It seems that language is a type of wrapper in which our thoughts are delivered. Discursive symbols and indeed language itself is made possible by our extraordinary intellect that is universally considered unique to humans. Logically, sound and movement exercises do not involve the direct exploration of discursive symbols.

Non-discursive symbols are essentially everything other than language—movement, gesture, body language, facial expression, posture and the sound of the voice. Sound and movement work is made possible almost exclusively through non-discursive symbolic logic. This non-discursive world references those things that we know through sensing and feeling and not through thinking. Most importantly, this unique type of non-discursive abstraction results in our ability to recognize, classify and communicate our feelings through expressive action. Expressive action would be all but impossible without our intuitive understanding of non-discursive symbolism. Surprisingly, this instinctual and seemingly unlearned type of physical-intelligence occurs without assistance from the intellect. It seems that words and language are the product of the mind, while the world of emotion and feelings are a product of the physical sensations and actions residing in the body. Rightly, Langer reminds us “human thought is but a tiny, grammar bound island, in the midst of a sea of feeling.” My students are often pleasantly surprised to discover that there is a larger world of intuitive, non-discursive, non-verbal abstraction simultaneously taking place in their body and voice all the while that they are thinking and speaking. This leads them to a greater respect for the important role the body plays in the expression of thought and feeling and a deeper understanding of expressive action itself.

Our movement, sound, facial expression, posture—all non-discursive symbolic abstractions—function on a semi-conscious level that often goes unnoticed without some type of awareness training. Abstract sound and movement explorations of expressive actions work directly to increase my student’s awareness of the physical properties that make emotional expression possible. When we express ourselves, we are very aware of what we are thinking—the conscious mind is essential to thinking and speaking. Conversely, we are often not fully aware of the important role our body plays in the process of emotional expression. Mehrabian discovered in his communication study that only seven percent of communication comes from spoken words, 38 percent is from the tone of the voice, and 55 percent comes from body language. This has profound
implications with respect to the importance of sound and movement work in actor training. When words are stripped away awareness is shifted away from the thoughts occurring in the actor’s head, to the physical life of the thought and feeling occurring in the actor’s voice and body. Sound and movement work encourages the actor to stop thinking and start sensing. When we consider, at least in the traditional theatre, that the playwright provides the language; it becomes obvious most of what the actor creates are non-verbal forms of communication that house or accompany the verbal forms. To this end, working without words is an essential awareness building exercise that both strengthens and enhances the actors understanding of the important role the voice and body play in the acting process.

Perhaps, the biggest struggle in teaching abstract sound and movement work rooted in expressive action is a deep-seated disrespect for non-discursive symbols and the physical forms that they create. Successful improvisation requires the student to abstract a pattern or non-discursive form that exemplifies the physical life of the feeling being explored—and experiential understanding of the structure of the expressive action being improvised. In fact, all abstraction begins with the recognition of a relational structure or form. Langer writes, “this unconscious appreciation of form is the primitive root of all abstraction, which in turn is the keynote.” However, a common and pervasive misperception about the physical nature of feelings often limits our awareness of the physical form of our feelings. While William James states that the sensory world seems to be “a blooming, buzzing confusion;” Langer insists that “out of this bedlam, our sense organs must select certain predominate forms” and make symbolic sense of them. There is a pervasive misguided belief that feeling itself is not a physical experience but solely a mental event related exclusively to thoughts, memories and other cognitive activity. Initially many of my students view the expression of their feelings as some nebulous and spontaneous overflow of human excitement devoid of any tangible structure or shape. For reasons that I find most curious most of my students begin sound and movement work with the limited notion that their thoughts and feelings are some hidden internal, mental event that have no direct relationship to movement of their body and the sound of their voice. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. If this were true, we would not be able to distinguish happiness from sadness, love from loss, or celebration from mourning. Langer insists, “feelings have definite forms.” The famous neuroscientist Antonio Damaso asserts, while feeling is impossible without some sort of cerebral action, the body, not the brain, is the mainstage for our feelings. Whether we are directly aware of it or not, feelings and the body which houses them, are perceived, classified and understood through a complex sophisticated, yet simultaneously primal form, of physical, non-discursive symbolic abstraction. Understanding the form of a feeling is tricky business. Like many things involving the body, the form of a feeling is a complex subject that can be explained satisfactorily but never completely. At best all I can provide the student is with some generalized directives about the universal structure common to all expressive actions. Specifically, broad categories of sensation can be identified and labeled to aid in our understanding of the form of a feeling. Ideally, all expressive actions charge and release, contact and withdraw, expand and contract, involve movement from the center to the periphery in the service of the expression of thought and feeling. This action can be fast or slow, heavy or light, direct or indirect, stable or unstable. Different physical properties mean different things in different

14. Langer, Susane K. Philosophy in a New Key. 1942. p. 81
15. Ibid. p. 81.
16. Ibid. p. 89.
contexts. A “fast” movement, for example, may express either anger or happiness depending on the other accompanying physical properties. The form I speak of is “directly reflected in the pattern of physical reaction, impulse and instinct” movement, gesture and sound that make emotional expression possible. It is essentially the study of the vast, simultaneous, integrated, complex interplay of all the physical and vocal actions that accompany, create and express feeling through the body—expressive action. When the physical nature of our feelings is clarified sound and movement work begins to move in new direction. In the process the body comes to be viewed as a rich emotional playground in which feelings are experienced and expressed. Most practically the students develop a rich and detailed vocabulary that describes the physical life of feeling in the body.

More Struggling with Abstraction

Let’s take a closer look at a typical student’s first struggle with abstraction:

Student A is asked to play an expressive action with the following physical properties: periphery, stable and indirect. Student A stands with both legs braced (stable), right arm extended, index finger pointed (periphery). The wrist rotates moving the index finger in a circular manner (indirect). As the finger orbits in space, the words ring, ring, ring accompany the circling finger.

It is not that I deem this exploration completely unsuccessful; again, it is important to recognize that while virtually anything might be possible during sound and movement work some explorations are more profitable than others. Most obviously, the student is abstracting some type of machine—an old-style rotary phone which ironically he or she has probably only seen in the movies. Most importantly the student is not playing an expressive action. It should also be noted that the word ring is in fact a word and not at all the type of non-verbal non-discursive exploration that I am seeking. This type of improvisation is a common occurrence in early sound and movement work. Bangs, bow-wows and twinkle twinkle are a common and welcome part of the experiential learning that must take place before a more successful exploration of expressive action can begin. Additionally, ghosts, goblins, all manner of violence, pain and physical injuries manifest themselves with great frequency. Physical states like tiredness and drunkenness are also common in the first days of sound and movement work. At some point, either through conscious direction on the part of the teacher or simply the natural process of experimentation and experience, the students begin to select more useful explorations that are linked more directly to expressive action. They begin to research the physical life of feeling in their body and voice.

Sound & Movement vs. Noise & Activity

Often the student is aided in their quest for more appropriate sound and movement exploration of an expressive action by making a distinction between sound and movement and noise and activity. Trust that these distinctions are in no way scientific and are certainly subjective; nevertheless, they have proved useful in guiding and directing the student towards useful and rewarding methods of improvisation. For example, a student making the sound of a clock ticking is said to be making a noise. While a student shrieking in ecstasy is said to be making a sound. Similarly, a student swaying from side to side
like the pendulum of a clock is said to be involved in an activity, while the student cowering backward with trepidation is said to be performing a movement. Essentially, sound and movement is defined as a specific term that expresses emotional and mental content—things that people do when they express themselves. Noise and activity, on the other hand, refers to arbitrary, random and insignificant physical and vocal activity that is void of emotional and mental content. Typically sound and movement occurs when the actor improvising is playing an expressive action. Noise and activity occur when the actor improvising is not playing an expressive action.

Gesture

More recently, I have come to find a discussion of gesture as a useful method of explaining the nature of sound and movement work rooted in expressive action. Gesture is commonly defined as the use of body movements in order to express meaning or emotion, or an action intended to communicate feelings or intentions. I suggest that there is also an accompanying type of vocal gesture that is rooted in the physical action itself. This vocal gesture I speak of is not directly influenced by words or language bouncing around in the brain; but rather, by the physical sensation occurring in the body. This involves a complex type of integration in which the actor does not consciously make a sound, but allows, if you will, the body to sound. When this occurs, we do not hear some type of arbitrary sound stacked randomly on top of the body, but rather we hear the sounds of the expressive action itself. Ideally, we want to hear the body through the voice—a type of integration essential to actor training.

Years ago when I first encountered this quote about gesture, I was shocked and disturbed by its implications:

Gesture is older than words, and in the actor's dramatic creation; too, it must be their herald. Whether it is visible to the audience or not, it must always be the peacemaker. Anyone who starts with the words and then hunts for the appropriate gesture to accompany them, lies to the face of art and nature both.

The more I work deeply with the body and through the body I become convinced of its accuracy.

Still More Struggles with Abstraction

Let's look at another example. The student is asked to explore the expressive action to obliterate. The goal is to develop an integrated sound and movement exploration, which reveals the universal human desire "to destroy something so utterly that nothing is left." Most importantly, in this type of abstraction emphasis should be placed on the experiential components of the expressive action and not the intellectual details that surround the action. How it feels to obliterate is of greater value than why or what the actor desires to obliterate.

Herein lies the struggle. Most beginning and advanced students new to this type of abstract exploration respond with the same series of questions that have, for better and for worse, become the hallmark of our Stanislavski-based acting system. Who am I? Where am I? What time is it? What am I trying to obliterate? Why am I obliterating? It seems that thinking and not sensing must
always be a precursor to expressive action. Thus, the journey in the cerebrum begins. The simple exercise has become quite complicated. If the student has the courage to venture out on a journey with no course charted and no clear destination, the rewards can be immeasurable. The students most often find that they can oblit rate in the abstract without prior background knowledge or justification of the previously seemingly essential given circumstances. Meaning is essentially derived from felt-experience rather than cognitive activity and predetermined mental deliberations. Sound and movement work thrives in a sea of fluid sensation that is unencumbered by the intellect. The facts are that abstraction cannot be experienced—at least initially—intellectually. Abstraction is first and foremost a sensory experience and not an intellectual event. Abstraction throws us into a world of sensation and feeling that from the outset asks us to put our intellect on hold—to sense before we think.

The fact of the matter is that we don't need as much intellectual information as we think to have a successful improvisation of an expressive action. I suggest that this simple, experiential abstract practice goes on in other art forms all the time. If I asked a composer to write a song in the key of D, it is not essential that the composer know what the song is about, or whom it is for, or why he is composing it. I suspect that the composer would have no problem improvising and just jump right in and see what happens along the way. As the composer experiences the music and plays with the keys on the keyboard, meaning and purpose would emerge spontaneously. Actors are also in need of a place in their practice for a similar intuitive and non-intellectual exploration of sensation and feeling. The fact of the matter is that our body can yield to the experience of the expressive action without the intellectual assistance. When this occurs a much simpler and primal type of actor training occurs that is rooted in movement, sound and sensation, rather than predetermined analysis and deliberation.

Though at first it might not seem possible, the students eventually discover that it is possible to proceed without any predetermined intellectual analysis and deliberation about the expressive action itself. It is important to recognize that "discursiveness" is defined as the process of using logic rather than the intuition to reach a conclusion. Non-discursiveness, by contrast, requires no deliberation or premeditation. The process of abstraction is instantaneous—unless the conscious mind convolutes the spontaneous process. Instantaneousness suggests an immediate response that happens instantaneously and without delay. It is best to move and sound first and think second. When this simple method of improvisation occurs, the actor often arrives at new results that were previously intellectually unthinkable that transcend personal experience.

It is important to recognize that this type of improvisation is not without its limitations. The expressive action being explored reflects only an extremely brief period or particular moment in an unspecified time and place. This type of sound and movement exploration of a single expressive action can only successfully represent the smallest units of unconnected human experience, which are dissociated from the larger fabric of human experience. This is not a limitation; but rather, a benefit. Improvisation in this manner is fast, simple, utterly uncomplicated and profoundly useful. We are not working on large, integrated chunks of organized human experience, but the smallest physical components that make feeling possible. The raw materials of the actor's craft—charge, contact, slow, sharp, unstable. In this type of specialized practice,
there is no scenario only the experience of the raw materials, which must be experienced in and of themselves and for their own sake. The student is not exploring content or context but the physical form of a feeling.

When the actor moves away from the specific, commonplace details and embraces the pure form of the expressive action, without reference to the specifics, an important and often overlooked type of generalization occurs. When this occurs the actor experiences the essence of the expressive action. Essence is defined as the quality or nature of something that identifies it or makes it what it is.\(^{23}\) It is the most basic element or feature of something representing its perfect or idealized form independent of and prior to its existence. It is important to recognize that all abstraction is at its very core a type generalization.\(^{24}\) When this occurs, the imagination is strengthened and an egoless understanding of the universal form of the expression of human feeling is celebrated.

### Ambiguous Referents

Most often everyone can immediately understand the generalized meaning of a successful abstraction of an expressive action. However, this expressive action may appear applicable to multiple situations or purposes and may appear to be present or prevalent in multiple places. Abstraction of this type are said to have ambiguous referents.\(^{25}\) Improvisation in the abstract explores universal forms of expression that relate in a generalized way to the whole world or everyone in the world. Effective communication about things in the abstract requires an intuitive or common shared experience.\(^{26}\) For example when an actor is improvising in the abstract, the actor and the viewers may develop different or contextual references for the same expressive action—or ambiguous referents. Typically, when the students do discuss, “What is going on?” during the improvisation, they provide a variety of responses to the same action. “I'm blowing my top.” “It reminds me of my cousin at my sister's wedding.” “No one is paying attention to me.” “Everyone is ganging up on me.” Many students agree that all of these statements are true. In fact, all of these specific responses are valid, when a universal understanding of the expressive action has been explored. Consequently, an actress improvising the expressive action to plead in the abstract is not necessarily pleading as Medea, Desdomona, Blanche DuBois or herself specifically; but rather, exploring an archetypal abstraction of the expressive action itself that transcends any particular time/space/character paradigm. The usefulness of this type of generalized exploration has profound implications with respect to actor training. Typically, when an actor can play an expressive action in a generalized time and space, the job of translating the action to a specific time and place is a relatively simple task. The adjustments needed to play an abstract expressive action in Shaw, Moliere, Mamet or Pinter are relatively easy to make. Concepts understood in the abstract, are retrievable in multiple situations and contexts. It is important to recognize that the actor is not so much exploring one expressive action but many varied and different expressive actions because they all share a similar structure and form.

### Conclusion

Susanne K. Langer states: There is a widespread belief—sometimes regarded as a very truism—that abstract thought is essentially artificial and difficult.\(^{27}\)

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23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
This invariably seems to be the experience of my students upon their first encounter with an abstract sound and movement improvisation. “Why are we doing this?” “What are you looking for?” “This is weird.” However, Langer rightly reminds us that there are unconscious or semiconscious truths that the rational mind conveniently ignores:

…if abstraction where really unnatural, no one could have invented it. If the untutored mind could not perform it, how did we ever learn it? We can develop by training only what is incipiently given by nature. Somewhere in man’s primitive repertoire there must have been a spontaneous intellectual practice from which the cultivated variety of abstract thinking took its rise. 28

The desire to think first and sense second is endemic to our culture. The more I teach and explore I find that I am increasingly less interested in how my thoughts influence my body and voice, but rather how my body and voice influences my thinking. When this occurs the mind learns to make accommodation for the body; and the voice and movement studio simultaneously becomes an acting studio. Most importantly my students discover that expressive actions have tangible physical properties that can be indentified, shaped and structured, which makes both them and their acting teacher very happy.