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Dalcroze Eurhythmics and the Theatre

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze was no stranger to the theatre. As a young man he worked as a touring actor and he briefly trained at the Comedie-Francaise in Paris. The showpiece of his work at Hellerau was the presentation of Orfeo et Euridice, working with theatrical innovator Adolphe Appia. Yet, this information would be of interest only to theatre historians if this activity had been the total of theatrical work in eurhythmics. Luckily, though, a number of innovators saw the possible benefits of eurhythmics training for actors.

An early supporter was Swiss theatrical designer and innovator Adolphe Appia. Appia disliked placing the three-dimensional form of the actor in front of two-dimensional scenery. Appia wrote that the poetry or music of the theatre is "fixed" in time. The theatrical setting is fixed in space. Appia concluded that the movement/mobility of the actor is the reconciling element that joins the text and the physical setting into an artistic whole. For Appia, the key to effective movement was rhythm.¹ Appia's interest led him to become a partner of sorts in Dalcroze's work.

Another early supporter was French director Jacques Copeau. Copeau visited Dalcroze in Geneva in 1915 and was impressed with eurhythmics. Consequently Copeau invited Jessmin Howarth to travel with his company on a tour of the United States. Unfortunately the tour did not prove as popular as expected. Copeau's company mounted 25 productions in as many weeks in an effort to maintain public interest. The sheer work of mounting a new play each week did not allow much time for actor training. Copeau attempted to use eurhythmics in his actor training when he returned to Paris in the 1920s with limited success.²

In America, eurhythmics was present in domestic theatrical production as early as 1916. The Little Theatre movement in the United States proved was fertile ground for experimentation with new playwrights, new production methods, and new training techniques. The Washington Square Players used eurhythmics in its production of the play *Bushido*, directed by M. Ito.³ More, a pamphlet published to popularize Dalcroze eurhythmics in England and America lists endorsements of eurhythmics in actor training by Charles Dullin, George Bernard Shaw, and Irene Lewisohn (a member of the Neighborhood Playhouse). Dullin, one of the great French actors and directors of the early twentieth century wrote, "I consider that Eurhythmics as Jaques-Dalcroze has created it, is an indispensable means of plastic education in forming young actors."⁴

The element that made eurhythmics an "indispensable" part of actor training was the training in rhythm. Rhythmic training helps the actor control the body and move in concert with other actors. Dalcroze wrote, "As concerns the solo actor, rhythmic training should not lead him to think out his own motricity, but simply allow him to attune it to that of the others."⁵ Or as Cecil Kitcat wrote

[I]f an actor crosses the stage in any direction it must have a reason, perhaps it is better to say his movement must have a reason, since we move in order to go somewhere and when we reach that spot there lies the climax or goal of our movement. Rhythm in space is the movement that bridges the distance between the starting point and the arrival point wherever that may be, and the arrival is the climax of that particular movement. [. . .] By learning always to move toward an accent, the student gradually learns to build toward the greater climaxes which are the culminating point of a whole composition.⁶

In practical terms, though, eurhythmics had its greatest influence on actor training by the way of two particular visitors to Hellerau. These two visitors were Prince Sergei Wolkonsky of Russia and Susan Canfield from Pittsburgh.

Prince Sergei Wolkonsky was a member of the Russian aristocracy who had a passion for theatre and dance in particular. Wolkonsky heard of the work being done in Hellerau and decided to visit, which he did in the summer of 1911. Wolkonsky, an aristocrat with an interest in the arts also happened to be the Superintendent of Russia's Imperial Theatre. As a man interested in the new concepts of art, Wolkonsky arranged for Dalcroze and his students to make a demonstration tour to Russia in January of 1912.⁷

This tour brought Dalcroze in contact with the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, the most influential theatre in the twentieth century. (The M.A.T. was responsible for popularizing the full-length plays of Anton Chekhov and was the home of the seminal acting teacher Constantin Stanislavski.) As Superintendent of the Imperial Theatre, Wolkonsky also made sure that Dalcroze gave a presentation at the state theatre in St. Petersburg, the home of the influential young director, Vsevolod Meyerhold. (Meyerhold's use of eurhythmics in actor training and his overall work requires further discussion than allowed here. Suffice to say that Meyerhold's work and use of eurhythmics is seen in the work of his student, the film director Eisenstein. Other influences can be seen in the early physical work of the Polish director Grotowski and the German director Bertolt Brecht. Wolkonsky, a pauper after the revolution, had little kindness for Meyerhold, a communist, and barely mentioned the director in his memoirs.)

As a result of the Russian tour, eurhythmics became part of the actor training at the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio in 1912.⁸ Participating in this program was the Polish actor Richard Boleslavsky. Boleslavsky, a Pole, left Russia during the revolution and wandered Europe in search of regular work. Ultimately Boleslavsky cobbled together a revue show that he brought to the Booth Theatre in New York City in October 1922. The show lasted only 20 nights on Broadway and 'Boley' was forced to move the show in Philadelphia.

Luckily for Boleslavsky, the Russian revolution also led the Moscow Art Theatre to arrange an American tour, starting in January 1923.

The Moscow Art Theatre tour of America was a major show business event. American theatrical workers were passionately eager to see the M.A.T. The plays they witnessed (in actuality old revivals from the M.A.T.'s early repertory) led the Americans to seek out how the Russians were able to accomplish such feats of art. Boleslavsky had been Stanislavsky's assistant back in Russia. On tour, Boleslavsky helped the company, particularly in training the extras for crowd scenes. By June 1923, with the help of some wealthy supporters, Boleslavsky started the Lab Theatre in New York.⁹

The Lab Theatre, the haven of all the rising theatre artists in New York, included instruction in eurhythmics. Boleslavsky wrote in his book, "Jaques Dalcroze [sic] told me a great deal about Rhythm . . . [and] I found a book on Rhythm in Architecture; it is not translated into English. Those were the only two reliable and practical guides to that great element of every art."¹⁰ Boleslavsky arranged for Elsa Findlay to teach eurhythmics to the students. In fact, the Lab Theatre had to change locations in January 1924 due to an enthusiastic Dalcroze class that jarred loose ceiling plaster of a restaurant in the floor below. (A waitress was evidently hit on the head.)¹¹

The Lab Theatre proved to be the starting point for twentieth century actor training. Among Boleslavsky's students were such notable teachers and directors as Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman. Strasberg and Clurman, along with Cheryl Crawford, were responsible for starting the Group Theatre in the 1930s. Strasberg was mostly responsible for what is known as 'Method' acting in America. (This is not the place for a full discussion of Strasberg's work. It should be noted, though, there are small traces of similarities to eurhythmics in some of Strasberg's work - the "Song and Dance" exercise, for example.) Thus, Dalcroze eurhythmics has been an on-going part of professional actor training in America. Eurhythmics also has been an on-going part of university actor training in America.

The other influential visitor to Hellerau was Susan Canfield. Canfield had worked as First Assistant Supervisor of the Music for Indiana Public School before moving to Pittsburgh in 1908. She taught at the University of Pittsburgh and taught even before earning her Music Bachelor's degree from that same institution in 1920.

Canfield had been attracted to Hellerau by reports and studied with Dalcroze. The war prevented her completion of the eurhythmics program, though. Evidently, these students were given a provisional status acknowledging they could teach what they had been trained and would be granted readmission when Hellerau re-opened. Hellerau never re-opened and Canfield returned to Pittsburgh in 1913. Interestingly, Canfield taught eurhythmics, not in the music department, but in the "Department of Play" (or Theatre Department).¹²

Canfield moved to the Cranegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie-Melon University) in 1921 and taught there until she retired in 1947. At C.I.T. Canfield taught eurhythmics as part of the music pedagogy curriculum. Eurhythmics, though, also became a requirement in the theatre program. Canfield was followed at C.I.T. by such other teachers as Mary MacNair, Doris Portman, and Cecil Kitcat - teachers who either had joint appointments in the Departments of Music and Theatre or a sole appointment in the Department of Theatre. Among those students who would have taken eurhythmics were Robert Cummings (1933), Howard Bay (1934), Walter (Beau) Rogers (1935), John Arthur Kennedy (1936), Mary (Polly) Bowles (1936), Josef Sommer (1957), Mel Shapiro (1961), and Renee Auberjonois (1962).

Dalcroze eurhythmics has been a part of actor training in the West throughout the twentieth century. The work done by Stanislavski and Boleslavsky set the course for most actor training in the West and eurhythmics was a part of that work. Actor training in American universities was influenced by the groundbreaking work done at C.I.T. All of this work resulted from the visit to Hellerau by Prince Wolkonsky and Susan Canfield.

As a postscript: Canfield, though, started another path that had major influence on eurhythmics instruction and the Dalcroze movement. Canfield was not a certified eurhythmics teacher. Because of the strength of her interest, Canfield was able to convince C.I.T. to hire a certified eurhythmics teacher from Britain, Mary MacNair. MacNair was the primary eurhythmics teacher for Hilda Schuster. So Canfield's trip to Germany started a chain of events that had a major impact on eurhythmics in America today.

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John Rudlin, *Jacques Copeau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 38 -43. Rudlin (with Norman H. Paul) includes correspondence between Copeau and Dalcroze in *Copeau: Texts on Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1990).

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From a letter to Copeau included by Rudlin & Paul, 66.

Cecil Kitcat, "The Play's the Thing: Applying the Principles of Rhythm to the Actor," *Carnegie Magazine* Oct (1934) 151 - 54.

Irwin Spector, *Rhythm and Life: The Work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990) 159-60.

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J.W. Roberts, *Richard Boleslavsky: His Life and Work in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981) 104 - 06, 108.

Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1934) 111 - 12.

Roberts, 119, 146.

Hilda M. Schuster, "The Aesthetic Contributions of Dalcroze Eurhythmics to Modern American Education," Thesis, Duquesne University, 1938, 31 -2.

Further documentary information is available in the *Bulletin of C.I.T.*, 1922-

23, 15. See also Glen U. Cleeton, *The Story of Carnegie Tech. II: The Doherty Administration, 1936 - 1950* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1965), 149. Canfield never married and died in 1961. Space forbids recounting of demonstration programs produced by Canfield and her successors and archived in the Carnegie-Melon library.

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