

Review

‘Feldenkrais® for Actors – How to Do Less and Discover More’

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‘Feldenkrais® for Actors – How to Do Less and Discover More’

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Review of ‘Feldenkrais for Actors – How to Do Less and Discover More’ by Victoria Worsley, illustrated by James Humphries; Nick Hern Books London 2016; 272 pages

How do we train actors to develop an organic competence of their craft? How do we educate young people to become agile, creative, sensitive and affective performers in a cultural context that affords an increased disembodiment of everyday life experience? How do we encourage open-ended inquiry within a corporate increasingly goal-oriented and fast-paced vocational educational training system?

Victoria Worsley, London based actor and Feldenkrais® practitioner, published the book *Feldenkrais for Actors – How to Do Less and Discover More* as a resource for students and teachers in 2016. Her writings emerged from her rich experience as an artist, teacher of Movement for Actors in Drama Conservatories, and as Feldenkrais practitioner who works with the general public. Her book offers a convincing resource for student-actors, professionals and pedagogues, with an historical introduction that links the work of Moshe Feldenkrais to theatre practice and to the current work Feldenkrais/Theatre peer-practitioners in the UK, a large experiential part linked to the needs of the student actor, and an appendix with useful links to resources for further study.

There is a growing context of literature on the study of Movement for Actors, often informed by modernist movement and contemporary somatic practices including the Feldenkrais Method®. Worsley’s thoroughly written book sets out from the start that it is concerned with articulating the application and possible benefits of the Feldenkrais Method in the training, education and self-care practice of actors. It allows readers to immerse themselves in a theory-practice world concerned with increased awareness, agility and function, self-perception and presence, always bearing in mind the professional context of the actor as flexible learner and spontaneous explorer. Worsley draws on her own training with Philippe Gaulier in physical theatre, and on her studies with Monika Pagneux who had worked with Moshe Feldenkrais in the 1970’s to identify key topics in her book concerned with the actor as a sensitive, affective and creative being. Worsley structures the main part of her book into chapters concerned with ‘Presence and Posture’, ‘The Role of Tension’, ‘Emotion, Character and Creativity’, ‘Voice and Breath’, ‘Injury and Anxiety’. Each of these chapters, split into differentiated sub-chapters, offers contextual

discussion, case-study examples and practical exploration parts, which bring the Awareness Through Movement® practice into a meaningful experiential context for the learner.

Worsley's book offers a comprehensive insight into the value of the study of the Feldenkrais Method within actor training contexts by making consistent links between Feldenkrais-based pedagogies and the world of the actor. As an educator involved in actor-training I appreciate such contextualisation and bridge-building greatly, as it offers a tangible place for the Feldenkrais Method in a training-context and allows students to access a non-goal oriented explorative practice from an informed perspective. The book achieves several things at once – it forges direct historical connections to the Feldenkrais/Brook/Lecoq/Pagneux lineage, and connections made to the dominant Western psycho-physical theatre heritage based on the work of Russian Modernist educator Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 -1938) and contemporary developments. This allows students and professionals to locate themselves within a culturally relevant learning trajectory. More so, the book is structured towards meaningful areas of application, and offers stories and case studies written from the field which allow the reader to identify relevant learning or problem areas concerned with embodiment, self-care, range of expression and creative choice-making for the actor. Here, the author accompanies the tangible with basic physiological information, at times in the shape of anatomical drawings, or through brief discussions on theory of perception. The book then offers a range of explorative practices articulated and distilled as games and simple Awareness Through Movement lessons which can serve as a resource for self-inquiry.

The 'Foreword' by UK director John Wright reflects on accessing and dealing with old habits and accessing FM as a 'rich and continuing area of inquiry' (2016: viii) to explore new ideas through a 'gentle art of teaching yourself not to try' (viii). In her 'Introduction' chapter Worsley reflects on the study of movement for the actor as an essential process of self-development. It introduces the potential of the Feldenkrais Method to support the actor's 'job of delving into human behaviour in all its variety and subtlety', by using movement in structured ways to 'enable how you personally respond or do things; to open up new avenues and expand your possibilities' (2016: 3). Worsley proposes the study of the Feldenkrais Method here as an inquiry into 'human functioning and developing potential' (3), and the possibility to move beyond habitual behaviour as highly useful for the actor. She clarifies the intention of the book as a personal resource for students for detailed self-discovery, 'of how you are you' (3).

Worsley's chapter 'A little bit of history' opens with a translated letter from 1978 by theatre-director Peter Brook (1921 -) arguing for embodiment as the most concrete 'foundation of the work of every actor' (cited in Worsley 2016: 7). Brook talks about his encounter with the work of Moshe Feldenkrais as an inter-cultural approach to the detailed study of 'the body as a whole' with hundreds of exercises of 'exceptional value' (2016: 7). Worsley then gives a brief historical overview on Moshe's Feldenkrais professional development with a particular focus on his connections to the company of Peter Brook, the US based company El Teatro Campesino and their collaboration during the San Juan Bautista Workshop in California in 1973. Here she

interweaves exercise descriptions with a discussion on the inquiry-based ethos of the Feldenkrais Method to foster 'curiosity, spontaneity and creativity [...], all qualities an actor needs to develop, too' (2016: 13). Worsley suggests that 'you don't come out of the Feldenkrais Method with a specific way of holding yourself or moving. You don't come out with rules, but you discover more about yourself and your potential. You do develop skill' (2016: 15). She then goes on to introduce a range of practitioners who have been influential on the application of the method within UK theatre and performing arts contexts as educators and artists. Perhaps it would have been beneficial here to have more of Moshe Feldenkrais' own thoughts on theatre included. Feldenkrais was familiar of the post-Stanislawski realism acting systems and methods developed in Israel and the US, and he articulates his thoughts most explicitly in the interview with Richard Schechner (Feldenkrais and Morris 1966). Feldenkrais had been introduced to the work of Stanislawski and his disciple Vakhtangov by actor and family friend Aharon Meskin in Tel Aviv already in the 1920's (Buckard 2015).

Feldenkrais suggests that an actor needs to be trained 'to have the fluent ability to act and check what his actions mean in reality' (Feldenkrais and Morris 1966: 118), and that his approach to learning fosters 'an awareness of action', 'greater clarity and ease', a capacity for 'rediscovery', and a heightened ability to 'listening to the other person' in the actor (118). Responding to Schechner's questioning regarding noted affinities between Stanislawski's work and his own, Feldenkrais claimed that Stanislawski and his leading disciple Vakhtangov 'often showed examples and could not teach what they wanted' because 'they had no body awareness themselves' and worked from visual 'impressions' (1966: 125-126).

In the 'Part 1' of the main section of her book, Worsley contextualises the use of the Feldenkrais Method through initial discussions on self-awareness, habit and neutrality as fundamental issues concerning the actor in training. She matches this discussion with some simple observation tasks and a thorough introduction to basic self-scanning practices of Awareness Through Movement (ATM®). Worsley addresses the difficulty of working from books by adding the useful suggestion of creating audio-recordings of the Awareness Through Movement explorations from which to work.

She continues to introduce key Feldenkrais learning topics through contextual discussions and practice suggestions, including *Proprioception/Kinaesthetic Sense*, *Self-Image*, and Feldenkrais-informed approaches to experiential and explorative learning. Here some cognitive science information on neuroplasticity based on the work of Michael Merzenich¹ sets the tone for an ATM lesson in sitting and turning: 'The richer, the more varied the possibilities of your movement landscapes, the more powerful you are. And the more imaginative you are and the more fun you are having' (Merzenich cited in Worsley 2016: 57). Here, perhaps a note towards the growing discourse on *Theatre and Cognition* (Blair 2015), which touches upon *Embodied*

¹ (no date provided by author)

Cognition, Enactivism and Neuroplasticity would have been a useful link to a wider context where a Feldenkrais-Theatre practice might be located meaningfully.

'Part 2' of the main body of the reader discusses issues regarding 'Presence and Posture'. As the section before, it provides a convincing experiential learning set-up that combines discussion of practical problems, with a wider performance-culture context and practical activities as a model that frames embodied self-experiments as part of a broader personal or professional learning. Worsley introduces the term *embodiment* in dialogue with awareness here to highlight the actor's need 'to feel a connection to what we do, so that in any moment we are fully, physically present: alive on stage, not "dead". It is awareness that roots you in yourself, rather than separates you from yourself' (2016: 76). The author always returns to first person language to talk from self-experience in an empathic way to the reader. She guides the reader into discussions moving from awareness towards being present with fellow actors and the audience, at times drawing on theatre-theorists as well as on a rare interview with Moshe Feldenkrais in the context of his working with Peter Brooke's company and El Teatro Campesino in 1973. The quote reveals Feldenkrais' understanding of the embodied and dialogic nature of the work of the actor:

What does increased sensitivity mean? It means telling the difference between minor increments or decrements in minor changes. It means you become sensitive to the little lead your partner gives you, to the change in your own voice, to your partner's voice, you become more sensitive, more differentiated, more awake. (Feldenkrais [1973] 2004, cited in Worsley 2016: 82).

Worsley draws a vivid and convincing picture here, how the, often introspective, self-reflective ATM practice might lead to a more nuanced ability to form relationships as suggested in the quote above.

Her writings on posture which embrace Feldenkrais' dynamic-systems proposals towards 'acture' and 'reversibility' as states of readiness and agility, focus on developing a holographic understanding of single parts to the whole organism and on developing a relational groundedness. Here, she draws on Feldenkrais Trainer Jeff Haller (2010) who suggests that

our muscle tone is turned on by our relationship with our environment. That means the specific ways we find support from the surfaces we are on. If I am faulty in the way I find support, then my musculature must in fact become engaged to support me because orientation is so crucial to me. [...] And it must engage. Because no living system that is healthy will just fall down. So the more specific, the more refined, the more clear you are in the way you find where you are supporting yourself from, the clearer any action will be. (Haller 2010 cited in Worsley 2016: 104)

Subsequently the chapter on 'Finding Dynamic Posture' includes practical explorations on developing awareness and agility of our centre of gravity and pelvic region, including a variation

of a lesson on *Pelvic Clock* articulation. The integration of the Awareness Through Movement in to the chapter is created through a preparatory discussion accompanied by simple anatomical drawings, and personal reflective section to support students into appreciating their experience of new tacit and felt knowledge on 'what grounded feels like' (Worsley 2016: 110). This embedding of lessons meaningfully into relevant experiential topics and into guided discussion on felt experience, is well crafted throughout the book and allows the reader to enter into a world of sensorial inquiry and agency as embodied resource for their professional practice. This is a real strength of the book and allows the novice practitioner to access a possibility to 'finding – and keeping a new home' (Worsley 2016: 110) in themselves.

'Part 3', titled 'The Role of Tension', explores qualitative questions regarding dynamism of practice within ATM practice, guiding the reader into processes of working through a reduction of stimuli, ultimately to achieve 'healthy, powerful, easy and pleasurable exertion [...] where efficient movement is effortless' (Feldenkrais [1972] 2010 cited in Worsley 2016: 117). As in 'Part 2' ATM practice - here a lesson on flexion and a lesson on pressing through legs into the ground - is sandwiched effectively between a contextual introduction on sensitivity and excitation, and reflections on sensitivity within acting practice. Worsley refers to the work of a broad range of practitioners, including 'Neutral Mask' work she had explored in dialogue with director John Wright. Neutrality as a concept is decoded and expanded as a place of potentiality through a finishing quote by Moshe Feldenkrais: 'I want neutrality only to free you from the inhibition of having one speciality' (Feldenkrais [1972] 2010 cited in Worsley 2016: 134).

'Part 4' is distinctly devoted to issues around characterisation, while touching upon connectivity between movement, sensation and feeling. The section on 'The Physiology of Emotion' refers to the psycho-physical demands within the work of practitioners Michael Chekhov, Sanford Meisner and Uta Hagen, again encouraging students to make links between somatic explorations and personal sensorial discoveries and established acting practice. Here the author passionately emphasizes the importance of inductive processes of trial and error where characters are allowed to emerge through creative play and 'not knowing' (2016: 197) as part of the actor's repertoire of unruly, pleasurable and unforceful working modalities. Worsley comes across here as a convincing advocate for the Feldenkrais Method as highly suitable for actors, 'because it encourages responsiveness, spontaneity, flexibility and adaptation to the situation - [...] great for actors' (2016: 196).

The last two chapters, 'Part 5' and 'Part 6', are concerned with the application of Feldenkrais process in relation to self-care and injury prevention. Here, issues of vocal practice and anxiety are highlighted and supported through experiential offerings. As in the chapters before, contextual discussions and anatomical drawing form a useful framework for students to engage in embodied explorations, to develop self-competence and to practice professional nuanced reflective practice. The book concluded with appendices with a useful section on resources for further reading and study, and a final appendix for Feldenkrais teachers. This final appendix makes explicit links between western modernist acting practices and the work of Moshe

Feldenkrais in their shared concerns with body-mind unity and the potential for experiential learning. It includes useful tips for problem-solving in the classroom that make the transition from a generic Feldenkrais pedagogy facilitation to the context of an arts-training situation with specific student needs and expectations tangible.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Worsley's book comes across as a convincing and well-constructed resource for practitioners in the acting field. It is a delight to read for informed practitioners as well as for students of acting. It is not a critical reader that discusses the limitations for the Feldenkrais Method in the field, nor does it include ideas about the integration of touch interaction based on Functional Integration practice as a learning modality. But that's not what the book set out to do, and it reads satisfyingly well as a complete whole. The bibliography would perhaps read better in Harvard style for easier reference. This is a minor issue, and perhaps based on the publisher's conventions.

I have taught Movement for Actors in Conservatoires and Universities for 30 years in the UK, and nearly 20 years of that time I have drawn on Awareness Through Movement and Functional Integration® practice, mostly in successful ways. Yet, the delivery of a non-corrective inductive embodied practice in a fast-paced competitive training environment can be very unsettling for all participants for many reasons, let alone that UK studio spaces often are too cold to allow students to spend a long time quietly on the floor. There are many commonalities between western acting theory/practice models and the organic learning modalities that Feldenkrais provides – this is no accident since all of them stem from a similar historical and cultural background that embraces knowledge from cognitive sciences, emancipatory body-cultures and the learner/performer autonomy of the contemporary democratic citizen. Yet, it is often very difficult for Feldenkrais teachers to guide students into understanding the bigger picture beyond their classroom experience without asking them to look at a broad range of resources. Likewise, it is not easy for Feldenkrais practitioners who do not have acting or actor training experience themselves to create a meaningful experience for students that allows them to make links to their professional development. Movement as an area of study for actors often has a low status within the curriculum and profession that is driven by literary practice and text interpretation. Together with colleague Jackie Adkins, I have started to use Worsley's book over the last year as a resource on the BA Acting programme at Bath Spa University where we both facilitate a Feldenkrais-informed pedagogy to first year students. The book appears as a hugely helpful resource that facilitates the integration of the Feldenkrais Method into the learning syllabus, offers contextual understanding and processes for self-directed study, and perhaps most importantly offers a well-articulated vessel for an emerging Feldenkrais-informed culture and method of embodied acting.

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Biography

Thomas Kampe (PhD) has worked as a performing artist, researcher and somatic educator across the globe. He works as Senior Lecturer for Movement/Acting at Bath Spa University, UK, where he co-directs the *Creative Corporealities Research Group*. Collaborations include work with Liz Aggiss, Hilde Holger, Julia Pascal, Tanzinitiative Hamburg, Somatische Akademie Berlin, and with Carol Brown on re-embodying the diasporic practices of Modernist choreographer Gertrud Bodenwieser. Thomas' research focuses on critical somatic legacies. He recently co-edited *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, Vol. 9. (2017) *Bodily undoing: Somatics as practices of critique*, with Kirsty Alexander. Thomas is a practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method®. Since 2015 direction of international symposia: *(re)storing performance*

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