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Anne T. Renshaw ^a

^a Washington, D. C.

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MODERN ATTENTION TO PANTOMIMIC EXPRESSION

ANNE T. RENSHAW
Washington, D. C.

THE American people, more than any other, have uttered in several different ways their cry for more attention to the development of art along pantomimic lines. We may cite four illustrations of the public demand for the training of the body and of its power of representation or appeal to the most used of the five senses, the eye, by calling to your attention the influence of the motion picture on American gestures; the various forms which the dance has assumed during recent years; the present attempt of the opera producers to coordinate graceful expression of the voice with those of the body; and, lastly, the impulse for pageantry which has been increasingly noticeable since the dawn of the 20th century. These are demonstrations of the modern public attention to pantomimic expression and evidences of the popular demand for the training of the body. We may call these, if we will, inartistic, lacking in all the true concept of art's relation to life, base in their forms of misrepresentation, and altogether foreign to established aesthetic standards. But malign them as we may we must recognize that they bear the marks of that universality which is the final measure of classicism. In many cases, is it not our fault that they remain the ridiculed interpretations which we decry? Is it not the obligation of the teacher of art to recognize the almost inaudible public plea, and quickly to seize and elevate the new expressions of a nation's aspiration to creative endeavor? Examination of these various forms which demand more attention to the art of pantomimic expression might well be worth our while.

From the inception of the motion picture business, which found its birth in the back alleys of art and in the gutters of artistic tradition, we have been able to observe, whether we willed or no, the remarkable strides it has taken toward artistic and industrial prominence. Commercially it now ranks fifth in the Nation's beehive.

Artistically we have not yet placed it, even if some of our most prominent exponents of dramatic interpretation have recognized it as the most facile medium of introduction to a hungry people. With this system of educating the public there has developed a concurrent education of the producers, but a defense of the moving picture as an art is not my purpose. I desire to show merely its influence upon a public that reads as it runs. In daily expression Americans have been given more or less to staccato gestures. Much of this tendency to the abrupt has now been displaced by an unconscious study of cause and effect on the screen. I have known a number of business men who would blush to admit that they had copied many bits of mannerism from some favorite actor of the "movie world." As an object lesson in various forms of thought transmission it has had its results. The debutante is no less affected than the athletic school girl, the suffrage speaker, or the woman's club president. As a constant source of development it is unparalleled. I believe that a closer observation of its influence on the people and their conscious or unconscious adoption of its pantomimic lessons would conduce to a greater receptivity of mind in the general public and in the student when the teacher attempts to define, illustrate and inculcate the principles of pantomimic training.

In turning to the dance as demonstrative of the universal American cry for more pantomimic expression, we face three particular phases,—general dancing, interpretative dancing, and that which, for lack of a better term at this time, I must call dramatic dancing.

General dancing, seeking new forms of Terpsichorean expression, has introduced such forms as the now old Bunny Hug, the Fox Trot, the Turkey Trot, the latter-day suggestive Shimmie, and other variations which arouse our disgust. Yet all of them are evidences of a creative public demand for interpretation of thought and emotions through the body, however misdirected or negatively expressed.

Interpretative dancing, we may say, belongs to the more impulsive school. It is a spontaneous aspiration to the purely aesthetic, and is indicative of the best conception and radiation of this demand.

The dramatic dance was not originally American, but was introduced into this country, I believe, by the various Russian ballets;

though undoubtedly inspired by an exotic demand of the American people. In the majority of cases these dances interpret tragedy through the power of the body, and are counterparts in pantomimic expression to the vocal expression of grand opera.

I have taken occasion to mention three types of dancing which are, to my mind, evidences of the universal cry for physical expression of thought in art. The dance has been with us always, but the recent universal attention and particular accentuation of the creative, are further evidences of the trend of the times, pantomimically speaking.

It is strange that the opera writers and conductors of Southern Europe, who in their daily lives are most expressive pantomimically, should neglect the body in training their prima donnas. Possibly the reason is based on some fallacy which prevents them from permitting the body to aid the voice in interpretation of score and libretto. On the other hand, the great Northern composer, who was equally gifted in dramatic interpretation, recognized justly the claims of the whole man in the interpretation of his noblest emotions and sufferings. It was left to Wagner to emphasize co-ordination in the world of opera, but since the Wagnerian operas, like some of the Browning poems, have a tendency to obscurity, (which, by the way, is no reflection upon the method of interpretation, but rather an exposition of the massiveness of theme) this great truth was lost or buried under the more obvious traditions of the operatic theatre. It has remained, then, for a later day and for contemporary American opera producers to emphasize the value of correct usage of the pantomimic functions, and to insist upon the physical as well as vocal training of the prima donna. This is indeed a hopeful sign, and one which I consider partially explanatory of the wide attention and reception given opera in this country today.

Colleges and universities, as well as community organizations, are almost universally seeking pageantry and its tableaux. While pageantry itself is old, the present American revival has certain distinctly new forms which are direct indications of the common demand for an art that appeals to sight rather than to hearing. All these may be cited as cardinal points of the modern demand for physical interpretation.

Some of the new manifestations have already received our

attention and approbation as fosterers of art, but we have failed to recognize their deeper significance and the possibilities that are wrapped up in them. The frank facing of the issues, and recognition of the significance contained in this complex and varied cry for pantomimic expression, will stimulate our own artistic endeavor; and produce, I am sure, a renaissance of our attention to the training of the body.

Of the two prime organs of sense, the eye and the ear, the eye is known to be the more facile agent of impression; the more sensitive and highly developed instrument. It is quicker both to receive the impression and to act as the forerunner of expression. No gesture, attitude, or phase of bearing, is properly introduced unless accompanied by a corresponding ocular demonstration, hence man's first search for truth in the expression of his fellows is the sincerity of the eye. Training and concentration may produce a wonderful similitude of truth in the thought which is to be given to another, but close observation of the eye invariably forms the final test of verity. Man is granted only two natural languages for the conveyance of thought and feeling. Undue stress should not be laid upon one at the expense of the other. The harmonious development of both, and the proper degree of co-ordination between them, will lead to a perfect balance between impression and expression. The tendency has been to deform the student by giving the weight of instructive attention to the training of the voice and its acquired language of words. The reason for this is not altogether apparent, but we find many illustrations of the fear of gesture in teachers who know nothing of the subject technically and who have seen too often the inferior methods and imitations that are used by others. These naturally tend to degrade the art, and to turn the attention of both teacher and student to the form which is the more familiar. Even as the eye is the quicker and more sensitive of the two agents of impression, so the first reception of ideas is from the visual nerves. For this same reason the giving of thought must naturally appeal to the eye first, hence the deduction that pantomimic action should precede vocal expression.

Scientific cultivation of pantomimic expression should be not merely an attribute of the teacher of a particular art, but a vital function of all education, to be introduced into the Nation's pri-

mary schools as such. While the end of all education is the development of personality, there are two sides to this development, the reception and the manifestation of truth; or in other words, the impression and the expression of thought and feeling. The development of the one and the neglect of the other invariably results in deformity. Repression and constriction in the training of the child's emotions will be noticeable in voice as well as in poise; and wherever there has been a marked attempt at restriction of pantomimic activity, there have invariably followed awkwardness and faulty vocal conditions, frequently going even so far as defective speech.

Too often teachers who really believe seriously in the importance of co-ordinate bodily and vocal training have been compelled to forego their plans of development because the ground is not properly prepared for the sowing of the seed. Various reasons may be assigned for this unpreparedness, such as: incorrect ideas of the relation between voice and body, previous horrible examples of imitation and untruthful repression. The proper functioning of the body in the realm of thought-giving is of vital importance to the harmonious development of personality. Moreover, it is impossible to secure adequate vocal modulation without corresponding modulations of the body. I have known the Dean of the School of Expression to listen to a pupil's vocal rendition of a reading while gazing through a window on the street below. Without visual observation the student's bodily position, bearing, and gestures were commented upon critically and with a revelation of the most intimate insight. Through the modulation of the voice the teacher could interpret the faulty actions and conditions of the body. The teacher of song will insist upon certain corrections of bodily gesture, thereby showing his faith in the influence of the body on the voice and the relation between the two. The student who has no alteration in the texture of his body, no play of activity in the face, limbs or torso, no rhythmic physical responses to his impressions, and no pantomimic imitations and reactions to his vocal and verbal expressions, is as truly deformed as the crippled or the blinded.

Within the great centres of population on the Atlantic seaboard, a recent pronounced movement for the assimilation of the immigrant stock has based its efforts upon the teaching of English by pantomime. While only the most basic and representative forms

are used by the teachers, and while in nearly every instance the pantomime is in connection with objects; yet an advanced pantomimic instruction with unlimited possibilities can be achieved if the teachers will study the fundamental unfolding of thought through rhythmic pantomime. I believe it is the custom of these teachers, when they advance the student far enough to give him a working basis of English, to proceed to higher studies by aid of the speech symbols or words. Why not assist in a definite comprehension of the finer influences and modifications of thought by the manifestation of higher forms of inflectional physical expression? The establishment of courses in pantomimic interpretation in our schools of art and in vocational centres would be of most practical benefit; and I believe that if properly introduced much research and application could be secured with the assistance of the government and the educational leaders of the country. The Americanization programme and its teaching of foreigners by the aid of fundamental pantomimic laws is also another evidence of the increasing public demand for attention to the expressive functions of the body.

Schools of elocution have formulated various methods and systems of approach to pantomimic training. Many have degenerated into imitation and the fault of too much emphasis on system. The widest and most nearly permanent system or method recognized by Americans is the group of ideas introduced by the pupils of Delsarte. Most of these prove to be actual truths which the great master discovered and gave to the world, but in too many cases the rules laid down are superficial and fragmentary, thus leaving a doubt as to the complete conception of the Frenchman. There have been various books illustrating postures, gestures, and the like, but they have either failed to satisfy, or have received an attention too literal to make them of benefit in the true development of the art. Out of them have arisen the faults of imitation and the discrepancies of type which have played so large a part in the degeneration of the word "elocution." Horror of the imitative and uncertainty as to the basic principles of pantomimic training have been the primary causes, I believe, of the failure of our teachers to attribute to the body its proper possibilities. There has been too little research along this line, and too much over-stimulation of the

voice; conditions which have prevented a technical standardization sufficient to satisfy the queries of the layman.

Several years ago, while teaching in a southern College, I was asked by the president to formulate or give a systematized course of elocutional training which would correspond to the general standards followed by the majority of musical instructors. At the same time he repeated the cry of so many educators for an acceptable and comprehensible standard of operation. Text-books have been too few, and in many cases too vague, to present teaching opportunities to the instructor who has no time for research. It seems imperative that we present to the public, and to the great body of teachers of expression, books on the theory and practice of pantomimic training. The study of causes, methods and effects would be of inestimable benefit to the profession. The psychology of pantomime seems to be wrapped up likewise in the common popular cry for character study through the expression of various parts of the body. In dramatic interpretation I have used many times the quotation, "If you can walk a character you can give that character," as an indication of the influence of the rhythm of walking on the rhythm of thinking. It seems that the highest function of pantomimic expression is manifestation or suggestion, so that the study might be divided into three groups: poises, attitudes, and gestures. Practically no attention has been given to the first two, thereby causing an unbalanced condition when gestures only are associated with vocal interpretation. I have seen Nazimova manifest the most powerful change in feeling by a change of position only. Of the two natural languages we might state in a general way that the voice is objective, dealing with the objective presentation of ideas: while the body is subjective, so subjective that it seems almost entirely the creation of feeling. For this reason bodily expression is the more difficult to study and to understand, being hardly analysable apart from the experience that causes it. As action it tends to be the more adequate means of character study, because it is the more unconscious and spontaneous. Fundamental action may be positive or negative, constrictive or expansive; and in this particular point, it follows the experiences and modulations of positive and negative emotions. Some one has said that a gesture is spiral in its action, reaching a climax through a series of connected and

progressive grades. This would mean that all gesture is expansive; working from within out, and I am not sure yet but that this is true of the negative experiences as well.

This paper is not intended as an effort at research or a pronouncement of a method of training. It serves only as an introduction to the modern aspects of pantomimic expression from the point of view of the practical demand and the artistic supply. It would seem that a proper amount of research by competent exponents of the art would logically be the first step to take; that the development of correct balance between the two natural languages should be stimulated under the best modes of co-ordination; and that a proper standardization of the results should be formulated and enunciated as an essential to popular comprehension. A stimulation of active study and practice, beginning with universal attention in the public schools and involving the creation of advanced courses, for normal and artistic reasons, in the institutions of higher learning, would be the most effective method of approach. Doubtless there are many of you who can suggest more adequate means and clearer concepts of the need. Education is not the mere acquisition of facts; it is rather the conquest of a deeper and truer understanding of the purposes of human nature. The teacher performs the act of introduction, and leaves the student to prosecute his research. We underestimate the importance of stimulating inquiry. How often does the child ask "Why did you look at me like that?" or "What did you mean by putting your hand out so?" How often does the child imitate the eccentric walk or the peculiar pose of the head and then pause reflectively to ask "Why?" Should such interrogation be answered with a true exposition or by evasion? The development of the right gesture or bearing in the child is not a matter of the acquisition of facts, but of the love of freedom of expression. I was at one time associated with an instructor of English who was so abnormal in his carriage, and so stilted in his facial responses to thought, that he received not the ridicule of his students, but, on the contrary, the most profound pity. I had verification of this by voluntary information from the students in his classroom. Does this not indicate the value of co-ordination between body, voice, and speech? As one student expressed it, "I can't hear what he says for seeing how he acts." It should be

the aim of our art to secure external representation for the internal manifestation of an ideal. The basis of fallacy and misunderstanding of the subject rests on the desire to lay too much stress on the objective, whereas the objective, to be art at all, must be subordinated to the subjective. Suffice it to say that the great influence and development of the moving picture, the various forms of dancing, the demand for the tableaux and suggestions of pageantry, and the physical training of the American operatic stage, are sufficient indications of the public demand for study and training of the expressive elements of the body. The artistic need is obvious. A study of its function in education, and a true recognition of the needed advance, are essential to the teacher of Public Speaking in this swiftly moving era. It is vitally connected with the creative instinct, and is universal in time, place and race.