

The practice and teaching of Delsarte in Somatic, Theatrical and Dance Education.

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There are three stages of scientific discovery: first people deny it is true; then they deny it is important; finally they credit the wrong person. ~Alexander von Humboldt, (1769-1859)

Francois Delsarte, (1811-1871), appears to have begun teaching his method in 1838. I do not imagine it to have been fully developed at that point, but well on its way. Seeing Delsarte as a contemporary of Darwin, 1809-1882, can provide a chronological context for his work, a time when a religious quest to understand the mysteries of creation could lead to secular discoveries. Credit is given to the discoverer, without requiring embrace of the accompanying religious faith. The practical discoveries remain separate from the religious beliefs of the explorer. It is still not uncommon for us as individuals to have personal or religious beliefs that may coincide with our somatic and artistic practices, while we keep some of those beliefs out of our practice when teaching from an academic angle. Managing the intersection of Delsarte's faith with his discoveries is not a conflict.

For 24 years I have practiced the work and technique of Delsarte. I do not practice or teach Delsarte-"ism." Although the term is commonly used, its appropriateness should be questioned. We do not teach Darwinism, nor do we practice Alexanderism, Labanism, or Bainbridge-Cohenism. The useful work of Delsarte is separate from an "ism" about the man.

A LITTLE BIT OF KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING. A TWO-PAGE, FIVE MINUTE DESCRIPTION OF ANY METHODOLOGY WILL FALL SHORT.

Delsarte's practical work follows four main lines of thought.

1. His analysis of expression relative to anatomy. I quote him from Stebbins, reordering his points for clarity of this discussion.

- "If I examine, one by one, the agents of that, (an) organism, it is *Anatomy*.
- If I tell how that organism behaves under the, (an), inherent action, that is *Physiology*.
- If I determine the initial phenomena under the impulsion of which the inherent powers act upon the organism, that is *Ontology*.
- If from a certain organic form, I infer a certain sentiment, that is *Semiotics*.
- If from a certain sentiment, I deduce a certain organic form, that is *Aesthetics*.

- If, after studying the arrangement of an organic form, whose inherent fitness I am supposed to know, I take possession of that arrangement under the title of methods, invariably to reproduce that form, by substituting my individual will for its inherent cause, that is *Art*.

In brief, Anatomy reveals to us the purpose and uses for anatomical structures (physiology and ontology). Understanding the purposes and uses, allows us to interpret an action (semiotics). Interpretation of action allows us to choose actions to signify an impulse (aesthetics). Substituting our will for the original impulse, with a certainty of unity between impulse and form, is *Art*.

I draw attention to two points. 1. Delsarte's definitions show us that this was a study of behavior based on anatomy, and organism design and function, not on cultural behavior. 2. Familiarizing ourselves with human behavior, with the intention of substituting our will for spontaneous action, is a modern acting method. It is not a mere collection of poses to simulate emotions.

2. Correspondence and Trinity. There are no academic debates about Delsarte's use of Correspondence and Trinity being his central theories. Although they can be very complex and multilayered, they can also be quite simple. Both principles predate Delsarte in the worlds of philosophy, i.e. Platonism and Hermeticism, and in religious traditions, i.e. monotheism and triune nature of many religions, but Delsarte, apparently for the first time, brought them into a practical realm of analysis of behavior and anatomy, resulting in an original school of thought, and a technique of expressive study.

- Correspondence in simple terms, addresses the inner and the outer nature of our humanity. To every feeling there is an action, to every action there is a feeling. It is a two way street. Any methodology which assumes that what happens on the inside can appear on the outside, and/or what happens on the outside can appear on the inside, is following in the steps of Delsarte's practical law of correspondence. Correspondence also means as the larger so the smaller. Any methodology which assumes that an individual part of the body can be a microcosm of the larger body, is also in line with Delsarte's use of the law of correspondence.
- Trinity in hermetic and theoretical mathematics, is a condition where two variables create the third. The three pillars of the Cabala are sometimes referred to as active, passive and harmonic. This is a classic trinity, because active implies the necessity of passive, and the presence of active and passive together imply the necessity of harmonic equilibrium between them. Imagining the tao, or yin-yang symbol, gives us another example of a duality with its inherent harmony. Delsarte is known to have studied cabala, to have taught hermeticism, and to have found his own personal expression of trinity fulfilled by image of Father, Son, Holy Ghost. (It should be mentioned here that one who has studied hermeticism, as Delsarte must have, is well capable of viewing any religious structure through a lens of archetypes, a rather Joseph Campbell view of religious text.) A classical trinity is always yet a unity. Even though individual parts can be identified, and uniquely looked upon, they cannot actually be separated, as one can study any single angle of a triangle, but cannot extract that angle from the triangle, or from the

other two angles upon which its measure depends.

Delsarte's practical application of trinity to the study of behavior, was to identify that trinity manifesting itself in what we today might call body, mind, and spirit. The triune nature of humanity shows itself in distinct parts of the body, and in various types and qualities of movement in the work of Delsarte, while a unity of those three natures holds consistently.

- When correspondence and trinity are applied together, we have an inner and outer trinity of what Delsarte called life, mind and soul, this triune nature, appearing in ever and ever smaller units of anatomy, both within and without. When merged with his ideas of anatomy, physiology and ontology, he located parts of the body anatomically inclined to serve that trinity of impulses.

3. Laws of Motion. Delsarte described movement patterns in terms of their correspondences and trinities. Direction in space, shape of movement, sequence through the body, velocity, altitude, size of movement, from the self or toward the self, from an external or toward an external, and parallel, oppositional, or sequential movement of multiple parts. Above all the aforementioned was his triune principle of ease, precision, and harmony in motion being the sign of grace with power, and a goal of aligning the body toward its best use in correspondence with its design for "free direction of the agents by virtue of which are revealed life, soul and mind." Ease, precision and harmony are shown as a trinity in the correspondence drawing by Delsarte's own hand, a copy of which I have from Delsarte's descendants. Ease corresponds to the body, Precision to the mind, and Harmony to the heart or soul.

4. This brings us to the few simple exercises referred to as decompositions and harmonic balance, designed to release hidden tensions and eliminate superfluous action in the body, and develop a supportive poise brought about by precise equilibrium of action. According to trinity theory, precision is achieved in proportion to the achievement of ease and harmonious action, Ease is achieved by precision and harmony, and Harmony is achieved through precision and ease. Trinities are interdependent.

Questions about the origin of the aforementioned "harmonic gymnastics" are addressed in this recent publication. "Exploring One of the Sources of American Modern Dance and Theater: The Teachings of François Delsarte and the Analysis of the Harmonic Gymnastics Manuscripts of Steele MacKaye", *Somatics Magazine-Journal of the mind/body arts and sciences*, 2018, vol. 18, #2., Franck Waille

What are some Delsarte lineages? In no particular order:

- Laban studied Delsarte with a teacher named Morel, a direct student of Delsarte.
- Alexander billed himself as a Delsarte teacher before developing his own method.
- Isadora Duncan taught Delsarte as a young woman before her own dancing career.

- The Denishawn connection is well known. Miss Ruth trained in Delsarte as a child, Ted as a young adult. Every graduate of Denishawn can be imagined to have a Delsarte background.
- The American Academy of Dramatic Arts founded on the Delsarte system. The 1944-45 catalogue describes a “pantomimic” training of the body, that is a precise description of Delsarte training without mentioning the name Delsarte. Former students listed in the catalogue include Lauren Bacall, Agnes Moorehead, William Powell, Edward G. Robinson, Rosalind Russell, Spencer Tracy, and Claire Trevor. Samuel Silas Curry was the founder of Curry College in the Boston area. Although he claimed to have renounced Delsarte, his entire system was based on the trinity of expression as described by Delsarte.
- Genevieve Stebbins taught Delsarte in various forms throughout her writing and teaching career. Without a thorough embodiment and understanding of Delsarte, it has been common to misunderstand some of her statements about the impracticality of taking on ALL of Delsarte’s ideas, including his religious and philosophical ideas, his metaphysical elements as she called them, and interpret those statements as a rejection of Delsarte’s work on the whole. In *Werners Magazine* 1894, she states, “Any practical artist in aesthetic training ought to know that the charts in question, though valuable as a practice for the actor who should be able to impersonate a fiend as well as an angel, are by no means suited to purely aesthetic culture.” She was no longer teaching actors as she had been, and goes on to state that she no longer teaches Delsarte by the numbers, or limits herself to her example of the nine positions of the feet because there are more positions than that, but she had already stated so in her first Delsarte book, and had advised the student to study with that in mind. Her statements are not easy to interpret, and the only reasonable approach to understanding the conflicting statements would be a thorough understanding of what Delsarte did offer. Stebbins is complex.
- Ms. Frances Stewart Parker (Frank) Feminist, Delsarte teacher, leader in women’s rational dress movement, and wife/colleague of Francis W Parker, leader in progressive education and founder of Parker Schools. Her Delsarte work is evident in his writings about educating the whole child into understanding and not mere repetition.
- Ned Wayburn, Choreographer, trained by Ida Serven, herself a student of Mackaye. Wayburn was a teacher of Fred Astaire, and choreographer of Ziegfeld Follies, and leader in theatrical dance development.
- La Meri included a chapter on Delsarte in her volume, *Total Education in Ethnic Dance*.
- Hazel Mackaye, daughter of Steele, staged tableaux in Washington DC for Women’s Suffrage.
- Dr. Mary Lee, Delsartean and head of physical culture at the Oswego Normal school, sent Delsarte trained teachers out into the national schools. The Tempe Normal School, and the Winona Normal School also had Delsartean teachers in charge of Physical education, indicating a vast population of public school teachers with somatic education.
- Rose Meller O’Neill, Delsarte teacher at London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts as early as 1913, published a Delsarte technique and theory text in 1927.

- Numerous graduates of the Boston area Delsarte based schools dispersed throughout the country and started elocution and dramatics classes in universities that would broaden into theater and communications departments.
- This list is far too small.

Additional notes:

As a study of expression and behavior, and a practice to free the body to become fluidly responsive and efficient at expression, the Delsarte technique does not have a physical fitness or athletic development component. A study of the late 19th century debates about whether aesthetic culture should be added to physical culture is interesting, and not unlike modern questions about including somatics and expressive fitness in our health as well as questions about risks of exercise that isolates the body from its poised and expressive nature while exercising.

- Stebbins in *Werner's Magazine*, Jan 1894. "...the true Delsarte System does not contain any system of physical culture. Everything is purely aesthetic."
- At the National Speech Arts Association convention, 1896, Miss L. May Haughwout presented a paper she referred to as "Has Emotion a Place in Physical Culture or Should Physical Culture Include a study of Emotional Expression?"
- In *Werner's Magazine* 1894, a Mrs Abner W. Lowell, (likely Marion Lowell, author of *Harmonic Gymnastics and Pantomimic Expression*, Challenges Baron Nils Posse's statement rejecting Delsarte exercises for children's physical education, and proposes that poise and refined muscular use are a value for other practices.
<http://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=KMgcAQAA MAAJ&source=books-notes-export&pg=GBS.RA1-PA229.w.3.1.0>

Some interesting notes from Reverend Alger on the mathematics of Delsarte in *The Proceedings of the First National of Public Readers and Teachers of Elocution* : Alger points out the Numeric nature of Delsarte's theory linking it to Aristotilian mathematics and mathematical abstraction. It has to be remembered that Rev. Alger was a minister, and his primary cause was religion, not art. Naturally his personal religious views must be balanced with practical content.

<http://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=JXecqYkzmHcC&source=books-notes-export&pg=GBS.RA1-PA97.w.1.0.0>

Thoughtful and knowledgeable writers on Delsarte from the late 19th century are many, and often approach the work from different goals, for actor training, for general health and well being, for self development in emotional expression, for education in a broad sense, etc.. They are all worth reading. I do not recommend books known as "readers", which contained poems or prose to be read for community entertainment, along with posed pictures and a very few pages

of Delsarte theory, as legitimate Delsarte books. They might be considered similar to a grocery store checkout line booklet stating that you can learn yoga in 15 minutes with this book.