**Acting the Metaphor**

**The Laban-Malmgren System**

 **of Movement Psychology and Character Analysis**

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Not for review

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The Laban-Malmgren System of Movement Psychology and Character Analysis*,* an influential training method of the post-war era, has helped to shape the thinking and work of some of the most expressive actors of our time, from Anthony Hopkins to Tom Hardy. The System is an original synthesis of Rudolf Laban’s ideas on movement, Jungian typology and Stanislavskian physical action, brought together by the Swedish dancer and acting teacher Yat Malmgren (1916-2002). He taught the System to generations of actors, first at his private Movement Studio in the West End, then at RADA and the CSSD and from 1963 until 2001 at the school he co-founded, Drama Centre London. It continues to be taught in conservatoires across the world.

The System originated in work developed in the early fifties by Rudolf Laban and one of his late-career collaborators, William Carpenter[[1]](#endnote-1). Carpenter was inspired by the belief that *"*words dance*",* that they could be made to convey psychological experiences which hitherto had only been intimated through physical sensation. Working alongside Laban, he attempted a synthesis between the latter’s ideas on movement expression and aspects of Jungian psychology, drawing in particular on Jung’s influential book on *Psychological Types*. Through Carpenter's diligent, if not always accurate, readings in Jung the confluence of two major intellectual traditions - Jung and Laban - had begun to bear fruit in a planned book relating to a classification of human types according to their psychology and the way in which this was reflected in movement. However, in June 1954 Carpenter died unexpectedly (Preston-Dunlop 1998, p.263) and Laban, feeling unable to develop the work on his own, entrusted Yat Malmgren with the notes Carpenter had left behind[[2]](#endnote-2). In the years that followed, by linking Laban’s and Carpenter’s work to Stanislavskian thinking on character and action (‘physical action’, Michael Chekhov, some American developments - notably Uta Hagen), Yat Malmgren struck out on his own, developing what Carpenter had conceived as a general ‘movement psychology’ into a narrower, yet coherent and useable training System **for actors**.

Laban’s and Carpenter’s approach was based on a deceptively simple idea: that between certain psychological and certain physically-based concepts **there is a direct correspondence**. Jung had argued that the psyche could be described in terms of four psychological functions: Sensing, Thinking, Intuiting and Feeling[[3]](#endnote-3). He also maintained that personalities developed in accordance with the ‘best foot foremost’ principle: that people recognised early in life that one or the other of these functions secured approval and success and therefore tended to rely on it and underplay the others. As a result, personalities are shaped by the “habitual” reliance on one of the functions (Jung 1971, p.482) and Jung describes a “Sensing type”, a “Feeling type” and so on. A particular personality also continues to draw on the other functions, so Jung distinguished between a “superior” and subordinate functions. Thus, one person could be said to be primarily a Sensing type, but to use Intuition as the “auxiliary” function (or *vice versa*)[[4]](#endnote-4). Moreover, following the James-Lange theory of affect, Jung also emphasised the physiological foundation of psychological processes, emotion in particular, and the mutually reinforcing relationship between the two. “I regard affect” – Jung writes – “on the one hand as a psychic feeling-state and on the other as a physiological innervation-state, each of which has a cumulative, reciprocal effect on the other." (1971, p. 412).

This was the fundamental thesis Carpenter had absorbed from Jung. He and Laban then decided to test the theory in practice: they observed the movement patterns of a group of people undergoing analysis at the Withymead Centre (McCaw 2011, pp. 306-16), a clinic run by two Jungian analysts who, as part of their arts-orientated therapeutic programme, encouraged their patients to attend movement classes (Hodgson 1979, pp.75-78; Stevens 1986, p.151).The habitual movements of the analysands were classified using the four elements into which Laban had long argued all movement could be analysed: the four dimensions or ‘Motion Factors’ of Weight, Time, Space and Flow (1950/1971, p.22).

In order to determine the dimensions of movement Laban undertook a sort of 'chemical analysis'. He studied the various 'molecules' and 'atoms' which made up movement with the aid of four 'instruments', four fundamental questions:

a. which part of the body moves and what relationship exists between it and those parts of the body which remain still?

b. what is the duration of the movement and in what relationship does it stand to other movement durations around it?

c. how much muscular power is exerted in effecting the movement?

d. which direction in space is the movement leading towards or away from?

Laban observed that in order to lift a heavy weight the muscles strain to overcome the force of gravity. Equally, lifting a light object necessitated only the lightest of muscle exertions. Thus, Laban declared, one of the four components of movement is its Weight, which, according to the intensity of the energy deployed, can be either Strong or Light.

Movements also have a direction in Space. Someone hammering will go as cleanly as possible between the raised arm and the nail - the movement is Direct. But a coachman whipping his horses will raise the whip, move it first to the left of his head, then to the right and only then crack it forward. The movement is convoluted, roundabout, Flexible.

Movements take place in Time. Here Laban pointed out that the important factor was not whether the movement was slow or quick, but how slow or quick in comparison with other movements around it, either of parts of the same body or of different objects. Thus a movement is said to be Quick or Sustained not in an absolute way, but in comparison with its surroundings.

Finally, effective movements involve a degree of co-ordination: they are either free and easy or halting and tight. This Laban defined as the Flow of movement, which could be either Free or Bound.

These components of movement rearrange themselves constantly: now one, now the other occupies the foreground, while the others take a supporting role. When a movement is expressive, the components are "in harmony" (Laban 1951, p.6). For Laban, movement was a psychophysical event, incorporating both physical motion and the psychological processes associated with it (1950/1971, p.22). The harmony of the components of physical movement was therefore an indication of the harmony of the inner being. Conversely, an inability to give physical expression to one's innermost feelings and sensations was a sign of inner conflict. In extreme cases this could lead to an "un-balancing" of the personality (Kosterlitz 1950, p.6; Laban in McCaw 2011, p.320). But, rather than look for specific gestural or postural manifestations of psychological disturbance, as some psychoanalysts working in the same period attempted to do (see, for example, Deutsch 1952; Reich 1933/1945; Lowen 1958), Laban and Carpenter linked the component elements of movement, their Motion Factors, with the 'elements' of the psyche, Jung's four psychological functions, which they called their ‘Mental Factors’. They argued that:

Sensing corresponds to Weight

Intuiting corresponds to Time

Thinking corresponds to Space

Feeling corresponds to Flow.

These connections were purely experiential. No proof existed, apart from that offered by their observations, which told them that a person's 'weighty presence' was associated with her sensuous engagement with the world; that a 'thinker' tended to go 'in and out' of his ‘inner space’ in order to solve a problem. Indeed, Laban’s journey to this conclusion was fraught with hesitations (Laban 1947, pp. 57-9; 1950/71, pp. 126-7) and even Carpenter sounds a little defensive on this topic when he writes:

When we are asked 'How can you prove that, say, a movement in Space reveals ‘Thinking and Attention', we must reply that our proof is empirical and that it is based on long continued observations. Psychological theory is based equally on empiricism and is not invalidated thereby (1954, p.3).

Elsewhere Carpenter elaborates a little on the nature of the observations which had led Laban to make this significant leap:

In our research into this relationship between bodily movements and inner emotion, we have been aided by students who had had an Analysis for a relatively long period under the Freudian or Jungian methods before joining us for training in Movement. In every instance the information obtained by the Movement Analyst from a study of the student's movements, has corresponded with the findings of the Psycho-Analyst... It is mainly through the comparison of such coupled findings that we arrived at the coordination of Flow & Feeling, Time & Intuition, Space & Thinking and Weight & Sense Perception (1954, p.19).

While Carpenter’s focus had been on the therapeutic application of Laban’s ideas, Yat Malmgren sensed their potential as an approach for actor training. Building on Carpenter’s foundation and incorporating other important concepts from Laban’s published work - Working Actions, Subconscious Motifs, Externalised Drives, etc. – Malmgren constructed a System designed to **sensitise actors to the links between physical activity and mental and emotional states**. In this general overview of this complex System, I only propose to focus on two of its salient features: the links described above and the classification of theatre characters flowing from it.

As we have seen, the System in founded on the observation that not only can one perceive which of the mental functions is dominant in an individual personality through the way in which a person moves, but that the more a person moves in a certain way, the more that movement pattern reinforces the personality bias. Thus, the System is founded on the mutuality of the Mental and Motion Factors within what Laban was already calling the “body mind”. This interdependence has since been reasserted both philosophically (Sheets-Johnstone 2005, p. 379 for a phenomenological approach) and by recent neuropsychological research (Damasio 1999, p.86; Edelman and Tononi 2000), enabling theatre scholars to speak of a “reflexive feedback loop” (Kemp 2012, p.61) of embodiment, in which gesture, verbalisation and impulse form an inseparable whole.

Laban and Malmgren think of this unit as a form of integrated psychological and physical ‘movement’ and the System describes it as a tempo[[5]](#endnote-5), a ‘cocktail’ of Motion and Mental Factors through which one can both *con*ceive and *per*ceive a character.

The System describes this psychophysical process using the terminology of Jung’s types. In so doing, the System simplifies Jung's ideas considerably: Jung had divided the functions along a major fault line, into rational (Thinking and Feeling) and irrational (Sensing and Intuiting). These were said to be incompatible with one another: a personality which overemphasised its rational functions suppressed the irrational and *vice versa.* The Laban-Malmgren System disregards this incompatibility and assembles its theatre character typology by combining psychological functions across the rational/irrational divide. By considering that any of the functions can be the superior function and combining it with any of the other three, the System arrives at a total of sixbroad types of theatre character. These Laban named his six Inner Attitudes. They are usually presented as pairs of opposites:

* A Sensing/Thinking[[6]](#endnote-6) character type called **Stable**
* An Intuiting/Feeling character type called **Mobile**
* A Sensing/Intuiting character type called **Near**
* A Thinking/Feeling character type called **Remote**
* A Sensing/Feeling character type called **Adream**
* A Thinking/Intuiting character type called **Awake**.

These categories are in effect clusters of psychophysical characteristics, engendered and shaped by the character’s Super-Objective.A character whose primary motivation revolves around sensuous desires,whose main concern is its own physical well-being (Moliere's *malade**imaginaire,* for example) belongs to materialistic Near. On the otherhand, characters whose lives are dominated by emotion (Ophelia, say, orHedda) are considered Adream. These decisions do not representrestrictions on the actor's freedom of interpretation any more thanchoosing a Super-Objective does. An actor playing Iago could choose ashis primary source of motivation the character's resentment at beingoverlooked for promotion, his sexual jealousy or class and racial enmity- all Sensing-rooted desires typical of a Near character. Butshould he decide to find his main motivation in Iago's emotionaldependence on Othello, on unacknowledged love for the Moor and hatred ofhimself, the character will be considered Adream.

Here a further level of complexity intervenes. In the practice of expressive movement, Laban considered his Motion Factors as points on a continuum between what he called their “Yielding” and “Contending” Elements or extremes:

Weight moves along a spectrum of Light to Strong

Space moves along a continuum of Flexible to Direct

Time moves along a continuum of Sustained to Quick

Flow moves along a continuum of Free to Bound.

The actor developing an Inner Attitude can therefore choose Variations which are combinations of these elements. At any given moment, a Stable character, for example, inhabits one of the following Variations:

Light/Flexible

Light/Direct

Strong/Flexible

Strong/Direct

The System thus analyses the tempi of characters in terms of Weight, Space, Time and Flow. Character traits described by adjectives such as 'dynamic', 'relaxed', 'powerful', 'indecisive' and a myriad others, are ultimately defined in terms of Light or Strong, Sustained or Quick and so on.

Yat Malmgren then extends this analysis from the realm of Character to that of Action and subdivides the latter into an Inner and an Outer Action.

The Inner Action denotes the thought-process of the character, its 'stream of consciousness'. It is therefore a psychological process, an internal layer through which the impulse passes before emerging into physical gesture.

The Outer Action consists of the 'doings' of the character. These include the psychological as well as the physical Activities the character plays on other characters. They are the means by which the character achieves its desires - the Objectives.

Inner and Outer Actions are described with the same terminology as the Inner Attitudes. An Inner Attitude cannot express itself through an Action Attitude which is its direct opposite (Stable through Mobile; Adream through Awake, etc.), but has at its disposal the two remaining pairs as Inner and Outer Actions. Thus, a Stable character might play an Adream (Feeling/Sensing – an inner monologue of cold rage, perhaps, or of intense, altruistic concern) Inner Action, covered by an Awake (Thinking/Intuiting) Outer Action - the visible expression of both Character and Inner Action in a cool, poised and perhaps manipulative attitude towards the other characters in the scene. A kind of ‘model of the atom’ structure emerges, with the Inner Attitude (the character essence) constant yet hidden at the centre and the Action Attitudes revolving at speed around it.

Malmgren’s way of looking at the relationship between Character and Action constituted a substantial departure from Laban’s original concept of Inner Attitudes. For Laban the Inner Attitudes referred to different states of mind or inclinations within the same, real-life, person. They were supposed to generate movement in an unmediated way: a certain Inner Attitude would find expression through its corresponding Motion Factors; changing the Motion Factors would result in psychological changes, with therapeutic outcomes. In applying these concepts to acting, Yat Malmgren separated Character from Action and described a dialectic relationship between Inner Attitude and Action Attitudes and their expression in movement:

The Inner Attitude is revealed through:

a. posture

b. shadow moves[[7]](#endnote-7).

The Inner Action is revealed through:

semi-voluntary yet recurring moves, akin to Michael Chekhov’s “psychological gesture”.

The Outer Action is revealed through:

a. (conscious) psychological activities

b. (consciously designed) physical activities.

Pedagogically, most students of the System are introduced to its concepts by means of practical exercises known as ‘scenarios’. Exercises in dramaturgy as well as acting imagination, scenarios are short monologues devised in order to embody one or the other Inner Attitude and its respective Actions and are adaptations of a performance style made famous by the American actress Ruth Draper (Zabel 1966).

A major performer from the twenties to the fifties, Ruth Draper (1884-1956) has faded from all but the most assiduous of theatrical memories, yet a quarter of a century after her death John Gielgud was still describing her as “the greatest individual performer that America has ever given us” (Draper 1979, p. xi). Draper’s speciality was the solo character performance, the creation alone on stage and by the simplest theatrical means (a table, chairs, a sofa set against a plain velvet curtain; a modest dress, at times a shawl or a carefully chosen hat) of strongly projected characters and – miraculously – of the worlds in which these existed. Through her reactions she told the audience everything they needed to know about the children, animals, lovers, servants, husbands of her characters. Her show, *Ruth Draper and Her Company of Characters*, for which she created more than sixty characters, was performed all over the world. It was on one of these tours that Yat Malmgren met her in May 1940; he later adopted her use of the monologue as the means by which his students assimilated the main features of his System.

Monologue is perhaps misleading, because – although actors are alone on stage – the dramaturgical structure inherited from Draper requires them to surround themselves with a host of ‘invisible partners’- imaginary characters whose presence the viewer infers from the protagonists’ reactions. The text we hear is therefore part of a dialogue or dialogues of which we only have access to one side. The spectator’s imagination is rewarded; the actors in turn concentrate on honing their reactions so as to express with as much clarity as possible the underlying Inner Attitude and the specific Actions to which this gives rise.

The earliest scenarios focus on one of the Variations of an Inner Attitude, drawing on simple experiences from the student’s daily life (arguing with a bank manager for an overdraft; putting a recalcitrant sibling to bed; etc.).They provide a **sensation** of what it is to be in, say, Light/Sustained mode, as opposed to Strong/Sustained or any of the other tempi described by the System. As the course progresses, scenarios became more complex and abandon the mundane for sophisticated, imagined worlds. Indeed, student scenarios are at their worst when their matter is the exploration of private angst or adolescent resentments, against parents, authority in general, lovers. They are at their best when, like the accomplished models in Ruth Draper’s work, they transport us to a different realm and display a strong feel for what Yat Malmgren called “the third circle”: a layer of meaning which transcends the internal worlds of the actors and their immediate relationships (the “second circle”) and extends to matters of social or political import - a Nazi doctor maintaining the purity of his ideals even after the fall of the Reich; a Rwandan lay preacher come to extract his wayward sister from a Paris brothel. These complex, though concise (usually around five minutes’ long) ‘Character Scenarios’ access the full complexity of an Inner Attitude and its four Variations, as well as deploying a full panoply of Action Attitudes.

Ruth Draper was famous for not drawing on people from her direct circle of acquaintances when devising her characters; in the same way, student scenarios shine when they are acts of vivid imagination, furthest removed from autobiography as well as direct observation. In all cases, the entry point into the tempi of the character portrayed is a small gesture, performed repeatedly, until an altered sense of self materialises[[8]](#endnote-8). The actor can similarly manipulate posture or silhouette, gait and dominant gesture patterns, thus accessing the psychological make-up of the character by way of the physical. The actor Michael Mears offers an example of the way in which this approach translates into professional practice (personal communication). In the nineties Mears played Mr Brisk, a character in *The Double Dealer* by Wycherley[[9]](#endnote-9). As his name indicates, Mr. Brisk is a busy-body, a buffoon obsessed with fashion, surface and making an impression. Responding intuitively to the writing, Mears considered Mr Brisk’s defining Working Actions to be Dabbing and Flicking. He then took as his point of departure the image of a young boy trying to keep a balloon in the air - a never-ending series of Dabs. From this simple gesture came a series of Shadow Moves. Shadow Moves*,* Mears observes, "suggest themselves, you notice them, then you begin to exaggerate a little, pull back, eventually incorporate them consciously into the physical life of the character."Occasionally, two or three such Shadow Moves may be distilled into “significant gestures” - gestures expressive of the character essence. From these arose a tempo which was eventually stitched into the character’s patterns of speech. Sooner or later, says Mears, the physical tempo must affect the psychology of the character. The actor and director Simon Callow also quotes playing a character that "came to him"as someone who traces convoluted, delicate round Gliding shapes with his fingers. This gesture arose spontaneously; Callow then consciously refined it into a deliberate expression of the essence of the character, to the point where he felt able to say, quoting Michael Chekhov, that *"*the gesture was the character"(personal communication).

In Simon Callow’s production of *Les enfants du paradis*[[10]](#endnote-10) the part originally played by Arletti in Jean-Louis Barrault's seminal film was taken by Helen McCrory. Director and actress are both graduates of the Drama Centre and were able to discuss the character using the terms of the System. Surprisingly, Callow recalls, by analysing its Action Attitudes they reached the conclusion that the character’s Inner Attitude was Stable (sensuous and cunning). On the page as well as in Arletti's interpretation, the character had presented Action Attitudes in the pairs Adream/Awake (the loving, erotic Outer Action hiding an inner element of calculation) and Near/Remote (the street urchin with a hidden loneliness and a melancholy sense of self**-**sufficiency).This pointed, Callow reasoned, to the Inner Attitude of Stable, with the character constantly distancing itself from the temptation of Mobility, of succumbing to emotion. Not an obvious interpretation for one of the most romantic figures of twentieth century drama, yet one which imposed itself upon consideration within the terms of the System.

An articulate account of this type of analysis was also offered by the actress Kate Garthside, another former student of Yat Malmgren at the Drama Centre (personal communication). Garthside played the character of Gervaise in an adaptation of Emile Zola's *L'assommoir*[[11]](#endnote-11) and her initial impulse, responding to the character's tragic emotionallife, was to consider it to be Adream. Testing this initial reaction by using the System, Garthside reconsidered the character's Inner Attitude by asking what its conscious Super-Objective was and took the view that the character was defined by her sociallimitations, her working class status. Gervaise was a tragic character indeed,but unaware of her tragedy, thus lacking one of the defining aspects of Adream, awareness of the heightened emotional state. Garthside's conclusion was that the character was in fact Near; emotion played a part, but was not intrinsic to the character essence.

The difference in Inner Attitude came to the fore when Garthside rehearsed the high point of the role’s trajectory: Gervaise is faced with the loss of her laundry, the source of her livelihood and status, and after a long silence during which she has been listening to the men around her discussing her plight she screams: "I hate the fucking lot of you" and walks out banging the door. That single line had to express the way in which the character deals with her feelings at a moment of major significance. At first Garthside felt her emotion was "flying out" and was "acted", "over-indulgent" - an Adream, self-conscious display, expressed vocally and gesturally as an elongated Slash. However, in Near characters, Garthside remembered from her experience of Near scenarios, emotion is “halted”, strangled at birth by the 'spade's a spade' attitude of the character. The tempo of the line, coming from a Near Inner Attitude, now changed to a Punch. From this sensation, arrived at through analysis of the Inner Attitude and amplified by the physical work deriving from it, the actress was able to build a character defined by the characteristics of Near. Garthside considers that she might have reached the same conclusion even without her training, intuitively, but that without the **vocabulary** of the system she would not have arrived at "the clarity of thought" which gave her intuition a "definition" necessary to construct characters such as Gervaise consciously and methodically.

The application of the System is thus predicated on two interdependent processes, familiar from Stanislavskian practice:

* An analytic phase, during which the actor collects biographical, sociological and historical data from the dramatic text and its contexts; draws inferences from these regarding the psychological traits of the character; then gives these characteristics physical expression
* A synthetic phase, which is reached at the point where the analysis has been integrated into a tempo which expresses the Inner Attitude as well as serving as a shortcut for accessing the character.

While the dramatic action – people, events, circumstances - of the narrative retains through analysis a prescriptive control on the behaviour of the character, both learning and application of the System are fundamentally experiential and phenomenological (Hayes 2010). Overall, actors trained in the System cite one feature as its enduring legacy: the way in which as students it **created a systematic way of linking physical activity with mental and emotional states and thus** **enabled them to** **give words to their sensations.** They retain an enduring perception of a phenomenological level of truth in the propositions put forward by the System. Simon Callow writes:

Yat Malmgren's work …addresses itself directly to the very nature of acting: not 'What it is for?' or 'What are the conditions which give rise to it?' It attempts to say what it **is.** It amounts to a praxis of character in action, an account of the physical embodiment of character and impulse *(*1984*,* p*.*39, emphasised in theoriginal).

And Oscar-winner Colin Firth:

Yat… [put] psychological concepts into space, into action, into the physical world…. I found that after a couple of years of it, it started to make an enormous amount of sense; it came as close as anything anybody really can to teaching acting... It made sense to me, and I still use it." (<http://www.firth.com/articles/03backstagewest.html>)

How does one account for this perception of an “enormous amount of sense” about the “very nature of acting”? I have suggested elsewhere (Mirodan 1997, p. 262) that the utility as well as the fascination of the Laban-Malmgren System resided not in its roots in a branch of psychology, now much contested[[12]](#endnote-12), but in the fact that it provided a *sui generis* **language,** a vocabulary describing its key concepts and a ‘syntax’ determining the relationship between these. I have also come to look at it as a complex of metaphors.

In certain cases, as the neuro-linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Michael Johnson have argued, metaphors are not only a function of language, but integral to consciousness. In traditional ‘faculty psychology’ our ability to reason - to form and use abstract concepts – is separate and distinct from our ability to perceive and to move. This tradition considers that, as Lakoff and Johnson put it: “perception may inform reason, and movement may be a consequence of reason, but…no aspect of perception or movement is *part* of reason” and that consequently “there is assumed to be an absolute dichotomy between *per*ception and *con*ception” (1999, p.37, italics in original). In their influential work on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Lakoff and Johnson proposed an alternative perspective, that of “embodied reason” (1999, p. 555 for a summary). According to this view, concepts and their properties are an inevitable and necessary consequence of the way in which our bodies and brains are structured, as well as of our interactions with one another and the physical world around us (1999, p.37). We conflate abstract concepts (emotions, ideas) with other concepts of which we have a direct, physical experience (spatial orientation, objects, etc.) and the two categories may be integrated at the neural level (Lakoff and Gallese 2005, p. 456).This, I believe, is what Carpenter had intuited when he asserted that “words dance”. While from a strictly cognitive science point of view his and Laban’s association of psychological descriptors with physical dimensions may be considered arbitrary[[13]](#endnote-13), they nonetheless give the actor a systematic way of describing the type of “experiential gestalt” of which Lakoff and Johnson speak: “coherent organizations of our experiences in terms of natural dimensions*”* (1980/2003, p. 117)

When given expression in language, these conflations lead to what Lakoff and Johnson describe as “metaphoric thinking”. We speak, for example, of a *warm* welcome and of people we are *close* to; or of *rising* political tensions and *falling* prices. Such metaphors are “based on cross-domain correlations”: a source domain (the sensorimotor experience through which we perceive temperature, distance, gravity, etc.) is conflated with a target-domain, that of subjective judgment (intimacy, emotions, justice, etc.) (1980/2003, p. 244). According to Johnson’s theory of conflation, such associations are formed automatically and unconsciously in early childhood: thus, “for an infant the subjective experience of affection is typically correlated with the sensory experience of warmth, of being held” (1999, p. 46); equally, repeated observations in early childhood that liquids or piles of objects rise as they increase and drop as they decrease link the subjective judgment of quantity (more/less) with the sensorimotor experience of verticality (up/down). Such conflations give rise to what Lakoff and Johnson call “primary metaphors”: AFFECTION IS WARMTH[[14]](#endnote-14); MORE IS UP; IMPORTANT IS BIG; CHANGE IS MOTION, etc. (1999, pp. 50-54)[[15]](#endnote-15).

In the Laban-Malmgren System the actor learning to associate Space (Direct/Flexible) with Thinking starts with the sensations of ‘towards’ and ‘away from’, as well as of direct and flexible movements. Thoughts are conceptualised as being either *grasped,* *captured* (fixed in space) or *drifting*. Complex thinking is revealed physically in the concave body of a listener doubting the speaker’s assertions (“Let us sit crooked and think straight” as Brecht says).Thought is perceived as a journey: the THOUGHT IS A JOURNEY experiential gestalt tells us that to accept or relate to an idea is to move closer to it; to doubt or examine it is to distance oneself from it: Thought and Space become inextricably linked. Similarly, linking Flow (Free/Bound) to Feeling is rooted in the sensation of emotions *flowing* or being *blocked* through the body, expressed in metaphors such as *the adrenaline coursed through my veins; love flowed from his eyes; her heart stopped in her mouth; a wave of jealousy*.

The System is built on a “foundational” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 542) metaphor: PSYCHOLOGICAL ACTION IS PHYSICAL ACTION*.* Psychological functions are perceived as movements: feelings *run high* and are *jarring;* thought *goes (straight) to the heart of the issue* or *around the problem*; intuitions are *quick off the mark* or *slow to catch on*; sensations are connected to gravity – *heavy/strong smell; light touch*. Our psychological experiences are structured in terms of physical forces.

Metaphors such as FEELING IS FLOW or THINKING IS SPACE are also defined by the primacy of the physical experience: THINKING IS SPACE makes experiential sense; SPACE IS THINKING does not. The relationship between source and target domains is “asymmetrical” - “inferences only flow from the sensorimotor domain to that of subjective judgment”” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 55), so to express the idea that a character is highly emotional students of the System tend to say “he is Mobile” or “he has a lot of Flow”, never “he is Feeling” or “Intuiting”; the original source domain for Mobile (Feeling/Intuiting linked to Flow/Time) has been forgotten; only the target domain remains – the association of intense emotion with agitation.

This makes this approach particularly attractive for actors whose starting points are movement and physical sensation: the conflation of Mental Factors with Motion Factors gives the analysis of character and action, of necessity involving abstract concepts, “the qualitative feel of sensorimotor experience” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 128). Terms such as Remote, Stable, Mobile, etc., have immediately accessible physical connotations. Thus, when directing, Simon Callow tends to use the terms of the System even with actors who are not familiar with their specialised meanings: "For example, I use Remote” Callow says, “because the word has a suggestive value in itself, even without the specific images created in training.*"* Callow considers that the Systemoffers actors, perhaps for the first time[[16]](#endnote-16), a language akin to thatavailable to musicians. He looks with envy at the fact that musicians cantalk of D major, 4/6 or mezzo-forte and know exactly what they mean. The lexicon provided by the Laban-Malmgren System goes some way to offering a similar precisionto actors (personal communication).

Naming experiences in terms of physical dimensions also enables actors to “categorise, group and quantify them – and, by this means, reason about them” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 25). Categorisation is not without its problems. Grouping characters on the basis of personality traits (characteristics) into the six Inner Attitudes is founded on two much-contested assumptions: that one can speak of a psychological ‘essence’, of a stable identity ‘underneath’ the appearances of behaviour; and that one can therefore classify human beings (and by extension characters) into categories or types based on such immutable essences. These assumptions go back to an idea proposed by the early psychologist William James: that human personality contains a multiplicity of ‘me’s’ which change according to circumstances, but that these are aspects of a core identity, which we as individuals recognise as our ‘I’ (see Benedetti 2005, p. 79). Fundamental to both Stanislavskian and Jungian thinking, the notion of a personality essence has caused a great deal of anxiety in theoretical discourse on acting, as it is suspected of ignoring, even negating, cultural, political or psychological differences. A detailed analysis of this criticism is outside the scope of this article, but it needs to be acknowledged, while also recording that classification is a natural function of our (metaphorical) way of thinking. Four decades ago Eleanor Rosch (1977) demonstrated on the basis of experimentation that we categorise objects by referring to culturally-determined “prototypes” and associating these with similar objects with which they bear a ‘family resemblance’. Thus, she asserted, the concept *bird* arouses the “prototypical” image of small, flying birds, while chickens or penguins, members of the same category, are marginal to it: “non-prototypical”. Similarly, considering a particular dramatic character involves perceiving that which is non-typical by relating it to the typical. “There is a close relationship between the person and the overall pattern in which he participates”, says the early ethologist E.T. Hall (1959, p.138). An approach which starts by describing the typical, as the System does, offers a useful set of reference points, which situate individual characters within a landscape.

“There are few human instincts more basic than territoriality”, Lakoff and Johnson declare, before arguing that we naturally place boundaries on reality, defining territories and objects as containers and thus enabling “an act of quantification” (1980/2003, p.29).The concept Inner Attitude places a boundary, turning individuality (diffuse) into Character (defined) in ways which we find most satisfying. This in turn permits an “act of quantification”; allowing us to compute the components of a character using Laban’s Motion Factors. Does this restricting of the ever-changing stream of personality and/or action constitute an unwarranted simplification? Only insofar as saying 'this is Sicily’ or ‘we are in the Rift Valley’ amounts to picking up a segment of the overall landscape in order to be able to conceive it and interact with it.

Actors using the System’s templates, Inner Attitudes in particular, are therefore concerned with creating characters that are recognisably ‘typical’. Their initial focus is not on immediacy and spontaneity, but on achieving a strong delineation of the outer ‘skin’, of the silhouette of the character: the character is ‘designed’. This is not to say that demeanour and action are artificial or ‘stylised’. In fact, the aesthetic engendered by the System encourages a fundamental tension betweenindividuality and personality on the one hand and the artificiality of the ‘designed’ character on the other. Students often have to confront this paradox: the principles of Expressionist art and dance (abstraction, distortion and exaggeration) hit against the physical reality of the actor’s body as well as realistic (though not naturalistic) values in acting. The result is a performance style which might be described as a form of attenuated expressionism or accented realism: a strongly delineated outer shape (the ‘shell’ of the character, as seen in its posture and gestures) containing actions and reactions carried out with spontaneity and immediacy. These are not silhouettes in the inflated sense of Brecht’s masked characters or in the Lecoq-inspired performances of companies such as Theatre de Complicité, they are ultimately realistic portrayals given an expressive edge.

This interplay between deliberate artificiality and ‘natural behaviour’ amounts to an unusual and specialised form of **deception** (Trivers, 2011, building on Byrne and Whiten, 1992/1998). Think - to take but two readily accessible examples - of Anthony Hopkins playing Hannibal Lecter or Tom Hardy turning himself into Bronson. The deliberate design of the physical ‘shell’ signals the deception, while natural(istic) behaviour delivers it effectively across the audience’s counter-deception mechanisms. We are in a very satisfying ‘play’ in which we know from the outset that a game is being played, yet we are allowed to involve ourselves fully in it. Kate Garthside makes the point that characters which respond best to the System’s approach are those written with "a universal intention",as metaphors for something greater than the individuality of the person portrayed. The recognition through physical signals of ‘what the character stands for’ depends on identifying the pattern or group to which these point. Inner Attitudes inevitably involve considering individuality in relation to a pattern. On the other hand, the deceiver will do everything in his or her power to create randomness, the absence of pattern – so as better to deceive. Spontaneous, reactive stage actions create believability. Two great impulses underpin the application of the System: to improvise, to engage in random activities so as to appear ‘truthful’; counteracting our other great instinct, which is to discern patterns in random activity and rely on them for judgement.

The System often works best for characters which represent "extremes". The very notion of Inner and Action Attitudes implies concentration: the physical life of the character, its speech and gestures, are boiled down to essentials; speech is refined to its rhythms, to its musical patterns; gestures are reduced to their common denominators and ultimately distilled to their 'spirit' - their tempo. This moves the character outside the mundane. Kate Garthside gives as an example her approach to playing Trish in *Unsuitable for Adults* by Terry Johnson[[17]](#endnote-17). The character is "fragile" - not an individual fragility alone, but the distillation of the fragility of a whole typeof women. Garthside decided to make her more fragile than the bounds of naturalism permitted: she lightened her voice, adopted a breathy tempo and an etiolated posture, as if stretched on a rack. This, she says using the terminology of the System, resulted in an Adream character whose Weight was so Light, and Flow so Free that she radiated emotion to the point where she touched on Mobile.

The examples above point to the *raison d'être* of the System: **transformation**. The system offers a route to thedeliberate design of character, first and foremost as a physical process. Posture, gait, gestural range, vocal qualities (pitch, timbre, tone, resonance), accent/dialect, breathing rhythms, etc., are translated into Michael Chekhov’s “imaginary body”, a psychophysical tempo perceptively different from that of the ‘daily’ actor. However, one would be mistaken to assume a mechanical application of the System in the practice of professionals. In the conservatoires in which it is taught, the System sits alongside other approaches, as one aspect of a complex curriculum, and actors assemble their personal methodologies from all these influences. Nor do most actors using its tools expect it and its implied aesthetic of transformation to dominate their work. They are aware that they might find themselves in the TV studio in the morning, playing a role close to their ‘daily’ physical shape and accent; and that very evening appear unrecognisable on stage; indeed, according to the requirements of the role find themselves at any number of points on the transformation ‘scale’.

Nonetheless, those trained in the System find it difficult to discard altogether its core teachings. The theoretical apparatus underpinning the System is complex, yet the movement-based, experiential approach through which it is taught goes beyond theory or technique, to a form of embodied learning which “shapes the subject” (Downey 2010, p. S23[[18]](#endnote-18)). By creating a language of acting and through it bringing sensation to consciousness, the Laban-Malmgren System contributes to the development of what the French call *disponibilité,* having a keyboard of acting possibilities and fingers nimble enough to be able to play it. The System is concerned, as Simon Callow puts it, "with making the word flesh, literally".

**[6791 words]**

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1. For, relatively scarce, material on William (Bill) Carpenter see Valerie Preston-Dunlop 1998, p.260; Mirodan 1997, pp. 26-28 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed description of the materials handed to Yat Malmgren, see Mirodan 1997, pp. 33-34. A broad outline of some Carpenter materials can be found in Hodgson 1979, pp.156-161. See also McCaw 2011, pp.351-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout this article, initial capitals denote that terms are used in the specific sense given them by the Laban-Malmgren System and its predecessors: Jung, Laban, Stanislavsky. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is a greatly simplified account of Jung’s ideas on personality. See *Psychological Types* and for a more accessible outline, *The Tavistock Lectures*; and Mirodan 1997, pp.57-83 for details of what the Laban-Malmgren System took from Jung’s theory of types and the differences between its understanding and Jung’s writing. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Defining this holistic conflation has exercised thinkers across disciplines: Warren Lamb, a Laban disciple, called a similar model the “Posture-Gesture-Merger (PGM)” (Lamb and Watson 1979, p.90); A.R. Luria speaks of a “kinetic melody” (1973; also Sofia 2013, p.84); Sheets-Johnstone (2009, p. 393) cites Luria but introduces the Husserl-inspired concept of “primal animation”, a “spatial-temporal-energic whole” (1996); see also Carol-Lynne Moore in McCaw 2011, p. 319. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Here and in what follows, the / indicates that the two elements should be read in either direction. Thus, one Stable character can be Sensing/Thinking, where the Sensing aspect is dominant, while another Stable character is Thinking/Sensing, where the Thinking aspect prevails, and so on. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *"…*shadow movements…are tiny muscular movements such as the raising of the brow, the jerking of the hand or the tapping of the foot, which have none other than expressive value. They are usually done unconsciously and often accompany movements of purposeful action like a shadow - hence the term" (Laban1950/1971, p.12). See also North 1958, p.15 and McCaw 2011, p.355 for Shadow Moves revealing the Inner Attitude. For the capacity of involuntary moves to reveal inner states see Ekman and Friesen 1969. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is a fairly standard process used by Stanislavskian teachers (see, for example, Benedetti 2005, p.22), echoing some of the exercises described by Michael Chekhov (himself influenced by Laban [1953, p. 13] and, in turn, an important influence on Yat Malmgren). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On a National tour, with Paul Eddington in the lead [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican Theatre, 1996 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, 1992 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jung’s description of personality types is considered obsolete, with the consensus in the psychology of trait and type now crystallising around the Five-Factor Model (Wiggins 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Although Nina Bull’s contemporaneous research on postural attitudes in hypnotised patients (1951) and Joseph de Rivera’s subsequent analysis of the connections between emotions and movement attitudes (1977) offer at least some observational support for Laban’s and Carpenter’s intuitive assumptions. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Here and below I follow Lakoff’s and Johnson’s convention of using capitals to denote representative metaphors. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is not without its challenges. As Lakoff and Johnson themselves point out, neurological research supporting it is not yet conclusive (1999 pp. 38, 42; see also Gainotti 2004) although, working alongside the eminent neurophysiologist Vittorio Gallese, Lakoff attempted to strengthen the argument (2005).The perceived over-extension of the concept of embodiment has been the subject of sustained criticism: see, for example, Sheets-Johnstone 2009 for a phenomenology-based critique, especially pp. 386, 397; Clark 2008; and Tribble and Sutton in Shaughnessy 2013, locs. 791-807 for a brief overview. I nonetheless find it a useful framework, while acknowledging that it remains a fluid hypothesis, not yet fulfilling scientific tests of falsifiability and repeatability. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Sheets-Johnstone 2009, p. 390 on the limitations of describing phenomenological experience in language; and Zarilli 2002, p.16 on the specific case of metaphors for acting experiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Library Theatre, Manchester [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See also Sofia in Shaughnessy, ed., locs. 3802ff. for recent (and incomplete) experiments designed to ascertain whether actor training can change cognitive capacities at a fundamental level. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)