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# *T*s o u t h e r n *Theatre*



**Period Movement:  
Not Just a Fancy Costume Party**

Complete Guide to Transporting Yourself to Another Century

**Sell Yourself to Schools, Employers**

How to Create a Portfolio on Paper or on CD





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Southern Theatre-Quarterly Magazine of the Southeastern Theatre Conference

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Angel Aderholt and Kerry McNerney appear in a production of *Romance/Romance* at Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama. Director Alan Litsey and period movement specialist Nira Pullin, who collaborate frequently, share some of the strategies they use to transport students to the era of the play on Page 10. (Photo by Matthew Mielke; cover design by Nicholas Greenwood)

# *What Century Is It, Anyway?*

## Exercises and Tips to Help Directors, Period Specialists Take Actors Back in Time

by Nira Pullin and Alan Litsey

*Actor: How do you do?*

*Actress: How do you do what? Oh. ..How do you do?*

*Actor: Fine! But what do I do now? Do I bow, kiss her hand or shake it? Kiss her on one cheek, or both cheeks?*

*Actress: How do I sit in this corset? Maneuver in this train? Do I fan myself with the fan or not open it all? If I take tea, do I pick up the cup and the saucer or just the cup?*

*Where does my napkin go?*

*Actor: How do I sit in a short tunic without exposing myself? Where are the pockets in my tunic? Where do I keep my ducats? What is snuff? And am I really wearing lace?*

All of these questions and more come up when producing a period play. If not, they should - and well before the first dress rehearsal! How do the actors become comfortable with foreign costumes, unfamiliar props, and language, and dances they have never heard of, let alone danced? How do they know manners they have not been taught? Which prop is correct - a chair with or without arms? A walking stick or a staff? Saber or foil?

Who answers these questions? Often a director does not have a background in period movement or is very challenged to juggle that responsibility in addition to directorial duties. And many theatres don't have the luxury of a fulltime period specialist on staff.

So how can you bring period expertise to your plays? You might try the solution we have found - collaboration between a period movement specialist (Pullin) and a director (Litsey). Our working relationship began as teacher and student in graduate school at Wayne State University. Years later, we still collaborate on period pieces, even though we work in different institutions and different states - Michigan and Alabama - that are hundreds of miles apart.



Kerry McInerney (left) and Kim Wimmer appear in Birmingham-Southern College's (BSC) production of *Romance/Romance*, one of many plays on which Pullin served as period movement specialist and Litsey as director. To appear at home in the 19th century setting of this play, actors must learn to sit in costume with an upright but relaxed posture.

If you can't bring in a period movement specialist for your production, you may find the following resources and exercises helpful in laying the foundation for an historically informed production.

#### **The Basics: What is Period Movement?**

There are many definitions of period movement but it comes down to "movement in any other than contemporary clothing." In period plays, actors must move in trains and long skirts, breathe in corsets and stiffened bodices, balance wigs and headdresses and move in high heels. Yes, men, too. Rituals and manners also vary greatly from era to era. Period movement reflects those variations that define an era.

#### **How Period Affects an Actor's Movement**

The movement in a period play is determined by the cultural context, what one is wearing, rules of etiquette of the day and the social class of the character. The higher up one was in the pecking order, the more rules of etiquette there were to follow. The upper class, from medieval times through World War I, was trained

from birth in deportment and etiquette by dancing masters. The leisured class had time to follow many rules, so society made demands on its public behavior.

The goal of movement training is to encourage an "upright but relaxed" body ready to respond to any circumstance in any period. Actors must not only discover the appropriate style of the period, but also find a process that encourages them to discard extraneous movement and perform with economy and ease. An "elegant bearing" was an immediate sign of social status but was not "stiff or stuffy" as we might categorize it today. People did lounge in earlier periods - but in private, not public.

Fashions differed from era to era, of course, and clothing influences movement. For example, 18th century fashion of the privileged classes was very restricting. The upper class did not have to do manual labor - servants did almost everything. So the clothing of the privileged classes was sometimes heavy and cumbersome. Lycra and other stretch fabrics were not invented yet. Wealth was literally worn on one's sleeve, and there were many rules on what could and could not be worn.

Etiquette also was full of rules about behavior what one could and could not do, who one could and could not associate with, the niceties of greetings and much more.

Another major difference between our culture and those of earlier centuries is in the degree of personal space. In earlier eras, fashions demanded more space - and so did social customs. Public displays of affection were rare. Romance was rampant, but only in private or behind screens! Handholding and walking arm in arm were acceptable. An embrace? Only to dance a waltz (beginning with the 19th century). Even then, both sexes wore gloves so flesh did not touch flesh. Chaperones had to see candlelight between two bodies.

#### **Preliminary Exercises: Moving into the Past**

Exercises can help your cast make the move back in time. Start with the following exercises to get the actors moving, thinking and getting comfortable in the world of the play:

##### **Posture**

*Each actor moves across the floor one at a time. He begins with the posture of a lowly servant and ends with the posture of an aristocrat. We then talk about where the actor's character belongs and begin to experiment with the posture that will work for his character. Period music selections work well as the actor crosses the floor.*

## **Why It's Important to Use Period Movement**

*Period style*

*choices can*

*enhance the*

*play's action and*

*the text. While we*

*cannot recreate*

*history on the*

*stage, we can*

*bring the past to*

*the present. You*

*will succeed at*

*doing this when*

*actors realize that*

*they are not*

*participants in a*

*'fancy dress'*

*costume party, but*

*instead are*

*extraordinary*

*characters on the*

*stage moving in*

*everyday clothing*

*and surroundings.*

## *Blending Movement and Character Work*

### **Tips to Help Director and Period Movement Specialist Work Together**

In period work, the actor must connect movement and character from the beginning. Characters are motivated by many impulses, and as a result their movement and behavior can be in or out of harmony with their surroundings. For example, Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* moves with a bold sensuality unlike any other male character in the play. That movement provides obstacles and issues for a number of female characters.

By working together closely, the movement coach and director help emphasize for the actor the inseparable nature of movement and character. Here's the process we use for our collaboration:

#### ❖ **Pre Production**

We do most work over the phone, by-mail and through postal mail. In collaboration with the designers, we build the production concept together. In some instances, this requires making a decision about the appropriate period setting for the production. Careful planning allows Nira Pullin, the period movement coach, to fly to Alabama for short or extended residencies to work with the actors, director, and other critical members of the production team such as Patti Manning, the costume designer in residence, and Matthew Mielke, the scenic and lighting designer.

#### ❖ **Rehearsal**

We build in time at the beginning and the end of each rehearsal process for an introduction to movement, posture, decorum, manners and attitudes of the period of the play. We also do warm-ups at all stages of rehearsal to help prepare the actors for the period costumes and to work on posture. We typically begin period movement work after the initial blocking of the play. By this point, the actors have had a chance to get to know their characters.

#### ❖ **Team Concept**

We work with the actors as a team. We do not make hard and fast distinctions between the role of the director and the role of the period movement coach. The work often does overlap, and it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction between an "acting" note and a "movement" note. We are comfortable exploring and raising questions together. Movement and character are, after all, intrinsically connected.

*the posture that will work for his character. Period music selections work well as the actor crosses the floor.*

—Manners

*Play a game of Musical Chairs in character. When the music stops, the gentleman must relinquish his chair to the lady if they both arrive at the same time. The servant also has to give up the chair to his superior. To be polite, one must learn how to let the Duke or King win without being obvious' so that one stays in favor and doesn't lose his head!*

#### **History Exercises: Bringing the Past to Life**

Actors need to know as much as possible about the world in which their characters reside. Costume pieces, music and a few props are all great tools to help the actor get started. A brief slide show of images from the period can also be very helpful.

Another strategy is to involve the actors in sharing personal research, through the following exercises:

—Show and Tell

*Each student brings in 3-5 minutes of colorful "show and tell" relating to the time period of the play they are working on or studying in the classroom..*

—Quickie Course



*Gabe Belyeu (left) is Valmont and Chris Hardin is Azolan in BSC's production of Les Liaisons Dangereuses.*

*Each student creates a "micro-teaching" immersion class on the period. For example, here are some of the topics Wayne State University students came up with for the middle or late Victorian period: cooking recipes, history of tea, opium use, readings from etiquette books, ladies' boots not showing the ankle, Victorian Parlor games, poems of Oscar Wilde, manservant/ladies' maids; corsets and underwear, gloves, education for women, parasols, social class structure in England, fan language, inheritance, and arranged marriages.*

Students bring an amazing new perspective to

#### **Casting Issues**

*You may want to consider having a movement component to the audition process when casting a period play. This can be especially helpful if you do not know each actor's work well. For example, the actor playing Valmont in Les Liaisons Dangereuses (left) must be able to capture the sensuality, grace and confidence demanded of the role. He must be able to wear, and move convincingly in, the costume onstage.*

## Off Book: Moving on Stage

*When the initial Staging has been completed and Actors are working 'off book,' director and period movement specialist may wish to work side by side. Rehearsal costume pieces are a must at this stage! Movement goals include: ensuring the correct moves are done well and seem natural, comfortable and character-related; economy of movement; adapting the rules of etiquette and deportment to individual characters and their relationships with the rest of the cast. Be careful not to tell actors, 'You can't do that,' or 'It is only done like this.' After actors have mastered the 'proper' movement, allow them to interpret it for their characters break as many rules as they follow.*



*Period style isn't a concern just for pre-20th century plays. Manners and movement still mattered in the 1920s, the setting for Noel Coward's play *Fallen Angels* (above). The BSC production featured Stephanie Kelly (left) and Seana McGaha.*

their own understanding of the period, as they create an instant and interesting history lesson. The presentations may be scheduled for one class period, as a banquet of cultural context and factoids. Or schedule one or two for the beginning of each rehearsal as part of a warm-up.

For actors, this exercise can be an acting assignment as well as a teaching and learning exercise. For example, they can do the lecture in character.

Or students may choose to involve other class members in the exercises - having them try on costume pieces or play a parlor game of the period, for example,

Inspire the students to use their theatre skills in this exercise. Imagination is the only limit!

### Warm-up Exercises: Begin with a Stretch

Warm-ups can be a tremendous boost, helping the actors feel at ease with one another and helping to build a sense of trust in the ensemble. Some direc-

tors mistakenly believe that warm-ups are a waste of time, and that rehearsal is better spent doing scene work and running the play. However, many actors in educational settings are still getting comfortable in their own bodies, working toward a sense of balance, ease and clarity. The more comfortable the actors feel in their bodies and the more confident they are on the mechanics of the required movements, the more productive they will be in their explorations of their characters and the characters' relationships on stage.

An actor warms up, stretches, frees up and conditions the body. This essential work aims toward improving the posture and going for a "relaxed but upright posture." Always start with a good neutral posture for each actor and work from 'there. Exercises from Alexander, Feldenkrais and Pilates work very well

Remind the actors to hold their scripts as their characters would and to start immediately on posture work - especially if they must move as aristocratic upright persons and they usually move in a casual manner.

### Rehearsal Exercises: Creating the Role

Period movement study must be an integral part of the rehearsal process. Actors need the discipline of ongoing training to avoid posturing, affectation and exaggeration. Starting the first day of rehearsal actors must connect the characters' behavior, manners and movement.

In addition to exploring and discussing the world of the play, actors need to learn basic ways of moving for the upper and lower classes. This includes standing, sitting, talking, bows and curtsies and other greetings.

They need to experiment with how the costume

*(Continued on Page 16)*

## Find Space to Accommodate Period Style

Even the use of space in scene design is influenced by the period of the play. Period costumes take up much more space than contemporary ones, and the actors cannot be squeezed together like commuters in a New York subway. Propriety does not allow this.

Sometimes the set is tight, so be aware of the space above you. If you feel squeezed and have to work on small platform playing areas, think up and out. The raked stage can make a major difference with movement. Blocking must be mostly in curves. This will be graceful on a rake. If you choose this option, encourage actors when standing on a rake to release their knees, especially the upstage one.

In the technical rehearsal, stand facing upstage as much as you can to take the strain off your legs. The tensions created by a rake insidiously accumulate, but you can lessen the effect by realigning your body and recentering the breath.

## RESOURCES

### Period Dance Workshops

Workshops in period dance can be helpful in learning to move for period plays. Following are some workshops that actors and teachers may wish to explore.

#### Workshops in the United States

Baroque Dance Workshop, Stanford University, CA. Phone: 415-337-7779

Stanford Dance Week, Stanford University, CA. E-mail: Kathleen.murphy@stanford.edu. Phone: Dance Division, 650-723-1234

East Coast Baroque Dance Workshop, Rutgers University, E-mail: LouisXIV2030@aol.com

Longy School of Music, One Follen Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: soehrmcke@longy.edu

Newport Vintage Dance Week, sponsored by Commonwealth Vintage Dancers of Boston. Contact: Hannah Roberts Artuso. E-mail: NewportOVintagebancers.org.

Flying Cloud Academy of Vintage Dance, PO Box 628113, Cincinnati, OH 45262-8113. Web site: [www.vintaQ8dance.net](http://www.vintaQ8dance.net)

#### Workshops in England

Nonsuch Summer School in Early Dance, Contact: Sian Jones, 101 51. Stephen's Road, Canterbury CT2 1UT UK. E-mail: pegnsh@globalnet.co.uk Dolmetsch Summer School, Chris Saunders, 17 Well Lane, Stock, Ingatestone CM49L T UK. E-mail: secretary@dhds.org.uk

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affects their movements. You want actors to have the time needed to master the rudimentary skills and the freedom to make bold choices.

Rehearsal exercises and games connected to the period are an excellent way to get the actor to experiment and expand boundaries.

Here are three exercises that may help:

#### Playing the King

*One person is the top ruler, and the rest of the actors are his court. He roams around an imaginary picture gallery, stopping to admire some pictures longer than others and sometimes talking about the works of art.*

*By exploring characters' physical and emotional lives, actors develop a confident command of the set, costumes, props and language of period plays such as As You Like It (right). Shown (left to right) are Olivia Dean, Erin Underwood, Dane Peterson and Carolyn Hembree in a BSC production.*



*The rest of the court follows behind him and, of course, must pay attention to all that is said and always agree with his opinion. The court must always be behind him and never lag or talk behind his back.*

#### National Enquirer

*Cut out outrageous articles from the National Enquirer, Star and other gossip magazines. Put the cast members into groups or pairs and give each group or pair one of the articles. The actors must create a scene of gossip (i.e. talk over tea, salon coffee, intermission at the opera) and paraphrase the article. Use the name only, add lady, lord, sir, madam, etc., in front of the name or use the names of cast members, trying to keep the conversation in the period style of the play.*

#### That's Me!

*Actors form a circle. The facilitator shares one statement at a time. If that statement fits the actor's character, he or she steps into the circle and bows as the character would and announces with passion, "That's me!" If the statement does not fit his or her character, the actor simply waits for the next statement.*

*You also can have actors make up their own provocative statements to share with the cast, such as:*

*I call dance a minuet gracefully.*

*I have secrets I can't tell anyone.*

*Romance is in my stars.*

*I always like to have the last word.*

*Tea is my savior.*

*The more invisible I am the better.*

*The more visible I am the better.*

*I love a fervent conversation, especially when it's about me.*

*I love to gossip.*

*Silence is golden.*

*I always win at cards.*

*My wit is usually the sharpest in any room.*

*I am always up for dancing at a ball.*

*I have the best tailor.*

*I play the \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in as appropriate: lute, piano forte, harpsichord) very well.*

*I know my place.*

*Often others wish I knew my place.*

*When I enter a room, everyone notices me.*

*I long to be the life of the party.*

*When I speak, the sparks fly.*

*I never speak except when spoken to.*

*I live to seduce; I live to be seduced.*

(Continued on Page 18)



'Dances of any period are a sign of the times. What would the 1920s be without the Charleston? They characterize the attitude, dress, and costumes of the people of that era. By learning the dances, you have an immediate physical glimpse into the social standards, behaviors and relationships of that time. It's a visceral way of learning history and, since dancing is universal, it's a fun way to learn.'

- Trisha Miller,  
Hilberry Repertory  
Theatre,  
Wayne State  
University

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### Dance Exercises: Building the Play's World

The study of period movement and dance go hand in hand. Dance was part of the education of a courtier and young lady and was a necessary social grace. Dancing was popular entertainment for all classes in the bygone devoid of television, DVDs and movies, At court, if you did not dance well, you were not invited back,

If you are using a dance as part of the play, teach it at the beginning and use it as a warm-up at each rehearsal. If the actors can dance in the proper way, they will move better in costume. Everyday movement and dance moves were not so very different back then.

Because an "upright but relaxed" posture is essential for period plays and period dances, the choreographer or director should work on posture throughout the rehearsal period. Otherwise, the actors will look lost in the costumes, which provide a lot more weight and material on the body than is the case with modern clothing. A good posture and center are necessary for a command of the stage.

Here is an exercise to get started:

#### —Dances in Different Classes

Even if you don't use a dance in the show, teach the cast members a simple one so they get practice moving in rehearsal costumes. Have them do the dance as their character and react to various partners in the cast. Also, have them see how different traits affect the movement. Who is more powerful (class/status)? How does age affect character? Who is in love with whom?

The following series of exercises will help students understand that the character, not the actor, must perform the dance.

#### —Dancing in Character

Teach a simple English country dance (see *Playford, The English Dancing Master or Elizabethan Country Dances*) or choreograph a dance using simples and doubles in various patterns:

Simple = one step and a close.

Double = three steps and a close.

Pattern suggestions: (1) forward and away from partner; (2) changing sides with partner; (3) man does a pattern, then the lady repeats; and (4) holding both hands and circling around each other.

Remember to do a reverence (bow or curtsy) before and at the end of the dance. Do the dance flatfooted at first, until alignment and flow look good, then add a rise and fall to the footwork. Once the dance is learned and performed gracefully, work

on the exchange between partners and others in the set.

#### —ABC Dance

While dancing, the partners say the alphabet to each other as conversation. Whenever they make eye contact, one whispers to the other. Example: The man says "A B C," then the lady replies "D E," and so on, alternating back and forth. They must get to the end of the alphabet by the end of the dance and not before.

#### —Dancing in Conversation

Have cast members dance again, this time with actors making conversation about appropriate topics for ladies and gentlemen: the latest fashions; a new opera, play, concert or novel; the health of the family; or the news of the day.

#### —Add Physical Changes

Practice the dance with different physical qualities, but without losing perfect precision. Suggestions: aggressively, shyly, flirtatiously, a bit tipsy and a bit too energetically.

#### —Become an Individual

Each member of the cast now chooses a particular quality to represent in the dance. Make sure that all do not choose the same one. (You might have students draw suggestions out of a hat, for instance.) Now, the dance tells a story: the relationship between the members of the dancing ensemble.

### Scene Change Exercises: Tell the Story

Scene changes are great opportunities to plump up the roles of the younger, less experienced cast members. They also are opportunities for students and teachers to collaborate. The challenge is to expedite the necessary scene change, while discovering ways to continue to tell the story and define character relationships.

For example, when we produced the 18<sup>th</sup> century commedia classic *The Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni, we used a "play within a play" production concept which gave us many opportunit-



Scene changes were used to help tell the story in BSC's production of *The Servant of Two Masters*, featuring (left to right) Scott Hathcock, Angel Aderholt, Kristan White and Chris Graham.

ies to approach the scene changes creatively and involve the ensemble characters in the action. This idea

## Posture for the Period: An Exercise to Improve Alignment

This exercise, created by the late John Broome of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada, helps actors assume a posture appropriate to a particular period for dancing – or just moving in character onstage.

❖ Stand and allow the body to roll down to hanging-forward position. Slowly roll up, feeling movement first in small of the back then between the shoulders and finally the back of the neck, until upright, shoulders, dropped and relaxed. Repeat, but when the upright position is reached, tilt the head and upper body back a little, then pull to upright again, feeling the lift through the top of the head. Walk anywhere, freely observing each other. From stillness again, roll the head effortlessly each way.

❖ Work with partners, one behind the other. The back person places the palms of his or her hands a little below the shoulders on the outside of the partner's arms and lifts, hold, and drops the partner's arms with no assistance from the partner. Immediately stroke down from top of shoulders to elbows, and repeat the relaxed lift. Eventually, the back person shakes the partner's relaxed shoulders freely up and down.

❖ Individually again, recline on backs on the floor, legs extended. Lift the head and look at the feet. Lower the head slowly, keeping it forward, and have the sensation of putting the nape of the neck on the floor. Let the tension go when it's down. Repeat several times. Lift the knees, and place the feet on the floor. Reach with both hands toward the feet along the floor, lift the head, look at the knees and again slowly lower the head. Relax. Repeat as before.

Maintaining this position, lift the hips just a little and rotate the hips forward, lengthening the lower back along the floor. (This can be assisted by a forward movement of the hands below the hips.) Lift the head and lower again. Sense the whole back of the body spread along the floor. Maintain this position, and slowly lower the legs to the floor. Relax.

❖ By working against a wall, you can achieve a similar result but with the advantage of being able to walk immediately afterwards. Stand, feet a comfortable distance apart. Prepare the body, and fall back against the wall. Discover which areas of the body make contact with the wall. Consciously adjust, so that the small of the back and the space between the shoulders touch the wall. Make sure the knees remain flexed. (The back of the head does not touch, but is a couple of inches away.)

Now slide the body up and down slowly, keeping contact. (Contract the abdomen if necessary to achieve this.) on finally coming up, leave the knees slightly flexed, push off slightly toward the front of the thighs and not by the sides. It is important to allow the body to remember this position as walking continues. If lost, go back to the wall or the floor.

❖ Walk with a high, buoyant, easeful feeling. Introduce a steady drumbeat (fairly slow), and allow the walking to follow this. The walk should remain dignified, free and easy. If this is difficult, think of the walk as a step and a swing, and let the drum mark this at the same time. The walk should be continuous in motion and not halting. The "step-swing" almost always cures this. Continue, but gradually reduce the tempo until almost impossibly slow. The action should continue, smooth and flowing.

❖ Walk beautifully, and lead a partner, arms low and forward. Share the walk. Introduce slow and fairly solemn music, and walk in pairs, as in a procession.

You are now ready to dance!

*The exercise above and the dance exercises on Page 18 were originally published in Nira Pullin's article, Bring the Past to the Present: Period Dance on the Stage, in Movement for Actors (Nicole Potter, editor), Allworth Press. New York, 2002.*

also allowed us the chance to use period dance to introduce the 19<sup>th</sup> century "actors" performing the play.

Scene changes can combine music, manners and props of the period.

*Examples: Actors plump pillows, sneak a taste of claret, steal a kiss, finish tying bodice, spray perfume, polish shoes, light or snuff out candles, sneak chocolates, make a quick dash with the feather duster, move in time with music of the period or leave a love note.*

Scene changes afford actors the opportunity to hone movement and dance. Each scene change needs to tell a story. Here is an exercise to get students going.

—Servant Exercise

*Assign each servant a specific scene change. His or her job is to find a way to use the transition to tell what is happening between the scenes. For example, it is nighttime. The servant sets the scene, then falls asleep in the chair. Or the servant is assigned to clean the room, within the context of the period, choosing music of the period for his/her pantomime.*

### Curtain Call

Remember, appearance, manners and deportment were very important to society in earlier periods. Your goal in period movement is to discover a sense of comfort, ease and naturalness in the world of the play. The actor must connect the manners and movement to the behavior of the character: *why* is as important as *how*. If the work is honest, the character's inner life will inspire and justify the manners of the period.

When your students learn how to assume the personas of their characters – rather than merely serving as participants in a fancy costume party – they will succeed in the goal of period movement: bringing the past to the present.

*Nira Pullin is a professor of choreography and period movement at Wayne State University. Alan Litsey is an associate professor of theatre at Birmingham-Southern College (BSC). Over the past 13 years, they have collaborated on a number of period productions in the commedia, 18th, 19th and 1920s styles at BSC. They began working together at Wayne State University in Michigan when Litsey was a graduate student actor studying under Pullin.*