

Yoga for Actors: Approaches

by Robert Allen

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In an article I wrote a few years back, I considered this question: What are the virtues and values of performance that we should be concerned with?¹ As I wrote then, I feel that today's theater needs to be animated by approaches that are more physical and experimental than in the recent past. In my own work as a performer and theater maker, I have been inspired by the visionary yet practical strategies for performers that have been put forward by the choreographers Martha Graham and Jose Limon, the director Tadashi Suzuki, and the theorist and teacher Michael Chekhov. I believe that yoga, properly understood, can be a similarly powerful tool to help theater move forward.

I write this from the viewpoint of someone who spent many years performing in modern dance and theater companies. When I retired from performing, I went back to school and ultimately began teaching theater, developing a specialty in what is known as movement for actors. I am impelled by a constant ambition to study and practice other movement-based trainings and traditions to make myself a better teacher. This has led me to and through intermediate and advanced yoga teacher training, leading in turn to a personal emphasis on adapting yoga practice for actors. For related reasons, I have become a certified teacher in the Michael Chekhov method of acting and taken many workshops with the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) company, including the intensive in Saratoga, New York, where I experienced the Suzuki method first-hand.

My focus is on how yoga—which is generally a good practice for almost anyone—is especially helpful to the performing artist. Indeed, I find that yoga is better than other kinds of

physical culture and exercise regimens even if we are only concerned with supporting an actor's health rather than also developing performance skills. On this level, the yoga that can be found in the numerous yoga studios of every city of even modest size is perfectly adequate. But to go the next step and have yoga be useful for the actor's specific needs is something else. Here I will offer a general sketch of how yoga can be beneficial for actors and also discuss some adaptations that can provide benefits that are already found in two other systems of actor training. Because these systems—associated with Chekhov and Suzuki—are rather specialized, they tend not to be as catholic or flexible as yoga. However, I believe that yoga can also promote some of the same performance values as these performance technologies. I will not develop this point in great detail but will provide enough of an overview to show how other acting teachers can make their own experiments along similar lines to better serve their students, obtaining supplementary training as needed.

Yoga: The Bad and the Good

As a discipline originating in India, yoga is equal parts spiritual and physical, involving attention to bodily posture, breathing, and mindfulness. For the purposes of this discussion, the emphasis will not be on either the usual western concern for greater health and physical beauty or the traditional spiritual aspects (often neglected in western practice in any case). The focus will be on the technical need of the performer to be able control the body and thereby manage expressive energy and vitality.

It is problematic that yoga in America is effectively an unregulated cottage industry. Literally anyone can hang out a shingle and set up shop as a yoga teacher. While there are some organizations—principally the National Yoga Alliance—that are supposed to provide something

like a seal of approval for yoga teachers, they have no real power to stop anyone deemed dangerous (or even just unqualified) from teaching. The fact is that yoga taught badly can be harmful to students, and the NYA has recently come under criticism for being too lax in its standards.²

Some approaches to yoga are unsuitable for most actors—or most anyone else, for that matter—because of a lack of rigorous attention to safety and effectiveness. Two in particular deserve notice here. The first is any yoga that attaches to itself the word ‘power’, such as ‘power *vinyasa*,’ or simply ‘power yoga’. Because of its physical intensity, power-centered yogas should only be practiced by those in extremely good physical shape, and they should only be taught by instructors who really know what they are doing— meaning that they know how to keep their students from injuring themselves by doing the wrong things (or the right things in the wrong way). The fact that these ‘power’ hybrids are designed to appeal to the kind of student who is addicted to physical intensity, or who has an immature need to exhibit physical prowess, underlines the fact that in most cases they are not a suitable adjunct to actor training. The second problematic type of yoga is the sort that heats the room to high temperatures and often does not allow for adequate ventilation. These so-called ‘hot yoga’ classes have gained a cult following in the past few years, but they typically only provide a general warning about the possible effects on one’s body. One might stop to consider how they stack up with respect to the Occupational Health and Safety standards for working conditions in other kinds of environments where physical labor is performed in conditions of high heat.³

In short, good yoga instruction depends partly on the level and conscientiousness of the instructor, and partly on the lineage in which they trained. For our purposes, the most useful

form of yoga is the ubiquitous Hatha yoga in its most generic form—no frills, no gimmicks.

These types of classes usually have a structure that takes the following form:

1. Begin by standing correctly.
2. Follow with a series of connected postures (flow yoga), usually structured around Sun Salute routines, with other standing poses integrated into the sequence as the students warm up.
3. Follow with floor postures where core strengthening is done as a preparation for more advanced postures such as inversions and back bends.
4. Follow with counter-poses, stretches, and spinal twists chosen to complement the previous work.
5. Finish with an extended period of lying on one's back in a state of deep relaxation.

Even in Hatha yoga there are a number of variations that come from different lineages, though almost all of them owe something to the work of two twentieth century Indian yogis whose work I highly recommend and whose influence should be sought out when researching potential teachers and studios: B.K.S. Iyengar (1918–2014) and Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009).⁴ Working within the tradition of Hatha yoga, Iyengar developed an approach centered on the mastery of postures or *asanas*. Jois took a similar approach but placed greater emphasis on movement and sequence. As the respective innovators of Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga, they tend to be the primary sources for those parts of a yoga class that are often described as about either *asanas* (postures) or *vinyasa* (flow). These are traditions that have consistently produced the better and more highly qualified instructors that we want for our students.

Integrating Mind and Body

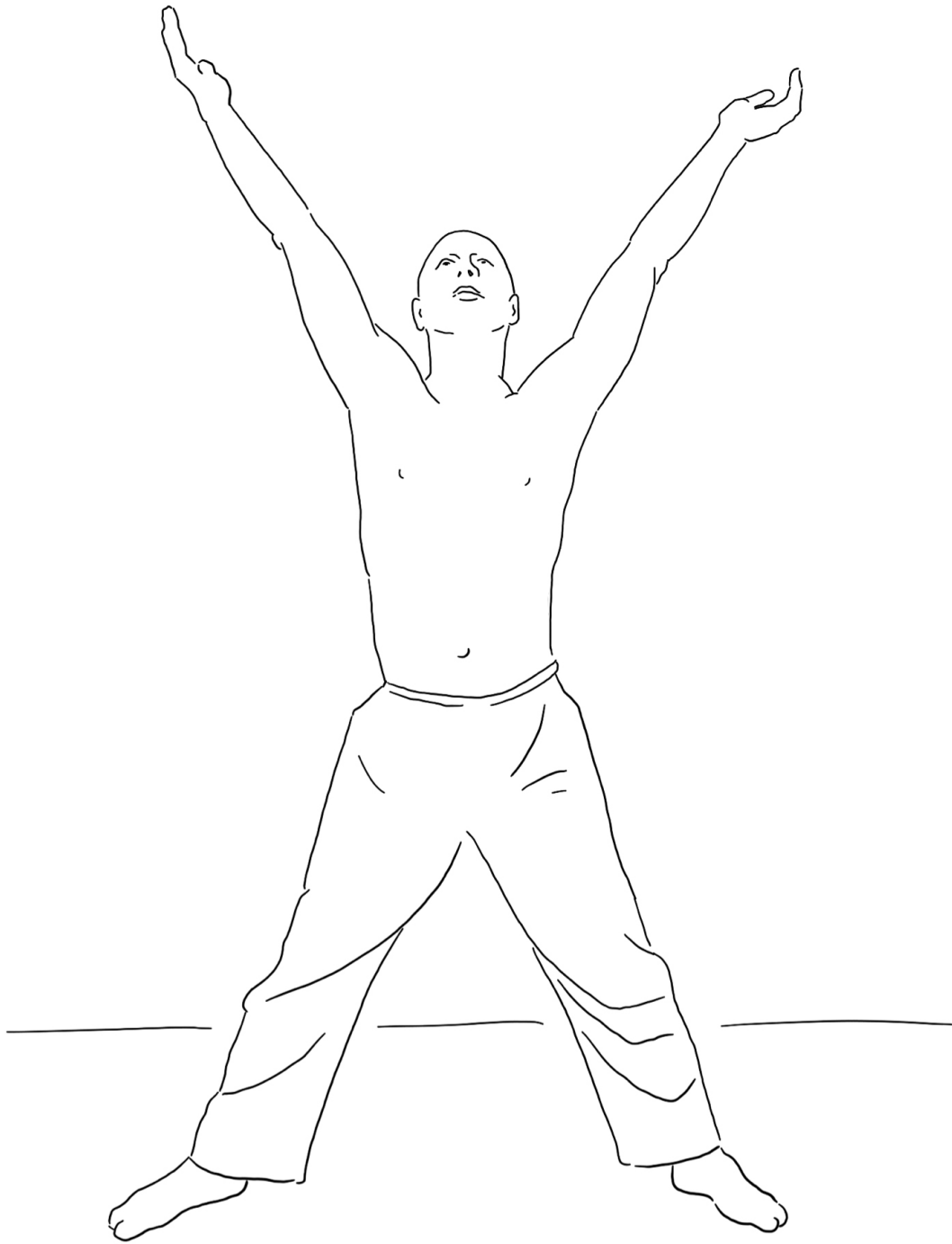
Turning from these concerns, I can now address some of the positive aspects of yoga for the actor, as well as for actor-training programs. First of all, it's a happy fact that good yoga instruction can be found almost anywhere nowadays. This means that once actors leave their training programs, it will be easy for them to continue a practice that can be expected to yield real benefits over the entire course of their career, no matter where that might take them.

In addition, the yoga lineages I have commended above are designed to address the whole person in terms of the body's individual parts—especially muscle groupings—and also in terms of striking a rational balance between strength and flexibility. Good yoga instruction goes well beyond introduction to, and mastery of, various poses; it is also concerned with proper alignment, healthy joint function, increased anaerobic and aerobic stamina, proprioceptive sensitivity, stress reduction—the list goes on. (Indeed, any set of practices that properly addressed all of these varied concerns would inevitably look a lot like the yoga I am now describing.) All of those things that we might imagine should be part of a complete exercise program have some significance in a well-rounded yoga practice. For these reasons, yoga is one of the best preparations and enablers I can think of for such highly physical acting styles as *commedia dell'arte* and clowning.

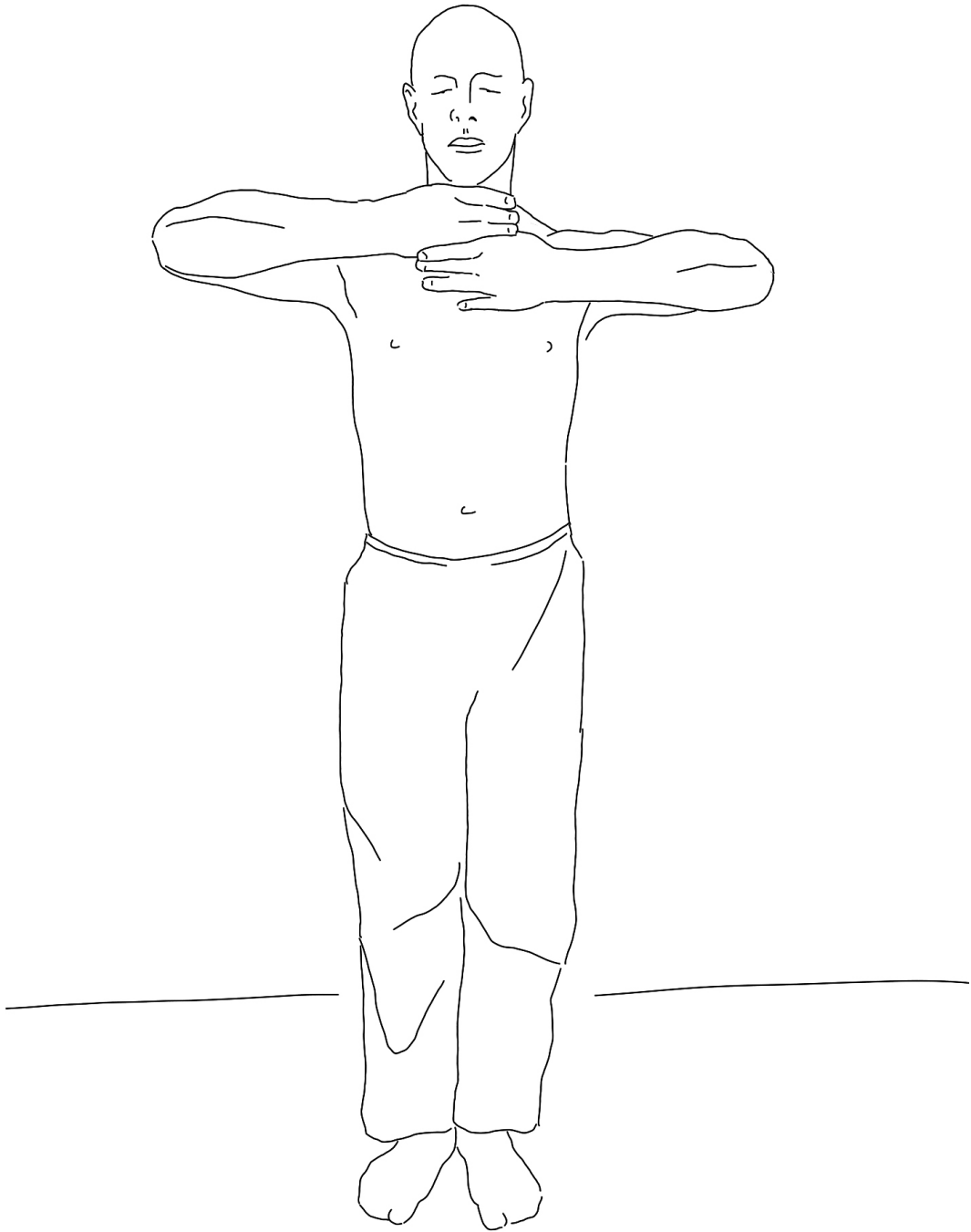
But something more is required when training actors. As Michael Chekhov noted, “All that hampers an actor’s work comes either from the body or from personal psychological peculiarities.”⁵ In terms of his first limitation—the body—it is easy to see how yoga can be of tremendous value to the actor, and it is no surprise that a number of actor-training programs already incorporate it into their curricula. But it's not enough to simply provide aspiring actors

with a yoga class and assume their needs are being met; there is still the second limitation to consider, the matter of “psychological peculiarities.” The “something more” that actors need is hinted at in the physical exercises that Jerzy Grotowski devised for his actors, the goal of which was to integrate the actor's mind and body. Scholars are at odds as to whether these exercises were themselves modeled on yoga, but in any case the integration he was aiming for is the gold standard for what actors need. There are two general approaches to this integration: one in which the receptive body will readily shape itself, expressing inner psychic forces and promptings (an inside/out approach); and one in which the body is purposefully shaped to provoke authentic psychic experience and emotion (an outside/in approach).

And if this is what we want, the only way to get it is through deep practice, a set of actual exercises for the actor that are designed to foster this highly desirable intimacy between mind and body. Such exercises form a major part of the Michael Chekhov method. And certainly this mind-body connection can be fostered, if more slowly, by *any* physical activity in which actors attempt to control their bodies in a precise way. Yoga does this in some degree, and it has the potential to do a significantly better job when combined with some of Chekhov's recommendations. For example, in *To the Actor* Chekhov describes a number of rudimentary postures or poses, which are presented as a kind of warm-up or foundational practice in preparation for more advanced work in acting technique. In assuming the forms Chekhov describes, the actor is encouraged to feel the emotional attitude that each seems to suggest.



A posture developed by Michael Chekhov. Drawing courtesy of Antoinette LaFarge.



A posture developed by Michael Chekhov. Drawing courtesy of Antoinette LaFarge.

Subtle variations in the hands, for example, are explored to demonstrate how even minor differences expressed by the most peripheral parts of the body can significantly change the feeling profile of a given shape. Similarly, yoga, with its back bends, standing postures, balances, inversions, and forward folds, can boast an equally rich and suggestive collection of postures. With very little adaptation other than a little extra space and time in which to experience the feeling states associated with each position, it is possible for a yoga class to explore and rehearse the same interconnectedness of mind and body that is explored in the Chekhov exercises. It might also be worthwhile to blend some of the classical Chekhov poses into the yoga class as a way to expand on this potential.

Yoga teachers have long observed how work with a specific type of posture tends to change the emotional dynamic in the room in predictable ways; an observation that jibes very well with Chekhov's approach. Moreover, scientific research has had a lot to say in recent years about how body posture can help create positive emotional states or feed depression.⁶ Training that addresses the effect that the body has on the psychic state of performers yields serious benefits in terms of both their craft and their general psychic well-being; and yoga can make a genuine contribution in both areas.

Working from the Center

The actor's center or core is that place behind and a little below the navel where everything in the body comes together. Being able to express movement that originates within the deepest layers of muscle at the core of the body opens up the truest moments of a performer's life on stage. It is the basis for what is commonly referred to as presence; without it, the actor will appear shallow. As I wrote elsewhere, the theater theorist Eugenio Barba has developed a sophisticated analysis

of presence and its connection to energy. He considers that energy “is a *how*. Not a *what*.” He goes on to argue that the performer needs to “think of this *how* in the same way as s/he would think of a *what*, of an impalpable substance which can be manoeuvred, modelled, faceted, projected into space, absorbed and made to dance inside the body.... For the performer, to have energy means knowing *how* to model it. To be able to conceive of it and live it as experience, s/he must artificially modify its routes, inventing dams, dikes, canals. These are the resistances against which s/he *presses* her/his intention—conscious or intuitive—and which make her/his expression possible.”⁷ Barba’s energy, in other words, is a physical reality, a force that can be felt moving inside the body, and an energy that can be projected beyond the physical limits of the performer into the surrounding space. These are the principles that inform the Suzuki method of actor training, which I elaborate on below.

That some people seem to have a highly developed sense of this integrated center without any specialized training is a bit of a mystery; less mysterious is the fact that you can develop it if you don’t have it to begin with. Like the physical and psychic integration discussed above, it can be the target of specialized training that forces performers to find, rely on, and eventually work from their core. It is a muscular development of this part of the body that allows an actor to fill the stage, as well as dominate theatrical time and space. It is one of the main benefits and goals of the Suzuki method—to turn the actor, via the cultivation of this potential, into a force of nature. Developed by the Japanese theater director Tadashi Suzuki (b. 1939), the method is extremely physically demanding, focusing on strength and endurance. Suzuki himself said it was his special mission to reintroduce a long-lost life and energy into the western theater tradition.

Now, I am not a teacher of the Suzuki method, and I don’t want to oversimplify what is a deep and powerful approach to making theater and training actors. But it is possible to develop a

similar prowess through other avenues, one of them being yoga. Since yoga is in part about creating a solid connection to the earth—especially in the balancing and standing poses—it can facilitate the recognition and strengthening of the actor’s core. Working from this powerful center is also a healthier way to practice yoga (or any other physical discipline for that matter). Bad training of any sort will tend to emphasize immediate result over correct working. An example: the long-limbed ballet dancers who learn they can be faster and more nimble if they rely almost exclusively on the lower leg muscles for the demanding *petit allegro*. After a few months this strategy backfires and the dancer usually acquires some degree of tendonitis, or even something worse and potentially career-ending. The healthy alternative is to work from the inside out, with the core as the primary support and its muscles as actually the first to move. In this way the muscles of the extremities, while still working at their fullest, are supported and can engage in those micro-releases that allow them to shed a type of unnecessary and damaging tension in the muscle that otherwise would work to degrade the tendons and bones over time.

This kind of deep understanding is already part of the wisdom of responsible and informed physical training, so we would expect the enlightened yoga class to address these concerns, broadly encouraging a proper use of the entire physicality with an emphasis on finding real support in the center of the body. What might still be needed, however, is awareness of how actors will apply core work to those moments when they are actually standing or moving onstage. To this end, students should be instructed in how to find and engage the appropriate muscle groups in the right way; and this could be combined with a judicious use of physical endurance as students practice holding a pose for longer and longer periods, learning to rely increasingly on the right type of support. For example, in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, there is a scene in which two characters, Bottom and Flute, improvise the story of

Pyramus and Thisbe, two lovers who are separated by a wall. The two performers must create the concept of pushing against that wall and being blocked by it—and sustain that for the entire scene. They might manifest this reality through an inner engagement of the core, as if those deep muscles were pushing against the wall and frustrated by their inability to break through.

This kind of work should be combined with a conscious attitude of ease and precision in the more peripheral and higher parts of the body so that the general expressiveness appropriate for these less central parts of the body develops side by side with the core work. Similarly, I would suggest taking a leaf out of the Chekhov and Suzuki playbooks by combining core work with an active visual focus and the reciting of prepared texts. Such combinations will go a long way to helping the actor bridge the gap between technique classes and on-stage acting.

Developing as a Teacher

Anything that has the potential to create a truly positive transformation in the actor depends on doing things correctly—and that begins with the instructor. The fact is that any potentially transformative technique can, because of its power, also be very destructive. And few activities are more discouraging and dangerous to the student than bad yoga instruction. For the kind of work I am advocating, it is best if teachers are trained in both yoga and theater—that is, are performers or ex-performers. They should also be interested in researching other methods that might help them refine and enhance their understanding of how yoga can help the actor.

What should be evident from the foregoing is that I am not trying to change yoga in any structural sense; I have not added new poses or suggested proprietary sequences. All I have done is to point out the opportunities that are already latent in the tradition. Let me give an example using the classic Warrior II pose, which consists of the following sequence of movements: the

student actor windmills the arms forward and up from a low lunge, bringing the upper body onto the foundation of hips and legs, with the arms fully extended from the sides of the body, the gaze over the leading hand, the back leg straight, and the forward leg bent at the knee with the thigh of this leg parallel to the ground.



The Warrior II yoga asana. Drawing courtesy of Antoinette LaFarge.

Working correctly, the actor will understand that this position must be established from the center of the body outwards, and that the legs and feet are an extension of the dynamic will that is centered in the lower abdomen. The upper torso, rising from this core, will express the sense of mastery that is appropriate to this part of the anatomy, while the shoulder girdle, arms, and hands will express art and grace, and the focus of the eyes will express purpose. At the same time, the

actor will work to open the self up to fullest emotional experience of the pose, rehearsing the integration of mind and body. This moment in the pose offers an excellent opportunity to understand the gesture as a critical moment appropriate to a specific character— possibly the moment when the mythical warrior Achilles, putting aside his sullen and petty discontents, returns to the battlefield.

Although students will begin by depending on the insights and wisdom of their instructors, as they progress it is hoped that they will learn how to develop themselves. At this stage, it will be possible for the actor to go anywhere and take almost any yoga class that falls within the definition of a good class, as sketched above, adding extra kinds of work to what might otherwise be an ordinary exercise class. For example, one might investigate the heart-opening vulnerability and tragic potential of the backbend, or the topsy-turvy, iconoclastic, transgressive potential of an inversion—and linking these, depending on the actor’s level, to either stock characters of comedy and tragedy or to specific characters the actor is working on at the time.

Knowing how to work properly allows one to engage in a technique that is open-ended in terms of its potential for growth (as well as providing the ultimate protection from instruction that is less than ideal). To this end I am encouraged that, unlike many other methods used for actor training, yoga was not invented to be a therapy, although it has certainly been used therapeutically. By contrast, a number of other fairly common physical trainings for actors that I am aware of were born of dysfunction, as an attempt to overcome an idiosyncratic set of identified problems. This is a troubling legacy because the logic of such systems is ultimately burdened by reductive goals—the necessity of removing undesirable characteristic X or lessening characteristic Y—and these come dangerously close to asking less of the actor. By contrast, yoga has benefitted from its origins as a spiritual discipline that asserts as its goal a kind

of perfection that, while ultimately unachievable, nevertheless encourages actors to see their craft as always asking something more of them.

¹ Robert Allen, “Yoga for Actors: Part I,” <<http://www.robert-allen.net/archives/portfolio/yoga-for-actors-part-i>>. I want to thank Antoinette LaFarge for her insightful editing of both that article and this one.

² For a typical critique, see for example James Brown, “Yoga Alliance Is Ruining Yoga,” <<http://americanyogaschool.com/yoga-alliance-ruining-yoga/>>.

³ On the OSHA website, see for example the pages on occupational heat exposure at <<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/heatstress/#hot>> and on indoor air quality at <<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/indoorairquality/faqs.html>>.

⁴ Both Iyengar and Jois were students of the Indian yoga master Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), who is frequently called the originator of modern yoga. They are major figures in the dissemination of yoga in the West.

⁵ Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Routledge, 1953), p. 133.

⁶ See for example Susan Weinschenk, “Change Your Body Posture To Change Your Life,” *Psychology Today* website, <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-wise/201210/change-your-body-posture-change-your-life>>.

⁷ Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 50–52.

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