



NIDA DIRECTING GRADUATE, CLARENCE SOPHIE DANY, A YOGA PRACTITIONER SINCE 1986, EXPLORES THE IMPACT THAT YOGA IS HAVING IN THE PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTRALIA.

Curtain, Lights up... yoga!

YOGA IS BECOMING A VITAL PART OF THE TRAINING, AND INDEED LIFE, OF THE PROFESSIONAL ACTOR. AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DRAMATIC ART (NIDA), YOGA IS A KEY COMPONENT OF MOVEMENT WORK. IT IS ALSO USED IN REHEARSAL WARM-UPS AT THE SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY, THE BELL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY AND THE AUSTRALIAN BALLET.

"I was introduced to yoga as a young acting student and initially felt somewhat negative because the yoga teacher had replaced our usual movement teacher. The sensation of well-being I experienced from the class led me to explore yoga further. These days, I practise yoga to help sustain the enormous physical stamina required in the performing arts industry. I also incorporate yoga as part of my teaching." Says Clarence.

Increasingly, yoga is being used in acting, movement, voice and technical training. This is because yoga generates energy, courage, optimism, confidence and flexibility, all key qualities in the performing arts. According to award-winning actor and NIDA movement tutor, Wendy Strehlow, it is the actor's perfect warm-up.

"I discovered yoga through a smashed knee from dance. I wanted to repair it so that I could perform again. What I found was amazing flexibility, core strength in the spine and a solar plexus softness that increased creativity and left me more open to direction," says Wendy. "So I went to NIDA's Head of Acting, Tony Knight and said that I wanted to teach yoga to the actors."

Wendy believes yoga is popular among actors because it has a centring effect. "When warming up it's really important to be centred," says Wendy. "Yoga's deep breathing practices help to achieve this."

Yoga first began to appear in the performing arts more than 18 years ago in Australia. According to Wendy, back then the dramatic arts looked on yoga as 'spooky', a little too alternative. However, with yoga's increasing acceptance within the general community, acting students are choosing to incorporate it in the rehearsal process, and to relieve performance stress. Senior movement teacher at NIDA, Julia Cotton says "that by third year, acting students are developing their own warm-up routines. These include a weekly yoga session often before rehearsals".

"Yoga prepares students for choreography, group movement, physical theatre and dance by making them more aware of their bodies," says Julia. "Tapping in to the body's innate intelligence rather than being too much 'in their brain' also enables acting students to be more receptive to other disciplines such as physical theatre, dance and circus work." Wendy says



Left to right: Wendy, Andrew, Monica and Praedra.

that by disengaging the brain, an actor can allow their natural instinct to work strongly, and the dance instructor for instance can guide them. Yoga also assists in movement technique with its attention to physical alignment. "You cannot turn safely and smoothly unless you are in alignment. In this way, yoga is a first step towards turns in movement work," says Wendy.

Wendy says that first year students seem to enjoy the sense of immediacy, the 'here and now' that yoga brings. Quite simply, it helps an actor to be in the present moment. "In the same way that you need to connect with every word to be in the moment, the actor must be connected to every move to perform in the present. To do this, they must be centred in their body," says Wendy. A moving meditation may well be an apt description of acting. "Yoga postures prepare the body for meditation, and acting is a form of meditation," says Wendy. "You need to be absolutely present. This is intuitive in the actors that we love the most. They allow themselves to be simply 'in the moment.'"

Like many people, a lot of acting students initially have poor muscle tone due to the sedentary lifestyle of today's western world. However, actors need to be larger than life with on stage movement for the entire length of a play, and sometimes over long seasons. According to Wendy, this requires a great deal of physical strength and stamina. Yoga develops core strength to make bodies strong and flexible, and to avoid injury. "In the latest play that I was in, I chose to do a yoga warm-up

because there was a very physical fight toward the end. I just couldn't afford to hurt myself as I didn't have an understudy" says Wendy.

Yoga brings both physical and mental challenges for the actor. "For instance, you can come up against your own laziness," says Wendy. "Yoga requires consistent practice, and whenever we have neglected our bodies, a yoga routine will usually make us aware of it. The choice can be between breathing through the stretch and overcoming one's laziness, or putting the challenge off until another day." Negativity such as laziness can lead to emotional blocks affecting an actor's performance. This is because a block puts the performer's focus in the past. Instead of body and mind being totally in the present, both are held back by old tension. With its constant coordination of breath, movement and mental concentration, yoga assists in keeping an actor focused.

Sam Chester was introduced to yoga through dance training. She is currently the yoga tutor to NIDA third year acting and technical production students. "Yoga teaches students the difference between acting from a centred core and from unacknowledged tension. Many yoga postures are challenging. It is easy to become tense or anxious. Through deep, conscious breathing these poses become manageable, and tension is released. In a performance tension can manifest as a form of tightness," says Sam. Wendy agrees. "Sometimes I experience incredible anger, particularly in some of the difficult poses. And I ask myself, 'Why am I angry about this?'"

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Reflecting in this way, coupled with yogic breathing, helps to bring me back to the present," says Wendy.

To achieve this level of self-awareness in performance, actors need to work through physical and psychological limitations. "As in a yoga practice, they need to accept limitations, to go with what they've got on the day," says Wendy. "If an actor fights their limitations a performance looks blocked. If they stay centred and open, their acting becomes real." According to Wendy, being open, that is, in the here and now is a reminder to actors that every time is a new performance. Through acceptance, limitations can be transformed.

Once an actor allows themselves to be physically vulnerable and open, they discover how to use their body for performance. Acting is about connectedness and focus. According to Sam, the feeling of union which comes from yoga works together with stage focus. This allows actors to relax within a space, and to take control over their bodies.

Allowing oneself to be vulnerable in public lies at the heart of the actor's craft. To do so with awareness and control is where an actor's strength lies. It is then that they are able to move an audience. Yoga, through its effect on subtle energy within the body, releases emotional blocks and physical tightness to allow this to happen more fully.

Sam suggests that yoga is also a nice equaliser during warm-ups and rehearsals. "Yoga enhances the feeling of community, or ensemble." Julia agrees. "After yoga you sense that the whole room is in a more aware state of mind. This enhances movement and choreography. You also tend to forget your ego by focusing on postures, the breath and the present moment."

When actors train, they learn to connect with thoughts and emotions through the breath. As they breathe deeper, thoughts and emotions

which contribute to a performance's richness are more available. Yoga complements basic acting and voice work by bringing performers into contact with the breath.

According to Wendy, yoga also helps to develop extraordinary courage, which is important when facing an audience. "As we perform asanas, some of which are quite challenging, we begin to become aware of ourselves, our body and our limitations," says Wendy. Slow, deep, controlled breathing, for example in *Virabhadrasana* (warrior pose), helps us to develop this awareness and yet persist, in spite of the intensity, to develop physical and mental stamina.

The word yoga means union between the individual self and universal consciousness. For the actor, this may suggest union with the 'archetype'. An archetype is an aspect of humanity, a strong quality residing within our psyche often manifesting as an image. For example, the 'fool' or 'trickster' is an archetype found in folktales, plays, tarot cards and within our dreams. To relate with a character's archetype can be inspirational for the actor. It also enables the audience to connect with the character's universal qualities. When actors perform at a more superficial level, it is difficult to hold an audience because there is less connection to truth.

Yoga postures help to open energy pathways in the body. Performers may choose an asana to restore energy during warm-ups. Poses also help to penetrate deeper aspects of the mind. This brings actors into contact with the unconscious where archetypes live. One of the benefits of yoga is that it calms the chaos of everyday thoughts. According to Wendy, this gives the actor clarity and allows instincts to work more strongly.

Specific yoga postures done beforehand can also enhance a particular performance. For example, Wendy's character, Ariel in

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was like a disgusting, big, black spider. "Ariel has a lengthy two page monologue. To warm-up, I decided to practise warrior pose because it is so intense. By doing it, I found the focus to perform the monologue, and basically to maintain the demanding spider-like qualities for those two pages," says Wendy.

Actors generally only have an hour or two to warm-up before a show. In this time, the body and voice must be prepared for performance. Voice graduate, Natasha McNamara uses yoga as a tool for vocal warm-ups. "Actors are often able to fulfil the character in the body, but not in the voice," says Natasha. "Yoga's capacity to bring the practitioner back to the present enables a receptivity and openness which is a great preparation for voice work." In particular, Natasha uses yoga side stretches, to help open up the ribs, work the intercostal muscles and improve the function of the diaphragm. Forward stretches are also ideal in that they help to resonate sound through the back. This facilitates humming and sighs used in voice preparation.

Using yoga in warm-ups for child actors can be a little different. Children sometimes lack a lot of physical stamina and mental focus. They can only cope with a few sun salutations. A lot of focus is placed on strengthening stomach muscles to support weak lower back muscles. Like many adults they have difficulty touching their toes, and are unaware of how their lower backs work. Using yoga in warm-ups for children helps to heighten their confidence, accept their limitations, and to develop discipline. Yoga then becomes a parallel to the discipline needed to perform in the theatre.

Julie Taymor, director of the Disney stage production, *The Lion King* describes how she uses bodies in physical pictures, calling them ideographs. "An ideograph can be best explained by comparing it to a Japanese brush painting where with just three brush strokes you express the entire bamboo forest. You alleviate yourself from the detail ... and go for the essence of the abstraction. An ideograph can be useful in probing the larger concepts for a piece". Similarly, by playing instinctively with certain poses actors can use yoga to find the essence of the character and to bring it to life in a physical way. In the case of *Commedia Dell' Arte*, a highly energetic, fast-paced Italian style with archetypal characters,

movement is led from the pelvis and footwork is light. Actors wear masks. This necessitates a lot of sudden turns to the audience so that it can see the expressions on the masks. The action verges on acrobatic with comic slapstick sprinkled throughout. It is also performed outdoors so voices need to be strong and project over vast distances.

In this theatre style, yoga is an ideal performance warm-up. Sun salutations, standing postures and forward bends work core spinal muscles. Floor work strengthens pelvic and abdominal muscles, and twists prepare the body for the sudden turns. Actors become breathless if physically unprepared and therefore are unable to sustain the style. Yoga postures assist at warm-ups and rehearsals to relieve physical and mental tension in performers. They achieve this by releasing subtle energy blockages within the body. As well as the energetic benefits, yoga's dynamic and sometimes extreme positions can also be drawn from to inspire during performances.

Yoga at NIDA is also attracting technical production and directing students searching for a means of eliminating stress. Tension is inhibiting for an actor but also for other

theatre practitioners. In technical production, yoga helps students develop the strength to carry heavy equipment and sustain creativity over long periods. Head of Technical Production, Bill Harris says that production students spend up to 14 hours a day at work, often standing or lifting. Yoga gives them a real appreciation of their breath, and what their body can achieve. Its mindfulness practices such as meditation also help to improve concentration levels. The latter is particularly useful when working with power tools.

Bill says that since introducing yoga to technical production students more than 18 months ago, there has been a greater interest from other departments such as design, costumes and props. One of the most difficult challenges at NIDA is finding the time to include yoga in what is basically an incredibly full schedule. Last year staff experimented with free lunchtime yoga during winter term. "It would be great to find a time when both staff and students can participate in yoga," says Bill.

Increasingly yoga can play an important role in the training of other theatre arts such as technical production, direction, design, costume and props. For actors, yoga can be

used as a warm-up or during rehearsals in conjunction with voice and character development. It can prepare performers to be more open to a variety of styles and movement. It is particularly successful in bringing actors to a sense of the present moment, while uniting them with reservoirs of unconscious impulses or their imagination. In all these ways, I believe yoga goes straight to the heart of what the actor does every day without taking away from the creative spirit, the freedom of direction and the inspiration of the rehearsal process.

Further reading:

The Path to Holistic Health, BKS Iyengar
Movement for Actors, Edited by Nicole Potter
Through the Body, Dymphna Callery
Playing with Fire, Julie Taymor

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