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The New Psychophysical
Trends in Voice and Performance with

SJ HARRISON



The New Psychophysical Trends in Voice and Performance with **SJ Harrison**

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Interviewer

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Photo by Bryon Malik



Dear SJ, I would like to start by thanking you very much for being with us in the interview. You work as a voice and performance coach at academies like Berkeley Repertory Theatre, & ACT, USA / University of California, USA and training at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Can you describe your profession with your own interpretation? I'd love to hear from you –as a voice trainer- as I know there is a wide range of content. And could you briefly describe yourself and your work to the Music Notes Magazine readers?

I'm an investigator and lifelong

learner. I'm also an actor and a playwright, and the role of physical voice and psychological voice respectively, are important to these two roles. I should perhaps also add for this publication, that singing has been a big part of my stage experience. I trained in singing, but focused on acting.

I started teaching student actors in the U.S. 15+ years ago, and found this work to be incredibly rewarding. The kind of training I had at RADA is rare in the U.S. (particularly on the west coast), where the American Method in its various forms has been centralised. We can think about the performer's skills as a toolbox. I discovered that many of my students were missing the following tools: movement, voice and somatic spoken text analysis. All of these modalities are important for embodied performance. The work I do now has developed in response to their needs. Increasingly, I was asked to teach voice. Voice is a

whole-body experience. Through the lens of Kristin Linklater's work, the role of voice became apparent to me. In working with my students, the undeniable truth of these words "To free the voice, is to free the person" (Linklater), was illuminated.

Additionally, I grew up in a multicultural environment and have lived in three different countries, and so I'm also extremely curious about the impact of people's cultural/environmental context on their ability not only to perform well, but to experience the joy of performance. Each person has common and unique challenges. I've discovered that the most direct way for me to help both artistic and business professionals excel in presenting, performing and sharing their message is to start with the voice itself and work outwards from there. Shine a light on the voice and you discover what has been blocked and oppressed. Unlock your voice and you unlock your full potential to achieve your highest goals. Voice is not only physical, voice is agency, integrity, confidence and empowerment.

■ **I know you use Linklater "Freeing The Natural Voice" and Laban "Motion Analysis" Techniques in your work. Do you also use Body Awareness Methods such as Feldenkrais, Alexander and Lessac? Why are these methods important for a performing artist?**

I am not trained in Feldenkrais or Lessac, and while I studied Alexander for years with an Alexander teacher, it is not something I teach. Despite my lack of experience with the two former practices, from what I understand, all of these techniques promote "being in the body" or kinesthetic body awareness. Alexander was life-changing for me: I became aware not only of my own posture but also the movement habits of others. This opened up an entire world for me, allowing me not only to



intuitively read others better, but also to notice my own physiological experience. To this day, this awareness allows me to change what isn't working for me in terms of my own movement habits. It's given me the ability to recover from injury and change negative postural habits that come about through habitual use or trauma. This is a lifelong journey because the body does not stay the same! It's also given me the power to assist others through observation, reflection and suggestion.

As an expressive performer, these modalities will help you take on different movement patterns than your own, and also to consciously shed them when you're ready, returning to your healthy set point. Additionally, living in the body includes pain and dis-ease. There is no avoiding it. When the body is in pain, the brain reacts by disconnecting from the affected part, which can lead to further injury. The more ease we can have in our bodies, the easier it is to be present in our bodies. Being present in our bodies is key to being present in each moment as it happens. Moment to

Nican Robinson and
Susan-Jane Harrison in
"Hunting Love"
photo by Eric Gillet



Additionally, if something in our anatomy isn't functioning, we can use the intellect to evaluate improve physiological functioning through exercises or other practices, or even whether to have elective surgery. This may sound a bit extreme, but let me give you a practical, reasonable example. When I was a first-year student at RADA, I developed constant, resistant case of tonsillitis. Furthermore, I was born with enlarged tonsils. Really huge! These severely limited my capacity for powerful vocal production. They had become severely infected. I had a tonsilectomy after my first year, and in terms of both voice and infection, I never looked back. This choice resolved my issues. Technique, the knowledge of how to do what we do in performance is very important as well. Without technique, I don't believe it's possible to become excellent or, at the height of our professions, virtuosic. Additionally without technique, our work will be 'hit or miss': sometimes wonderful due to expressivity or the inspiration of the moment, but without strong technique, inconsistent. Without technique, the performer is unable to reproduce their most magical moments. The life of a performer includes much repetition. We repeat our performances and we need to be consistently good at performance. I strongly believe that supportive structures

create the best containers for creativity. Technique is one such supportive and necessary structure.

■ **I was very interested in the terms active analysis, psychophysical technique, inhabiting and somatic technique in a scientific publication. Would you like to clarify these issues for our readers?**

Stanislavski's System of Active Analysis is a psychophysical modality included in Stanislavski's acting system. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, this technique was unknown to the West. It has been long practiced by Russian practitioners. I am happy to recommend these international experts on the subject. Your readers may be interested in their books: Bella Merlin (who I first studied with, and subsequently worked with as a colleague) and Sharon Marie Carnicke. Active Analysis is an iterative rehearsal or learning process for actors, which centralizes spontaneous physical improvisation in response to a play text, as the springboard for analysis. The analysis is expressed first as a physical response, or action, after which we can observe or reflect on the experience and see what happens when we do it again. Each time we gain more information. It's an iterative process. This is the contradiction of the American Method, where extensive reading

Clementine Sparrow,
Susan-Jane Harrison
and Rebecca Rogers in
"Hamlet", courtesy of
The Pop-Up Globe, NZ



Photo by Malcolm Wallace

moment experiencing is an important component of virtuosic performance.

■ **I have been working as a voice trainer and when I put voice at the center. I think of a few building columns like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. One of them is anatomy and voice physiology another is body awareness, the other is mindfulness, the other is technique according to music genre, the other is musical and intellectual infrastructure and psychology. How would you construct these building columns?**

This is an impressive question! I really have to think about this one. When it comes to how we use ourselves to activate dynamic performance, my simple model is represented by an ellipses, with intellect, emotion and the body forming entry points on this ellipses. Each is gateway to the other two dalities. They "speak to" trigger each other. In of Maslow's Hierar- Needs, I will do my

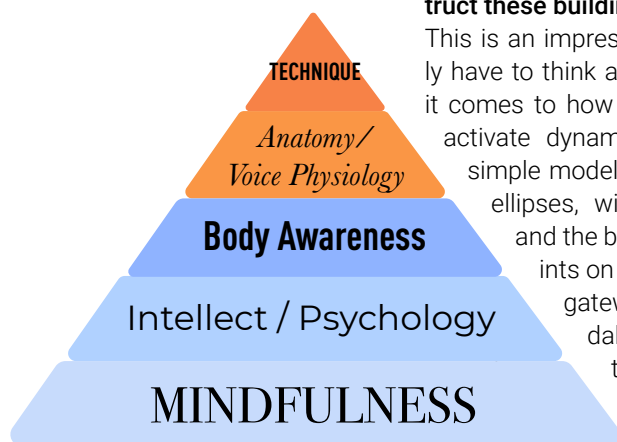
best! (See left)

Now this is a very hard question because I believe that ALL of these things are both connected and important. I put mindfulness first because mindfulness brings us into the present moment. Here feelings can flow rather than remain stuck. Here we can be calmly awake, receptive and spontaneous. In performance and in learning, this is key. We must be able to do this.

I wanted to put body awareness second from the bottom, after mindfulness – this shows the bias I have towards the kinesthetic; beginning with the physical as an entry point! However, I have seen the problems that result from a myopic focus on feeling and intuition, aspects of the self which tend to 'reside' in the body. The tragedy of acting only on emotion plays itself out on the global stage. In the absence of intellect and logic, false ideologies abound, creating self destructive cycles. This is true in regard to how an individual lives a life, and the choices they make, as well as nations and societies.

Thus it occurs to me that one of the most powerful and necessary functions of intellect in this model, is the ability to observe and analze. For this reason I have placed it as foundational for body awareness. My premise is that one cannot do much with body awareness, if one cannot interpret the experience of the body. In other words, if I cannot observe and analyse, and thus draw conclusions from my body awareness, I remain in a reactive emotional state - rather than moving into a pro-active state, where numerous elements can work together.

It may surprise some readers that I have placed anatomy and voice physiology second from the top. This choice reflects my belief that we can change our anatomy and voice physiology through the use of intellect. The mind is a powerful "body influencer".





**strong
female
character**

and analysis of the text occurs before physical response. Now that we've looked at Active Analysis, hopefully the concept of psychophysical technique becomes clearer. Psychophysics is the study of quantitative relations between psychological events and physical events or, more specifically, between sensations and the stimuli that produce them. Somatic practices centralise the body as the vehicle for moving or shifting emotion. This is the case with somatic therapy for example. When difficult emotions or thoughts arise, a somatic therapist may instruct the patient to move their body in a particular way, or to place their visual attention in another part of the room. Somatic practices understand that emotions reside in the body. Emotion relating to past trauma can be released by moving, or massaging or working with specific parts of the body wherein that emotion is 'held'. Breathing and vocalizing can also be powerful ways to activate somatic experience.

The Inhabiting Technique was created by me as a useful structure for actors who want to become more embodied performers. Like most techniques, Inhabiting draws on the work of others (Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg, Kristin Linklater, Richard Schechner, Rudolf Laban, Grotowski, Stanislavski). The aim is to help performers to become in the words of Artaud "athletes of emotion" to be able to move from one emotive expression to another, starting from a physical activation. Inhabiting frames emotion as a landscape the performer can visit, or inhabit. Inhabiting is useful for singers as well, for increasing ease of emotive expression. While Inhabiting is something that dancers can benefit from, Laban already exists! Laban is a wonderful system for dancers.

■ **What can be done to strengthen the expression on stage for singers, theater artists, opera singers, ballet and modern dance artists?**

I think that you have asked some powerful question in this interview. Particularly regarding Maslow's hierarchy. This proved to be a great mental and pedagogical exercise for me! It will be useful do this with students and discuss the hierarchies they come up with. I do believe that interdisciplinary artistic training benefits and expands each artist. Exciting collaborations also emerge when artists from an array of disciplines come together and learn from each other. Anything that promotes embodied expressive performance, such as the practices we have discussed, can only enrich and widen the scope of performers from all of these disciplines. As you can see, I am a strong advocate for addressing all the aspects of the self-as-instrument in performance.

■ **SJ, thank you so much for this nice conversation. Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers and young performer candidates?**

I would like to say to your readers, thank you so much for your interest in this subject matter. To your performer candidates: Be a life-long learner! Your training should never end. And when you have completed your initial studies, know that this completes the first stage of setting up your performance toolbox. Leaving your training is only the beginning of learning to use your tools and adding more tools to the box. You will improve hugely with time and experience. Stay observant and curious! The path of a performer takes many unexpected turns. It's okay to do other things as well. Learning to perform teaches you how to see the World in a very useful way. Apply your learnings to your entire life.

Susan-Jane Harrison is a British-American Voice & Performance Coach, Playwright and Performer. Unusual collaborations in Harrison's artistic work have allowed her to develop across disciplines. Her development of the Inhabiting Technique, a complete physical, intellectual and emotional system for actors resulted in academic publication of her performance research. Her father, Dr Roger Harrison, was a pioneer in the field of Organizational Culture & Development and her mother, Diana Harrison, a highly sought after Executive Coach. Their mentorship instilled in SJ a sense of respect for ethics, and a sensitivity to the empowerment of the individual within each client's wider context. SJ learned Spanish as an adult and is intrigued by linguistics; her love of language originally sparked by performing and teaching Shakespeare throughout her career. Her multi-national experience – she has lived in 3 different countries – as well as training in accents at RADA has made her a sought after accent coach in the U.S.A. SJ has an extremely varied work life as a successful entrepreneur and artist. Mother of two and head of a multi-cultural, bilingual household, SJ is highly attuned to matters of identity: the desire of clients to stay true to their own cultural context and be clearly understood in the global environment. Working with ESL speakers is one of the most rewarding aspects of her work. SJ is accustomed to having dialogue on matters of race and ethnicity, and is an attentive listener when it comes to each client's lived experience. Being a mother is one of the greatest joys in her life, and the learning she has received from this role has been immeasurable. She is profoundly grateful to have the opportunity to continue to learn from, as well as to empower her children.

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