

The nature of Physical theatre

At its simplest, you could define Physical theatre as a form of theatre that puts emphasis on movement rather than dialogue. But remember there are a huge number of variations as the genre covers a broad range of work. But essentially Physical theatre is anything that puts the human body at the centre of the storytelling process. As a result it's often abstract in style, using movement in a stylised and representational way. With the expression of ideas choreographed through movement, such performers use very little or no dialogue at all.

DV8 are arguably among the main practitioners of Physical theatre as a 'full' art form. They focus on looking at the dramatic potential that can be unlocked from movement. Their work is often described as existing at a crossroads where dance, sound and drama meet. DV8 are well known for using Physical theatre to explore complex aspects of human relationships and social or cultural issues.

In DV8's production, *Can We Talk About This?* the director and performers used Physical theatre to express extremely complicated and delicate political and social issues. The main theme of the production looked at multiculturalism, separatism and militant Islam. Words and bodywork were combined to express what's sometimes difficult to put into words alone.

Combining dialogue and physical movement

Another major company in Physical theatre is Frantic Assembly. The company's production of *Lovesong* by well-known playwright and author, Abi Morgan, illustrates another level of Physical theatre. There's a substantial dialogue script for the play but much of its impact in production comes from the movement work representing the relationship of a couple over the years. This clip shows a group of actors from Frantic Assembly working with director, Scott Graham on the play.

Using Physical theatre in your production

Stylised movement

Imagine a production of Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. Usually we hear about the battle at the start of the play. How would it affect the production if instead we saw the fighting in a stylised fashion with the witches clearly controlling the action as though they were puppeteers? Kenneth Branagh's 2013 production of *Macbeth* was hailed for its physicality, particularly during the battle scene at the beginning of the play.

Physical theatre can also be used in the way director, Steven Berkoff used it in *The Trial*, to provide the scene, whether this is furniture for a room or a busy street. The use of people to create everything allows great opportunities for dynamic impact. In *The Trial*, it was the cast, very simple frames and a rope on an empty performance area that created the whole staging.



Credit: George Riddell, Blackeyed Theatre's *The Trial* (2012)

Combining art forms

Physical theatre has a focus on movement but can be separate from the spoken word or united with it to expand and explore its meaning. It may well be devised or contain substantial elements of work beyond the printed script. These elements could be other art forms such as music, dance, the use of media or visual images. So you could use a combination of elements that may also be combined with script, for instance. You could reach out to the audience in a way that challenges the so-called fourth wall, making the audience a collaborator in the action. (It's not unusual for Physical theatre to actually encourage or demand audience participation.)



National Theatre Wales' production *In Water I'm Weightless* was performed by a cast of six deaf and disabled performers and took a provocative look at the human body Credit: Farrows Creative / National Theatre Wales.

Innovation

How can you be innovative in your use of Physical theatre? This clip shows the Physical theatre work that Complicite incorporated into its 2013 production of *Lionboy*, a piece based on the trilogy of best-selling books by Zizou Corder. Notice how the profile of the leading big cat is evoked by the bodies of three actors in striking shadow play (subtitles are available).

Devised work

If you're working on a devised piece and you need to use Physical theatre, make certain that what you do is adding to the effectiveness of the performance so that the physical work doesn't just seem a random addition. It must be in keeping with the style of the production. The highly successful National Theatre production of *One Man, Two Guvnors*, was inspired by the **Commedia dell'arte**' 17th-century play, *Servant of Two Masters*. It used the Commedia's types of physical comedy such as the form's physical **lazzi** (Italian for 'jokes') and enhanced the production considerably.

Commedia dell'arte began in Italy in the 16th century. It was a popular form of street theatre based on improvised scenarios between stock characters. These characters were universal types of masters, servants and lovers. **Commedia dell'arte** is a very physical form as many of the characters wear masks so their facial expressions can't be seen by the audience. As a result actors must rely more on their bodies to be understood. If you do use the **Commedia dell'arte** as inspiration, this clip from the National Theatre shows the physical shapes that some of the stock characters use.

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It's likely that the work you do will be more limited than the work of DV8, for instance. Perhaps in a Shakespeare play, the violence or magic will be carefully represented by movement. Or, if you perform a comedy, you could use a movement as a character trait, taking your inspiration from **Commedia dell'arte**. You might use your cast to create and build not just the set but much of the mood and atmosphere of your piece.

Physical theatre techniques

So if the body is the actor's musical instrument, how can you produce the music of Physical theatre?

- **Mime** – This usually means stylised movement but can be comparatively realistic.
- **Gesture** – A gesture may be something small but can have emotional impact or it can be a particular movement that defines a character.
- **Status** – This may be executed by use of levels or by distance or strength of contact, or a combination of all of these with voice work.
- **Proximity** – How close or far you are from your co-performers can be a source of very powerful impact. For example, the threatening gangster who speaks to his victim from a distance of perhaps a couple of inches.

- **Stance** – This is associated with strength as the body could radiate assertion and authority or weakness by stance, incorporating posture.
- **Harshness and tenderness** - Used here as umbrella terms to focus on the fact that in physical work the gestures and bigger movements come together to express the emotions of the piece.
- **Movement** - Every movement needs to be rehearsed with precision.
- **Not moving** – If the stage is full of characters moving, immobility can have a powerful effect.
- **Mask work** - The impact of a mask is visual and without the facial features to show action, movement becomes an even more central performance instrument.
- **Dance work** – Don't be afraid to include dance in your work; you don't have to be an experienced dancer. 'Dad dancing' can work well in a comedy for instance!
- **Motif** – This is repeated use of a movement pattern which has meaning and reminds us of the central theme of the work.
- Physical theatre shows that you don't have to use words to express ideas. It uses techniques such as movement, mime, gesture and dance and can be used to explore complex social and cultural issues.

Using contact improvisations

Contact improvisations are spontaneous physical dialogues that range from stillness to highly energetic exchanges.

Alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation, trusting in one's basic survival instincts. It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened. **From Caught Falling by Nancy Stark Smith and David Koteen**

Contact improvisation is a developed form of improvisation, usually a duet, between two experienced dancers. Our interest here is in the starting point – a point of contact. The improvisation is the movement that develops from that. Even if you're not a trained dancer, you can experiment with shared movements. Think about how the effectiveness of a stage punch depends on the reaction of the recipient. The movements are associated and work together.

Exercise

You can explore simple contact improvisation in pairs by exploring simple touch, eg starting palm to palm using two basic dynamics of 'to push' and 'to pull'. You could move onto another simple exercise by maintaining a point of physical contact at all times with a partner. Here you could explore three basic rules:

- to absorb an impulse by the partner
- to resist or ignore it
- to respond to it

Test your understanding of Physical theatre

Answer the question then check your response against the sample answer.

Question

Suppose that the devised work you're doing is based on the idea of fairy tales in a modern or somehow different setting. Your group has chosen *Hansel and Gretel*. What effects could you create through Physical theatre?

