



# THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN ACTOR

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*“Life is meaningless without art.”*

- Karen Finley

*“Above all, you must remain open and fresh and alive to any new idea.”*

- Laurence Olivier

*“The body does not have memory. It is memory.”*

- Jerzy Grotowski

*“In everything, without doubt, truth has the advantage over imitation.”*

- Cicero

*“The actor must constantly remember that he is on the stage for the sake of the public.”*

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

## The Work of Yat Malmgren: Christopher Fettes' New Book: “A Peopled Labyrinth”

by Ronald Rand

Christopher Fettes, renowned theatre practitioner and highly-regarded acting teacher in the UK and around the world has created a new book – [A Peopled Labyrinth: The Histrionic Sense: An Analysis of the Actor's Craft](#), dealing comprehensively with ‘The Histrionic Sense’ or the Law of Expression of the application of Yat Malmgren’s work.

Mr. Fettes’ book is an engrossing journey into Yat Malmgren’s technique of actor training, stemming from the creation of one of the great English acting schools: Drama Centre, London. Yat Malmgren’s work continues through the training at the Giles Foreman Centre for Acting taught by Mr. Fettes and Giles Foreman, successor to Yat Malmgren.

As Mr. Fettes clearly states in the beginning of the book: “The Histrionic Sense enables a man to interpret gesture on the one hand, the act of speech on the other. When we come to speech, most of us believe we know where we stand. We know, or anyhow sense obscurely, that a sign, or strictly speaking a symbol, in that it stands, not for something in the present environment that confronts us, as the screech of brakes indicates the presence of a fast-moving car, but, to be precise, the ‘idea’ of a thing. Words exhibit meanings, on a one-to-one basis. If we don’t understand them, we can resort to the use of a dictionary. Because actors or the actresses often seem indifferent to the interpretation of the text as such, they are widely thought to be stupid; improperly so, that telling a story involves, more importantly, the creation of virtual events that have about them a peculiar ‘feel.’ It is the business of the actor to communicate to the audience a feeling of eventual and lasting happiness or alternatively of impending doom... What ensues (in this book) is a detailed account of the Laban-Carpenter ‘Theory of Movement Psychology,’ brought to its conclusion by Yat Malmgren in the context, not of Dance, as might be expected, but of Dramatic Art.”

### A Peopled Labyrinth

The Histrionic Sense:  
An Analysis of the Actor's Craft  
by  
Christopher Fettes



The Work of Yat Malmgren: An Interpretation

Yat Malmgren’s journey into developing a technique of actor training grew out of his career as one of the great solo artists of European modern dance during the mid-point of the



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*“One wishes to know something but the answer is in a form of being more aware – of being open to a richer level of experience.”*

*- Peter Brook*



twentieth century.

In the early 1930's, Malmgren first trained as an actor under Julia Hakanson, who had originally created roles in August Strindberg's plays. However, Malmgren's direction lay in dance, and he soon received world-renowned recognition for his dance solo recitals across Europe. Malmgren was then invited to dance with Kurt Jooss' company in London, and around that time also met Rudolf Laban, a dance artist and theorist, and also considered one of the most important figures in the history of dance.

In 1939, Kurt Jooss invited Malmgren to join the Jooss company, and Malmgren went on to perform on tours across Britain, the U.S., Canada and South America. A year later while the company was on tour in South America, Malmgren decided to leave the company and stay in Brazil. He established a school, danced as a solo artist, created an impressionist cycle based on the preludes of Debussy and Negro spirituals, as well as a series of studies from the lives of the young mulatto dancers of Rio de Janeiro's streets.

It was during a time in Brazil that he witnessed the effect of shamanic trances, and began to see how an external rhythm can completely change the internal life of a person - that movements associated with certain rhythms can definitely influence a person's mental and emotional life. This would play a direct role in the later discoveries of his life's work.

After Malmgren was appointed choreographer to the Casino Copacabana, he also began a series of recitals with two outstanding soloists from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Tatiana Leskova and Nini Theilade, and in the late 1940's returned to Europe. Continuing his recitals, he concluded his touring with a triumphant return to dance at the Concert House in Stockholm. Malmgren was awarded a scholarship by Mona Inglesby, prima ballerina of the International Ballet, to study in London and Paris. When he sustained an injury in 1954, it unfortunately ended his stage career.

It was just by chance, while he was in London that he was introduced to the actor, Harold Lang, who persuaded him to begin teaching movement classes. Among his students included Sean Connery, Diane Cilento, Natasha Parry, Patricia Neal, Gillian Lynne, Anthony Hopkins, Brian Bedford, Elizabeth Fielding, as well as the directors Peter Brook, Tony Richardson, Bill Gaskill, Michael Blakemore, Seth Holt and Alexander Mackendrick. The directors were students of Yat Malmgren but had an interest in the work and in the actors he worked with.

It was during this period of time that Yat Malmgren and Christopher Fettes first met and they soon decided to hold classes together in a studio space in Covent Garden. Among the actors attending these classes included Diane Cilento, Anthony Hopkins and Sean Connery. Malmgren was also invited by George Devine to work at the Royal Court, and by Rudolf Laban to join the staff of the Art of Movement Studio in Addlestone, Surrey. The following year he assisted Sir Peter Brook and Sir John Gielgud on their production of "The Tempest." Malmgren was also invited by Lawrence Olivier to work at the National Theatre.

Also, during the early 1950's, Laban and his assistant, William Carpenter, explored the synthesis of movement expression and aspects of Jungian psychology. Carpenter began to create a common language related to his theory of four distinct personality types, and the psychological factors of the human being.

As Malmgren sought to find a coherent training system for actors, he began to see a link existed between Laban's and Carpenter's work to Stanislavsky's System of Acting regarding character and action. Central to Malmgren's approach was Laban's precise, detailed analysis of the non-discursive symbolism of dance, the role of gesture and what it plays in underlying



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*“Love is stronger than differences. We all live on the same planet. We walk on the same earth. We breathe the same air. No matter where I was born, no matter what color skin I have or what religion I was raised to believe in, everything and everyone is connected to this one life. I no longer choose to prejudge others, to feel either superior or inferior. I choose equality – to have warm, loving, open communication with every member of my Earthly family. I am a member of the earth*

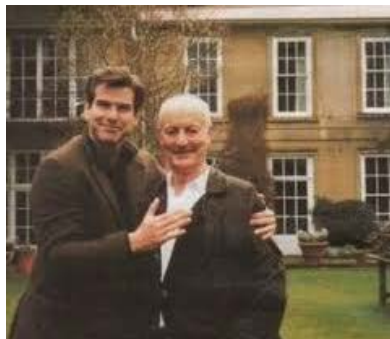
the act of speech. Malmgren extended these ideas by completing Laban's theory with the Confluence of Externalized Drives, thereby creating a fully realized typology of human expression bringing together Laban and Stanislavsky.

In the fall of 1963, Yat Malmgren and Christopher Fettes created a new theatre school, the Drama Centre London in an old church, that would literally change the face of training in the UK and around the world.

Actors who have studied at the Drama Centre London include Colin Firth, Michael Fassbender, Lambert Wilson, Pierce Brosnan, Simon Callow, Geraldine James, John Simm and Penelope Wilton, Ian Hogg, David Leland, Oliver Cotton, Jack Shepherd, Celia Bannerman, Penelope Wilton, Frances de la Tour, Paul Bettany, Anne Marie Duff, Tara Fitzgerald, Helen McCrory, and Tom Hardy.

Today, Mr. Fettes teaches at The Giles Foreman Centre for Acting in London. Giles Foreman, one of the leading acting teachers in the UK, a specialist in the Methodological approach to acting, was trained by Christopher Fettes, Yat Malmgren and Reuven Adiv. He carries on the torch of training into the next generation of actors.

Christopher Fettes had originally started out as an actor working with the legendary East London Theatre Company led by Joan Littlewood. Invited by Tony Richardson to join the opening season of The English Stage Company at the Royal Court theatre, he created leading roles in several plays including those by Angus Wilson, Arthur Miller and Ronald Duncan. Fettes also directed a number of famous productions including Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus" with Wilfrid Lawson and Patrick Magee, "The Miser" at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre with Warren Mitchell and Fenella Fielding, and Schnitzler's "The Lonely Road" with two of his acting students, Anthony Hopkins and Colin Firth. Mr. Fettes also introduced the work of Calderon de la Barca to the British stage.



Janice Orlandi, who heads the Actors Movement Studio Conservatory in New York City made us aware of Christopher Fettes' new book "A Peopled Labyrinth," and Giles Foreman's Studio in London, where Christopher Fettes is currently teaching at eighty-seven years of age.

Orlandi had studied Laban's system of movement analysis in America, and while on a trip to London opening a play, "The Other Mozart" at the St. James theater, saw Tom Hardy's transformational character work in the film, "Legend." She found out that Hardy had trained at The Drama Centre in Yat Malmgren's work. She contacted Giles Foreman's Center for Acting in London, and soon began a week of intensive training with Giles Foreman. Immediately she felt Yat Malmgren's technique should reach a wider audience in America.

When Orlandi returned to New York City, she arranged a book event for A Peopled Labyrinth at The Players Club in early 2016. She also arranged for Giles Foreman to come and teach workshops in New York City in the spring and summer through an educational exchange and collaboration at Actors Movement Studio Conservatory.

Orlandi told us: "I think it's important to bring the work of Yat Malmgren and Christopher Fettes into the pedagogical mix of actor training in America. This extraordinary body of knowledge gives the actor a layered system of tools for physical exploration and character transformation. When I studied Yat Malmgren's work in London, it 'connected the dots' for me – from Stanislavsky physical action and Chekhov's 'Imaginary body' and 'Psychological gesture' – extending the huge body of Laban's work and dance notation, Movement analysis and Effort actions to Carpenter's glossary of terms and vocabulary. This system is now taught in its entirety at the Giles Foreman Center for Actors. This work became clearer for me as an actor and a movement teacher. I believe it's a missing link connecting physical character transformation into a physical action that I've been seeking to understand. It's just been a most amazing and profound discovery!"

When we had the unique opportunity to interview Christopher Fettes, we first asked him why he chose A Peopled Labyrinth as the title for his new book.

"Actually it's a description of the city of Venice from the poem, "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" by the English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. I chose the phrase because it expresses the huge variety of human beings and the complexity of their psychology, and I wanted the title to encompass that."

*community."*

*- Louise L. Hay*

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*"To flourish, society depends on a strong cultural heritage as well as innovation. The challenge is to breathe new life into the arts. Creativity is at the heart of every successful nation. It finds expression in great visual art, wonderful music, fabulous performances, stunning writing, gritty new productions and countless other media. Giving form to our innate human creativity is what defines us to ourselves and the world.*

*This is what the arts have always done. The lasting value and evidence of a civilization are its artistic output and the ingenuity that comes from applying creativity to the whole range of human endeavor. What is education if it doesn't teach our children to think creatively and innovatively? What use is a robust economy unless it is within an innovative country that can attract and stimulate the world? How can good governance exist without a population that is engaged, educated and able to form its own opinions?"* Excerpt from an essay, "Reviving a creative nation,"  
*– by Cate Blanchett and Julianne Schultz, April 16, 2008, For the Creative Australia Stream at the 2020 Summit*

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*"Simply think the words."*

*— Goethe*

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*"Action is the direct agent of the heart."*

*— Delsarte*

*What led you to create this book at this particular moment in your life?*

"It's been ten years since I began work on the book, but more than fifty since Yat entrusted me with the teaching of movement psychology and acting, based on the work of Rudolf Laban and William Carpenter who provided the origins. During the last ten years I finally had time to step back, to reflect on all that had been developed at Drama Centre London. I wanted also to ensure that the name of Yat Malmgren was perpetuated."

*What do you hope readers will take away from reading [A Peopled Labyrinth](#)?*

"It's not something to rush through, like a novel – but with the use of this book, hopefully it will be easier to analyze a complex dramatic text and create subtle, layered characters. It is designed for anyone interested in the analysis of human behavior; and not only for actors, but also directors, designers – all those concerned with the realization of dramatic text on the public stage and screen."

*What originally led you to want to act?*

"More than anything, it was a feeling for a vocation – and initially admiration for, in particular, John Gielgud, whose production as Macbeth I was brought to London to see, at the age of eleven. Later he was particularly known in America for his role in the 1953 film, "Julius Caesar" alongside Marlon Brando and James Mason."

*You also worked as an actor with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Company in East London.*

"She deserves a good deal of credit. She was a very remarkable person. The work we did there was exactly the opposite of what was being done, and which I saw, at the Old Vic Theatre and in the West End, and which went on to become the National Theatre – against which she represented a calculated revolution. She was a method teacher, her background was Stanislavsky, and her theatre produced actors and directors, many of whom went in a different direction. What we did at the Drama Centre represented a continuation of her work – an essential part of the training from the word go was Stanislavsky's method and the work of Uta Hagan – but not exclusively so."

What was your experience of being a part of the ensemble of The English Stage Company led by Tony Richardson at the Royal Court Theatre?

"One has mixed feelings. It was challenging and invigorating, being part of the inaugural production and in the early years of the company. I think it was a noble attempt to make available to the audiences many of the plays of great English literature, and of the modern theater. They didn't really use the Method – John Osborne set the seal on it with "Look Back in Anger." It was essentially a writers' theater, not an actors' one, even though it produced actors."

*How would describe Yat Malmgren, and what would you say initially led him to begin teaching?*

"He was a distinguished modern dancer. He was reserved, but very self-assured. Like all modern dancers of the period, to make ends meet he was compelled to teach. Later, having been a member of the Jooss Ballet, he left the company in South America during the war and found that he couldn't get back to Europe. He danced with the International Ballet Company, and created adaptations of his own work. I think, from his first meetings with Laban, and having initially been trained as an actor in Sweden – all these things eventually led him to his work as a teacher.

Later, Yat taught Character Analysis in San Francisco, at the American Conservatory Theatre and there was discussion about him joining the staff of Juilliard, but he decided that he couldn't leave Drama Centre."

*Those who studied with you and Yat Malmgren have included such actors and actresses as Sean Connery, Anthony Hopkins, Pierce Brosnan, Geraldine James, Colin Firth, Michael Fassbender, Tom Hardy, and Simon Callow, among many others. It made me think about the Herman Hesse quote found in your book: "Teachers are more essential than anything else. Men who can give the young the ability to judge and distinguish, who serve them as examples of the honoring of truth, obedience to the things of the spirit, respect for language." Have those three examples influenced you as a teacher?*

"The quote seems accurate – I placed it in the book as it's what I feel Yat represented. Whatever one sets out to achieve, one tries to do one's best, and may be successful in some cases. No doubt, it's dependent upon the strengths or inadequacies of those whom you teach; upon the drive and the talent of the individual. The one thing that is essential is to teach actors the proper use of their personal resources; and definitely a respect for language, of which I taught the literary side, having taken a Degree in English at Oxford. I expect I've been very

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**"The supreme goal of the theatre is truth, the ultimate truth of the soul."**

**— Max Reinhardt**

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**"Through the unity of reason and emotion, of spirituality and affection and sensation, the actor will discover his creative genius for the stage – the art of acting."**

**— Erwin Piscator**

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**"The artist-actor unveils his inner soul."**

**— Eleonora Duse**

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**"Living is a process. Acting is the act of laying oneself bare, of fearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself. It is a serious and solemn act of revelation. It is like a step towards the summit of the actor's organism in which are united consciousness and instinct."**

**— Jerzy Grotowski**

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**"Let us find our way to the unknown, the intuitive, and perhaps beyond to man's spirit itself.. "**

**— Viola Spolin**

demanding, severely realistic – but perhaps that’s why the actors you mention are as respected as they have become.”

*One thing the art of creating certainly requires is the time for discovery, exploration. Yet in the theater, and especially in film and television, it’s very rare to ever have enough time.*

“The act of creation, when you’re dealing with the complexity of an art form such as acting, requires that you seek out answers from the reality, from the questions that you ask. To try and develop an interpretation is not something that can be rushed. But people making TV and films, they want answers immediately and it can limit the possibility of producing a completely layered portrayal in that short amount of time. Most of the screen acting we see is minor in scope, but when the role allows for complexity we can see the work. Nine out of ten directors are not focused on the acting, they want that contribution to come from the actors themselves.”

*You’ve now been teaching at the Giles Foreman Studio in London.*

“It’s been immensely helpful working with Giles. It’s where young people can go to get an understanding of what they truly need to learn. What they do learn, of course, is dependent upon on how committed they are, and their talents. As a teacher I must forge ahead, and while some may be brilliant and some are not yet there – yet we forge ahead. The most important thing is to teach them how to work by themselves – no one else will!”

*“It is a law of life that man cannot live for himself alone. Extreme individualism is insanity. The world’s problems are also our personal problems. Health is achieved through maintaining our personal truth in a balanced relation of love to the rest of the world. No expression is more emblematic of this relation than the creative act which we call art. No art by its very constitution typifies the social nature of that creative act more than the theatre. The theatre, to be fully understood and appreciated, must be seen as a manifestation of this process of interchange between society and the individual. It must be judged as a continuous development of groups of individuals within society, a development which becomes richer, acquires greater force and value as it grows with the society in which it originates. Only in this way can the theatre nourish us. - Harold Clurman*

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