



routledge performance practitioners

Rudolf  
**LABAN**

Karen K. Bradley

### Practice

**Leading/Speaking from Body Parts:** Practice experiencing moving and speaking from the heart, the head, the "gut", the pelvis, the feet, etc. and note what different characters and qualities emerge from each.

Try using different Body Attitudes for the same type of exploration.

**Changing Organization:** Practice movement that is organized by body half; i.e. right-side vs. left-side and upper half vs. lower half. How do you view the world differently from each organizational set? Does your perception change? Are new characters created? Then practice contralateral organization and see how perception and character shift.

**Voice Work:** Find the particular vocal origin in the body for different characters: for example, a duchess or duke, a clown, a scientist, a homeless person. Note how the voice is supported, or not supported by a variety of body-level organizations, counter-tensions, groundedness or body-level connections.

## THE EFFORT LEVEL

Laban described four separate qualities of movement: flow, weight, space (or focus) and time. Each of these occurs along a continuum, and each reflects a change in attitude towards a particular factor.

Flow describes the ongoingness of movement and can be defined by the extremes of bound flow (capable of stopping at any moment) and free flow (continual releasing of the flow of movement).

Weight effort describes the attitude towards power and overcoming gravity and is defined by the extremes of strong weight effort (capable of pushing a piano across the floor or overcoming an obstacle) and light weight effort (rarified, buoyant surmounting of gravity).

Space effort can be single (direct) or multi-focused (indirect or flexible).

Time effort is a change in attitude towards time, as defined by the opposites of quickness or acceleration (a hastening of time) and sustinment (a lingering in time).

Efforts tend to occur, stylistically, in pairs (called States) and in threes (called Drives). States are read as moods; while Drives are fully loaded moments of full expressivity. Individuals and characters in plays tend to operate in States, and to reveal more about themselves in Drives.



Figure 4.4 Free flow



Figure 4.5 Bound flow



Figure 4.6 Strong weight



Figure 4.7 Light weight



Figure 4.8 Three examples of direct space effort



Figure 4.9 Indirect space effort

#### STATES

Weight and Space = STABLE

Time and Flow = MOBILE

Weight and Time = RHYTHM

Space and Flow = REMOTE

Weight and Flow = DREAM

Space and Time = AWAKE

#### DRIVES

Weight, Space, Time = ACTION (no Flow and therefore no transitions or ongoingness from one moment to the next; the most externally and task-oriented Drive)

Space, Weight, Flow = SPELL (no Time and therefore a kind of spell is cast)

Weight, Flow, Time = PASSION (no Space and therefore no attention or investigation of the moment: the most internally-oriented Drive)

Space, Time, Flow = VISION (no Weight and Space, Time, Flow = VISION (no Weight and therefore no sense of personal power or intention within the moment))

## Practice

**Building personal style:** Try activities such as making breakfast by primarily using a single effort in extreme; i.e. direct space or focus effort, or free flow, or strong weight, etc. Practice each one and note what tasks are easier with each effort factor. In this way, one can build a repertoire of expressive components.

**Adding to the palette:** After exploring each effort quality, decide which of them one is least likely to use expressively. Explore the full range of that factor and write a journal about the experience. Try using the factor in a variety of circumstances: while taking a walk, while in conversation, in a store, taking a shower, etc.

**Using effort in improvisation:** Create a dyadic situation in which a task is shared with another mover and enter into the improvisation using one of the eight effort qualities. Note how each mover adapts and changes qualities in order to communicate and complete the task.

## THE SPACE LEVEL

Laban's work differs from many other somatics or body-based systems of movement because of his rich understanding of space, not as a separate and simply quantifiable entity but as a part of the interaction of inner and outer phenomena. In fact his original model for the analysis of movement consisted of Body (the action and inner world), Effort (the mediator of inner and outer through expression) and Space (the environment in which movement occurs).

He was, as we have seen in Part I, fascinated by both the geometric and the mystical aspects of spatial analysis. His space harmony work, including several "scales," draws on the artist/researcher's multi-

focused understanding of the beauty, the drama and the mathematical calculations that unpack our relationship to the world around us.

If we think of personal and general space as our own real estate, it is easier to understand that each of us is drawn to particular aspects or places within that real estate. Some people are expansive in their use of space; some are specific and occupy well-defined segments of the full range of possibilities.

Space is alive in the sense that each mover infuses particular aspects of space with his/her energy. Some may limit the direction of that energy in space, honing it to a single dimension or plane; others "light up the room." Space is the container for effort and shape, and the architecture for actions.

## One-dimensional space

The dimensions are defined as single spatial pulls with two polar ends. The Vertical Dimension is an Up-Down pull and relates directly to gravity. The Vertical Dimension divides the body into horizontal halves and therefore elucidates the side-side Horizontal Dimension, an imaginary spatial pull that bisects the body into upper and lower halves.

Put these two lines together and what is revealed is the Sagittal Dimension, a line that is pulled to the front and back of the body, completing the cross of axes. Laban devised a movement scale that follows these spatial pulls, called the Dimensional, or Defense Scale.



Figure 4.10 The three dimensions

The dimensional scale requires that the mover inhabit each dimension fully and with counter-tension: the vertical dimension is the first phrase, the horizontal dimension the second phrase and the sagittal dimension the third phrase. A mover may go from PLACE HIGH to PLACE LOW, and then cross over the midline in the horizontal dimension to PLACE ACROSS and PLACE OPEN, then to PLACE BACK and PLACE FRONT. The order of the sequence matters less than the dynamic tension between points or placements in space. When one reaches for PLACE HIGH, for example, one feels the counter-pull to PLACE LOW and then the pulls are reversed; with the PLACE LOW reach becoming the primary movement and the PLACE HIGH pull as the counter-tension.

### Two-dimensional space—planes

The spatial pulls combine to produce planes in space. Planal movement is common in western cultures, and each plane is affined with particular ways of operating or presenting the self.

The combination of the horizontal and vertical dimensions result in what is called the vertical, or door plane. This plane is often seen in "TA-DAH!" moments, and is also known as the plane of presentation.

The combination of the horizontal and the sagittal dimensions result in the horizontal, or table plane. This plane is where spinning and twisting, skating, gathering and scattering tend to take place. It is also known as the plane of communication.

The third plane is the combination of the vertical and the sagittal dimensions and is called the sagittal, or wheel plane. Somersaults and other gymnastic activities take place in the wheel plane, as do bicycling and many other sports activities. It is also called the plane of operations.

Performers can use the selection of possible orientations to the space to create characters or diversity of pattern. Leaders can learn to "read" the preferences of clients and team members, and attune to, oppose, or balance out those people.

### Three-dimensional movement—the cube

Combinations of three dimensions, or spatial pulls, become diagonals; extremes of far reach space that crisscross the body's center from one corner of an imaginary cube to the opposite corner. Laban devised the Diagonal Scale to explore these extremes of personal space. The Diagonal



Figure 4.11 The three planes

Scale is a great way to warm up and energize the performer and the stage space, and is often used by actors, with the accompanying effort drive configurations, to practice a full range of active energies.

There are eight corners of the cube that are connected via four diagonals:

FRONT-RIGHT-HIGH to BACK-LEFT-LOW  
FRONT-LEFT-HIGH to BACK-RIGHT-LOW  
BACK-LEFT-HIGH to FRONT-RIGHT-LOW  
BACK-RIGHT-HIGH to FRONT-LEFT-LOW

When performing the diagonal scale, the above sequence is initiated entirely from one side/one arm of the body. When the other side/

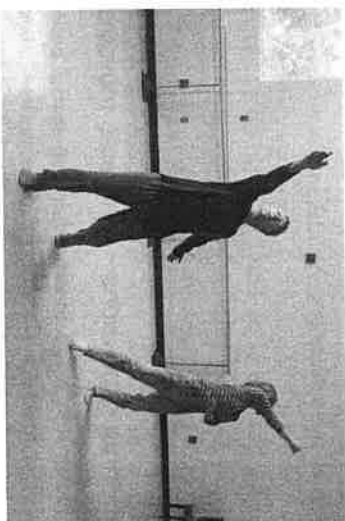


Figure 4.12 Two of the diagonals within the cube

arm of the body initiates, the sequence is the same, but the right-left directions are reversed. In this way, the mover has to adapt the torso and pelvis in crossing the midlines of the body, creating deeper and more complex involvement of the body with the space. The most difficult point or tension to head towards, when leading with the right arm, for example, is often the BACK-LEFT-HIGH corner of the cube. In order to fully experience the three-dimensionality, the pelvis remains facing forward, and the arm/shoulder/torso shapes and accommodates with the fullest possible counter-tension and deep rotation in the joints.

The more dimensions of space are being accessed, the deeper in the joints the movement needs to reach, and the more complex the body-space connection is. When any movement into space feels tense or too difficult, it is almost always possible to deepen flexion in the joints, release into more rotation in the joints, and reach further into the space. The deepening has to happen in the joints that are proximal to the body part(s) initiating into space, but also in the opposing proximal joints, in order for the counter-tension to allow the mover to reach further into space from a deeper part of the body.

The corners of the cube are best found by feeling the three dimensional pulls equally. If one dimension or another takes over, the tension and counter-tension will not be fully felt, the movement will become two-dimensional. In this way, it can lose its potency and clarity, as well as expressivity.

### *Practice*

In addition to simply practicing the diagonal scale, try telling a story about a scary event, or rehearsing a monologue that describes action after doing the diagonal scale fully on both sides. Notice the vocal changes, the gestural differences and the ability of the torso to support the meaning and the expression of the story.

### **On beyond three dimensions—transverse movement**

Transverse movement is full of ever-changing spatial pulls that move between the clear lines described above. The mover changes form and is pulled off-vertical in constant change. The following series of photographs may give a sense of how rich such movement can be:

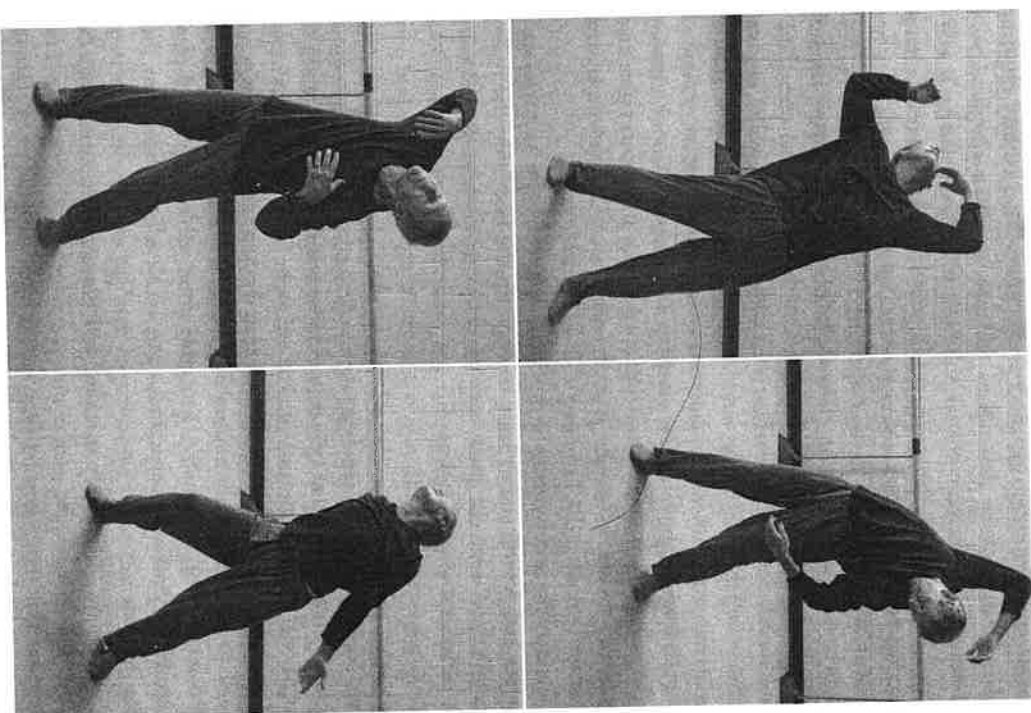


Figure 4.13 Imagine the above photos in sequence and transverse movement can be seen

Laban devised many scales in order to encourage his students to explore transverse movement, including the Axis Scale, the A-Scale and the B-Scale. Each of these scales follows movement that

transverses within the icosahedron (a sphere-like, twenty-sided crystalline form), shifting dimensions and planes with each phase. As the movement unfolds, each spatial pull both calls the mover to it and the mover is called to the next point, resulting in the ever-changing adapting described above and demonstrated in the photos.

Laban saw space as a dynamic and ever-changing canvas, not as points to hang movement on. "The essential contrasts of space directions felt by everybody are not so much the static-dimensional ones than the more mobile icosahedral-surface diagonals," he wrote (NRCD notes).

The symbols that Laban and others derived for those points in space were never meant to be static destinations for movement, but rather, a map for possibilities, energies and change. "Connections with or deviations from non-contrasting corners (of the planes) give rise to bends and twists, especially if it is compressed," he wrote of transverse movement (NRCD notes).

The bending and twisting he described are used today as warm-ups for dancers and actors, and as ways to open up the body into the realm of possibilities. We are not stuck with the access to space we have developed out of habit and preferences; we can expand and open up new vistas.

### Practice

Explore characters that emerge from one-dimensional and two-dimensional (planal) movement. For example, what kind of movement and communicative possibilities are created when the mover limits him/herself to the vertical dimension only? The horizontal? The sagittal?

What kind of personality uses the door, table and wheel planes, respectively? And what characters can be developed based on transverse movement?

Another suggestion: try speaking and moving text in one aspect of space only:

"O that this too, too solid flesh would melt" is a different statement when it is spoken from the vertical dimension than it is when it is spoken from the sagittal dimension. Try all the dimensions.

Explore well-known characters with different planes or diagonals. Examples: Blanche du Bois, Prospero, Didi and Gogo, Tartuffe, Auntie Mame, Macbeth, etc. Where does each character seem to operate from? Try improvisational scenes with characters operating from different planes. Example: two roommates trying to make breakfast separately

in a small kitchen; with one tending to be in the horizontal plane and the other in the sagittal plane.

**The Cocktail Party:** Characters enter the party in various spatial forms: dimensions, planes, diagonals, transverse or icosahedral movement. As the improvisation unfolds, who each character is can be discovered, a name and occupation derived. Vocal patterns emerge, informed by the space and effort aspects of the character.

The scales are described and notated in Cecily Dells' *A Primer for Movement Description* but it is difficult to follow these without knowing the notation symbols. Ideally, one learns the scales from a *Certified Movement Analyst*, but it is also possible to simply explore one-dimensional, two-dimensional (planes), three dimensional and transverse movement in a more general sense through activities such as sports, folk and world dance forms, and martial arts.

## THE SHAPE LEVEL

Shape is a recently identified category and, like the rest of Laban Movement Analysis, addresses the changing human form, in both shape and attitude. Shape is about the how the body changes shape in relationship to others. "Others" can be other movers, the space itself, or objects. There are three "modes" of shape change, or three different levels of relationship that human beings engage in.

### Shape-flow

Shape-flow supports the body changing its form only in relationship to itself. People in shape-flow are growing and shrinking, twisting, breathing, self-referencing and experiencing a relationship of self to self. There is no relationship to others, to space or to any external event or object. Shape-flow appears when people are daydreaming, grieving, just going through the motions, taking care of themselves or are simply self-involved.

Imagine the way an infant changes shape as he/she is picked up by the mother, or the rocking back and forth of someone in deep grieving. Notice the self-involved dancer on the dance floor or the dreamy look on a young lover's face. All of these people are likely to be changing shape in relationship only to themselves and will be unaware of people around them. This is shape-flow.

## Directional shape

Spoke-like and arc-like movement that bridges from self to the environment or an object or person is the second tier of shape. Directional movement is often that of the professional handshake, giving directions, the traffic cop, the cheerleader—anyone who is connecting self to space for expressive or utilitarian purposes.

Picture two business men talking and describing their latest deal, or punching each other in the shoulder. Notice the clear pathways, directions and intentional movement of someone doing American Sign Language. Recall the “*ta-DAH!*” throwing of the arms up in the air of a magician after finishing a trick. Directional movement can be arc-like, describing a boundary around the body, or spoke-like, penetrating the space between and bridging to an object.

## Shaping

Shaping denotes a rich interaction between self and other; a constantly changing and responsive relationship that is mutual and sophisticated. One can think of it as molding or carving through and with space or a person. Hugs are examples of shaping, as is the urban hip-hop multi-phased handshake that young men do with each other.

## Practice

Practice shape-flow through meditative practices, rocking, fitness practices or any activity that allows one to move in relationship to oneself without the necessity of attending to the outer world.

Directional movement needs little practice. Most of our formalized human interactions naturally occur using directional movement (think about the business handshake). Observe traffic cops and business lunches to clarify what directional movement looks like.

Shaping is supported by full-bodied interactions, and one of the best ways to access it (aside from lots of good hugs) is through contact improvisation. Improvisation in which the body molds and adapts to other bodies, or to the floor, objects, or simply the space can be a great way to practice shaping.

**Other Exercises:** Try shaking hands in each mode to clarify the level of interaction or relationship.



Figure 4.14 Dancers shaping around each other and with the space

Thirty-second encounters: two actors enter the space from opposite sides and encounter each other. Without speaking, they size each other up, while maintaining shape-flow, directional or shaping mode. As they interact further, they either stay in the same mode or shift modes in relationship to the other. They separate and go to the opposite side from where they began. Unpack the encounter and describe what happened between the two characters.

Open scenes: Three scenes can be prepared; one that is about two people Meeting, one about two people waiting for something to happen (Maintaining), and one about two people separating (Leaving). The Meeting scene can be done with both people in shape-flow, one in shape-flow and one using directional movement, one in shape-flow and the other in shaping, or any other combination. The same choices can be applied to the Maintaining scene and the Leaving scene. Notice how the meaning changes with different combinations and how modes of shape change can clarify relationships.

## AFFINITIES

Body, effort, shape and space are aspects of movement but they are not discrete features. How they occur together and under what circumstances

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## CONTENTS

### List of figures

### Preface

### Acknowledgments

### 1 LABAN'S CORE: BIOGRAPHY

|                                        |    |      |
|----------------------------------------|----|------|
| Developing                             | 3  | x    |
| Training and studying                  | 5  | xi   |
| Exploring Munich and Paris             | 6  | xii  |
| Evolving philosophy/choreosophy        | 8  | xiii |
| Communing in Ascona                    | 9  |      |
| Learning from the world                | 13 |      |
| Post-war recovering                    | 14 |      |
| Publishing and theorizing in Stuttgart | 14 |      |
| Laban as performance-practitioner      | 16 |      |
| The end of performing                  | 21 |      |
| The approaching nightmare              | 24 |      |
| Advancing mastery                      | 25 |      |
| Growing dance theory                   | 26 |      |
| Tossing and turning                    | 28 |      |
| Waking up                              | 31 |      |
| Re-energizing at Dartington            | 33 |      |