

# STUDYING THE STROKE

## A Secret Weapon for Singers and Actors

After generations of neglect, the return to the stage, concert hall and opera house of the Art of Gesture may yet be acclaimed as the most significant development in theatre over the past half-century. Perhaps surprisingly for some, gesture's current energetic international revival has been initiated by a handful of Australian researchers, teachers and practitioners.

The Art of Gesture was first discerned from nature by the ancient Greeks, and formalized by Roman scribes and orators. Cicero and Quintilian were foremost among the early writers who recorded the rules of the art for posterity. Additionally, there were the Greek and Roman sculptors who, in their quest for beauty, inadvertently immortalised gesture in stone.

The purpose of gesture is to empower chosen words so that an audience can more clearly comprehend the scenes and passions these words are meant to convey.

At the heart of gesture is the “stroke” – the precise ending of movement on the accented syllable of a word chosen for gesture. The late Dene Barnett, the founder of the modern-day gesture movement, often spoke of the need for “Ciceronian precision” when executing a stroke. This, he maintained, was the “very essence of the art”. Any meaningless waving of arms or hands is tiresome for onlookers and destroys the timing that makes gesture such an empowering weapon for performers.

Gesture comes in infinite variety – large gestures for dramatic moments, smaller for the intimate ones; gestures at various levels and in various directions. Gesture can involve one hand or both in prone, supine or vertical positions. The whole body is involved – placement of feet, the curve of the body, positioning of arms, hands and fingers, a turn of the head or eyes are all part of gesture, as is a moment of stillness.

Such are the techniques of gesture. But what has to be clearly understood is that gesture is the outward expression of what is in the mind, the heart and the soul of the artist. Gesture enables the audience to join in the experiences of the performer.

In all of this, the use of facial expressions to show passions, such as grief, anger, joy or fear, demands vigorous study and constant practice. Classical paintings depicting such passions are a major source of inspiration for singers and actors alike.

Some songs or spoken pieces may demand very little gesture and, certainly, too much gesture can detract from, rather than enhance, the impact of words. Despite the necessary rules of gesture there is plenty of room for an “artistic-intuitive” approach in putting those rules into effect.

Prior to his death in 1997, Dene Barnett taught philosophy at Flinders University south of Adelaide. In the course of his prolific readings he encountered gesture in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian. Renaissance scholars were following a similar path when they stumbled upon this treasury from the past. Thanks to their efforts gesture entered its second golden age – this time in the courts, religious houses, educational institutions and theatres of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe.

A steady stream of books on the subject was written well into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These included Gilbert Austin's “Chironomia”, published in England in 1806, in which he presented a method of notating gesture. Of importance, too, was the 1827 Amsterdam publication “Gesticulatie en Mimiek” by J. Jelgerhuis with its many expert drawings of gesture and depictions of passions.

Such publications and many contemporary letters show that the art of gesture was understood, appreciated and demanded in Europe throughout this period. Without appropriate gesture, an actor would be publicly derided, a priest would lose his congregation and a courtier would be banished to the lower ranks.

Among surviving anecdotes is the story of Elizabeth I's request for a copy of a sermon that had pleased her in chapel. On reading it she exclaimed: "That's the best sermon I ever saw, but the worst I ever read"!

From the 1850's the study, teaching and use of gesture declined until, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was caught up in a misty area of the subject known as elocution, with some flow-on to silent films. It had disappeared by the time Dene Barnett, like the Renaissance scholars, re-discovered it in the writings of the ancients.

His research over some twenty years, mainly in Europe and sometimes behind the then Iron Curtain, eventually gave rise to his magnum opus: "The Art of Gesture – the Principles and Practices of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Acting", which was published in Germany in 1987. This monumental work is, in effect, an overview of the art which will underpin its future international development.

But even if the book is something of a foundation stone for the new gesture movement, reading it does not – in itself – produce a skilled practitioner. Much more than reading is required because today's gesture student is not supported by a society in which the art is in daily use as it was, for example, in the upper classes of Roman and Renaissance times. Only constant study, mastery of the rules and notation of gesture, and daily practice in front of a mirror will produce long-term results. Working in a team with other practitioners is also an invaluable aid.

In Melbourne the task of reviving the all-but-lost art is well underway. A core of fluent gesture performers has been established during ten years of private teaching by Helga Hill at the University of Melbourne's Early Music Studio. .

In July 2006, three fully-gestured presentations by the University of Eccles' *Judgment of Paris (1701)* marked a high point for the art in Melbourne. The intimate link between music, word and gesture was noted by many.

Following an intensive workshop given by Helga Hill at Sydney Conservatorium in 2007, gestured performances of Alessandro Scarlatti's *Fede, Idolatria e Furore* and *Il ratto di Proserpina* were presented in Verbrugghen Hall in October, 2008.

In July 2011, with its highly successful production of John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (1683), St Michael's Grammar School in Melbourne gave Australia its fifth gestured early opera. This was followed in 2012 by the innovative *Arianna Gesture Project* at the University of South Australia. The professional filming of a gestured performance of Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* was one notable outcome.

The Early Arts Guild contributes to this work through its gesture library, the planning of classes and performances and by fund-raising for research. Dene Barnett's brother, Gordon, and his wife Jean, also provided valuable support.

The study of gesture is as demanding as it is rewarding. Once the spirit of the art is understood, and its nuances mastered, actors and singers have a powerful tool to, almost surreptitiously, involve audiences. A new, not-so-secret, weapon is at hand.

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