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TEACHING THEATRE

Junior Theater Festival West

Lead with the body
Practical theatrical biomechanics in middle school education

The show must go on
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Diary of a playwright
A day in the life of Thespian alum and Pulitzer winner Doug Wright

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Lead with the body

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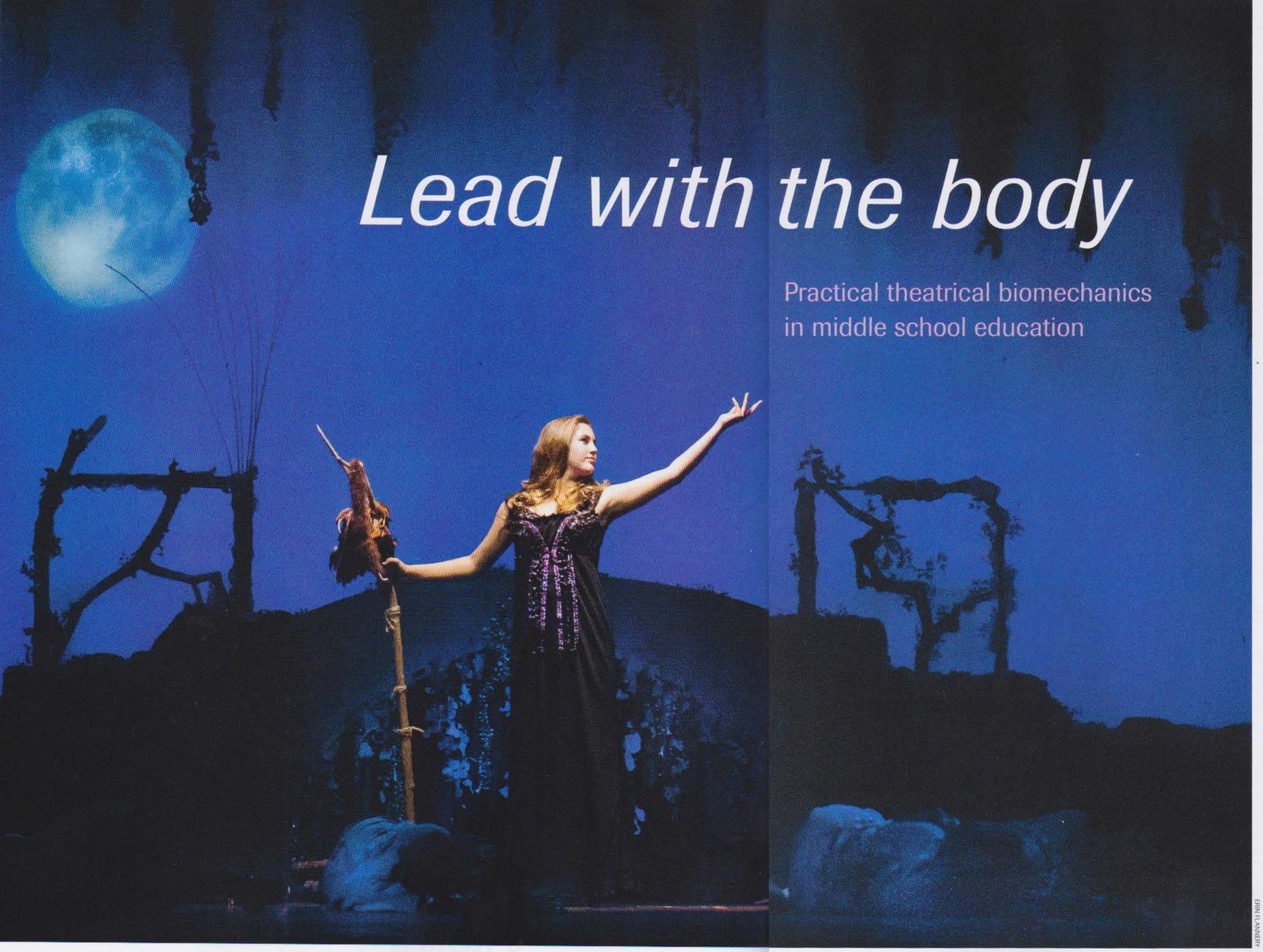


ERIN FLANNERY

John Adams Middle School (Santa Monica, Calif.) student Emery Komlos performs in *Into the Woods* under the direction of Chad Scheppner's after-school enrichment program Theatre 31.

BY JASON ROHRER

FOR THEATRE EDUCATOR Chad Scheppner, time is always limited. Through the Los Angeles-based Theatre 31, Scheppner runs after-school drama programs in nearby public schools that lack arts curricula. For instance, at Santa Monica's John Adams Middle School, he is granted only four hours a week most of the year to teach 80 students and to direct four musicals. Every moment must be teachable.

So, why would he spend precious class time playing theatre games rooted in theatrical biomechanics, a largely forgotten discipline that flourished briefly in 20th century Moscow? "Exercises based on physical principles are of the utmost importance for young actors," Scheppner says, "even if we don't do specific Meyerhold exercises like 'Shooting the Bow.'"

Between 1898 and 1902, Vsevolod Meyerhold worked under the not-yet-legendary Konstantin Stanislavski. They shared a passion for staging authentic emotion rather than mere imitated feelings. Meyerhold became dissatisfied with Stanislavski's focus

John Adams Middle School students rehearse *Anything Goes* with Chad Scheppner.

ERIN FLANNERY

on psychology and memory to prepare actors. He argued that the best acting comes "not from emotional experience, not from within, but from without, from movement." Slowly, and eventually in collaboration with Stanislavski, Meyerhold developed his own method.

Even if you've never heard of Meyerhold or his acting technique, you may already be using biomechanical concepts in your teaching work. And if you're not, you might want to. His use of the term biomechanics might be rendered down to "actor as athlete." As he said in 1922, "Any movement — the tilt of the head, the turn of the body, the smallest gesture, even the fluttering of eyelashes — should ideally involve the whole body of the performer, who possesses musical rhythm and quick, reflexive excitability."

Meyerhold choreographed kinesthetic sequences based on the premise that "all psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes" and that, consequently, "from a sequence of physical positions and situations, there arise those points of excitation which are informed with some particular emotion." His movement compositions ("The Slap," "Shooting the Bow") guide human bodies through what he hoped would become a universal vocabulary of movement: the sending, the refusal, the brake, the point in space, the pause.

Thoroughly executed biomechanics routines are impressive to see. Not intended for performance but rather for training, they look like animated classical sculpture, a mix of athletic and oratory poses, yoga, and dance. They use archetypal forms that can be recognized everywhere from da Vinci's anatomy sketches to modern bodybuilding competitions. These originated within the intensely rigorous curriculum at the State Meyerhold Theatre, which taught ballet, mime, and gymnastics to condition actors for biomechanics.

Only a few students still practice such theatrical biomechanics or memorize its arcane vocabulary. And given his limited resources, you

might expect Scheppner to be too busy putting up a show, any show, to bother with physical theatre. But you don't have to sweat through your clothes or assign huge reading lists to find Meyerhold's work useful in class. Scheppner's intent is to get the kids away from their script and into their bodies. "How do you get actors to physicalize an impulse? Otherwise they might as well be holding a script!"

Scheppner's warm-ups include kinesthetic-awareness activities directly analogous to biomechanics. Substance work — moving while pretending the body is full of a given substance like Jell-O or stone — teaches students to pay attention to space, physical intention, and each other. In a variation on this game, students can "hand off" their substance and adopt someone else's. "However we might feel at the beginning of class, all that movement makes us less jittery," reports Isabel Lindley, an eighth-grader at John Adams. "It helps give you a feeling of calm, and the class feels like a togetherness."

Into these games, Scheppner integrates work based on Viola Spolin's improvisation techniques. For example, he'll assign a classic exercise on notions of conflict and objective, in which students are limited to "yes" or "no" responses, but will "biomechanize" things by taking away their words and asking them "to listen physically and to physicalize their answers." He might use an example like going to the store with your mother and being told that, no, you can't buy something you want. "What does that look like?" Scheppner asks. "That way, they're building a vocabulary of physical action to achieve objectives."

Meyerhold would likely approve. Acton Academy Venice Beach eighth grader Ruby Lapeyre certainly does. Lapeyre, who took her first Scheppner class as a first grader at Coeur d'Alene Avenue Elementary, has worked with him on more than 20 workshop productions. Lapeyre continued studying with Scheppner

Meyerhold, Stanislavski, and Stalin

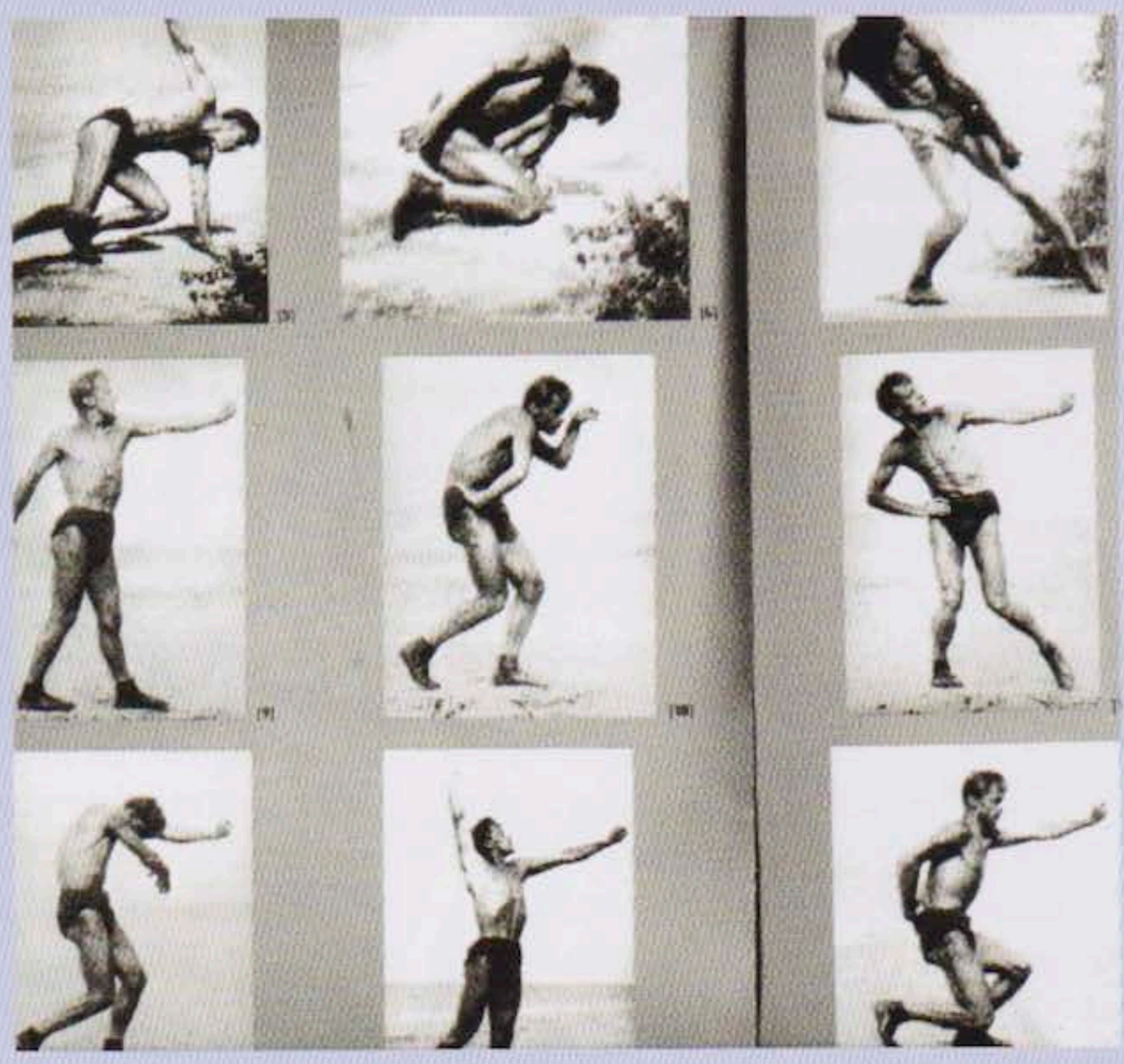
AS A YOUNG actor with Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold appeared in about 20 of the master's productions. Meyerhold left MAT in 1902, fascinated by the physical traditions of kabuki, dance, commedia dell'arte, and clowning. He saw the body as the essential theatrical instrument, the best way to convey theme, mood, story, character — even setting. His ideas were so interesting that Stanislavski invited him back to continue his experiments at MAT and, later, the State Opera Theatre.

Meyerhold taught that an emotion could be triggered by its physical attributes. How easy is it to be happy when you're laughing? How hard is it to laugh when you're doubled up, as if in pain? In Meyerhold's view, what he called the "laws of reflexes" dictate most of our actions.

As a director, Meyerhold needed casts full of muscle to power his highly theatrical formalist productions. Beyond analyzing the biological connection between movement and idea, he simply found Stanislavski's actors to be sloppy. Meyerhold envisioned a standardization of the balance and dexterity with which an actor walks (or handsprings) across a room or makes gestures or handles props. His methods expanded actors' awareness of space and encouraged their full vocal expression.

Tragically, neither Meyerhold's stage style nor his training regimen survived fully intact after his 1940 imprisonment and execution. Josef Stalin systematically purged "alien" art to enforce realism as the official Soviet form, and for decades, it was illegal to teach or practice Meyerhold's work. As a result, one of the most influential movements of the early 20th century was almost erased from history.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, though, a living biomechanics tradition resurfaced, taught by a single actor, Gennadi Bogdanov, who had been trained in the 1970s by one teacher from Meyerhold's outlawed school. Bogdanov has since revived the method across Europe, founding the International Centre of Theatrical Biomechanics in Perugia, Italy, in 2004.



COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF THEATRICAL BIOMECHANICS

Meyerhold's greatest legacy may lie in his influence on Stanislavski. In the 1930s, the two collaborated on a Method of Physical Action, incorporating biomechanics and improvisational training. Before his death, the most famous acting teacher in the world declared Meyerhold his "sole heir in the theatre." As a direct result of Stanislavski's late emphasis on the actor's body, serious conservatory programs followed MAT's lead. Today, movement training is a standard component of an actor's education. — *JR*

in after-school classes through sixth grade and participated in summer theatre camps run by Theatre 31. She says that "when you can't use words to express yourself, your body has to show everything. You get to create when you don't depend on the words to show all your feelings."

Scheppner also likes that such exercises help students to follow their impulses rather than inhibiting or over-thinking their responses. "Especially as you get into middle school," he says, "you're being judged all the time and you're judging everything. Allowing yourself to be moved by your first thought is a huge gift at any age, but especially when you're 12."

Scheppner finds Meyerhold's exercises especially helpful for rehearsals. Early in the creative process for a given show, Scheppner likes to demonstrate one of Meyerhold's pet theories by having actors do "body leads" — letting the nose, hips, elbows, even the teeth — lead the body across the room. "By doing it and by watching each other, kids learn that leading with your nose means something specific. You appear a certain way. You feel a certain way. You behave, therefore, a certain way."

Then, Scheppner will "allow them speech with that. What comes out of your mouth when you stop and interact with someone in that state? They change their voice, their attitude about life, and all they're thinking is, 'I'm leading with my teeth.'" Lindley agrees, "You're doing the things that make the character, but you're not thinking about the character."

Next, Scheppner tells students to think of a line in the play and what part of the body the character might be leading with at that point. This approach, he says, "often results in a more organic choice than brooding about it for a long time, which we don't have the luxury to do anyway."

He also uses an improv exercise called "three pictures," which is strikingly like the movement compositions Meyerhold called études. A small group comes up with a simple story and tells it to the rest of the class visually, by arranging the characters — their own bodies — into successive frozen positions, representing three moments.

"With the first picture," Scheppner explains, "we should know what the relationships are and maybe we'll get an understanding of story. By the second picture, we should have a clearer understanding of both and of what's at stake. In the last picture, they come up with some sort of resolution."

Afterward, the other students will let the group know what it is they saw. Scheppner says, "If the audience hasn't a proper grasp on relationship, character, and conflict, I'll ask the group to try the pictures again and to go further with what their bodies are doing in order to make the story more clear."

Scheppner's intent is to get the kids away from their script and into their bodies.

This kind of movement-based feedback fosters an actor's necessary self-awareness, as opposed to self-consciousness. By using their bodies to tell stories visually, students can learn to "stop worrying about what people think of them as a passive object," Scheppner says. "They start to think in terms of how you can change your movements, your face, to make more clear what you're doing."

Dixie Lovett, a student at Santa Monica Alternative Schoolhouse, says that having other students give honest criticism helps get her out of her head and into the moment. "When you're acting, a lot of it is improv anyway," she says, adding that reacting to what's going on in the space is not something an actor can discover in words. "If you don't act with your body," she says, "you're not really acting."

Later, Scheppner builds versions of the three-picture exercise into actual scenes from the play. "Whenever I direct *Grease*," he says, "I'm reminded that middle schoolers don't know what a drive-in movie is. But they certainly have in their minds where they think the scene should be, and other questions come in like 'Can I hold his hand?' It can get awkward."

In this situation, Scheppner will have his actors create a frozen image of the moment. Suppose a boy and girl sit in a car on a date. "Her body may be facing away, because she's not happy with him, and his body language is trying to charm her or pouting. And I'll ask them, 'Okay, where's this going? Let's physicalize the next image.'" The actors now perform the scene from one image to the next, acting out the story nonverbally "to get from one place, one state, one beat, to another." In just this way, after studying Meyerhold's work, Stanislavski liked to have his casts rehearse by improvising within the given circumstances of a scene.

While a visionary like Meyerhold was aiming for absolute mastery of form and technique, a young actor may be just trying to get through a scene without blushing. Scheppner employs a biomechanical premise to outflank self-consciousness when he directs young actors to think about performance in terms of size and physical volume. He says, "Telling a shy actor to take his performance to 110 percent will make him feel cartoony and silly at first, when in actuality he's now getting to maybe 80 percent of what the production needs from him." He believes that the simple act of placing the actor's attention on his activity goes a long way toward creating a confident, persuasive performer. Lovett concurs. "When Chad tells me I'm at 50 percent," she says, "I think, 'Oh, I need to get more into what I have to do so the audience will get it.'"

Scheppner's student actors don't all give gigantic performances full of Jell-O. And his school productions are not academic exercises in form. But a middle school theatre program built on biomechanics and physical theatre can yield lively, entertaining productions full of courageous, fully engaged students. T