

# Monika Pagneux

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## Monika Pagneux



Photograph of Monika Pagneux workshop © Robert Golden.

Monika's teaching of movement has deeply and profoundly affected all those who have studied with her over her long career, and yet she is an often overlooked figure in the history of European performer training. Despite the fact that she has worked alongside established male pedagogues such as Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, and leading figures in theatre and movement such as Mary Wigman, Peter Brook and Moshe Feldenkrais, she has not been widely recognised for her work. This is in part because canons require definition and dissemination, and Monika has not published her work as her male colleagues have done; in part because her work has been largely ignored by academic publishers (with the exception of Simon Murray's chapter in Hodge (2010)), and in part because her focus has always been on her students rather than on establishing her own status. She has stated: 'I don't feel it's right to describe me as a teacher. What is important

to me is the people who are standing in front of me. It is their work, their responses, that give me my inspiration' (Pagneux in Daniels, 2000: 4).

Born in Germany in 1927, she moved to Berlin in 1947 to study modern dance with Mary Wigman. After performing with Circus Knie she studied in Paris with Étienne Decroux and later with Jacques Lecoq. She went on to teach movement at Lecoq's school for fifteen years. She has worked with Peter Brook and his international company in Paris, as well as running an international theatre school with Philippe Gaulier also for fifteen years. She has taught master classes around the world.

At the heart of her teaching is a commitment 'to help people re-find the life in their movement on stage' (Daniels, 2000: 4). To this end she does not impose style on her students and is constantly seeking to help them understand the simplest and most playful way to be themselves on stage:

The big risk for us all is to become mechanical in our movement. What we must seek out is the same quality of surprise and spontaneity that we find in our everyday lives. It is our bodies which teach us. All my work has taught me how to feel and how to listen with my body. It is such a difficult process to describe, but I know that it involves a lifetime's searching.

(Daniels, 2000: 4)

As John Wright states in his profile of her for *Total Theatre*, 'Monika is not impressed with virtuosity [...] She is looking for vulnerability and pleasure at the moment of risk and the

lightness and simplicity of movement that is fully integrated' (Wright, 1994: 11). In contrast to the practice of many other leading twentieth-century pedagogues, her practice is eclectic, drawing on a range of influences, and as Wright affirms: 'Contrary to Lecoq or Gaulier, Monika is the most thorough and the least painful in her process of removing artifice on stage and revealing personal potential' (Wright, 1994: 11). She draws on Feldenkrais because she understands that his method, 'can help actors be "sensitive and aware"' (Yen, 2015: 251). In addition, she has the ability to turn the exploration of movement into 'a game, into play, into a creative process' (ibid.). This playfulness and the emphasis on the search for natural, playful and efficient movement, means that her work is hard to define or understand without absorbing it into your own body and its movement. As a student of hers in the 1980s, I remember her as both intensely focused on the details of movement, and passionate about the need to enable the body to 'sing with pleasure'. She is part of a line of women theatre movement practitioners (including Litz Pisk and Trish Arnold) whose influence has been deep and profound and yet who are not widely recognized for their work (Evans, 2013). Her work is anti-canonical in that: a) it rejects fixed ways of doing things and the rigidity that that brings to movement and the body; b) it is the work of a mid-European woman within a pedagogic environment largely dominated by men; c) it rejects the idea that it is possible or desirable to transmit such work through writing. By focusing on the student and on the development of their embodied practice, her work resists more patriarchal models and ideas of ownership of practice as 'product'. In these respects, it raises important questions about the need to re-consider forms of historiography and scholarship to better acknowledge anti-canonical practitioners in the future.

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