

Let's Be Melodramatic!

You might have heard the term 'melodramatic' today, used to describe someone or something that is over the top and dramatic. What you might not know is that the term in fact derives from a specific form of theatre: melodrama. Melodrama was the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in Britain for over a hundred years (approximately 1800-1900)! It was performed all over the country to all kinds of people, from local families to Queen Victoria herself.



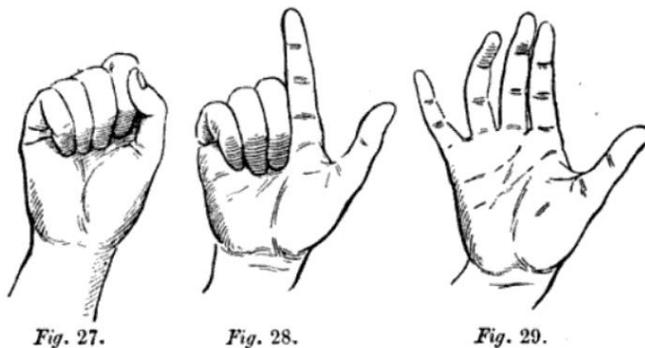
Although each melodrama was different, they were all made up of dramatic situations – a character rescued from a mine flooding in real time; a chase through the forest during a lightning storm. They made use of exciting and innovative technical effects – horses running on treadmills set into the stage; trains travelling across the stage, coming to a stop right ahead of a character tied to the tracks. This was all emphasized with appropriate music and dramatic performance style. In order to match with this dramatic style of theatre, the acting style was **BIG** and **BOLD**!

Today, we're going to look at a couple of sections from an 1895 acting manual written by Henry Neville – a popular melodramatic actor of the time – so that you can think about and practise this stylized approach to acting.

Exercise A

'What's in a Hand?' (1 of 4)

In his 1895 guide to gesture on the stage, Henry Neville – a popular actor in the period – tells us that the hands express great emotion and meaning in the theatre. Certain gestures, he argues, should be practised and learnt by the melodramatic actor.



Instructions

In the box overleaf are a list of gestures that are supposed to be performed on stage with the hands.

1. In your group, try out each gesture. Remember you're supposed to be on the stage, so make them as big and dramatic as you can!
2. Discuss what you think each one is supposed to mean and fill in your answers.
3. See the final page for Henry Neville's answers. Do you agree? How close were your answers?

Henry Neville's
Guide to Hand Gestures
on the Melodramatic Stage (1895)

THE HAND ON THE HEAD

THE HAND ON THE EYES

THE HAND ON THE LIPS

THE HAND ON THE CHEST

WAVED OR FLOURISHED

CLASPED OR WRUNG

EXTENDED

Henry Neville's
Guide to Hand Gesture
on the Melodramatic Stage (1895)
ANSWER KEY

THE HAND ON THE HEAD

Indicates pain, distress, thoughtfulness.

THE HAND ON THE EYES

Shame and sorrow.

THE HAND ON THE LIPS

Command, silence.

THE HAND ON THE CHEST

Appeal to conscience.

WAVED OR FLOURISHED

Joy or contempt.

CLASPED OR WRUNG

Trouble, despair.

EXTENDED

For friendship, appeal, to receive.

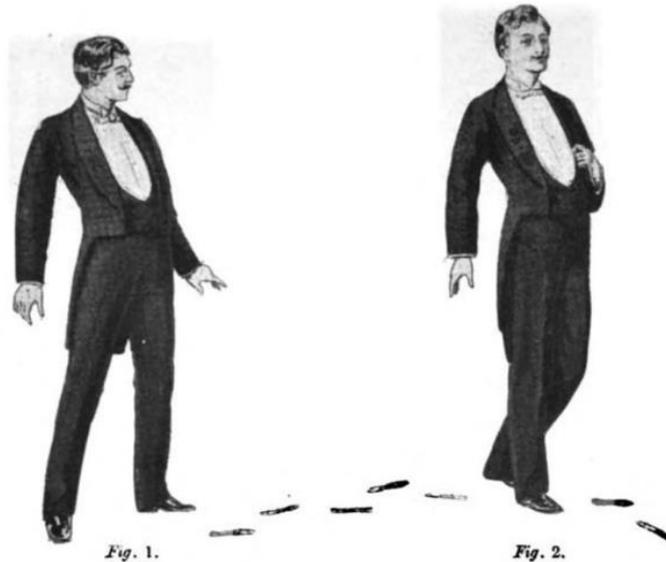
Discussion Questions

- ❖ Why do actors need such big and bold gestures if they are also talking?
CONSIDER the type and size of theatre (in a big theatre, can everyone always hear and see everything?). CONSIDER ALSO the ways your body conveys meaning that might be different from language.
- ❖ Do you think these gestures mean the same today as they did in 1895? Is it even possible for gestures to be universal (understood by everyone in the same way)?
CONSIDER the ways in which our culture and experience shape how we understand the world.
- ❖ Who are these movements written for? Do they presume a certain kind of actor with a certain type of body? Does this exclude some people?

Exercise B

'Walk with Me' (1 of 4)

In his 1895 guide to gesture on the stage, Henry Neville provided an extraordinarily detailed description of the appropriate walk for a 'typical' person on the stage.



Instructions

1. Read over Henry Neville's instructions carefully (provided overleaf).
2. Underline each body part he mentions. How many are there in total?
3. Number each instruction you find. Is it more than you expected?
4. Try it out in your group! Is it difficult to follow his instructions?

Henry Neville's Guide to Walking on the Melodramatic Stage (1895)

The length and peculiarity of the stride depend on the character; for ordinary purposes a stride of about sixteen inches [40 cm] will suffice.

Incline the body in the direction in which you are going, look where you are going; the foot will involuntarily follow the head.

Start with the leg away from the audience.

The bent, or flexed leg gracefully loose and ready; walk straight, feeling the first impulse in the thigh. No rolling, bobbing, strutting, or peculiarity belonging to character.

Shoulders well down, head erect, chest forward.

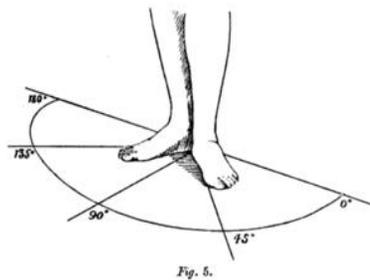
In the most elegant walk the ball of the foot should first touch the ground, but with high heels this, of course, is impossible.

The torso and head should sway in sympathy with every motion of the legs.

Contd. →

Henry Neville's Guide to Walking on the Melodramatic Stage (1895) *contd.*

[Before you begin] turn out your toes to an angle of, say, seventy-five degrees (the second position in dancing), with the heels about five inches apart [12 cm] (Fig. 5).



Start from the right with the left foot; from the left with the right foot. Otherwise the legs seem to cross each other in a very awkward, ungraceful manner.

Practise walking from right to left. Turn gently and change the position of the feet with the utmost simplicity, free from parade or dancing fancies.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Why do you think Henry Neville gives such specific directions for the simple act of walking? Is walking on stage different from walking on the street?
NOTE the comparison made with a dancing position. Is walking on stage more like dancing than walking on the street?
- ❖ Do rules about what to do with your body help you to show what you mean or do they limit what you can say?
- ❖ Who are these movements written for? Do they presume a certain kind of actor with a certain type of body? Does this exclude some people?

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This worksheet was prepared by Dr Isabel Stowell-Kaplan, Marie Curie Research Fellow in the Department of Theatre at the University of Bristol. The research for her current project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 843672.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101036029.