

SUZUKI'S WAY

*A Japanese director
teaches actors to work
from the ground up*

BY FRED SOKOL

TADASHI SUZUKI thinks actors ought to have a second language, a means of expression he calls "the grammar of the feet." Through an intense discipline of actor training that he has developed over the course of thirty years of work in his native Japan, Suzuki seeks to help actors learn to speak with their entire bodies, whether they are engaged in rigorous movement or standing in absolute stillness.

"The goal," Suzuki wrote of his training regimen in *The Way of Acting*, a collection of essays published in the United States in 1986, "is to ensure and enrich the histrionic unification of the whole bodily expression along with the speech; both of these elements are constructed on the basis of the feet.... In the fullest sense, [the actor] will have his feet on the ground. The value of my training can be said to begin and end with the feet."

Suzuki has been recognized as an important figure in the theatre world for years, and there are directors and actors in

At right: Kelly Maurer as Hamlet in Eric Hill's Suzuki-influenced StageWest production.

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Near right: Tadashi Suzuki directing a training exercise.

Far right: Eric Hill, artistic director at StageWest, in a Suzuki exercise stance.



this country who have been studying his method for a long time. Their numbers are growing, and the establishment of a training and performance center in Saratoga, New York last year insures that Suzuki's name will become increasingly familiar to American acting students.

The Japanese director feels that many Western actors perform from the neck up, ignoring or forgetting that the center of the

From the waist down, the actor may bow the legs, shuffle or slide his feet, become pigeon-toed, walk sideways, or slide and glide as if ice skating. Conventionally trained Western actors often stay back on their heels, a rigid and unimaginative gait.

Thus Suzuki's exercises are designed to reacquaint the actor with the pelvic region and the lower half of the body. Suzuki training features a series of stomps, squats, and motions that heighten the actor's consciousness of the ground beneath him. Suzuki productions are often characterized by the same kinds of highly stylized movement.

The Suzuki method requires intense concentration. Some of the exercises require a hard and continuous stomp, while at the same time maintaining an awareness of the upper body. The idea is to create a balance between the upper part of the body (that which reaches toward the sky) and the lower vector (the part that connects us with the earth). In order to perform the movement correctly, one has to send energy downward while remembering to relax and lengthen the upper body. When the actor loses control, arms and legs tense or tremble.

Suzuki movement, which can be traced to traditional Japanese theatrical forms such as Noh and Kabuki, is exceptionally difficult to execute. (I speak from experience, having spent a considerable amount of time in Suzuki method classes with the actors at StageWest in Springfield, Massachusetts.) During one exercise, music begins and one circles the floor, more or less following someone else, stomping fiercely while in a semi-squat. It seems an interminable period until the music stops, at which point one is supposed to fall to the floor, attempting to be completely quiet and still. Soon, the music begins again and one rises, in what is expected to be a smooth, graceful, and deliberate motion, to assume a naturally relaxed upright posture. The idea is to contrast movements (first motion, then rest), trying to be dynamic and powerful at first, then static yet controlled.

Many of Suzuki's exercises are accomplished while the upper body is erect, yet relaxed (it helps to have someone brush a hand from the base of the spine toward the nape of the neck to get the idea) while the lower half is tensed, disciplined, and filled with power. According to Suzuki, the pelvic region is the key to execution of his movements, for it is through the center of the body, a spiritual and emotional focal point, that the desired balance may be achieved.

Often at the end of a training session, actors face one another and move, ever so deliberately, toward one another. One tries to use each portion of the sole of the foot as he walks. The movement, to a novice at least, seems painfully slow. The actor chooses a position for the arms at the outset and holds that posture; stillness within the motion is the goal. The eyes gaze forward

toward an imaginary horizon. Arms (usually in front of or across one's body) are held in position until the other side of the room is reached. Here the individual pivots and heads the other way. As the actor makes a full turn, he gracefully changes the position of his arms and holds that moment as he gradually strides back across the stage.

At the close of Suzuki productions, actors frequently take curtain calls in this fashion. Many Suzuki productions feature the vigorous stomp and sliding steps, as well. When a play closes with the very slow, transfixing curtain call, the contrast with the previous physical power of the play is extraordinary.

TADASHI SUZUKI was a student at Waseda University in Tokyo during the 1960s and founded his own company twenty-five years ago, calling it Waseda Sho-Gekijo. In 1976, he moved the theatre to Toga, a tiny mountainside hamlet in Japan's Toyama Prefecture, all the way across the country from cosmopolitan Tokyo. The theatre's name was changed to Suzuki Company of Toga, or SCOT. In 1982, Suzuki became chairman of the Japan Performing Arts Center in Toga.

Each summer Suzuki hosts the Toga International Theatre Festival, featuring his own work and that of invited artists.

Speaking from his home in Toga last summer, Suzuki said, "We are attempting work two levels at the same time. The very act of performing a play makes a statement. And by being here rather than in Tokyo, we are showing that theatre can not only survive but lift the spirits of townspeople. This village was depopulated for a time. But the theatre company has actually brought people back. Artistically, the work must sustain a very high level. Otherwise, people will not listen to you."

Americans watching a Suzuki production for the first time are sometimes unable to understand or appreciate the form; the layperson may be bewildered by it. While aware of the audience—he frequently addresses the house before performances—Suzuki does not concern himself primarily with meeting its expectations.

Reflecting upon the work of another artistic master, Suzuki says, "When Pablo Picasso first started his work, people didn't understand it. Now, it's seen as normal art is perceived as fine work. That's because he was able to make his audience. Similarly, theatre directors must carve out an audience. We don't need the current production system. I am trying to create a theatre rooted in its location, connected to this community, to become a statement for this community."

Suzuki often speaks of animal versus non-animal energy. Civilization, he observes, is based on technology, while culture, on the other hand, depends upon the energy human beings supply. "Within the context of civilization," he says, "we need some way of cultivating. I wanted to



Maurer in Hill's *Visions of an Ancient Dreamer* at StageWest.

PHOTOGRAPH: STAGEWEST

body is vital both to vocal expression and an actor's identification with a character. Too often, he says, they proceed habitually on stage, bringing in well-worn gestures instead of new, fresh physical approaches. Often they seem to ignore the obvious: that they are connected to the floor through their bodies. "A performance begins," Suzuki observes in *The Way of Acting*, "when the actor's feet touch the ground..."

create a system to address this issue directly. Those of us destined to be actors need to realize the importance of theatre in society. Sometimes, we mirror society. Theatre can point out that civilization has tended to diminish the cultural value of our lives."

Suzuki speaks historically, philosophically, when he is asked to discuss his contribution to world theatre. "If you examine either the Russian or French Revolutions, and certain points in Japanese history, when society is unstable or when things are turbulent, the expression of theatre tends to become very powerful within society. The theatre formerly helped to resolve conflict. Within the present world, that position has been weakened. There's a loss of contact with that voice and level of power. We need to recover that."

"We need to reconfirm that theatre artists, unlike painters, composers and novelists, do not work alone. You always work within a group and the nature of the work is that it is a social activity. In the United States, group theatre work has been compromised."

SUZUKI'S IDEAS have been gaining increasing currency among American directors, teachers, and actors in the past few years. His most recent creative partnership is with Anne Bogart, a highly respected American director who has long admired Suzuki's work. Together they established the Saratoga International Theatre Institute in upstate New York, which offered its first productions to the public last fall—Suzuki's *Dionysis* and Bogart's *Orestes*. During May and June the institute will offer a training program for actors at Skidmore College, with both principals in residence. Next fall they'll return for two more productions: Bogart will direct a new piece titled *Marathon Dancing*, which she's writing in collaboration with playwright Laura Harrington; Suzuki will direct *The Tale of Lear*.

Eric Hill, artistic director at StageWest, a resident professional company in Springfield, Massachusetts, is a Suzuki proponent of long standing. He has been studying under Suzuki for nine years and has created a number of Suzuki-influenced productions; members of the acting company at StageWest take daily classes in the Suzuki method. Hill performed in both of the inaugural productions at Saratoga last fall.

Three years ago, working six days a week with seven acting interns in their early twenties and with actress Kelly Maurer, who has trained with Suzuki in Japan for several summers, Hill presented a studio production of *Hamlet*, with Maurer taking the title role.

The following summer Hill directed a bilingual adaptation of the play at Suzuki's Toga Festival. The first American asked to direct Toga company members, Hill again featured Maurer as Hamlet and brought five members of the StageWest company with

him. Tadashi Suzuki designed sets, costumes, and lights.

The *Toyama News* critic wrote of the production: "Though both English and Japanese are flying at you... one does not feel the presence of a language barrier. The staging artfully portrayed the internal discord of modern human beings, and hence added a precious page to the history of countless *Hamlet* productions. As portrayed by American actress Kelly Maurer, Hamlet's laughter of madness in the final scene is still lingering in my ear."

Hill has drawn on the classical repertory for his Suzuki-influenced productions, setting the characteristic stylized movement to modern music in reinterpretations of

Shakespeare and Euripides. His *Hamlet*, for example, included Roy Orbison's "Mystery Girl" and songs by Enya and David Byrne. His *Visions of an Ancient Dreamer*, which adapted three plays by Euripides, featured the Eurythmics, Talking Heads, and the Nylons, among others, with actors executing movements they had practiced for hundreds of hours in the StageWest rehearsal hall.

Last spring, Hill staged a Suzuki-influenced production of *The Trojan Women*, with Maurer, Susan Hightower (who also played Ophelia in his *Hamlet*), and his interns acting in the studio produc-

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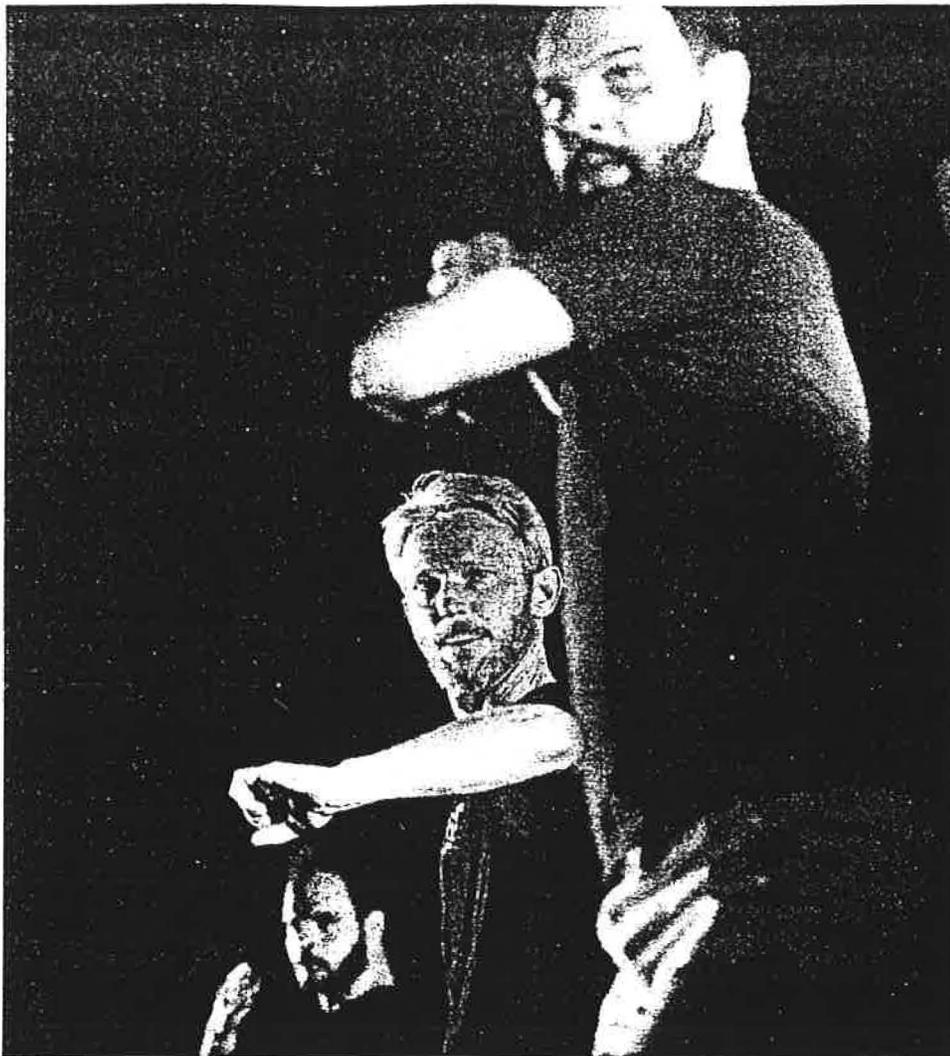
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Actors in a Suzuki method training session at StageWest.

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tion. This spring, a new intern company will perform *What You Will*, an adaptation of *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night*.

Hill emphasizes that Tadashi Suzuki's training is not an end in itself; it is a way of giving actors access to the kind of performance that he wants. He explains: "You need to find a way to translate the play work that you've selected into the training—not the other way around. The training wasn't devised first only to have plays evolve out of Suzuki's method. He, at first, had a series of plays in mind. As he began to develop them, he realized that the requirements for realizing his vision were actors who were capable of leaping to very extreme situations in the body to coincide with a high psychological intensity. Then he developed the exercises to get actors to that point.

"Training, purely for the sake of the training, can lead to merely imitating the training in the plays. That's not what I'm after. This can be a misguided notion. You want actors who are available to whatever permutation you wish to make with a text. The training does allow actors to attain a certain level of concentration and physical

performance. You must invent, however, in the context of the play itself. The training is an arena where focus and concentration, through the voice and body, on the moment may be attained.

"It serves as a litmus test for the actor to determine whether he is capable. You partake in the training not to master it but to find out about yourself. It helps you to pinpoint, perhaps, a lack of control or ability to do something in time and space. It's a gauge to ascertain readiness and availability to the moment, dramatically speaking."

ANY ACTOR may be able to grasp the fundamental concepts of Suzuki's "grammar of the feet." What happens, however, when one cannot execute these very difficult movements, when one's body isn't physically flexible enough to stomp hard or to dart into the statue-like positions which are another of Suzuki's disciplines? Will older actors become Suzuki dropouts?

Suzuki replies that he is "dealing with the human being in all of its manifestations. Hence, an individual should be able to act for his entire life. The forms in my method are not so important as the actor discover-

ing his own limitations as he addresses the forms—where there are problems. Actors of different ages will get different answers. It becomes the job of the actor to try to overcome barriers as he ages."

He goes on: "There's a fundamental difference in my method as opposed to, say, classical ballet. In ballet, there's the execution of the form. But, here, the training is more like a blood test which shows you your situation and provides an evaluative check list."

While working with his own company and a large contingent of American actors last summer, Suzuki commented upon his experiences as a director with an international cast: "You have different positive and negative qualities of the Japanese actor and the American actor. The contrast is helpful to me, as a director."

But actors who have been trained in a different system sometimes find it hard to change their thinking. "Some actors," says Suzuki, "are actually too relaxed. They're not accustomed to training for long periods of time."

While the training might have been originally devised with adult actors in mind, Suzuki feels that it has value for younger students, too. "If we look at this as a way of looking at the human body, it would seem to follow that the earlier one's exposure to it the better. The motions, themselves, are not necessarily limited to theatrical work. It's a global idea and form. We're working for spiritual and psychological control even more than gymnastic ability."

With this in mind, Eric Hill cast then-eleven-year-old Magin Schantz in *Visions of an Ancient Dreamer*. Graceful and poised on stage and off, she says the training helped her focus and concentrate on what she was doing, and enabled her to remain motionless on stage for long periods of time. "It gets my mind set on how to do things," she says. "It's not that hard for me to do because I like to do it. It's not something I have to do but it's in my schedule so I'm there. It gets easier for me the more I'm out there practicing. I think that teenagers can definitely do Suzuki training if they really want to."

Actress Ellen Lauren toured last year with Suzuki when she played *Lady Macbeth* in his production. Married to Eric Hill, she has trained in Japan, performed in Hill's *Hamlet* and *Visions of an Ancient Dreamer*, and practiced Suzuki training for nearly a decade. She says, "I've seen it work beautifully for young children. They get their funny bodies—growing so rapidly—and coordination in line and they have an ease since they don't have a lot of learned habits already that we have. Or, if they have them, they are able to let go of them."

Kelly Maurer says, "Adolescents can do this work if they realize the commitment the work entails. The myth in this country is that to be an actor means to sit on your behind, open up a script, think really hard about a character; try to make some mental or personal emotional connection with the

person on the paper, and then try to stand up and do it. I don't think that many young people understand that besides all of this there is a huge physical commitment. Suzuki is only one method out of a zillion but it is a way of life, not just going to work. The intensity of this method would be valuable in and of itself."

For Maurer, "The daily discipline is most important—like the pianist's scales or the ballet dancer's barre. When I work, I have to find the body of any character I play. I need to find his or her connection to the ground. By working so vigorously physically, you have to tap into your own will, your own importance. Then it becomes more spiritual. Suzuki's son once said to me, 'You do all these movements and you work so hard physically so that you have the ability not to move at all.'"

Actor Will Bond, another member of the StageWest company, has trained in Japan during recent summers. He and Kelly Maurer, to whom he is married, have recently given Suzuki workshops at Springfield-area high schools, during which they demonstrate the technique and then ask student actors to give it a try on stage.

Bond says, "The training helps me, even within naturalistic or realistic plays, to

control time—to turn on somebody or get across the room. And whenever I've played a character, this goes back to pre-Suzuki days, I've looked at his feet first and tried to wear his shoes immediately."

IT IS JUST a coincidence, the people at the Saratoga International Theatre Institute say, that the name of their town can be said to mean "Fresh Toga" in Japanese. Still, it is Suzuki's hope that the Saratoga project will, like his theatre at Toga, bring together artists who find the world a lonely, sometimes alienating place. "Many of us, in different ways, are seeking similar things. We want to reaffirm the bonds amongst us all. A context is necessary. With the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, the world is smaller, more localized. Artists need to talk and learn from one another. If we can create a place within the United States where people from outside of the country can gather, this has to be a plus.

"Toga may become a place to create the work and Saratoga a place to present it."

Suzuki hopes to build extensive dormi-

tory facilities and another theatre in the Toga village. Then, the Japanese complex will become a base of support for the Saratoga project. "I want to make this place a sanctuary for people who love theatre; such locales are becoming so rare in this world."

Fred Sokol is a theatre critic and a professor of communications at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut.

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