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The Greek Chorus in Context:
Building the Greek Chorus for a Modern Audience Through Ensemble Cohesiveness
and Physical Imagery

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The Choral Ode Project is a series of explorations that build an ensemble through a process of collective movement creation, led by a teacher/director, which weaves the community values of ancient Greek theater with physical processes of contemporary movement masters. The process centers on collaboratively creating choreography, and staging Greek choral odes specifically. The primary goal is directly applying particular movement and vocal techniques in order to unify the cohesiveness of the chorus ensemble, to reach the essence of the text of the odes, and to fully communicate it in a dynamic way to modern audiences. This work came out of choreography created by Caroline Good for a production of *The Bacchae* at Wabash College in 2009.¹ Since then, the “Chorale Ode Project” has been developed for voice

¹*The Bacchae*, directed by James Cherry at the National Theatre of Scotland, from David Grieg’s *Euripides’ The Bacchae*, London: Faber and Faber, 2007. (In addition to reading and studying the play, the students learned the deeper sense of the chorus’ role from an experiential perspective. Since what we know about the performance of the Greek chorus is limited, examining the odes from a physical intelligence perspective gives us another research tool into the possibilities of the meanings that can be created in the play. None of the other traditional means of studying the play were disregarded. Historical, literary, and cultural analyses are still necessary to be able to come to grips with the reality of

and movement classes, professional workshops, acting classes, and has been incorporated into a Greek unit of a theatre history survey course. The work can also be utilized by directors and choreographers to engage the actors playing the chorus members into a unified ensemble and to allow for instances of collaborative creation. Inspiration and guiding elements of this work have been drawn from the work of Jacques Lecoq, Arthur Lessac, and The Living Theatre. Lecoq, the French physical theatre specialist who gives us some of the most extensive research into Greek choral movement, discusses the Greek chorus as a “collective body,” a “unified persona.”² Drawing from Lessac’s work in *Body Energies*, we can create that sense of unification in energy quality and tempo with a common physical vocabulary. Although the chorus members may be unified intellectually and psychologically, utilizing a common physical energy quality and tempo will allow for that to manifest more clearly. Finally, the ritualistic circles of the Living Theatre’s Bacchus dance help create the unity and community of the choral movement.

The Choral Ode Project: Exploring & Collaboratively Creating Choreography for Choral Odes from *The Bacchae* in the Classroom

Here we offer a summary of the steps in the process of developing a Choral Ode Project for rehearsal, performance, or classroom:

a Greek chorus. This physical approach is designed to weave with other research methodologies to reveal a deeper understanding of the meanings created by the chorus of an ancient Greek play in performance.

² David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 110-112.

- Learning (or Re-Learning) the Body NRGs³: Students are introduced through the use of familiar events to the Lessac Body NRGs in order to apply them in various ways throughout the process.
- Developing Expressiveness: Since the choral odes demand a heightened style of expressiveness, students are guided through Physical Representation exercises to explore a range of expressiveness, develop a more flexible and responsive physicality, and to more deeply engage the essence of the text.
- Building the Ensemble: Students are guided through a series exercises in mirror play, beginning with a partner and then engaging in larger chorus groups, employing the body NRGs, atom-to-atom movement, and utilizing a heightened sense of awareness to the ensemble.
- Mining the Ode's Text: Using choral ode text from *The Bacchae*, participants (groups of 4-7) begin their collaboration by defining the mood of their chosen particular choral ode, discussing the inherent themes of the text, the atmosphere that the text is evoking, and apply to those elements the appropriate Body NRG choices.
- Body NRG: Explore physically the prevailing body NRG of the selected ode text and begin exploring movement, gesture, and the qualities of the movement stimulated by the Body NRG. Is the body NRG stimulating movement that is light, slow, and legato (Buoyancy), or staccato, slow, and condensed (Potency), or vibratory, fast, abrupt, and staccato (Radiancy)?

³ NRG = Neurological Regenerative Growth, the acronym Arthur Lessac uses in his *Use and Training of the Human Voice: A Bio-Dynamic Approach to Vocal Life*, New York: McGraw-Hill/Mayfield, 1996, and *Body Wisdom*, San Bernardino: Lessac Institute Publishing Company, 1981, to describe "energy" as "pure, harmonic, intrinsic, vitalistic motion as opposed to movement" (*Use and Training* 273).

- Formations: Collaborate in choosing formations (expanded/contracted shapes, patterns, space, and levels), isolated individual gestures and postures, and ensemble physical representations executed in unison or in other structural patterns that best support the text.
- Physical Representation: Choose which movements best represent and punctuate key words or phrases. Are these abrupt and quick movements, or continuous movement that serves as an undercurrent to the text? Which individual movements could be executed simultaneously?
- Vocal Dynamics & Variations: Allow the body NRGs and the movement to inform the vocal dynamics and variations in executing the text. Are there percussive consonant opportunities, or tonal vowel opportunities that best support the text? How can employing unison, call/response, echoing, repetition, chant, or using sound to punctuate or emphasize certain words or phrases be incorporated? Allow these vocal variations to revise the movement.
- Share the versions of the interpreted choral odes with the larger group.

The choral ode project can be implemented over several class periods or condensed to one 90-minute class session with a leaner ode text. For introductory classes, we do encourage working with a lean text, such as David Grieg's 2007 translation of *The Bacchae*. In rehearsal and in the classroom, this process of collaborative exploration can be invaluable not only to a student's understanding of the construct and perspective of the Greek chorus, but also to the potentiality in performance that lies within the ode's text.

Lessac's Body Energies (NRGs)

In communicating the chorus' collectiveness and the various moods of the choral odes, Arthur Lessac's Body NRGs of Potency, Buoyancy, and Radiancy are employed extensively throughout the process. These very distinct physical influences shade the movement, adding a textural layer of tempo and intensity which manifests into communicating very specific atmospheres, moods, and emotional nuance. The NRGs provide an immediately accessible language for a director or choreographer to communicate more specific physicality to the ensemble as well.

We introduce the Lessac Body NRGs through physical discovery of "body pain relievers" and "relaxer energizers."⁵ Imagine touching a hot stove with the tip of one finger, then pull back and shake the fingers back and forth to relieve the pain. Just to be sure, "touch" that stove with your other hand, and shake the pain out through the ends of the fingers. Shaking is a body pain reliever, which frees up the muscles and the joints, and disperses pain. Next, imagine that you have been traveling in a car for six hours without stopping, and when you finally get out, your muscles yawn this way and that to relieve the stiffness. Experience this as a muscle yawn rather than a stretch: a muscle yawn releases beyond the ends of any part of your body. Finally, drink in a lovely aroma, such as the Cinnabon store at the mall, and let the intake of the pleasant aroma release your muscles on the exhale. If you can take in a pleasing, refreshing breath, on the exhale your muscle floating will act as a body pain reliever, releasing shoulder muscles and melting away tension.

⁵ Introduction to Lessac body NRGs based on the Kinesensics syllabus created by Nancy Krebs, Lessac Master Teacher.

We move from experiencing body pain relievers into engaging the physicality of relaxer energizers. Relaxer energizers simultaneously relax and energize the body with awareness. Go back to some gentle shaking, starting with little ones, then larger ones, all over with different parts of the body. Shaking will release muscles, free joints and ligaments, and promote a feeling of well-being. The Body NRG we associate with shaking is Radiancy. Next, re-experience the sensation of muscle yawning. Begin to yawn muscles by releasing power in different directions. Move as if you are a cat waking up, and add in the words, "Oh it feels so good to get up in the morning!" The Body NRG we associate with muscle yawning is Potency. Finally, find a new way to fully breathe in a pleasant aroma, perhaps smelling a sweet flower. Cup your hands around the source of your aroma and drink it in with pleasure. On the exhale, allow a sigh to come out, and feel the release, the floating away of tension. The Body NRG we associate with this floating sensation of Buoyancy.

We do Body Pain Relievers and Relaxer Energizers consciously and with awareness. Restful energy and energetic rest: we must learn to be habitually aware of the body's natural functioning. Any body activity that will free muscles, relieve tension, maintain body awareness, support personal pleasure and salutary feeling, and sustain body inquisitiveness and vitality can be considered a relaxer-energizer. The relaxer-energizers do not have to be learned; we all do them. As adults, we do not consciously indulge in natural relaxer-energizers often enough to relieve tension. They all feel good because they induce an NRG of looseness where previously there was tension. They all represent *natural* relaxation in action.

Now we will begin to engage the Body NRGs directly and with intention. Start to move in Potency NRG. Allow muscle yawns in different directions, and feel the power of reaching, the extension of muscles releasing. The feeling should be strong, expansive, and powerful; yawn is stronger than brawn. Continue to muscle yawn in different directions, then turn off the Potency, but keep moving. This brings us into Buoyancy NRG. The movement should be weightless, airy, a floating sensation fueled by the Buoyancy NRG. Experiment with rising, settling-down, and floating Buoyancy. Continue moving in Buoyancy, notice air molecules bubbling around you, supporting you, sculpting you. This new, sparking sensation is the infusion of Radiancy NRG. The movement should be a bubbling, flitting, fire-fly like activity, like a dance. Allow the Radiancy to relax, and begin a neutral walk. Then, from your center core out, begin to feel what it is like to walk in Potency. Feel the expansiveness and power of muscle yawning. Notice and interact with your fellow actors. What kind of character begins to emerge? Release the Potency into a neutral walk. Then, infuse your physicality with Buoyancy, and feel what it is like to walk in Buoyancy. You are weightless, filled with air. How does your walk change? Allow a new character to take over. Release the Buoyancy into a neutral walk. Finally, find a walk in Radiancy. Feel the shaking energy, the electrical, spark-like movement. You can use trembling from the cold, shake with anticipation like a kid on Christmas morning, or flirt. How is this character different from previous body NRGs? Release Buoyancy into a neutral walk. Now we are ready to put some of these Lessac body NRGs to work in the Greek choral odes.

Incorporating the Lessac Body NRGs into the Choral Odes

We begin the process of utilizing the body NRGs in choreographing the odes by examining each of the odes and scenes for their inherent moods, look for moments when those moods seem to shift, and explore which body NRGs are most applicable to those moods. For instance, in *The Bacchae*, the first ode exudes a celebratory welcoming atmosphere, while the later odes contain the menacing blood-lust of the Bacchic women.

The Body NRGs also provide a common physical vocabulary for the chorus and are valuable in unifying the energy of the chorus members. When informed by the prevailing mood of the ode, in addition to the familiar physical awareness of the “assigned” body NRG, the chorus members are able to immediately feel a sense of unity.

Potency is a highly concentrated, strengthening body NRG that is fueled by the muscle-reaching yawn. Its tempo is normally slow and controlled with a tai-chi-like quality that spreads, reaching beyond the body, fingertips, toes. Reaching Potency and writhing Potency are the two dialects within the body NRG. Reaching extends beyond the body, spreading and opening the body posture, whereas writhing Potency is a reaching that is directed toward the inner center of the body, closing the posture. This latter dialect is most applicable to grieving, mourning, or recoiling. Potency greatly informs the choral odes in which the Bacchae are exuding their bloodlust toward the killing of Pentheus in Ode 4, when they are pleading and calling for Dionysus in the end of Ode 3, and when they are enticing Agave in telling of her victory over the “lion” during the last scene.

Buoyancy NRG also adds to a shared physical vocabulary. Buoyancy is a light, floating, anti-gravitational body NRG, is oxygen fueled and breath fed, and normally breeds a slow, graceful tempo. Buoyancy has three dialects: rising buoyancy, floating buoyancy, and settling-down buoyancy. In praising Dionysus in Ode 1, the chorus employs rising buoyancy; as the chorus prays to the river Dirce in Ode 3, floating buoyancy is employed; and as they feel rejected and abandoned by Dionysus and mourn his absence in the same ode, their reactions are unified by utilizing settling-down buoyancy.

Unlike Buoyancy and Potency's tendency toward slow tempos (although each *can* also be utilized in quicker tempos), the body NRG of Radiancy has a wider range of tempos. Electric-like, lively, and more indirect, Radiancy is utilized at times leading the frenzied state of the Bacchae, during the earthquake and the dancing, and often combined with Potency to produce a menacing atmosphere. When the Radiancy is contained within the body, the dialect known as "signal alert," a highly-charged inner state of alertness manifests subtly, but still communicates intensity and suspense.

The employment of the body NRGs combined with focusing on key words in the text also inspire the gestures of the chorus. Much of the choral movement is in unison, but we can choose, in many instances, to have the individual chorus members create their own gestures that are inspired by the body NRG and the text they were to speak alone. For instance, out of the spark-like Radiancy combined with filled Potency in Ode 1, stems a sudden springing upward movement with open fingers on each instance the word "burst" is spoken in "...burst with green, burst with red berries, burst with bright flowers..." Each of the three chorus members that speak one of the three

phrases executes a similar gesture on the word “burst,” but these gestures are not exactly the same. The universal idea of “bursting into bloom” guides their creation of the physical gesture, but each with their own individual nuance accompanied by the body NRG. This process of organically developing these individual gestures we call “Physical Representation.”

Physical Representations

This process of improvising and creating physical representations for symbolic images in the text guides many of our structural patterns and gestures for the choral odes. The concept is similar to Lecoq’s “identifications with materials,”⁶ in which his students would “become” crumpling paper, dissolving sugar, or various forms of each of the elements. During rehearsals for *The Bacchae*, some of the movement was created by the chorus members themselves through this process by transferring the mental image into a physical form that best represented a particular word, or section of the text. This act not only helps further the ideas embedded throughout the text for the audience, but allows the chorus members themselves to dig deeper into the visceral relationship between text and body.

The exercise of mining the text through physical representations can lead to more creative individualized movement that is specific and rooted in the text and is most useful in creating and executing individual physical gestures for the chorus members when they separate themselves from the group momentarily to speak a single word or phrase. We allow the body to respond to the imagination, to be molded into some form, creating an artistic sculpture, a gesture in motion, a physical interpretation

⁶ Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (London: Routledge, 2001) 43.

of the object, element, or idea. When given a word such as “river,” “victory,” or “hate,” the body first immediately responds with a body NRG to the image that word represents, and then sculpts the body to formulate a posture that communicates the image or idea clearly and uniquely.

Before intentionally building these gestures and movements into choreography and exploring themes, we begin with the chorus members individually developing physical expressiveness by exploring a wide range of physical representations based on the four elements and familiar objects. Immediately, the body senses a body NRG, perhaps Radiancy NRG with “fire” and Potency NRG with “wind.” And, almost simultaneously the body assumes a distinct, but highly individualized form. We then moved to physical objects (electron, sun, cloud, etc.), investigating the inherent characteristics, postures, and applicable body NRGs associated most readily with these objects. Finally, we transition to the more abstract and thematic, exploring “hunger,” “pain,” “pride,” “victory,” “peace,” etc. Informed by the body NRG and the image, the posture may immediately close for “hunger” and be permeated with a writhing Potency NRG. For “victory,” the body opens and rises up with a reaching Potency NRG. It is important to guide the chorus members throughout the explorations to follow their instinctive responses in order to build a reservoir of potential gestures, postures, sculptures that can later be incorporated into the choreography of the odes.

Ensemble Building “Atom-to-Atom”⁷ with Breath

After the chorus members develop individual expressivity through physical representation explorations and feel their collectivity of energy through experiencing the body NRGs together in the same space, we begin building the ensemble through mirror play. Utilizing the body NRGs and a heightened sense of awareness, partners work with atom-to-atom contiguous continuity to explore the legato cohesiveness in their movements. How in-tune with one another can they be? It is vital that they work slowly, as if transferring the movement from one atom to the next. Although one partner is leading and the other following, both are seen as one unit. The follower must sense the breath of the leader and anticipate the movement and the leader must feel the sense of responsibility in guiding his/her partner, communicating through breath and energy. The partners begin in the same body NRG, but as the work progresses, the leader will shift the body NRG and the follower must sense this and match it. They are encouraged at this point to experiment with levels, turns, and traveling. We then begin to incorporate physical representations by calling out a word or theme that informs their mirror movement and allow the partners to pass back and forth the leader's role. Changing partners during this step of the process is also important, if time allows, so that the chorus community can be built through more intimate contact between members. This exercise builds the essential collaboration that leads to the larger ensemble unit.

The next step is to mirror play with the larger group. In a classroom or workshop, groups of 6, 10, or 14 are configured into two V-shapes facing one another

⁷ Atom-to-Atom movement is a concept taught throughout Lessac training. It provides balance, control, and a heightened sense of awareness to movement.

with the two leaders at the bottom points of the V's. One of the leaders begins the movement in a body NRG and the leaders alternate initiating the movement while the entire ensemble fluidly follows again sensing the breath and anticipating the direction of the movement. Here, we emphasize the need to commit to a heightened sense of awareness and to work as a collective unit, or what Lecoq calls "one living organism."⁸ Then, we revisit the themes to inform the leaders' physical choices and body NRG through physical representation as in the partner exercise.

Once the group has established a sense of cohesion with the movement, the voice is added. The leader chooses a new word/theme from the text with the ensemble echoing, calling/responding, or chanting the word as they follow the leader's newly informed movement. Leadership is then passed off to the other leader when he/she offers a new word/theme, changing the body NRG and movement to suit the word. This serves as an initial exploration in developing the ode's themes and text as an ensemble and continues by alternating new leaders into those positions.

This exercise is stunning to watch when the performers are wearing masks. We often begin working with the masks during the partner exercise, but they can be incorporated during any point in the process. The mask does increase the need for heightened sensory awareness as most masks restrict peripheral vision.

We then deviate from the symmetrical formation of the V-shape mirroring to the modulating cluster, or flocking exercise. Here the ensemble positions itself into a tight irregular formation facing the same direction. The member in foremost frontal position is the designated leader and leads the group's body NRG and movement until the leader

⁸ Lecoq, 130.

slowly turns to the right to give the leadership over to the member who appears in the new foremost frontal position upon turning, and so on. It is important the movement continues to be fluid and seamless when transitioning from one leader to the next. This requires the highest sense of awareness. Here, we encourage the leaders to extend the movement, to commit to the movement from their centers, to utilize various postures and levels, and to travel, all while keeping in tune with the group.

Exploring Formation & Shape

The use of physical shapes, levels, and punctuated movements that articulate emotion and project theme can also be incorporated to reinforce the narrative of the odes. In the classroom or workshop, groups are guided through explorations on how to utilize various configurations (shape, space, levels) to interpret and communicate certain themes, or emotions of the chorus. We begin simply by demonstrating with a group using “oppression” as the theme. The group forms a low tight circle with each of the members facing out and heads bowed low. The circular shape and the closing of the space tightly between the members can communicate the solidarity of the group with the low level communicating the weight of the oppression. In smaller chorus groups of 4-7, the chorus members then improvise using spatial techniques to experiment with configurations and create a sculpture in motion based on a given theme. Examples of formations are the modulating cluster, the tightened and expanding circle, the triangular, squared, or V-shape, the spiral, and various line configurations. What configuration most appropriately communicates the essence of the text, the circumstances of the chorus? Is the theme best supported by the symmetry of the square, or the irregularity of

the cluster? Is there a ritualistic emphasis which may suggest the circle? Is the chorus in a low position, or high? Organic transitions between one configuration to another result after these explorations. One event that was spawned out of the ritualistic circle formation of the early traditional Greek chorus and is often incorporated into this work is the “Bacchus Dance.”

The “Bacchus Dance”

The Living Theatre, an internationally-renown experimental theatre group which draws many of its theories and ideas from Brecht, Meyerhold, and Artaud, incorporated the “Bacchus Dance,” a sensual and ritualistic movement, into their production of Brecht’s adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in 1965. This dance can be performed in several variations throughout *The Bacchae*. The Bacchus Dance accentuates the sensual, which includes the sexual but is not limited to that. A leader establishes an ongoing click or percussive sound at about 90-100 beats per minute. Often this is accomplished by tongue-clicking of one of the participants. The dance is performed in an eight-beat cycle. Chorus members start with knees bent, in a signal-alert posture, ready to pounce. As the dance progresses, actors move about the space, interacting with individual audience members and with each other. On beat one, they slap both hands on both thighs, making a sharp, slapping sound. On beats two, three, and four, they run their hands sensually up their own bodies to the head, as the feet keep traveling. On beat five, a full extension of arms is released, along with the head, up and out, while at the same time allowing an ecstatic “Ahhhhh!” to escape, and on beats six, seven, and eight, the arms float back down to prepare for the next thigh slap on a new beat one.

The Bacchus dance brings us back to the ritualistic circle, and adds to the collectivity and unity of the chorus. Utilization of The Bacchus Dance frees the performers to find new ways of both extended and physical interaction, and these discoveries get put back into the creation of movement and choreography of the odes themselves. Sometimes a version of The Bacchus Dance is incorporated into the final version of an ode. Although the dance is mainly performed in a circle, it can also be performed in a variety of configurations.

Beyond Unison: Exploring Vocal Variations & Punctuated Movement

Musicality can be incorporated into the spoken text of the odes by using vocal variation techniques and punctuated or percussive movements that are informed initially by the body NRGs and consequently through the influence of the physical representations. Such vocal variations include the organic use of vocal dynamics (volume, duration, rhythm, and tempo). The Body NRGs greatly influence the voice, enhancing more percussive consonant opportunities, or perhaps more tonal vowel opportunities. Potency, for example, often fuels the voice with more concentrated tonal energy; buoyancy with its floating qualities breeds a feeling of openness in the oral cavity, lengthening the duration of the vowels; and Radiancy can induce a percussive, staccato quality in the tempo. Chorus members are guided to experiment and explore these vocal influences and opportunities.

Breaking up the text is crucial to adding variety to the often choral unison, especially for today's audiences. By incorporating the various techniques of individual release, call/response, echoing, repetition, chanting, and using sound, such as slapping

on the ground, or on the thighs as in The Bacchus Dance to punctuate key words and phrases, the choral ode text is much more poignant. Each of these techniques can be explored using a small section of ode text.

To better guide the chorus members in application, we return to the demonstration using the oppression theme, this time adding punctuated movement vocal variation of building in volume. The chorus members, configured in their circle facing out, chant the word “oppression” as they each stomp with the right foot on the last syllable of “oppression.” This demonstration will help guide the chorus members in experimentation and application of these techniques into their own choral projects.

Application to Multiple Texts

The Choral Ode process can work in any ensemble driven process, but is most useful in the overlapping expressions of devising/improvisation/collective creation. Take, for instance, a group that wants to devise a performance piece out of a collection of poems. You could choose what you believe to be the central, unifying stanza or theme of the poem, and stage it through this choral ode process, thus establishing a shared physical vocabulary as a foundation, out of which each performer can find individual expressions where appropriate in the poem. The utility in applying this approach to ensemble building and actor training, particularly for a newly formed or young improvisation ensemble, is apparent. The great advantage of this approach when creating a new performance piece collectively is that it provides a shared physical lexicon that can include the power of unison sound and movement, combined organically with individual expressions that blend seamlessly with the group sections of

the piece. And, when the inevitable creative walls are encountered, you can always toss in a piece of text, song, or new movement around which the group can collectively improvise new work to add to the piece.

A similar application of this technique can be useful in specific instances of the modern chorus found in musical theater. The Choral Ode process works best with musicals in which each actor must function both as a character and as a member of an ensemble, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Pippin*, or *Children of Eden*. In these musical plays, the action must grow organically out of the story being constructed onstage, so a physically organic process like this can lend results more effectively than when applied to a highly choreographed musical, such as *Oklahoma!* or *Kiss Me, Kate*. While standard musicals still require justifying the choreography out of the story, the more ensemble driven musicals can yield group dynamics that still leave room for individual expression. The Choral Ode process is particularly effective in such an aesthetic.

The Choral Ode technique offers the advantage of getting a group on the same page physically, while not obliterating the contributions of each individual. Once the common physical vocabulary is established, there is a wide range of possible exploration along the continuum of group to individual work. The artists have new, flexible tools with which to create a wide range of physically dynamic performance pieces.