



**RESOURCE PACK: Layering in the work of Frantic Assembly.**

**By Simon Bell**

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## **Master class: Layering in the work of Frantic Assembly**

### **Overview**

The master class will focus on one specific convention from the work of theatre practitioners Frantic Assembly. Frantic Assembly are a company who use movement as an integral part of their practice. They can be seen as sitting under the wide and varied umbrella of physical theatre, though it is certainly not a term they themselves use to define their work.

Frantic Assembly are known for working from a starting place of text and through a collaborative devising process develop the ways in which they will present this text. The artistic director of the company does not come into the rehearsal process with a clear vision of the production, rather a few images, a list of song titles, descriptions of various physical images, quotations and text extracts. Certainly there is little to no linking factor between them. From this starting place the company works together to create moments within the production where movement can be used to express more than the words alone can communicate.

The convention we will explore in this master class will be the technique of layering. This is fundamental to Frantic Assembly's process. It enables performers in their style to be non-dancers and even non-actors. As a technique it is perfect to use with students because it is so accessible to any ability level, age, gender etc.

### **Starting place**

ALWAYS begin with a warm up. We are time pressured as teachers and this often seems like a step that can be minimized or even omitted in order to progress to the task itself. However, warm up's are a vital part of the process. They serve a variety of functions. Encourage your students to understand these functions:

- create a focused energy within the ensemble
- warm up the muscles of the body to prevent injury (on this note, a warm up should not consist of static stretches . That could cause rather than prevent injury)
- engage the mind in a physical process

A classic Frantic Assembly warm up:

#### *Clear the Space*

Introduce the following series of instructions. Students should follow these instructions as quickly as possible, with direct movement, no talking and commitment to the success of each instruction.

- a) Centre – move to centre of space and place head on shoulder of another performer
- b) Clear the space – move to the edge of the space
- c) Favourite place – move to a pre chosen favourite spot within the room. It should always be the same.

- d) Point – wherever you are in the room, point to your favourite place.
- e) Pair – hug another performer.
- f) Diagonal – create a diagonal line across the entire space.
- g) Fold – fold up into a small ball on ground
- h) Stretch – stretch your body out as wide as possible.
- i) TV – everyone moves to look at one specific pre-assigned point. A genre of programme is assigned and the ensemble collectively reacts to the genre of programme.

Play energised repetitive music throughout the exercise – it provides focus and enables a more controlled participation.

### *Name Circle*

Go around the circle. Say names loud and clear with a three second gap between names. Do this twice. Encourage ensemble to really listen to the names. Now speed up so there is no gap between names but they are still said with the same clarity and pace. Again repeat twice. Now one person can gain eye contact across the circle, say that person's name and move towards them. Before they arrive, that person has to achieve eye contact with another and begin to move therefore vacating their space. This exercise grows in speed and intensity until performers are running with urgency towards each other.

### **What is 'Layering'?**

Layering is the idea of building up choreography in stages. It begins by creating a series of movements without any intention, character or story. The sequence is built around one simple instruction. Then direction is layered onto this sequence of movement in stages. It is a belief of the company that limitations actually breed creativity and by handing creation of the movements over to the performers, something more honest and accessible is created. By simplifying and taking too much 'thinking' from the process, we allow accidental moments to occur which lead to exciting creative possibilities.

### **Exercise 1: Push/pull**

Step 1: Create a sequence of moves which show a transference of control using push/pull and start/stop motion – A moves B but stops them before their move completes its natural trajectory. This can be large movements which affect the whole body or smaller movements which just affect an isolated part of the body. What is important is that the focus is on controlling the other in both the initial move and the stop. After a few moves, B gains control and the control shifts. Create a string of 12 moves. This is simply an exchange of control, nothing more.

Step 2: Add context to these specific moves. You aren't adding anything extra to the sequence. Just a way of doing the moves.

- brutalise it

- make it tender
- make it playful

Consider how this may affect the force, pace, extension and energy of the move. At this stage the face is not engaged in the movement. There remains no character and no story.

Step 3: A specific direction is now given. Try saying something through the choreography rather than through actual speech

- I'm sorry
- I'm still angry with you
- You don't get around me that easily
- You are mine

Now discuss the stories/characters that have begun to emerge.

Step 4: Try playing the sequence again, based on a story or character decision. This may now include some additional movement and start or end of sequence. This should be based on the truth of the situation - the abstract movement only makes sense if it is born out of reality.

Step 5: Finally sound or text can be layered in.

- try adding in whispering or laughing
- try adding in a single line for each character which can be said at any one single point in the sequence.

Step 6: Once a fully formed sequence has been created, you will want to try it with different pieces of music. How does music affect the meaning that is created?

At each step, discuss what is being learnt and what is being discovered. It is so important all ideas are documented during the process.

## **Exercise 2: Round the world**

This follows the same format but uses a slightly more directorial approach. You come in as director with a clear intention.

Step 1: Stand opposite a partner. Imagine the body of your partner is a world map. Place your finger someone on their body. This is the starting place. Your finger is like the flight path of a plane. You draw the line of the flight path out from their body and back down to the final destination of the flight somewhere else on their body. Now as you stay still in your new position, your partner does the same to you. You continue this pattern to create four movements each, making a string of eight movements in total.

Step 2: Play with the pace of each movement and how far out the flight path comes from the body. Rehearse this sequence so it is memorised. The intention is to focus on accurately recreating the flight path each time.

Step 3: As director you will choose a piece of music. You will now perform your sequence of moves, influenced by the mood created by the music. Listen to the music through once. Don't discuss your thoughts, even with your partner. Go straight into the exercise and use your impulse. This is best done with just half the class, and the other half as observers. Analyse whether any stories or characters began to emerge.

Step 4: Take a single pair where a story or character has been identified. Now play a given intention – 'I want to.....you'. You can model this, but let the performers come up with the objectives.

Step five: Now specific text could be layered into this.

### **Discussion**

It is vital to discuss the scenes created. What were different meanings for different spectators? Where could these sequences lead? Do they put you mind of any particular scripts or scenes?

### **Warm Down**

Just like the warm up. This is something which should not be rushed or missed out. This is an opportunity to stretch tired muscles to avoid injury and also calm the mind following the intensity of the previous work.

### **Links to the Course**

This work could be used in a variety of ways in the course. For *working with play texts*, one could explore one of Frantic's texts such as 'Stockholm', 'Hymns', or 'Beautiful Burnout'. Their style could be explored through a variety of devising and text based exercises such as the ones explored in this workshop for *creating theatre based on theatre theory*. The techniques used in the workshop could be incorporated into the *creation of original theatre* and indeed the process which Frantic Assembly uses could be taken as a model for devising. In terms of the final assessments, the convention of layering could be used to create a moment within the collaborative devised piece and likewise it could be explored as a performance style to be used within the director's notebook. It would, however, be hard to take this convention and apply it to the solo performance as Frantic Assembly's work on the whole does not lend itself well to solo work.

## **Suggested Primary Sources**

The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre, Graham S. and Hoggett S. [www.franticassembly.co.uk](http://www.franticassembly.co.uk)

## **Practitioner's Pathway**

Simon Bell was born in the UK and trained as an actor in Bristol. He worked professionally in theatre, film and television as an actor, before becoming more involved in devised and physical theatre. He developed a variety of collaborative and devised works both in London and touring the UK, working with many different companies including Frantic Assembly, Punchdrunk, Splendid and Shunt.

Simon switched his focus to teaching and worked in both the public and private sector in the UK teaching GCSE and A level Theatre programmes. In addition, Simon led professional workshops at the BAC and worked with both the Royal Court Theatre and RSC on workshop programmes for young actors. He continued to provide movement direction in the development of new pieces of theatre for several companies.

Simon now lives in Atlanta, GA and is currently teaching IB Theatre at the Atlanta International School.