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## Misunderstanding Delsarte (And Preserving the Cherries)

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Salle HERZ, rue de la

Mardi 15 Avril 1862, à 8

DERNIER CONC

DONNÉ PAR

F. DELSA

STALLE : 10 FRANCS

Salle HERZ, rue de la Victoire, 48.

Mardi 15 Avril 1862, à 8 heures et demie,

DERNIER CONCERT

DONNÉ PAR

F. DELSARTE.

STALLE : 10 FRANCS.

On trouve des Bilets à la salle HERZ, et chez M. DELSARTE, éditeur  
des Archives du Chant, rue des Batilles, n° 1, à Chaillot.

STALLE : 10 FRANCS.

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# MISUNDERSTANDING DELSARTE (AND PRESERVING THE CHERRIES)

Thomas Leabhart

*Leabhart reminds us that much of Delsarte's original teaching has been lost, and that what is currently called "Delsarte" is a "fertile misunderstanding" which has evolved necessarily, to complete the missing information.*

[M]isunderstanding is fertile. It creates new realities, it is a stimulus toward new inventions, although it is historically incorrect.

—Nicola Savarese

The dilettantes, those geniuses of delight, who have been set aflame by some brief (or sometimes lengthy) encounter which they then simmered lovingly in an alpha state until it boiled over (to continue the culinary metaphor) into some delicious (*delizioso*) concoction—these are the creators of the most dazzling fusions in the twentieth century.

—Leonard Pronko

I first encountered the name François Delsarte in the early 1960s when I studied for four summers at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Lee, Massachusetts. As I had some skill in lettering signs, Ted Shawn asked me each year to make flip charts for his Sunday evening lecture on Delsarte. For these lectures, Shawn (modern dance pioneer and author of *Every Little Movement: A Book About François Delsarte*) dressed in a white linen suit,

**Ticket for Delsarte's farewell performance, 1862.**

*Francois Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA*

stood in a pool of flattering pink light, and, pointing to my charts, gave as entertaining and captivating a lecture as I had ever heard before—or since. With his words, and with simple yet eloquent demonstration, Shawn introduced a nineteenth-century Frenchman whose work had inadvertently given birth to American modern dance.

In addition to daily classes in ballet, modern, and what we then called ethnic dance, students studied elective subjects like Labanotation, kinesiology, dance history, or Delsarte. I eagerly chose Delsarte, remembering my delight in Shawn's lectures. I quickly found, however, that once the basic principles already explained in the lectures had been expanded upon, little remained. By this I mean that Shawn presented no physical movements or exercises directly from Delsarte; as he explained it, there was considerable difficulty in knowing exactly what Delsarte had taught. Principles existed, but nothing on the level of "incorporated knowledge"—the equivalent of ballet combinations, or *kata* in martial arts. We performed, as I recall, some undulations with the arms, and some walking exercises which divided the foot into parts as they touched the ground—but nothing that approached a "technique." While I had derived great joy from his lectures, the elective class gave me a feeling of loss—a feeling that we could never know crucially important aspects of Delsarte's teaching. Whereas Shawn's attempt to be what Kabuki scholar Leonard Pronko calls a Documenter (a scholar with a "wakeful mind") necessarily failed from lack of enough information, he succeeded as a Dilettante (again Pronko's terminology) by making ground-breaking choreography using Delsarte's principles, inventing his own combinations or *kata*.

During the intervening years, I have often given my version of Shawn's Delsarte lecture, and have always enjoyed getting back to this material which actors and general audiences alike have found useful. But as I read more about Delsarte, the same feeling of loss returns.

For example, this first-hand account of Delsarte's performing causes me to regret deeply not being able to see it:

He depicted the various passions and emotions of the human soul, by means of expression and gesture only, without uttering a single syllable; moving the spectators to tears, exciting them to enthusiasm, or thrilling them with terror at his will; in a word, completely magnetizing them.... It was a triumphant demonstration. (Durivage 614)

And what exactly was Delsarte's son, Gustave, doing when he demonstrated "spiral movements of the arms" [and] spirations of the whole body, with flowing oppositions of the head, the torso, and the limbs. He trained his pupils in the gentle, slow, precise expansion, contraction,

and modulation of all the expressive agents through their nine forms of attitude, with their interchanging play. He also exemplified the poses of the famous classic statures, with a musical melting out of one into another, without any break in the passage; beside portraying, in the manner of his father, as he said, a great many other poses and movements based directly on their originating principles. (Alger 4, qtd. in Ruyter 1999, 11–12)

How I longed to be able to see Delsarte's daughter perform "with marvelous skill...the attitudes and the physiognomy changes" and the "eighty-one expressions of the eyes, one after the other" (Arnaud 1893, 298; and Odend'hal 509, qtd. in Ruyter 1999, 12).

What did Steele Mackaye (Delsarte's last pupil, and his successor) look like, and what exactly was he doing when he

showed a number of "chromatic scales" or "gamuts" of facial expression, as he called them, so astonishing and impressive as to beggar all description. In exhibiting these gamuts, he stood perfectly motionless, except in his countenance, and, starting from the normal expression, would make his face pass very slowly through a dozen grades of emotion to some predetermined phase, and thence he would descend, reversing the previous steps, to perfect repose.... Thus, he showed a chromatic state of emotion running through satisfaction, pleasure, tenderness and love to adoration, and, having retraced his steps, descended facially through dislike, disgust, envy and hate to fury. Again he exhibited the transitions from repose through jollity, silliness and prostration, to utter drunkenness; and made a most astonishing but painful spectacle of his fine face, passing through all the grades of mental disturbance to insanity, and down all the stairs of mental weakness to utter idiocy.—The impression produced was at once very lively and very profound. (qtd. in Mackaye I, 152)

In short, why can't I go to a Delsarte demonstration, or buy a Delsarte video tape or DVD in the way that one can see Kurt Joss' *Green Table*, or dance of Bali, or Meyerhold's biomechanics or even something as esoteric as Gurdjieff's movement technique? Why didn't Shawn teach us these things then, and why can't I see them now? The sad, unalterable fact is that they were, like the recipe for preserving cherries in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, lost. Certainly, people have tried to re-create elements, like statue posing<sup>1</sup>, that may or may not originally have belonged to Delsarte's work, but we should not confuse such conjectures with a living tradition passed from teacher to pupil in an unbroken line over the years. Instead of speculating on what





the missing bits might be, the Dilettante (Shawn, St. Denis, Stanislavsky, Grotowski, the list goes on...) creates "some delicious concoction": we must make a new recipe if the cherries are not to spoil, and the orchard sold.

Possessing only partial evidence, we cannot know Delsarte's work exactly. Frequent misunderstanding of this partial evidence compounds the problem. Many Americans familiar with his work assert that Delsarte has often been misunderstood. Steele Mackaye's wife wrote: "The name of Delsarte is so well known, the term Delsartian so widespread and so variously applied and *misapplied*..." (qtd. in Mackaye I, 133).

Mackaye's son, Percy, wrote that

In after years, through banalities of the incompetent, the self-seeking and dully commercial, the august name and principles of "Delsarte" became bewilderingly misapplied, misunderstood, and vulgarized, as happens to nearly every noble cause in the chaos of groping democracy. (Mackaye I, 162)

Ted Shawn stridently denounced most books about Delsarte which he considered "full of personal (mis)interpretations, [and which were] false, cheap, trivial and worse." He wanted to rescue the "pure nuggets of gold" from the "low grade ore" of most Delsartean literature (Shawn 13). He carried his search for "pure" Delsarte material to almost obsessive lengths. One might say it was his Holy Grail.

Annie Payson Call (self-help author from the early years of the twentieth century) makes a more measured estimation of what was known to her as Delsartism:

[S]o much that is good and helpful in the "Delsarte system" has been misused, and so much of what is thoroughly artificial and unhealthy has been mixed with the useful, that one hesitates now to mention Delsarte. Either he was a wonderful genius whose thoughts and discoveries have been sadly perverted, or the inconsistencies of his teachings were great enough to limit the true power which certainly can be found in much that he has left us. (Call, 116)

Percy Mackaye, in a two-volume biography of his father, Steele Mackaye, lists in some detail the depth of these misunderstandings: at the height of the Delsarte craze in the United States, unethical vendors sold Delsarte corsets,

**Drawing by François Delsarte.**

*Francois Alexandre Nicolas Delsarte Papers, Mss. 1302, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA*

Delsarte garters, and the Delsarte adjustable limb to gullible thousands. Delsarte's name had become "commercialized and travestied by the distorted and ludicrous perversions of ignorance or half-knowledge" (Mackaye II, 266).

This leads one to ask, what exactly has been misunderstood, misrepresented, commercialized, travestied, distorted and perverted? We have the books of Delsarte's serious students, which agree on certain things. Should we agree to accept only those things that everyone identifies as being the "true kernel" to be upheld?

I have been able to find very little first-hand reporting of what actually transpired in Delsarte's classrooms, attached to his living quarters, at one time in a residential building on the sixth floor, 88, boulevard des Courcelles in Paris (de Hegermann-Lindencrone 287). Madame de Hegermann-Lindencrone, an American singer and socialite, spent nine years in Paris just prior to the war of 1870 and the Commune. Her name was then Mrs. Charles Moulton, and her published letters from this period record a few lessons with Delsarte. In one of them she writes:

On the walls are hung some awful diagrams to illustrate the master's method of teaching. These diagrams are crayon-drawings of life-sized faces depicting every emotion that the human face is capable of expressing, such as love, sorrow, murder, terror, joy, surprise, etc.

It is Delsarte's way, when he wants you to express one of these emotions in your voice, to point with a soiled forefinger to the picture in question which he expects you to imitate. The result lends expression to your voice.

Delsarte asked Mrs. Moulton to sing for him, and

When I came to "Prends cette lame et planges [sic] la dans mon Coeur," [Take that blade and thrust it into my heart] he stopped me short, and pointing to a horrible picture on the wall indicating bloody murder and terror (No. 6) he cried, "Voila l'expression qu'il faut avoir" [That's the expression you must have]. (de Hegermann-Lindencrone 77-79)

The correspondence between Delsarte's drawings of emotions described above and those done by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) and published in *L'Expression des passions* seems to me too obvious to ignore (Le Brun).

Another first-hand account, written by Mackaye's wife, describes something of the physical space and what went on there:

It was a wonderful experience to sit for an hour in Delsarte's plain, bare room, above the door of which was written, in French: 'Qui rejette le temps, le temps rejette' [Whoever rejects his own time is rejected by it



in turn]. There were two rooms leading from the drawing room. In the first (about eighteen feet square) the lectures were given; beyond was a smaller room, an inner sanctuary, where Delsarte did most of his writing, and where stood the famous *armoire à glace*, or wardrobe, which was piled to the top with Delsarte's writings, charts, etc. In the first room, chairs were arranged, usually for not more than twenty people. Opposite was the blackboard, and by its side an armchair in which sat Delsarte. An open space before the blackboard served as a stage.

The first part of the morning was given to the exposition of philosophy—the explanation of some theory, or chart. This part of the class work—during the last months—was given by Mr. Mackaye, Delsarte from his armchair putting in a word, a nod, or smile of approval, to his little audience. After the exposition came the practical part: the recitation of a fable, a scene from a play, or perhaps a song, any of which was rendered sometimes by a pupil, sometimes by Delsarte himself. When Delsarte recited, then came indeed the miracle:

As he rose, there stood for a moment before you the figure of an old man, in a long, brown dressing-gown, a foulard kerchief carelessly tied about his neck, on his head a sort of house-cap like a biretta, on his feet the huge, shapeless, felt carpet-slippers so universally worn in France. In another instant there stood—whomsoever Delsarte chose to stand there. It might be Orestes, pursued by the Furies, half wild with terror, present and to come; it might be Iphigenia sublimely calm before her accepted fate. Or there would stand the stupid peasant in Meyerbeers's *Robert*, so hopelessly, helplessly dense that an intelligent cow would seem a Newton to him. (qtd. in Mackaye I, 136–7)

In these first-hand accounts of Delsarte's lessons, intelligent and articulate observers, whose primary activity was not the making or teaching of art, describe what they saw. (In theatre history, we know of other teachers who, like Delsarte, did not publish their writings, but whose students kept daily records over a period of years. The stenographic notes of Louis Jouvet's lessons provide one example, as do Etienne Decroux's students' notebooks.) We don't know precisely from Delsarte's students *what* they learned, or *how* he taught it, even though there are some notebooks of his students at the LSU Library.

Even Delsarte's children and closest associates cannot agree on what Delsarte taught. We can resolve the famous question of the origin of the physical exercises called Harmonic Gymnastics if we take at face value the case built by Mackaye's obviously adoring son, Percy, that Steele Mackaye

had already invented these exercises before studying with Delsarte, and that Delsarte had welcomed them into his already elaborated system. For confirmation, Percy cites Delsarte's daughter, who asserts that her father never taught gymnastics of any kind (Mackaye II, 272). However, William Alger's statement that Delsarte's son, Gustave, taught gymnastics, arm spirals, and flowing oppositions (qtd. in Ruyter 1999, 11), contradicts this evidence. If we do the math based on the above description of Delsarte's rooms, a classroom eighteen by eighteen feet, with twenty chairs, a blackboard and an armchair would have left very little room for any kind of gymnastics.

If most reasonable people would consider the sale of corsets, garters and wooden limbs perversions of Delsarte's teachings, we must think we know them, at least partially. Can the "truth" ever be known?

Changes occur in a codified system of incorporated knowledge in a variety of ways:

1. Through faults of memory, therefore, unintentionally.
2. Through ignorance, as one has only partial knowledge of a system, or misunderstands what one has learned.
3. Willful distortion, for financial gain or some other personally advantageous reason; or "fertile misunderstanding" in the case of Pronko's Dilettante.
4. Consciously, once a system has been completely understood, one could elect to make certain modifications or elaborations or developments or adjustments to a system.

The line of argument that I will follow here is:

1. Very few students had first-hand knowledge of Delsarte's *complete* system. Two of his children, Gustave and Marie, understood it, but through problems of memory, or else willfully and consciously, at least one (and perhaps both) misrepresented it.
2. Most other students necessarily taught only a *partial* version of it. Many perfectly ethical practitioners lacked the years of continuous study from which the Delsarte children benefited.
3. The incomplete nature of most subsequent "Delsarte" work makes it more *misunderstanding* than *development*. The creative Dilettante's project becomes a "fertile misunderstanding."

For example, contemporary French director Ariane Mnouchkine, making no pretense of being a Kabuki scholar or practitioner, knowingly distorts her limited knowledge of this technique in a theatrical production (Pronko).

In Savarese's definition, this constitutes a "fertile misunderstanding" rather than an ignorant one. An example of a "development" of the same technique in the different schools of Kabuki dance, occurs where families of practitioners possess techniques fully and have studied them for decades. Yet different schools each confirm that they have the one "true" version of a given choreography. By this we understand that even after a lifetime of total immersion in an art, certain developments or modifications do occur, either consciously or unconsciously.

Theatre practitioners find these fertile misunderstandings ("fertile" is Savarese's word) which litter theatre and dance history as rich as scholars find them worrisome ("incorrect" as Savarese would have it). The partial list of "fertile misunderstandings" I include here is impressive and diverse: Decroux's "truncation" of Copeau's teaching to create Corporeal Mime in the 1920s; Lee Strasberg's Method Acting, a "version" of Stanislavsky's teaching; the Camerata dei Bardi's failed attempt to recreate Greek drama which became Opera in the late 1500s. Leonard Pronko provides other examples in his essay (Pronko).

François Delsarte's teachings, in particular, have lent themselves to a variety of misunderstandings or interpretations in dance, theatre and even film. At one time Isadora Duncan billed herself as a Delsarte teacher (Blair 18), and the Alexander brothers, F. Mathais and A.R., taught Delsarte (Evans 129–30), or had it taught in their school in Sydney (Alexander 252), before making breakthroughs (as a modern dancer for the former, and founders of Alexander Technique for the latter) that established them as household names in different fields. Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis taught Delsarte principles to generations of students including other household names like Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham (whose famous "contraction and release" are, in this author's estimation, nicely reminiscent of Delsarte's principles of "concentric and eccentric").

Subsequent generations of dancers and choreographers compounded misunderstanding upon fertile misunderstanding. Barton Mumaw describes working on choreography with Ted Shawn, a famous Dilettante:

Shawn began to set the work on us with no definite theatrical idea beyond experimenting haphazardly with forms he developed from his knowledge of Delsarte—oppositions, successions, parallelism, tension and relaxation, rising and falling, response to natural forces, movements of water, of air, of resolution, the motion of a single body in relation to the group, architectonic forms resulting from bodies that moved in unison or fell in succession or simultaneously. (Sherman and Mumaw, 271)

Later, *Successions*

was a study developed from Delsarte's concept of the division of movement itself into three categories: opposition, parallelisms, and succession. Successive movement is that which passes through a hand, a limb, a body, a group in a smooth, unbroken, wavelike progression. (ibid. 274)

Barton Mumaw remembers "the combination of ballet, Delsarte, Dalcroze and ethnic movements that Shawn had devised and that I learned at Greater Denishawn" (ibid. 315).

Ruth St. Denis, another Dilettante, combined yoga, Swedish gymnastics, Buddhism, and oriental dance; she first studied Delsarte with her mother. Her biographer Suzanne Shelton says that St. Denis' hallmark arm undulations originated in Stebbins' Serpentine Arm Drill (Shelton 15). These arm undulations are especially apparent in one of St. Denis' most famous dances, *Incense*, which is, according to Shelton, "[n]othing more than a Delsarte exercise refined by a keen artistic sensibility..." (57). But is this a Delsarte exercise or a Stebbins's version of a Delsarte exercise?

St. Denis and Shawn discovered that "[w]hen Delsarte taught that gesture was the mirror of inner emotional states, he established an axiom of American modern dance" (Shelton 128). One could easily say as much for modern theatre, although theatre historians and practitioners recognize Delsarte less frequently than do dancers and dance scholars. However, Jerzy Grotowski, not reluctant to recognize this influence, knew Delsarte's work through Polish translations of Prince Sergei Volkonsky's works, as well as studies in Moscow (1955–56) where Delsarte was included in his theatre school curriculum.

I was very interested in Delsarte's thesis that there are introverted and extroverted reactions in human contact. At the same time, I found his thesis very stereotyped; it was really very funny as actor training, but there was something to it, so I studied it. We began searching through Delsarte's program for those elements which are not stereotyped. Afterwards we had to find new elements which are not stereotyped. Afterwards we had to find new elements of our own in order to realize the goal of our program. (qtd. in Schechner and Wolford 45)

A recent book on Stanislavsky mentions "Thought-Centre, Feeling-Centre, and Action-Centre" (Merlin 71); to me these descriptions recall Delsarte's trinity of Mental, Spiritual-Emotional, and Physical centers.

Another recent book describes Michael Chekhov's development of characterizations based on centers located in different parts of the body (Chamberlain 79), which also seem reminiscent of Delsarte's trinity. Neither book mentions Delsarte although Stanislavsky knew Delsarte's work, and Chekhov worked with Stanislavsky and uses the idea of acting from centers in the body.

Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Florence Vidor, Ina Claire, Ruth Chatterton, Louise Glaum, Mabel Normand and Louise Brooks all studied at the Denishawn School in Los Angeles, and "created a language of silent film gesture based solidly on Delsarte" (Shelton 137). The choreographer of many Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies, Hermes Pan, also studied a version of Delsarte as a child (Paquet 3), and Marilyn Monroe, who studied with Michael Chekhov (Chamberlain 33) would have known about acting from centers in the body.

Sometimes people under the influence of Delsarte's theories, or what they understand of them, become "True Believers." While this ardent enthusiasm may get in the way of cool and critical evaluation, we must recognize that something in Delsarte techniques and philosophy has always concerned the spiritual and the moral. Never just about "exercises" or abstract ideas, or scholarly materials, the work always engaged the whole student, mind, body, and soul—sometimes provoking ardent enthusiasm. The Delsarte Trinity even may have become a part of our national way of looking at things, as evidenced by John Kerry's reference, in a stump speech given in September 2004: "You can trust me with your head, your heart, and your gut." The "True Believers" certainly do their true believing with three centers—and easily become Pronko's Dilettantes.

According to one historian, "[t]he Delsarte system in America thus began its life in a grandiose idealistic sphere, following the lead of Delsarte himself" (Ruyter 1999, 20). Delsarte had a way of "converting" students; his wife noted that "[Steele Mackaye] came home from that first meeting 'walking on air, wrapped in a mantle of enthusiasm, reverence and delight, which from that day to his latest hour he never relinquished'" (qtd. in Ruyter 1999, 18). Shawn, too, was charismatic if not evangelical in his teaching of Delsarte.

Eugenio Barba explains "radioactive teaching" as a world-view with a long shelf-life, a way of looking at things strong enough to cause a permanent genetic change in things exposed to it. While we may not know the original form of Delsarte's teachings, we can, however, see their effects, certainly in mutated forms, in subsequent generations.

Delsarte's thousands of misunderstanding followers have produced fertile, impure, and glorious artistic work in the hope of recreating what was lost. True Believers, the wild-eyed, and fuzzy thinkers, make cosmic connections where none exist, or at least none for the academic and analytic scholar, Pronko's Documenter.

Mixing metaphors, perhaps what we know of Delsarte can compare to a truncated and scarred ancient statue. While missing a great deal, what remains radiates dynamically, exciting the imagination to try to recreate, to replicate the missing parts. How else can we explain the tremendous vitality of these ideas in our time and the diversity of their fruits? As each Dilettante's imaginative processes differ, each one—from before Shawn to beyond Grotowski—imagines (in place of the missing ones) limbs or appendages in different attitudes on different stages for different reasons. Coming back to the *Cherry Orchard* metaphor, there exist as many recipes for the cherries as inspired Delsartian Dilettantes who want to preserve them: the loss of the original recipe forced them to create.

Nonetheless, something in me still longs to see the original.

### Note

1 Emma Lyon (1765?–1815) performed statue posing before Delsarte was born. See Volker Schachenmayr, "Emma Lyon, the Attitude, and Goethean Performance Theory," *New Theatre Quarterly* 49, Volume XIII, February 1997.



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**The author with Delsarteans Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis  
at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, August 1964.**

*Un-attributed photograph.*