

Trish Arnold obituary

Pioneer of movement training for actors



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Trish Arnold, who has died aged 98, was a pioneer of movement training for actors. In 1955, she accepted an offer to teach movement at the London drama school Lamda, in a role created to meet the challenges of postwar theatre and the changing physical life needed on stage. No longer evoking the upper-class characters of Noël Coward, the new playwrights wrote about working-class people and they needed actors who could really inhabit these roles. Traditional movement training might have involved elocution, fencing and a bit of traditional dance, but Trish set about creating a new way of working, which later became known as Pure Movement.

The voice teacher Iris Warren warned her not to do any movement that would hamper the actors' free breathing. She said: "There is a breath with every movement – you don't hold your breath to do a movement, you let your voice go out with a movement." Trish's genius lay in creating a methodology and approach that worked from impulse (initial mental, emotional and physical responses) and release (letting go of habits of movement), so that actors could adopt the physical signals that help an audience recognise a character on stage or screen.

She was adamant that her work was about enabling actors, rather than giving them a rigid lexicon of exercises. She was always focused on the class immediately in front of her, trying to help them get their imagination and body to work in harmony.

Trish once said: “I think movement can be one of the hardest parts of training for an actor. Acting is an amorphous art and TV gives the young aspirant the idea that to appear ‘natural’ is all that is needed. Actually, no acting is natural. I believe to appear ‘natural’, actors have to give up some of the habits they have accumulated. The posture is hard to change because what is habitual is safe. They have to unlock their expressive, imaginative body.”

Born in Peebles, in the Scottish borders, Trish was the daughter of Ronald Thorburn, a woollen manufacturer, and his wife, Elinor (nee Burne). She was educated at home, came out as a debutante, began her training and career as a dancer at the Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet School, and went on to dance with the Royal Ballet Company. She married John Arnold in 1945 (the marriage ended in divorce), and after the birth of two children, Sonia and Peter, began to teach classical ballet, but became increasingly bored with the limitations of its form.

She found new excitement in the work of [Sigurd Leeder](#), a German refugee who had worked closely with [Kurt Jooss](#)’s Modern Ballet Company. Trish trained with Leeder, and it was here that her work progressed from classical ballet to the more modern forms of movement, and her appointment at Lamda. She was head of movement there from 1963 until 1972.

Over the subsequent 40 years she developed her approach to training not only at [Lamda](#), but all over the world, including at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, New York University and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London. She continued to respond to the changing needs of the acting profession. The Pure Movement is now the basis of movement departments in many major British and US drama schools and Trish’s influence is felt in the work of prominent directors and choreographers in film, on stage and on TV.

She continued to work late into her 90s, mainly at her home in north-west London, where teachers she had trained would visit, drink tea (or something stronger), push the furniture aside and begin swinging, stretching and spending hours talking about movement. (A 2008 DVD set, [Tea](#)

[with Trish](#), by Merry Conway documents this experience.)

In her last years, she would make an occasional appearance at Guildhall, Rada or Lamda to teach a masterclass and to make sure that the next generation of movement teachers was developing well. She also gave masterclasses on voice training sessions at the Central School of Speech and Drama.

Ana Laan, a pupil at one of her sessions in 2011, described Trish, by then walking with assistance, as “a majestic little bird ... she settles at the end of the room to watch us closely. We perform our swings for her, she shouts the occasional instruction, we are aflame ... Trish steps away from her walker and demonstrates. Her legs waver a little, then she stands alone. And then ... she extends her arm in one long line from clavicle to finger tip, giving new meaning to arm, to line, to extend ... It is one glittering moment.”

Peter died in 2015. Trish is survived by Sonia, seven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

- Patricia Joyce Arnold, movement teacher, born 19 June 1918; died 2 February 2017