

**YOUR OWN ART LANGUAGE: PERFORMING WOMANHOOD IN THE DELSARTE
SCHOOLS OF EXPRESSION**

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Abstract

This thesis considers the expansion of the Delsarte System of Expression in the late nineteenth century United States and seeks to understand why this pedagogical framework for acting and elocution was especially embraced by upper-middle-class white women at the height of the Progressive Era. Drawing on extensive archival materials, I consider the work of three notable “Delsartians” and their respective institutions: Genevieve Stebbins’s New York School of Expression, Anna Morgan’s Studios in Chicago, and Emily M. Bishop’s Department of Delsarte at the Chautauqua Assembly. These leading practitioners used space, rhetoric, and performance material in their curricula to prepare their female students for life in both the private and public spheres in a way that significantly reflects the cultural shift away from defining American womanhood as a cult of domesticity. Their approaches allowed theatrical training to become synonymous with the cultural practices of educated womanhood, granting their students a new vocabulary to understand their bodies and their minds in distinctly public forums. I argue that the Delsartians serve as a case study for how women in the United States performed their identities in a multitude of ways, and that by re-examining the archive, their work can be further integrated into the history of American theatre.

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Introduction

“I have a new teacher called Delsarte,” Lillie de Hegemann-Lindecrone wrote to her mother in 1865 during a trip to Paris, “the most unique specimen I have ever seen” (77). The day she arrived for her first lesson, the twenty-one-year-old soprano had little reason to believe the advice of this “unique specimen” would amount to greater success in her stage career. While François Delsarte had earned a reputation as the premiere European acting instructor, and trained hundreds of young men and women in what he called “artistic expression,” at first glance, Lillie worried she was “in the presence of a concierge in a second-class establishment” (77). She was startled to find, “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” (77) adorning the walls of Delsarte’s front parlor. The room itself was in complete disarray:

“The lid of the piano was absent and to judge from the inside, I should say that the piano was the receptacle for everything that belonged to the Delsarte homestead. There were inkstands, pens, pencils, knives, wire, matches, toothpicks, half-smoked cigars, even remnants of his luncheon, which seemed to have been black bread and cheese, and dust galore. Delsarte had on a pair of much-worn embroidered slippers, a velvet *calotte*, the tassels of which swayed with each of his emotions, and a dilapidated *robe de chambre* which opened at every movement, disclosing his soiled plaid *foulard* doing duty for a collar” (77-78).

But despite her reservations, Lillie stayed for her lesson. As he coached her through a challenging aria, Delsarte pushed Lillie to think critically about how her character would be feeling in such a situation. He asked her to identify the core emotion behind each lyric, having

her point to a picture on the wall that corresponded with the feeling. He emphasized authenticity over perfection: a slight tremor in her voice would display her sadness better than perfect pitch ever could, and her face needed to betray her character's violent distress even if it went against lady-like presentation. "No one," he told her, "in such a moment of emotion could keep on the right note," and he encouraged her to bring her "natural" emotions into her performance (79). "My head began to whirl with all this talk," Lillie wrote, and she left her first lesson inspired by Delsarte's methods, resolving to practice at every opportunity (80). As she informed her mother, "There is no doubt that he is a *great artist*...He assured me that there is no art like that of making people believe what you want them to" (79). Within a year, Lillie would find herself performing for the court of Emperor Napoleon III. When the Emperor praised her dramatic expressions, Lillie responded, without hesitation: "That is my teacher's art...Monsieur Delsarte" (145).

Lillie was one of the earliest women to be educated in François Delsarte's System of Expression, and one of the few to be personally trained by its creator. Drawing on philosophical principles of semiotics and aesthetics, combined with new theories of psychology, Delsarte formulated a system of physical and elocutionary training that claimed to be the solution to artificiality in acting. At its core lay the idea that personal expression was the result of outward manifestations of inward emotional states, and that the union of the mind, body, and soul was needed to express a genuine emotion on the stage. At a time when performance education was limited to apprenticeship and the contradictory advice of private teachers, and anti-theatrical sentiment still pervaded popular culture, the System offered a standardized pedagogy that could make acting as respected an art form as music or visual art. But to those outside Delsarte's private studio, his theories of expression resembled the state of his front parlor: a jumbled collection of random objects and ideas that seemed to bear no use for anyone outside the theatre

industry. By the time word of the System of Expression reached the United States in the 1870s, the master teacher had passed away without publishing any complete text on his theories, leaving the next generation to sift through his notes and make his wisdom accessible to the public.

Initial interest in the System of Expression was led by male actors and educators, notably actor and director James Steele MacKaye, one of Delsarte's final private students. By the 1880s, however, we see a shift in the demographics of Delsarte's disciples. Hundreds of American women were fascinated by Delsarte's tactics, and like Lillie, were compelled to look beyond the messy studio to find the deeper meaning in the fragmented archive. Over the next fifty years, upper-middle-class white women became the primary teachers and practitioners of the System of Expression. These "Delsartians," as they called themselves, became masters of marketing and self-promotion, running their own private schools and publishing guidebooks to the System for professionals and amateurs alike. They held positions of respect in society, chaired educational conferences, ran university departments, and participated in reform efforts. Many advocated that learning to act could prepare a woman for public life, help her overcome her own insecurities and express herself to the fullest. Still others challenged fashion conventions and rejected corseting practices in favor of loose-fitting gowns, placing the feminine body onstage in a way that showcased a natural beauty rather than a restrictive ideal. Though the tactics of these teachers varied widely across the decades, the "Americanized" versions of the System of Expression still clung to Delsarte's original intention: cultivate the mind and the body to produce authentic emotional responses from the soul. From the 1880s to the 1910s, Delsartism was the dominant performance pedagogy in the United States. Women could be found preaching Delsarte's gospel from the smallest vaudeville venues to the Metropolitan Opera House, from

finishing schools to elite universities. For these performers, the art of making people believe what you wanted was the gateway to societal prestige and individual autonomy.

But a cursory glance at histories of American acting training will reveal a noticeable absence of Delsartism from the narrative of theatre history. Theatre historians did not begin chronicling the story of the System of Expression until after the pedagogical framework faded from performance degree programs during the First World War. Many of these early historians were members of the Little Theatre Movement, and as Charlotte Canning argues, they often relied on diminishing the work of the past to elevate their own contributions to their present artistic climate (Canning 308). As a result, they tended to focus on criticisms of the System as they considered their historiography. For instance, throughout the 1890s, Samuel Silas Curry, at the time one of the foremost teachers of elocution and acting, publicly railed against the work of the Delsarteans, claiming their methods exemplified everything wrong with the American theatre. In his book *The Province of Expression* (1894), Curry dismissed the idea that acting was a skill that could be mastered outside of spontaneous artistic exploration:

“In the first place [Delsarte] is artificial. Things are measured by an artificial standard. The mind, the body, and nature are searched, not for truth, but for something to fit into an ingenious and artificial mold...In the second place, it is a system, although the author may have disclaimed the word. There is a good sense in which the word ‘system’ is used, but when it is applied to art, especially to a method of training, it becomes mechanical. In fact, a system in this sense is a series of facts built upon a mechanical plan” (quoted in “Practical Expression” 176).

Later historians would use this and similar arguments to dismiss the System's artistic merit, focusing on the criticisms found in the archive rather than the praise. Many of these arguments were also steeped in sexism, with male historians despairing that women had somehow corrupted the original French's master's ideas with their own. Claude Lester Shaver claimed in 1937 that these women's works were "perverted" expressions of the artistic framework, part of "a welter of unauthorized books, misunderstandings, distortions and quackeries" (4). As recently as the 1960s, Delsarte warranted little more than a sentence or two in notable histories of the field. In his *History of American Acting* (1966), Garff B. Wilson admitted that Delsartism was important for establishing a professional educational program for actors but concludes "American acting was influenced for the worse in many cases" (102-103).

Dance historians have been more forgiving of Delsarte, largely due to the influence of modern dance pioneers Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, both of whom encountered Delsartism in their youth. Although she later rejected claims of Delsarte's influence on her work, Duncan wrote in 1898 that "Delsarte, the master of all principles of flexibility and lightness of body, should be universally thanked for the bonds he has removed from our constrained members" (quoted in Preston, 223). In her autobiography, St. Denis recalled seeing renowned Delsartean Genevieve Stebbins in performance as a child:

"Not until I saw my first vision of the creative dance in the person of Genevieve Stebbins did I begin to have any idealism in relation to dance. The image of her white Grecian figure became so indelibly printed in my mind that everything I subsequently did stemmed from this revelation" ([1939], 16-17, quoted in Mullan 99).

St. Denis's husband, Ted Shawn, offered lectures on Delsarte's ideology during his residency at Jacob's Pillow throughout the 1960s, and the codified series of gestures became

influential to the American modern dance tradition (Leabhart 10). Shawn would go on to chronicle the journey from Delsarte to modern dance in his book *Every Little Movement* (1963), but despite his meticulous archival research, Shawn continuously excludes the writing and perspectives of the women who made Delsarte an American staple. He refers to Genevieve Stebbins as “not a dancer, not even a theatre performer, but a lecturer and teacher only,” (80-81), and writes that her surviving publications “are of much less value to us today” (96).

Scholarly interest in Delsartism declined after Shawn, but in the 1990s, historians began to consider the United States’ pre-Method acting traditions more critically. James H. McTeague’s groundbreaking text *Before Stanislavsky: American Professional Acting Schools and Acting Theory 1875-1925* (1993) provides an extensive examination of early acting schools grounded in Delsartian ideology. However, like his predecessors, he actively dismisses women’s contributions to Delsartism. While McTeague offers complimentary reviews of male-led acting schools such as Steele MacKaye’s Lyceum Theatre School, Franklin Sargent’s American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and Samuel Silas Curry’s School of Expression, the pedagogy and practices of female-led schools is largely ignored. Examining Genevieve Stebbins’ 1885 textbook *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, McTeague concludes that Delsartism had been “corrupted by those who were not aware of [its] significance”, accusing pupils like Stebbins of “mechanizing” the System (38).

A paradigm shift occurred in 1999 with Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter’s *The Cultivation of the Mind and Body in American Delsartism*. Coming from the perspective of dance history, Ruyter chronicles the evolution of the System from Delsarte’s original theories, to Steele MacKaye’s efforts to bring the System into higher education, through Genevieve Stebbins’ career as an actress and educator. The book aims to provide a historical “who”, “what”, “where”,

and “when” rather than a “why” governed by a specific framework (xiv). Ruyter’s account prompted several scholarly inquiries into Delsarte across disciplines to answer the “whys”, but many carried the same tone of disappointment that the Delsartians were not more radical in their performances of American femininity. Taylor Lake examines how Delsartian Mary Anderson’s performance as Galeta reflects a medium where women could perform in ways that were still aligned with traditional standards of femininity (114). Joseph Fahey expands on Ruyter’s argument that Delsartism was “a quiet victory for progress in American theatre and women’s rights” but remains critical of the failure to standardize the System and claims that it carried “a professionalism defined by little else than a defensive response to those who criticized [it]” (75).

After this crucial period of activity, theatre history once again shied away from close analysis of Delsarte. However, in communication studies and social history, interest in Delsarte continued to expand into the twenty-first century. Marion Wilson Kimber’s *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (2017) devotes significant attention to the role that Delsartism played in encouraging community among upper-middle-class women and provided a new rhetorical framework for women to understand their bodies and their minds. Paige V. Banaji explores how Delsartism helped to “re-gender” public speaking as a female-coded activity (155), and Linda Tomko’s *Dancing Class* (1999) points to how the physical culture movement placed women’s bodies and emotions on a public stage.

Communication scholars have also taken important steps to legitimize American Delsartism within historiography, and recent work shows that analysis of the archive is always subjective. For example, Nan Johnson’s influential text *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* (2002) examines a massive archive of women’s rhetorical performance, with special emphasis on the elocutionary movement that would pave the way for

the adoption of Delsartism. In her analysis of popular elocution textbooks, she notes that illustrations of women's performance texts featured women in white gowns reminiscent of togas, while men are drawn in formal suits. Johnson concludes that this is an example of male rhetoricians diminishing women's ability to perform, relegating them to putting on foolish costumes rather than distinguished professional attire (34). But ten years later, examining the same set of textbooks, Lisa Suter argues that the toga represented not a demeaning costume, but a harkening back to the rhetors of Ancient Greece, allowing women to present themselves as part of the classical rhetorical tradition worthy of respect (146). Furthermore, the toga provided women with much more freedom of movement than the era's notoriously restrictive corsets, allowing them to take up more physical space with their gestures. Such arguments show that we need not be bound to pre-existing theoretical frameworks when examining the archive.

With so many other disciplines interrogating the archive through new and exciting lenses, why has theatre history fallen behind? Perhaps it is because it is tempting to write the history of American theatre as a line of progress—away from melodrama and toward realism, away from a confusing past and toward something more recognizable to the twenty-first century eye. But when we try too much to interrogate the past through the lens of the present, we miss vital details about realities of life and art in past time periods that leave our histories lacking nuance. Similarly, it is tempting to follow Shawn's and McTeague's views that Delsarte's original methods were misinterpreted and manipulated, leading to its eventual downfall. This historiographic framework diminishes the voices of the very real people who subscribed to Delsartism, and who viewed their practice as a means to display the human condition in its most authentic form. Instead, we can view the Americanized versions of the System of Expression as

their own distinct entity that, although different from the French master's ideas, held very real importance to their various practitioners.

Theatre history is not the only discipline, of course, that has fallen prey to selective memory. Part of why Delsartism has been dismissed from the history of performance is because its story departs radically from the way we have been taught to understand the late-nineteenth century, particularly the lived experiences of women. As such, we can look to women's history for examples on how to move away from a pre-existing theoretical framework and embrace a more nuanced historiography.

In her 1966 essay "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter argues that the lives of nineteenth century women were judged by "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). Under these virtues, women were held "hostage" within the "private sphere" of the home, while the "public sphere" of politics, economics, and education was reserved exclusively for men (151). Welter consults a variety of archival sources, arguing that the literature of the era provides proof that women were manipulated by oppressive male forces into believing their only value was in the home as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, devoted to upholding a "cult of true womanhood" within this ideology of separate spheres. Although women gradually gained more political and social freedom as the years went on, Welter claims that "the stereotype, the 'mystique' if you will, of what woman was and ought to be persisted, bringing guilt and confusion in the midst of opportunity" (174).

This essay has become one of the defining texts of women's history, providing a paradigm for early women's historians to understand an archive fraught with records of oppression. It is important to remember that women's history as a discipline was born out of the

Second Wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Analyses like Welter's served an important purpose at the time; they encouraged a narrative of women's oppression by patriarchy, providing important justifications for contemporary women's fight for political rights (Kerber 1988; Davidson 1998). While I would not discredit Welter's archival survey, it is important to remember she paints only one picture of life in the late nineteenth century. Applying this ideal to all women ignores the realities of immigrant women, women of color, and poor women, who were not bound to the same social standards (Kerber 17). It also absolves white women from their role in perpetrating existing systems of oppression, including imperialism and racism, by presenting them as strictly victims (Kaplan 582). When we favor a pre-existing theoretical framework over historiography, we risk misunderstanding the realities of these women's lived experiences (Davidson 456).

When scholars have considered the Progressive Era, a moment of serious cultural shifts for white, middle-class women in particular, the stories that are told tend to be those of "extraordinary women," openly participating in the public sphere of politics. I do not mean to diminish the accomplishments of the more outspoken reformers of this era whose efforts lead to real, radical change for American women, including the right to vote, the right to divorce, and the right to reproductive autonomy. I instead maintain that the more "ordinary" women in the Progressive Era were striking their own blows for gender equality, rather than being prisoners of a Cult of True Womanhood. Indeed, contemporary historians have increasingly pushed against this worldview in their re-examinations of the archive. Frances Cogan proposes another paradigm of late nineteenth-century womanhood, which she terms "Real Womanhood." Consulting a wide variety of archival documents including pamphlets, magazines, advertisements, and newspaper articles, Cogan argues that the ideal of the "Real Woman"

emphasized education for education's sake and a moral obligation to better the world in whatever ways possible (6). This ideal co-existed with the literature Welter references in her construction of the Cult of True Womanhood, indicating that there were a variety of ideas about how to perform upper-middle class white womanhood through the Progressive Era (9). Similarly, Ellen M. Plante's *Women at Home in Victorian America* (1997) examines primary sources that enforce a definition of womanhood that again focuses on being an educated participant in cultured society that prioritizes emotional openness (4-5). Spatial constructions of public and private have also been called into question in recent scholarship. In her examination of gender relations in rural Massachusetts at the turn of the twentieth century, Deborah Ruffman finds that women actively participated in the public sphere alongside men in entrepreneurial and leisure pursuits, arguing that "Historical, archaeological, and other anthropological analyses of gender must recognize that simple correlations of male/female with public/private spaces mask the complexities of dynamic social relations" (673). Although this ideal still focuses on a white, middle-class group of women and in no way claims to speak to the experiences of all women in the Progressive Era, it is a crucial reminder that examining the archive through just one historical lens will never tell the whole story. As Cathy N. Davidson puts it, "Sometimes all it takes is a little research to puncture the separate spheres" (460).

Archival explorations like Cogan's, Plante's and Ruffman's are promising steps toward disrupting the binary framework of the ideology of separate spheres. I argue that as a discipline, theatre history faces the same problem as women's history: the urge to interrogate the past through the lens of the present. Linda Tomko argues that rather than imagine a distinct "women's culture" within a private sphere, historians should instead consider the diverse range of "cultural practices" undertaken by women that immersed them in public life. The term "practices" places

women in a dynamic position, calling on historians to examine the ways they “actively make, question, or remake ideas, behaviors, and embodiments of what it means to be female” (38). The arts, Tomko explains, were a crucial part of women’s cultural practices, inseparable from the more explicitly political activities they engaged in at the turn of the century and deserve to be analyzed in tandem with the political, intellectual, and social movements of the era (39). A re-examination of the teaching and practice of the Delsarte System of Expression can be another method of understanding the nuances of Progressive Era womanhood. By joining the ideas of Cogan’s Real Womanhood with Tomko’s notion of cultural practices, theatre historians can strive to paint a more complete picture of women’s performance at this time.

This thesis continues the work of dismantling the ideology of separate spheres by considering the work of three notable American Delsartians between 1885 and 1905, a critical period for both women’s social advancement and theatre history. It is my attempt to answer Ruyter’s “why”, as well as uncover a “how”; consulting a variety of archives that have been made accessible thanks to digitization, I aim to discover what aspects of the System of Expression made it so compelling to women at this crucial moment in American history.

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the cultural and social circumstances that facilitated the development of the System of Expression as a pedagogical framework. One of the key facets of Delsartism is the understanding that artists are the inheritors of a set of knowledge passed down from teacher to student. I will explore the lives and teachings of the two original practitioners of the System – creator François Delsarte and his American student James Steele MacKaye. I will also outline the key elements of the System’s pedagogy as it was practiced between 1860 and 1880, before women became the primary educators. I close with a proposal

for why these teachings were so attractive to American women coming of age in the Progressive Era.

The next three chapters feature case studies on the lives and teachings of three of the most prominent Delsarteans between 1885 and 1900. The artists I have included in this survey all published widely on their theories and methods and were part of institutions that preserved their documents. Following the examples given in the archive, I will refer to these artists as *Delsarteans*, and the wider movement as *Delsartism*. I have also chosen the pronoun “she” as my generalized descriptor to honor the women who were the movement’s primary educators. I hope that in highlighting their stories, we can be encouraged to dig even deeper into the practices of the countless women who dedicated their lives to teaching the United States to act. Each chapter will elucidate how these artists' use of space, rhetoric, performance, and social engagement elevated their art form and presented new definitions of both theatrical excellence and American womanhood.

Chapter 2 follows the life and teachings of Genevieve Stebbins, a pupil of Steele MacKaye, and the first teacher and performer to publish on Delsartian ideology in the United States. During her time as the principal of the New York School of Expression, Stebbins created an environment where careful study could lead to spiritual transcendence through the art of acting. As a professional actress herself, she prepared her students for careers as both performers and educators, while vehemently defending her work from misogynistic critics and maintaining an important cultural presence in New York City. Her first book, *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* (1885), served as the model for many Delsarteans’ work, and therefore is the natural place to begin a survey of the System’s expansion.

In Chapter 3, I move to Chicago, where performer, director, and socialite Anna Morgan headed the Department of Delsarte at the Chicago Opera House Conservatory, and later the Anna Morgan Studios in the iconic Fine Arts Building. Her practical approach to the System, as recorded in her widely-read book *An Hour with Delsarte* (1889), helped spur on the national craze in both the professional and the private spheres. Furthermore, her role in the Little Theater Movement helped to further popularize the System in performance, as well as integrate the theatre into high society leisure culture.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the work of Emily M. Bishop, Principal of the Department of Delsarte at the Chautauqua Assembly's School of Physical Education. Bishop was not an actor, but rather an advocate of the physical culture movement, who saw Delsarte's teachings as a way to improve bodily and spiritual health. Her primary text, *Americanized Delsarte Culture* (1895), helped to transition the movement out of the academy and the theater and into the popular consciousness, teaching multiple generations of women that the art of performing oneself was a skill that could be mastered in the same way as dramatic performance on the stage.

I conclude with a call for future theatre historians to continue to examine the Delsartian archive with a more sympathetic eye. The work of the Delsarteans provides ample case studies for historians to better understand how women's cultural practices blurred the boundaries of the ideology of separate spheres in the Progressive Era. By looking at the history of women's performance, we can paint a more complete picture of life in this turbulent cultural moment. As theatre historians, we need no longer be bound to the theoretical frameworks that prioritize a tidy story over historiographical evidence, nor need we hang onto the words of great men at the expense of chronicling women's reality. Like Lillie de Hegemann-Lindecrone at her first lesson

with François Delsarte, we can look past the mess around the piano and let ourselves be moved toward a place of deeper understanding. As the following pages will demonstrate, the women who practiced and taught Delsarte took their art form seriously, regardless of their critics, and if they did, it's time we did too.

Chapter 1: “Contemplate Yourselves” – The Pedagogical Roots of American Delsartism

“I offer you a work superior even to those sciences which have been described to you; superior to all which the genius of a Michael Angelo [sic] or a Raphael could conceive; a work in comparison with which all the magnificence of science and art must pale. I propose that you should contemplate yourselves!” – François Delsarte, date unknown.

“Express boldly to yourself what you think and feel; seek a scientific system by which you can raise the weighty lid that burdens your spiritual eye and prevents it from looking into that world which is the reality of which we dream.” – Steele MacKaye, undated diary entry, 1861.

A Delsartian education was grounded on the understanding that actors were members of a lineage of artists who understood the secrets of the universe through the lens of emotional expression. Thus, an understanding of the lives and practices of those who came before them was essential to an actor’s education. This chapter examines the two educators who popularized the formal study of acting – French singer and teacher François Delsarte (1811-1871) and American actor, director, and teacher James Steele MacKaye (1842-1894). The work of both Delsarte and MacKaye served as the foundation for the version of Delsartism practiced by American women, and their trials and tribulations served as important mythology for students of acting. By providing biographical sketches and outlines of their pedagogical practices, I set the social and artistic scene for the innovations made by the women who followed in their footsteps.

Prior to 1871, the United States had no specialized schools for acting. The few established acting companies followed a system of theatre education that had been in use since the early Renaissance. An aspiring actor would join either a resident or touring “stock company,” which typically performed work by Shakespeare and other British writers, and later French dramas, minstrel shows, and melodramas. The young actor would take on small parts in the chorus while apprenticed to observe the company’s leading actors or “stars.” If she showed potential, she would gradually take on larger speaking roles and understudy the star, finally taking over the leading roles when the star moved on. Some roles might have required an additional dance, diction, or fencing class, but overall acting was meant to be learned through observation of one’s elders (McTeague xi-xii).

The stock company system had its benefits; it ensured a steady stream of new talent and provided a cohesive, established hierarchy within theater companies. But the model left little room for creative exploration. Once an actor’s “type” was established, she was often bound to that role for life. There were also no designated times for apprentices to work with their stars one-on-one, with companies often learning and performing multiple plays simultaneously (McTeague xii). Touring companies were especially vulnerable to financial hardship. The miserable members of John Barnard’s showboat company, for example, suffered through a severe outbreak of malaria, and when their producers skipped town with their paychecks, actors were left digging for shellfish in the riverbed to feed themselves (Hanners 101). In such dire conditions, there was little time to consider character motivations or intentional gestures. Actors said or did whatever they could to keep the audience’s attention on the stage. As one showboat actress honestly stated, “In those days, it was play or starve” (Hanners 19-20).

While the American public certainly enjoyed plays and variety shows, theatre was not regarded as “high art” on the same level as, for instance, orchestral music or painting. Theater spaces were dark, dirty places in unsavory areas of big cities, and the United States’ inescapable Puritanical heritage led many to see actors as bad influences rather than artists. In 1820, a Presbyterian minister admonished his daughter in church for attending a play at the Park Theatre in New York, with a public declaration reading, “Eliza Spring, having recently visited one of those profane and sinful places of carnal recreation, commonly called theatres, is here by cut off from the communion of the Church of Christ” (Gassner xviii). Many critics bemoaned the standard repertoire of butchered Shakespeare and ripped-from-the-headlines melodrama. No less a critic than Walt Whitman wrote that “Of all ‘low’ places where vulgarity (not only the stage, but in front of it) is in the ascendant, and bad-taste carries the day with a hardly pleasant point to mitigate its coarseness, the New York theatre may be put down...at the top of the heap!” (Whitman 71) By the 1840s, to bring in more sales, companies began channeling their money into hosting stars from Europe, further casting apprentices to the sidelines (Gassner xix).

While theatre struggled to assert its prestige, elocution cemented itself as a cultural hallmark. From as early as 1800, the study of public speaking was a key component of education for both men and women from primary school to university (Kimber 6). As they learned to read, very young children would recite age-appropriate stories and poems before their peers, gradually working their way up to Bible verses, Romantic poetry, and longer dramatic speeches. The works of Tennyson, Browning, Shakespeare, Shelley, and Byron were popular selections in schoolhouses around the country, and the ability to recite such complicated verse was hailed as a triumph of the American education system (Borchers & Wagner 283). Students often displayed

their skills at community events, sometimes competing for prizes and scholarships donated by community organizations and wealthy benefactors.

Elocution was a key component of education at the university level as well. In the early days of American higher education, men attended college to be trained for a select number of professions: primarily law, medicine, and ministry, all of which require the ability to effectively communicate ideas. Beginning in the 1860s, the expansion of the liberal arts model of education encouraged more people to attend university to study a greater diversity of subjects. Public speaking became a popular elective choice, especially as more women began attending college. In the shifting academic environment of the post-Civil War era, public speaking became yet another vehicle for the liberal arts education system to emphasize personal development of the individual for the betterment of society (Borchers & Wagner 280). The late nineteenth century saw an expansion in specialized schools of public speaking. Chief among these were the Leland Powers School of Expression, the Curry School of Expression, and the Emerson College of Oratory. Larger universities also began adding departments of expression, notably Boston University's School of Oratory. These schools offered both two- and four-year degrees in expression, preparing a new generation of Americans for careers in public speaking.

Outside of formal education settings, declamation was a cornerstone of American entertainment. Reform movements organized rallies to spread their ideas to hundreds of people at a time, standing on wooden platforms and explaining their positions. Leaders of the women's suffrage movement, the temperance movement, and the abolitionist movement made steady livings as public speakers on these lecture circuit (Johnson 29-30). Any large community gathering – from Fourth of July celebrations to Christmas pageants – featured recitations of some kind by readers of all ages. Upper-middle class women held recitation meetings in their parlors,

sharing poetry and stories with their communities. Teaching private elocution lessons was also a popular method of earning income as a young woman before marriage (Kimber 150).

Despite the widespread acceptance of an art form that was inherently performative, elocutionists did not consider themselves actors. These public speakers often saw themselves as above acting, recalling and embodying the work of past geniuses rather than performing as fictional characters. Elocutionists were well-off, educated bearers of universal truth; actors were poor, uncultured vagabonds concerned with imitation (Johnson 21). This dichotomy would prevail for the better part of a century, until the words of one French innovator would unite them forever.

A LAW OF HARMONY: THE LIFE AND WORK OF FRANÇOIS DELSARTE

The details of François Delsarte's early life are inconsistent in the archive. Early European Delsarteans were known to embellish certain aspects of his life story to build a more compelling narrative of a tortured artistic genius, and these exaggerated accounts were reiterated by American Delsarteans in their own teachings. The following account is compiled from Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter's archival surveys, Donald Hebert's 1997 doctoral dissertation, and the writings of Delsarte's students Angelique Arnaud and the Abbé Delaumosne.

François Delsarte was born in 1811 to a poor family in Solesmes, France. After his father bankrupted the family, François's mother took him and his siblings to Paris. His two sisters were left in the care of an aunt, and his brother and mother died soon after. While we do not know the

specifics of his time in Paris as a child, he survived on his own doing odd jobs.¹ Around 1823, he encountered a professor of music named Père Bambini, who offered him both a place to live and extensive musical training. In 1826, he received a scholarship to study vocal performance and drama at the Conservatoire de Paris, where he remained for the next three and a half years (Ruyter 3-4).

As a student, Delsarte was continuously dissatisfied with his education. He found his various professors' advice was often contradictory and felt his performances lacked emotional authenticity. In a memorable anecdote from his unpublished papers, he recounts his struggles to convey genuine surprise while playing a character reuniting with a long-lost father. His professors told him he ought to reach out toward the object of surprise, but the position felt unnatural to Delsarte. One day, while practicing the scene alone in a courtyard, he received a surprise visit from a cousin, and observed the natural response of his body:

“My hands were not extended toward the object of my surprise – not the least in the world. By an anterior extension of the arms, they were raised high above my head, which, far from being uplifted with the exultation which I had hitherto simulated, was lowered to my breast; and my body, stranger yet, instead of being toward the attractive object, bent suddenly backward... ‘What,’ thought I, ‘are my masters absolutely ignorant of the laws of nature?’” (quoted in Delaumosne 389)

The experience inspired Delsarte to formulate his own theories of gesture and speech, which he hoped could serve as a universal language for actors and singers and standardize performance education. Over the next three decades, Delsarte meticulously studied the world

¹ Different Delsartians shared different accounts of Delsarte's childhood as an orphan in Paris. Arnaud and Delaumosne claim he was apprenticed to a porcelain painter, while others place him as a rag-picker. The narrative of an artistic genius discovered from poverty remained incredibly important to the disciples who spread his teachings in both France and the United States.

around him. The cousin who had surprised him in the courtyard happened to be a medical student, giving Delsarte the opportunity to study cadavers, observe patients in the mental and maternity wards, and sit in on autopsies (Delaumosne 401). He also frequented the Louvre to examine the gestures and corresponding emotions of statues and paintings, and sat in parks to observe how different people walked, spoke, and interacted with one another (Delaumosne 20). These experiences helped him to formulate a codified series of gestures that when placed together could create what Delsarte saw as genuine emotional experiences on the stage.

After leaving the Conservatoire in 1829, Delsarte began his career as an opera singer while continuing to formulate his theories. His desire to perfect his own methods likely resulted in an unsuccessful stage career; his daughter Madeleine later wrote, “He did not tolerate his convictions being attacked” (quoted in Ruyter 7). Throughout his life, Delsarte would claim that the improper training he received at the Conservatoire ruined his voice, forcing him to retire from singing full-time by 1834, at age 23 (Ruyter 5). The next three decades saw Delsarte refine his theories even further, developing a reputation as a leading teacher of acting, singing, and declamation. From his home in Paris, he offered individual lessons, group workshops, and general lectures open to the public. His lectures took place in an eighteen square-foot drawing room, with a small playing space between a row of chairs and a blackboard. Delsarte’s most popular lecture series was his *Cours d’esthétique appliquée* (Course in Applied Aesthetics). A typical session of the *Cours* started with theory work, followed by recitations from the pupils and rehearsals for public presentations (P. MacKaye 136). Delsarte’s wife Rosine, a Conservatoire-trained pianist, often accompanied private vocal lessons, and his children Gustave and Marie were trained to teach his system (Ruyter 9). Alongside some of the great European actors of the nineteenth century – including Henriette Sontag, Rachel, and Sarah Bernhardt – Delsarte’s

students included writers, clergymen, lawyers, composers, and painters interested in the secrets he claimed to possess about the human frame and voice (Ruyter 9).



FRANCOIS DELSARTE

Figure 1: Delsarte photographed in 1869, printed in Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye

While he achieved public renown, Delsarte struggled to financially support his wife and their seven children. He also experienced chronic health problems beginning in his early 40s, which led him to withdraw from most public appearances and delayed his efforts to publish his theories (Ruyter 7). In an undated letter to his friend the King of Hanover, Delsarte explained that he intended to publish a book entitled *My Revelatory Episodes, or the History of an Idea Pursued for Forty Years*:

“It will be my task to connect and condense into a single narrative all the circumstances of my life which had as logical consequences the numerous discoveries which it has been granted me to follow up, discoveries which my daily occupations left me neither time nor ability to set forth as a whole. I know not what fate is reserved for this book. I know not

whether I shall succeed in seeing it in print during my lifetime. The minds of men are, in these evil days, so little disposed to serious ideas, that it seems to me difficult to find a publisher disposed to publish things so far removed from the productions of the century” (quoted in Delaumosne 384).

These “evil days” likely referred to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, which forced the Delsarte family to flee Paris. His health continued to decline, and he died in 1871 around the age of 58 (Ruyter 8)².

“THE SUPERIOR PRINCIPLE”: UNDERSTANDING DELSARTE’S THEORIES

After Delsarte’s death, two of his French students, Angelique Arnaud and the Abbé Delaumosne, worked with his wife Rosine and children Gustave and Marie to organize his remaining letters and notes into *The Delsarte System of Oratory* (1882), published in the United States by Edgar S. Werner. The book contained English translations of Delsarte’s philosophy in his own words as well as Arnaud and Delaumosne’s interpretations of his teachings. This text became foundation to the American Delsartean’s innovations.³ A rough outline of the System’s principles as theorized by Delsarte is as follows:

Aesthetics and Semiotics in Performance

Delsarte recognized that his era’s interest in scientific study and categorization could be beneficial to actors. He was especially interested in the growing philosophical fields of

² Delsarte’s daughter Madeleine would later recall that her father would often “be seized by dizziness and migraine.” Delaumosne attributes his health issues to “hypertrophy of the heart.”

³ The original French editions of Delsarte’s surviving writings are now available in Alain Porte’s volume *François Delsarte: Une Anthologie* (1992).

Aesthetics and Semiotics. In his definition, Delsarte deduced that “If, from a certain sentiment, I deduce a certain organic form, that is Aesthetics” (461). He believed in the inherent beauty of the human body, and that an internal emotional experience should be translated into a physical expression that was, at its essence, beautiful. In a similar vein, Delsarte argued that “If, from a certain organic form, I deduce a certain sentiment, that is Semiotics” (461). In his studies of paintings and statues, for instance, he recognized the position of the shoulders could reveal a subject’s temperament, and that a character’s emotional state could be revealed even without dialogue. The “application” of this philosophy on the stage meant producing gestures and vocal expressions that served as visual and aural signifiers for internal signs. These definitions of aesthetics and semiotics worked together to produce an artistic experience, and guide the audience through an aesthetic contemplation of their own.

The Principle of the Trinity

Delsarte believed in a three-fold ordering of the universe directly linked to the Christian Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Human expression could be split into a trinity of three forces:

- **The Vital Force** is the realm of the physical, carried in the limbs.
- **The Mental Force** is the realm of the intellectual, held in the head.
- **The Moral or Emotive Force** balances the Mental and the Vital, carried in the torso.

Each part of the body was also further split into these three forces. For instance, while the hand carried a Vital force generally, the palm carried a Mental force, the wrist Moral, and the fingers Vital. According to Delsarte, these three forces are always striving to be in balance with each other, what he called “a law of harmony” (quoted in Delaumosne 445). If the head is extended to

the right, for instance, the arm should be extended to the left to strive for balance. In his notes, he represented this “harmony” as a triangle with each point contingent upon the others to achieve perfect balance. The goal of the actor was to portray this trinity onstage, demonstrating the inherent beauty of the universe through the body and voice in dramatic situations.

The Ninefold Accord

When put into practice, the three forces of the Trinity translated into three types of motion.

- Tonic or Eccentric (ecc.): Vital forces representing dynamic motion.
- Atonic or Concentric (con.): Mental forces representing inward motion.
- Normal (nor): Moral forces that achieve a sense of balance.

These three principles could be combined in nine distinct combinations, illustrated by Delsarte in a series of charts which were later illustrated for publication by Delaumosne (See Figure 2). Each part of the body could reflect these various combinations, acting as external signs of interior states. Eccentric-Concentric (ex-con) motion in the head, for example, means the head is raised upward but inclined away from the subject. The audience would interpret this gesture or “attitude” as a sign of “stratagem or cunning,” since it shows both a physical and mental effort to distance oneself from the subject. With all these gestures and emotions working together, the performer could express what Delsarte believed to be a reflection of Nature’s will, “the superior principle” that organizes the universe.

When considering these principles together, Delsarte’s European students were able to imagine themselves as artists displaying the truths of the human experience onstage for the public, encouraging aesthetic contemplation in the process. After this initial phase of activity in

the 1860s, the work of several overseas students would lead to the “Americanization” of the System of Expression that would cement its principles as aspects of late nineteenth-century cultural practices.

CRITERION OF ORATORY. 5

GENUS.	SPECIES.		
	1	3	2
II. Conc.....	1-II Ecc. Conc.	3-II Norm. Conc.	2-II Conc. Conc.
III. Norm....	1-III Ecc. Norm.	3-III Norm. Norm.	2-III Conc. Norm.
I. Ecc.....	1-I Ecc. Ecc.	3-I Norm. Ecc.	2-I Conc. Ecc.

Figure 2: Criterion of Oratory, from *The Delsarte System of Oratory* by M. L'Abbé Delaumosne.

“A NEW IDEA”: STEELE MACKAYE AND DELSARTISM IN THE UNITED STATES

American actor, director, and playwright James Steele MacKaye (1842-1894) occupies a complicated place in the history of acting training. Like his beloved teacher François Delsarte, MacKaye left behind no book or guiding document of his theories of expression. His eldest son, Percy MacKaye, composed a two-volume biography, *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye* (1927), using letters, newspaper reports, first-hand accounts, and diaries from his father’s collections. Unless otherwise noted, the following account of his life is lifted from Percy’s book.

Known to his friends and family as Jim, MacKaye lived a comfortable, upper-class life in Western New York with his father Colonel James MacKaye, and three sisters. The Colonel, also an ardent abolitionist and art connoisseur, intended for MacKaye to be a painter, paying for him

to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. At age 19, he returned home to teach painting at the Weld School, one of the first co-educational schools in the United States. MacKaye, however, was always drawn to the theatre. He was deeply interested in personal expression, and in his private notes he philosophized that systematic gestures could be used to properly communicate emotional states. He meticulously studied the muscles and movements of the human face to find out how emotion could be best captured in his paintings. He posed for sculptures and paintings for his fellow students, experimenting with different expressions and postures. MacKaye also read works by Emerson and Swedenborg on the relationship between beauty and personal expression, and took copious notes on Pope, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, the Bible, and history books. Gradually, he began to theorize that personal expression was the key to understanding the secrets of aesthetic beauty, and that the human body onstage could reflect a universal harmony, eight years before he ever encountered François Delsarte. Sometime in 1861, he wrote in his journal his “Passing Thoughts from the Ideal World”:

“Men who have the power of expression, or gift of creation, should remember they are but the servants of humanity, interpreting between them and their God, thus gaining food for them...Express boldly to yourself what you think and feel; seek a scientific system by which you can raise the weighty lid that burdens your spiritual eye and prevents it from looking into that world which is the reality of which we dream” (90),

<i>"Pantomime and Expression: 1861</i>				<i>Regulations of Time:</i>
From 10:00 o'clock	till 2:00 o'clock	—		Drawing and Painting.
" 2:00	" 4:00	"		Dramatic Exercises.
" 2:00	" 2:20	"		Exercise—Voice.
" 2:20	" 2:40	"		" Body.
" 2:40	" 3:00	"		" In <i>Pantomime</i> .
" 3:00	" 3:20	"		" In Calisthenics.
" 3:20	" 3:40	"		" In <i>Emotional Ex-</i>
" 3:40	" 4:00	"		<i>pressions of Coun-</i>
				<i>tenance.</i>
				" Miscellaneous.
" 7:½	" 9:½	"		2 Evenings in week: Specialty."

Figure 3: Steele MacKaye's personal schedule from his journals, sometime in 1861, when he was 19 years old, not long before he joined the Union Army, printed in *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye*.

A staunch abolitionist like his father, MacKaye resigned his teaching position in 1862 to serve in the Union Army during the American Civil War. While serving with the Seventh Regiment, he and his fellow soldiers formed a theatre troop, giving Jim his first chance to perform. He played Othello, Cassius, Hamlet, and Antonio throughout his time in the regiment, and traveled to New York whenever possible to see professional theatre. He rose to the rank of Major before he was forced to retire due to illness.⁴

After his time in the army, MacKaye continued to explore theories of expression, meeting with everyone from writers to painters to phrenologists, searching for a way to combine the mystic nature of art with a scientific understanding of the world. Convinced that there was something noble, even divine, about performance, he decided to devote his life fully to the study of acting. In October 1869, MacKaye, his wife Mary, and their children traveled to Paris so he could take classes at the Conservatoire. Mary later recounted that the day before Jim's first class, his father urged him to schedule a meeting with François Delsarte instead, who was quickly gaining a positive reputation as an acting teacher. Jim only intended to pay a polite, five-minute

⁴ Like Delsarte, details of Steele MacKaye's illness are subject to debate. He suffered from fainting spells throughout his life, and experienced heart palpitations, bouts of intense insomnia, and panic attacks.

visit to the teacher, but returned two hours later, according to Mary “walking on air, wrapt in a mantle of enthusiasm, reverence and delight, which from that day to his latest hour he never relinquished” (134).

From October 1869 to July 1870, MacKaye studied with Delsarte daily in his Course of Applied Aesthetics. In the System of Expression, he found his answer to the science of art. Under Delsarte’s mentorship, MacKaye began teaching private lessons in the master’s studio, immersing himself in the Paris theatre scene. It was immediately clear that Jim was Delsarte’s favorite pupil. Mary MacKaye later wrote, “From the very first Delsarte recognized Mr. MacKaye as his co-worker and successor, as well as pupil. He realized that his pupil could not only understand and apply all that he taught, but that he, too, was creative and philosophic” (135).

With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870, however, MacKaye was forced to return to the United States as Delsarte and his family fled Paris. Upon his return, MacKaye spoke with passion about Delsarte to anyone who would listen. Two of MacKaye’s friends – Professor Lewis B. Monroe of the Boston School of Oratory and the Unitarian minister William R. Alger – encouraged MacKaye to take Delsarte’s System to the masses. Alger was well-connected to the New York theatre scene, and Monroe with the academic community in Boston. Pulling together their money and acquaintances, the three friends arranged a lecture at the St. James Hotel in Boston, inviting journalists, actors, elocutionists, and professors. The money raised would be sent directly to Delsarte’s family to support them throughout the war. On March 21, 1871, after a day of terrible thunderstorms, the clouds parted as Steele MacKaye introduced the Delsarte System of Expression to the United States.

The lectures opened with a scientific breakdown of the System, followed by a demonstration of how the theories could be applied in performance. MacKaye performed Hamlet's "To be or not to be," a French translation of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and a humor piece "in Gallic-English by a Frenchman on Shakespeare" (152). He then performed several "gamuts of expression," a series of gestures and facial movements described by the critic of the Boston Advertiser as "running through satisfaction, pleasure, tenderness and love to adoration, and, having retraced his steps, descended facially through dislike, disgust, envy and hate to fury...The impression produced was at once very lively and very profound" (152). He closed with a plea for the United States to establish a school of dramatic art at the same level as the Conservatoire de Paris to further standardize performance pedagogy.

After the success of this first lecture, MacKaye lectured on "the Mysteries of Expression" across the United States, sending the proceeds to Delsarte's family to support them in their exile. Modeled on his first lecture in Boston, these sessions took place in churches, universities, primary schools, private parlors, and vaudeville houses. Reactions to the tour were mixed at first, particularly from elocutionists. A scathing review in the *New York Herald* implied that Delsarte's ideas would just be another example of Americans being won over by foreign systems:

"The people of America, like those of Rome in its great but still growing days, are very susceptible to the aestheticism of growing nations...The great system of dramatic expression by M. Delsarte is the latest aesthetic novelty that threatens us. A young gentleman, a disciple of Delsarte, has given a lecture or two in America, and straightway the subterranean rumblings of an aesthetic earthquake give warning of what's to come...We have our rights and should protect them. In the oratorical line these are to say what we please, how we please" ("Delsarte on the Stump").

Within the theatre community, there remained a stigma that great acting could not be taught at all; rather, a brilliant actor was seized by passion in the moment of performance. The *New York Times* reported in 1872 that “Acting is, after all, very much an affair of the imagination, and imagination can hardly be drilled into one by rules like those of Euclid” (5).

Among the general public, however, MacKaye’s performances were unlike anything they had seen on the dramatic stage. Reviewers were fascinated by his ability to conjure so many emotions and were enamored with the idea of a distinctly American school of acting. According to the *New York Times*, the English Shakespearean actor Walter Montgomery, after seeing MacKaye in Boston, “threw his arms around the young artist and exclaimed: ‘You have delighted me beyond expression. Your exposition has so intoxicated me that I feel like a boy of seventeen again. This is the best thing I have ever heard!’” (P. MacKaye 151). An anonymous student reporter in the *Harvard Advocate* wrote after his appearance at the college that his lectures “brought home to our minds a sense of our own deficiencies in elocution, concerning which so much is said and so little done at Harvard” (155). The famous New York drama critic Nym Crinkle (pen name of Andrew C. Wheeler) recalled after MacKaye’s appearance at the Lotos Club in New York, “He painted the divine mission of the beautiful and the true in the world of work, and wrought over the abstract truth of philosophy into the concrete field of endeavor” (156). *New York Herald* reporter Joseph I.C. Clark wrote that when MacKaye appeared at Steinway Hall, “That night a new voice had been heard and a new sign made visible...From that April night of his lecture in Steinway Hall the name of Delsarte advanced quickly to be a synonym of art expression the country over” (157).

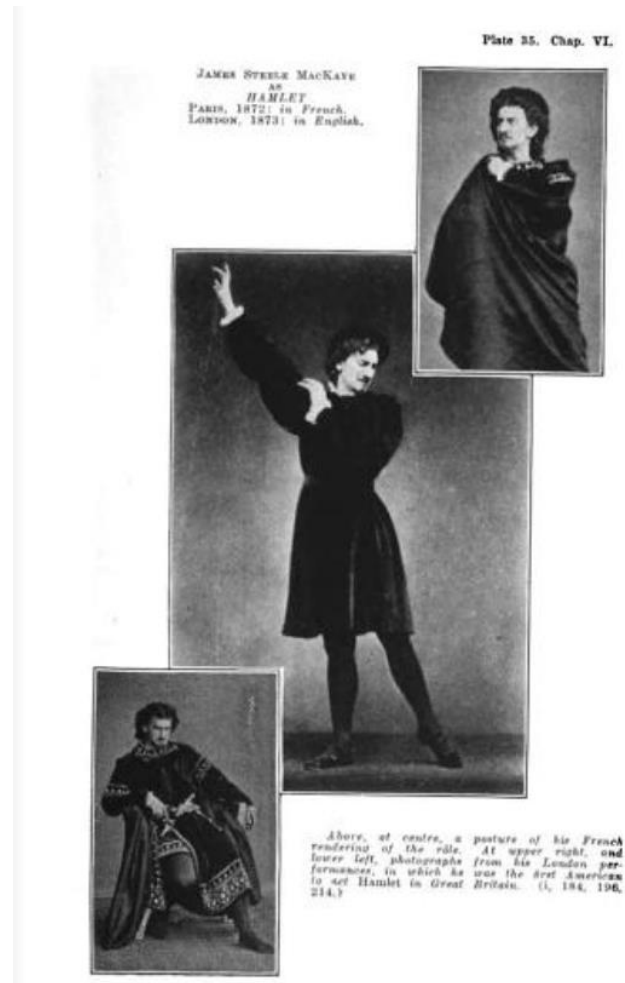


Figure 4: Steele MacKaye utilizing Delsartian gestures in his two most famous performances as Hamlet. Printed in *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye*.

After Delsarte's untimely death, MacKaye pushed to integrate the System into the American theatre culture. "I will not dishonor Delsarte with vain regrets," he wrote to William Alger, "No! I will redouble my efforts to do him honour, and to carry out the great work which he has so grandly begun. He will be with me in this – happy, and inspiring me as I work" (162). MacKaye found work as an actor and stage-manager (what we would now recognize as a director) in New York City. Working at first with the St. James Theatre, MacKaye began to integrate Delsartian training into the rehearsal process. Around this time, MacKaye also began

writing his own plays. His first finished piece, an adaptation of Washington Allston's Romantic novel *Monaldi*, became the first play performed in the United States in the Delsarte style. As he wrote to Alger, "It will do far more for our Delsarte scheme than the sublimest lecture I could possibly produce" (148). The play opened at on January 8, 1872 at the St. James Theatre to mixed reviews, but the critics unanimously praised the physicality and emotional authenticity of the performers, particularly MacKaye in the title role. *The New York Times and Messenger* reported,

"If Mr. MacKaye were paralyzed from the neck down, he could express more with his face than nine-tenths of justly celebrated actors could with all their physique. His speechlessness is as crammed with expression as a thundercloud with electricity. *His attitudes are language*" (168, emphasis mine).

The New York Standard agreed, writing that "To be passionate without violence, graceful without weakness, and aesthetic without voluptuousness, was no easy matter" (168).

After the modest success of *Monaldi*, MacKaye's career was turbulent. He became the first American to play Hamlet in London in 1873. During his time in London, he became acquainted with George Eliot and George Henry Lewes, working with Eliot to write an adaptation of her novel *Silas Marner* for the stage. In the United States, he had his first major success as a playwright with *Hazel Kirke*, which premiered in 1880 to rave reviews, becoming the best-selling production of the year and touring across the country. He also invented several devices to improve stagecraft, including a fire curtain, the folding theatre chair, and an elevator system to unload scenery. Still, MacKaye often found himself in dire financial circumstances. He often poured his own money into producing his plays, and if they failed at the box office, his family suffered the consequences.

All the while, Steele MacKaye continued to preach Delsarte's gospel across the United States, and largely succeeded in integrating the vocabulary into American theatre training. "I represent a new idea, a new school in my art," he wrote to his father. "I have already won many ardent admirers and supporters. These have been gained in spite of the most depressing circumstances, without resorting to any tricks of management, and without backing of capital. So I think I am justified in hoping that I may yet win my way to the foremost place in my profession" (P. MacKaye 178). Despite his unstable career, MacKaye held a reputation as the premier teacher of acting.

ELEVATING THE ART: TEACHING DELSARTE IN THE UNITED STATES

Throughout his endeavors, MacKaye remained adamant that the United States need a formal school of acting on the same level as the Paris Conservatoire, grounded in Delsarte's System of Expression. Shortly before the premiere of *Monaldi*, he published a pamphlet titled "A Plea for a Free School of the Dramatic Art," where he outlined his plans to turn the St. James Theatre into an acting conservatory. "This theatre will be a school for the player and the public, having no less a purpose than the elevation of both," MacKaye argued. "If dramatic art retains any of the potency which the pulpit and the press have always urged in its behalf, then this experiment becomes one of social no less than aesthetic importance" (166).

Though this school failed to materialize, MacKaye held leadership positions at the Madison Square Theatre and the Union Square Theatre, and eventually founded the Lyceum Theatre School, credited as the first established secondary school for theatre arts in the United States.⁵ Financial problems plagued his multiple institutions and nearly bankrupted him personally several times, but his positive reputation prevailed. In addition to his theatre schools, he gave private lessons from his home in New York, with his students including the wives of some of the richest men in America at the time. He also visited many of the Schools of Expression, training the leaders of the elocution movement and encouraging them to add Delsarte into their curricula. He would go on to work with Charles Wesley Emerson, Silas Curry, Franklin Sargent, and Leland Powers, integrating the Delsarte System into American higher education. MacKaye also continued his work as a director, teaching Delsarte to his actors throughout his rehearsal process.



DUNSTAN.—"Begone! I cast thee out adrift—adrift forever from thy feyther's love, and may my eyes no more behold thee!"—"Hazel Kirke."—Act I.

Figure 5: Advertisement for an 1881 production of *Hazel Kirke* emphasizing Delsartian gestures. Printed in *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye*.

⁵ After a series of financial hardships, including an incident where he purportedly tried to steal \$33,000 of the school's budget to finance his own play, MacKaye was ousted from the school in 1885. Under the leadership of actor and elocutionist Franklin Sargent, the Lyceum would be reimagined as the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (AADA), which still exists today.

In all his institutions, MacKaye largely adhered to Delsarte's philosophy of the Trinity and the Ninefold Accord as a guiding force for gesture, but his unique innovation of Harmonic Gymnastics deserves further attention. To prepare the body for work, MacKaye proposed a series of gymnastic exercises for the head, arms, legs, body, and face. Moving through the Ninefold Accord, the actor learned how an emotion motivated a corresponding motion. If these motions could be perfected in private study, MacKaye reasoned, they could be recalled easily on the stage. After careful study of Harmonic Gymnastics, students were encouraged to apply what they had learned to dramatic situations. A teacher might offer suggestions for different gestures, but overall students were encouraged to interpret situations on their own. MacKaye did not keep his actors bound in "types", as the old stock companies had, but encouraged everyone in his companies to take on many different roles. Much like the paintings and statues he had posed for in his youth, MacKaye believed the body should be able to tell the full story of a piece even without the use of language. The "gamuts of expression" that were so popular in his lecture series were a skill his students could master in order to conjure the proper gesture in the appropriate dramatic situation. The Delsarte System, therefore, became a common vocabulary for actors, a jumping-off point for personal exploration of dramatic motivations.

With this mission in mind, acting could be elevated to a sublime artform, not commonplace entertainment. MacKaye encouraged his students to take their work seriously, and to see themselves as true artists, not merely entertainers. In his "Pleas for a Free School of Dramatic Art", he argued that "It is far more agreeable to see something commonplace well done than to see something fine unworthily done; for nothing is more revolting than the abasement of the sublime from its high and modest simplicity by the loud, vulgar, or weak action of the mediocre and trivial actor" (352). The atmosphere MacKaye cultivated in his theaters also helped

to dispel the stereotype that theatre was not suitable for high society. Rather, it was a civilizing force, of “social importance,” part of the culture of reformation that characterized the late nineteenth century. Reviewing the premiere of *Monaldi*, the *New York Tribune* reported that “Mr. MacKaye has admitted only *ladies* and *gentlemen* to this company. You cannot conceive of the desire of the *elite* to join this company” (“The Ladies’ Favorite,” original emphasis).

Building on Delsarte’s original philosophy, MacKaye’s values of professionalism and personal reverence, combined with his innovation of Harmonic Gymnastics, lay the foundation for the American school of acting. Yet the absence of a definitive text on his theories hindered the standardization of his tactics across the discipline. Another generation would take up the fight to bring Delsarte to the masses, this time with a distinctly feminine interpretation.

“THE LADIES’ FAVORITE”: WOMEN AND AMERICAN DELSARTE CULTURE

To read both Delsarte’s original writings and accounts of MacKaye’s work, it would be easy to conclude that women were absent from the narrative. It is true that men led the initial propagation of Delsarte’s theories, particularly in the United States with leaders like Lewis B. Monroe and William Alger pioneering its integration into academia. Still, Delsarte’s courses were co-educational from the beginning, and part of his rise in popularity was due to his training some of the premiere sopranos in European opera. Mary MacKaye recalled that at Delsarte’s recitals, “There were society women, French, English, and Belgian, to whom Delsarte had given the art whereby they had made famous their salons” (137). As previously mentioned, Delsarte’s wife Rosine and daughters Marie and Madeline both trained in his studios and were instrumental in preserving their father’s work after his death, as was his student, Angélique Arnaud. From the

early days of MacKaye's speaking tour, it was clear that the System of Expression was particularly appealing to American women. After the premiere of *Monaldi*, the New York Correspondent in *The Cincinnati Commercial* called MacKaye "The Ladies' Favorite," for more than just his looks.

"Isn't he divine!" was the expression of most of the ladies within ear-shot. This, and "Isn't he lovely"; "I love him"; "He's so beautiful"; "Oh, I could look at him forever", were the echoes around the theatre as we passed out into the clear night air and thought of Delsarte, the universal genius, who taught...Mr. James Steele Mackaye how to cultivate by the hundred the hearts of the most exclusive, fastidious, and intellectual women in the world – the women of the inner circle of New York" ("The Ladies' Favorite").

At his various institutions, MacKaye's classrooms and rehearsal rooms were always co-educational, as were the schools of expression where he lectured. Yet beginning in the 1880s, while Delsartian tactics could be seen on stages across the country, the practice became increasingly feminized. I see this phenomenon as a result of the System of Expression sharing many key values with new paradigms of Real Womanhood that were taking root in the late-nineteenth century.

In the first place, the System demanded intellectual and artistic engagement. Delsarte and MacKaye encouraged their students to study broadly, engaging with literature, visual art, music, and contemporary science. To understand the human condition, an actor needed to observe others, and understand the cultural moment she was a part of. As discussed in the introduction, the ideal of "Real Womanhood" in the nineteenth century centered on a woman's personal education. Even if a woman was not encouraged to undertake a career, being well-versed in art was vital to being seen as a respectable member of society. As part of this mission of "Self-

Culture”, most middle to upper-class women learned a second language, played a musical instrument, and read widely (Plante 7). By 1880, women would represent one-third of all university students in the country, and even if a career was not the end result of her time in education, it was still becoming socially acceptable a well-off woman to learn for learning’s sake (Plante 5-7). Elocution was already a part of the culture of education and was explicitly coded as feminine in much mid-century literature; an 1839 textbook explained that “A fine reader may contribute as much pleasure to the domestic circle, during the course of life, as a skillful performer of the harp or pianoforte” (quoted Kimber 7). Similarly, Anna U. Russel writes in *The Young Ladies’ Elocutionary Reader* (1853),

“Whether we regard the sphere of woman’s duties and influence in society, or in domestic life, her power to render herself useful – in the noblest sense of the word – is dependent on her power of expression. The charm of intellectual refinement cannot be felt but in audible words. The living influence of woman’s mind is in proportion to her power of utterance” (17).

A well-off woman hosting a dinner party, for example, could earn the respect of her guests by adequately performing great works of poetry, or holding her own in a conversation about the latest scientific discoveries (Kimber 4). Delsarte’s ideas perfectly aligned with the popular understanding of the well-educated woman, and both Delsarte and MacKaye privately tutored many high-society women in their Systems. MacKaye’s work in schools of expression therefore integrated Delsartian philosophy into the pre-existing expectations of educated womanhood, placing acting on the same intellectual and artistic level as elocution.

Secondly, MacKaye and Delsarte both believed in the spiritual power of performance. Both teachers believed that great works of theatre, literature, and art could reveal truths about the

human experience, and serve as a way for audiences to understand themselves and the world more deeply. Particularly, MacKaye's efforts to make acting a legitimate artform relied on the rhetoric that acting could encourage spiritual growth, making the American theatre a "social" project as much as an "aesthetic" one (MacKaye 166). This was incredibly enticing to upper-middle-class American women, who were believed to be and often imagined themselves as the caretakers of the nation's spiritual health. Their involvement in reform movements, for example, was often motivated by a desire to preserve the nation's moral conscience, creating a better world for the children they would inevitably raise. Learning to speak and act could be a part of that process, as the roles they played could offer audiences a chance for self-reflection.

Finally, Delsartian training required close observation of the self, an understanding of the way one's body functioned and how that body could be a vessel for spiritual understanding. To know the body was to know the mind, and for women in the late-nineteenth century, the body was a subject of constant contention. Outside of the theatre, white womanhood was an identity to be performed, and the etiquette guides that flourished during this time stressed values of decorum, selflessness, and grace. Even though community engagement was encouraged, women were still expected to maintain classically "feminine" standards of presentation. Ellen Plante explains that

"New guidelines were called for and intricate codes of acceptable behavior became the norm...Leaving the safe haven of the home, the middle-class woman subjected herself to the scrutiny of strangers. She was to do nothing to draw attention to herself and yet to present herself as a true lady at the same time" (106-107).

The body was the central site of this scrutiny. Again, Plante puts it succinctly: "the connection between mind and body was recognized as being important to a general well-being, and joy,

hope, and love were seen as positive influences while fear, grief and anger could be debilitating” (180). The stage, however, offered a space for women to explore a far greater range of emotional expression than was generally considered socially acceptable. Running through MacKaye’s gamuts of expression and acting out dramatic textual situations allowed women to perform anger, greed, passion, and many more emotions in controlled environments. Delsarte and MacKaye’s emphasis on the inherent beauty of the human body in all emotional states appealed to a definition of femininity that emphasized strength, not submissiveness. Furthermore, Delsarte’s call for actors to “contemplate yourselves” allowed women the freedom to consider their own minds and bodies, a truly radical concept in a cultural moment that emphasized female selflessness.

The cultural, spiritual, and individual implications in the Delsarte System of Expression made its theories incredibly enticing to women looking to improve themselves and their society. As the theatre-going public took greater notice of MacKaye and Delsarte’s work, women from across the United States took up the fight to legitimize acting as an art form. While the innovations made by teachers would be ridiculed for decades to come, the unique interpretations they made would aid women in self-discovery and bodily autonomy. What began in Paris as a common vocabulary for actors would become a cultural phenomenon that defined a generation.

Chapter 2: “Fired in a Flaming Heart”- Genevieve Stebbins, the New York School of Expression, and a Feminine Performance Pedagogy

“The sum and substance of the whole philosophy of an educated, well-poised life may be summarized thus:

Round out your own individuality, so that the habitual attitudes of your outward form may be a perfect expression of the living soul within.”

– Genevieve Stebbins, “Personal Culture” in *Werner’s Magazine*, 1895

By the mid-1880s, the Delsarte System of Expression had become a common language for actors and elocutionists. Studying and attending the theatre was gradually increasing in respectability, perceived as an act of social good as well as a source of entertainment. The early phases of Delsartism in the United States were dominated by men, with teachers like Steele MacKaye, S.S. Curry, Lewis B. Monroe, and William Alger leading academic interest in the System. Over the course of the next three decades, however, the teaching and performance of Delsarte was increasingly undertaken by women. In the chapters that follow, I analyze the causes and effects of this shift, examining the lives and careers of the women who led it, all of whom firmly rejected an ideology of separate spheres as the defining feature of the performance of femininity.

The shift toward a more feminine performance pedagogy was led primarily by actor, writer, and teacher Genevieve Stebbins (1857-1934). Of the Delsartians I discuss, Stebbins’ career has been the most frequently studied, owing to her role in the development of American modern dance. However, previous scholarship has diminished Stebbins’s work as an actor and

educator, instead focusing on the ways her innovations corrupted Delsarte's original ideas. I am interested in considering Stebbins as a teacher, and the tactics she used to bring almost exclusively female students into professional careers on the public stage. I begin with a brief biographical sketch, recounting how an ambitious middle-class girl from San Francisco became "undoubtedly the leader of present-day Delsartism... a living illustration of its beauties, graces and possibilities" ("Stebbins Lessons" 69), and how she resisted adherence to the ideology of separate spheres throughout her life. I then closely analyze Stebbins' work as the principal of the New York School of Expression, where she cultivated an atmosphere of continued cultural engagement with a distinctly feminine spin. Considering her use of space, the rhetoric of her primary textbook, and the design of her performance curriculum, I argue that Stebbins' greatest success was in showing her students that acting was a means of engaging with art, culture, and wider society – an essential facet of upper-middle-class womanhood at the time.

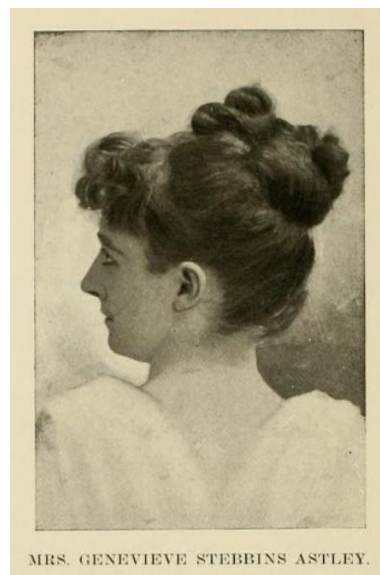


Figure 6: Portrait Genevieve Stebbins used in promotional materials for the New York School of Expression. Printed in The Stebbins Family Genealogy.

“A LIVING ILLUSTRATION”: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Genevieve Stebbins was born to a middle-class family in San Francisco, California in 1857. Her mother was descended from a long line of East-coast intellectuals, and her father became a prominent lawyer, though he lost much of his family’s wealth investing in gold mines (Greenlee & Greenlee 1099). Genevieve’s early life exemplified Cogan’s paradigm of Real Womanhood. She was encouraged to read widely, became fluent in French, and even acted in local children’s shows. Her acting talents granted her access to wealthy homes, “so that her nursery breathed on her an atmosphere of adulation” (*NYSE* 22). In 1875, at age 18, Stebbins moved across the country to New York City, where she intended to study acting professionally. An account of her life published in *Werner’s Dictionary of Elocutionists* proposed that she originally left home “to embark on what they considered woman’s true sphere of action – a wealthy marriage” (quoted in *NYSE* 22). But as her own New York School of Expression would later advertise, “Matrimony, however, possessed by few charms for a girl thrilling with enthusiastic ideas of Art, Oratory and Social Reform” (*NYSE* 22).

Stebbins’ early theatre education adhered to the stock-company model, with the young actor understudying Rose Eytinge, the leading lady of the Union Square Theatre. She likely met Steele MacKaye through Eytinge, who directed her in a production of *Rose Michel* for Union Square’s 1875-76 season. MacKaye was impressed by Stebbins’s dedication and enthusiasm. She thrived in his Delsarte lessons, and soon began working with MacKaye as his teaching assistant. During the 1878 school year, MacKaye invited her to demonstrate Delsarte poses for him at the Boston University School of Oratory. She eventually took over his teaching duties entirely when professional responsibilities called him back to New York. As *The Successful*

American later wrote, “Nearly every well-known graduate of that most famous of schools was under her instruction, and to her many of them are indebted for their entire knowledge of the Delsarte System” (106). MacKaye’s long-time friend and Dean of Oratory Lewis B. Monroe allowed Stebbins to take additional classes with elocutionist Mary S. Thompson, with whom she would collaborate regularly over the next fifteen years.⁶

Stebbins grew rapidly into an accomplished elocutionist and actor. In 1879, after completing her studies in Boston, the 22-year-old returned to New York to continue her acting career. She was hired as the leading lady of the Madison Square Theatre, performing in both contemporary plays (including MacKaye’s *Hazel Kirke*) and classics like *Hamlet* (1880) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1885). At the same time, Stebbins and Thompson began hosting what they called “Delsarte matinees” at theatres around the city. Like the speaking engagements MacKaye gave early in his career, the matinees were variety shows that featured pantomimes, recitations, short scenes, and theory discussions. Although Delsarte was becoming widely accepted within elocution and acting communities, Thompson and Stebbins helped further entice the public to consider the System’s theories. The *New York Times* reported that the performances “always draw crowds, perhaps because a large portion of the public is interested in the system of Delsarte, but probably because Mrs. [Genevieve] Thompson gives a ‘good show.’” (Amusements 4)⁷ Regardless, this “good show” helped expand interest in Delsarte beyond the theatre industry and the academy. *Werner’s Magazine* praised Stebbins’ ability to elevate Delsarte’s work:

⁶ By 1888, Stebbins had married Joseph A. Thompson, most likely the brother or another relative of Mary S. Thompson. The marriage appears to have ended in 1892, and Stebbins’s collaborations with Mary Thompson ended shortly after. No records of any divorce proceedings have been discovered at this time.

⁷ This report is one of the few instances in which Genevieve is referred to as “Mrs. Thompson.” She performed and published consistently under the name Miss Stebbins for most of her career, occasionally as “Genevieve Stebbins Astley” or “Mrs. Stebbins” after her second marriage.

“Reporters who have attended her popular matinees at the Madison Square Theatre in order to ridicule ‘an Aesthetic Fad,’ have gone away wiser men, profoundly impressed with the wonderful personal power which cultured artistic grace can produce. Unbounded praise has filled the space which editors had set aside for journalistic fun” (quoted in *NYSE* 21).

While these performances garnered press attention, there was still no canonical English text on Delsarte’s theories for an American audience. In 1881, elocutionist Edgar S. Werner, founder of *Werner’s Magazine*, approached Stebbins to write a book on the System of Expression. Werner had already begun translating Arnaud and Delaumosne’s *Delsarte System of Oratory* into English, and with MacKaye frequently occupied with directing projects, he saw Stebbins as the natural fit to undertake the project (Ruyter 49). She spent approximately the next year in Paris, fully immersing herself in Delsarte’s world. Stebbins met with Delaumosne in person, who was purportedly “greatly interested to hear in the report I bring of the spread of Delsarte’s teachings in America” (Stebbins 4). Throughout these years, she ardently continued her own education, training her voice at the Conservatoire de Paris and studying privately with other renowned European teachers. She also looked to the growing discipline of “physical culture” for inspiration, taking classes in calisthenics and gymnastics in her quest to understand how the body moved onstage.⁸

While in Europe, Stebbins formulated her own theories of expression separate from her beloved mentors’. Like MacKaye and Delsarte before her, she believed that visual art held the key to stage movement. She became fascinated with Greek statues, seeing them as evidence of humanity’s inherent beauty, later writing of her pursuit,

⁸ See Chapter 4 for a more thorough description of the physical culture movement and its impact on American Delsartism.

“London, Florence, Rome and Paris became rich fields of my study. I spent months studying the collections of the antique in the galleries of the Louvre, making notes, checking off every law and principle of Delsarte’s opposition, sequence, and poise, and trying for one whole year to find a really artistic contradiction to his general formulation, but in vain” (quoted in Ruyter 49).

Crucially, she recognized that Delsarte, and by association acting, could be used for the betterment of the individual, not just wider society. She also recognized that the harmonic gymnastic exercises proposed by MacKaye could strengthen the body not just for performance, but for daily life. Furthermore, the chance to embody certain characters and the intellectual engagement it took to do so could encourage deeper philosophical exploration for individual students. By blending the theoretical ideas of Delsarte, the gymnastics of MacKaye, and her own ideas about the body, Stebbins formulated what would become a distinctly American training system under the banner of Delsartism. In 1885, Genevieve Stebbins published *The Delsarte of System of Dramatic Expression*, the first complete guidebook to Delsarte published exclusively in the United States. A year later, she returned to Paris and met with Delsarte’s widow, Rosine, supposedly to receive her blessing to continue her late husband’s work. During this meeting, Madame Delsarte gifted Stebbins much of her late husband’s writing (Ruyter 50). After this, Stebbins did not appear in major theatrical productions, focusing her energy on teaching and performing Delsarte exclusively.

Initially, MacKaye expressed excitement that Stebbins was beginning a teaching career, writing to her in 1879,

“In reply to your note requesting permission to apply my system of dramatic training to the instruction of your own pupils, I am glad to assure you that it gives me great pleasure

to grant that permission, and to be able to say sincerely that you are thoroughly competent to put that system to good use. You are the only one of my pupils now living whom I can conscientiously recommend or gladly authorize to teach what I teach myself” (quoted in Ruyter 47).

Not long after *Delsarte System* was published, Stebbins and MacKaye severed ties, going so far as to publicly berate each other’s work. Ruyter proposes two suspected causes for the schism: first, that Stebbins’s innovations on Harmonic Gymnastics – which she rebranded as Aesthetic Gymnastics – and her insistence that the exercises be performed in public instead of solely in a classroom drifted too far from Delsarte’s intentions for MacKaye’s taste; and second, that Rosine Delsarte’s choice to bestow her husband’s papers on Stebbins rather than MacKaye drove a wedge between the two (47, 50). As Stebbins’s popularity expanded, the MacKaye family pushed back against her publicly. In a letter to his wife, MacKaye wrote of his desire “to defend [he and Delsarte] from the frauds who trade upon and obscure – by an irrational and sentimental presentation of inconvertible truths – our philosophy as well as our names” (P. MacKaye, II, 270). The use of the phrase “sentimental,” a derogatory indicator of the feminine at the time, should not be overlooked.

But while MacKaye had caught the nation’s attention in 1871, Stebbins held its gaze for three more decades. *Delsarte System Dramatic of Expression* quickly became required reading for many young actors, and the Delsarte matinees gained even greater popularity. After 1885, these audiences were increasingly made up of women. *The New York Sun* commented on “the startling aggregation of femininity” present at Madison Square Theatre whenever Stebbins took the stage (*Werner’s 1893*, 445). A report on an 1887 matinee stated that “The house was

crowded with a most fashionable audience, chiefly ladies, and the success of the entertainment was enormous” (NYSE 26). *The New York World* wrote in 1889,

“The theatre itself, packed as it was to the roof with pretty, enthusiastic women, was like a conservatory ripe with blooming plants, or an art gallery during some triumphant ‘loan collection’ epoch; at least, such were the opinions of the forty-seven males who, by actual count, were present in the densely-crowded house” (NYSE 28).

The press emphasized Stebbins’ femininity in her performances, as well the impact that her portrayals had on women viewers. A reviewer for the *World* noted, “During her slow, graceful changes from one beautiful, familiar position to the next, the women in the audience held their breath...They half rose from their chairs to watch the changing visions more closely.” (“Classic Statue Impersonations”). By the time Steele MacKaye died in 1893, Genevieve Stebbins was considered the leader of American Delsartism.

One Stebbins’ most important innovations was the addition of a series of “statue poses” to her repertoire, in which she embodied the Greek statues she so admired. To Stebbins, classical art represented the ideal human form, the perfect representation of Delsarte’s theories of harmony and balance. In her statue poses, Stebbins evoked figures like Aphrodite, Pallas Athene, Greek nymphs, and Amazon warriors, with the goal of showcasing how contemporary bodies possessed all the strength and grace of ancient ones. These performances required a specific costume that would become a hallmark of Delsartism in the 1890s – loose fitting, white gowns that allowed for greater ease of movement. In a time when the average woman’s complete clothing ensemble could weigh up to thirty pounds, these dresses opened the body up for all the channels of expression possible in dramatic performance, what the *New York World* called “the exercise of exquisite grace” (NYSE 28). Stebbins would later become an advocate for less-

restrictive clothing even outside of performance, making several appearances at events held by the Women's Congress for Dress Reform. In turn, statue posing became a national craze, with women's clubs and theatres adapting the practice at both the professional and amateur level.



Figure 7: Genevieve Stebbins in her iconic white dress for statue posing, which would become the uniform of Delsarteans across the country. Photographed 1892 and printed in Werner's Magazine.

Above all, Stebbins considered teaching her primary profession. She lectured across the country at major universities, schools of expression, and in private homes, bringing Delsarte to as many women as she could. She listed, among some of her pupils, not just actors and elocutionists, but also high society wives and daughters including “Mrs. Pierpont Morgan,” “Miss Vanderbilt”, and “Mrs. Rockefeller” (“A School of Expression” 107). In Stebbins, young women saw a figure who was at once intellectual, emotional, and in control of her body. *The Boston Globe* reported on Stebbins’ 1893 visit to Wellesley College, then one of the most prestigious women’s colleges:

“The Wellesley girls yearn for grace as well as strength of body. If these progressive young women continue in this path of wisdom, they will by and by evolve the perfect women, and then let the men beware, for she will be irresistible. Think of it! A woman who is learned in Latin and all the ologies, and yet has not a weak back, is not awkward, angular or unshapely, but who carries about with her a body which is the true index of her beautiful, well-ordered mind, in its free elasticity and supple grace. This is the Wellesley girl’s ideal whom she saw in the flesh lately in the person of Mrs. Genevieve Stebbins...since her visit the Wellesley girls have been wild over Delsarte” (quoted in *Werner’s 1893*, 445).

Genevieve Stebbins’ life defies the rhetoric of separate spheres. She traveled widely, advanced her studies at leading universities, mingled with high society, and defended her theories under the gaze of a judgmental old order, all to great public renown. Under her leadership, American Delsartism gained greater prestige, becoming intertwined with definitions of educated womanhood as a worthwhile cultural practice for young women. Her most ambitious teaching project, the New York School of Expression, further solidified this intellectual, physical, and emotional ideal, making professional acting training accessible to women curious to learn more about themselves and their world.

THE NEW YORK SCHOOL OF EXPRESSION: BROAD STROKES

In 1893, Stebbins founded the New York School of Expression with her second husband, British journalist Norman Astley. Located in the newly-established Studios at Carnegie Hall, the school’s first prospectus promised to provide four distinct services:

“1. An artistic finishing touch for teachers and post-graduates.

2. A systematic course of instruction, for normal pupils, in those studies which command an immediate market value.

3. Elective courses of study, with special diplomas for graduates in physical culture, Delsarte expression, or elocution.

4. A gymnasium specially equipped for Swedish and Aesthetic work.” (NYSE 2)

In her role as Principal, Stebbins maintained a consistent presence in the day-to-day education of the students. Astley served as business manager and headed the Department of Dramatic Criticism. In 1894, the school merged with the elocutionist F. Townsend Southwick’s School of Oratory, and Stebbins and Southwick continued as co-principals. By all accounts, Stebbins remained the face of the school’s activities, and its prestige was marketed chiefly using Stebbins’ reputation (Ruyter 52). The rest of the staff were experts in acting, elocution, and physical culture, with both men and women teaching a diverse range of classes to prepare the students for theatrical work. *The Successful American* lists teachers specializing in Shakespeare, rhetoric, anatomy and hygiene, gymnastics, orthoepy (the study of pronunciation), voice culture, diction, and theatrical make-up (“A School of Expression” 1902).

During its years of operation, the school had about 50 pupils at any given time (“Reports and Transactions” 88). Diplomas were offered in Literature, Elocution, Delsarte Expression, Physiology, and Physical Culture. Students could also add on an elective diploma, choosing to specialize in one to three of these topics to increase their employability. Students had several options for courses of study. A Complete Course consisted of two years of enrollment, after which graduates received a Diploma of Merit and were certified to teach by the New York State Board of Regents. The first, or “Junior” year focused on foundational skills, while the second or “Senior” year was dedicated to advanced theory and preparation for a teaching career. A partial

one-year course could be completed for a School Certificate, with the opportunity to complete a second year at any time. The school also offered a post-graduate course consisting of 40 lessons, open to both Stebbins' graduates and graduates from other schools who passed a qualifying exam. Post-Graduates were intended to be aspiring performers and had the opportunity to act onstage with Stebbins in her Delsarte matinees. For students who could not commit to full or part-time study, special elective classes were offered in literature, elocution, Delsarte expression, physiology, and Aesthetic Gymnastics. Throughout the school year, which ran from October to May, students presented recitals and full plays for public audiences. Classes took place between 2:30 and 5:30 p.m.; "The morning hours," wrote Stebbins, "are to be devoted to private study, which is the best time for such work" (NYSE 18).

NEW YORK SCHOOL OF EXPRESSION
 ROOMS 807, 808, 809 CARNEGIE HALL.
 PRINCIPALS:
GENEVIEVE STEBBINS, F. TOWNSEND SOUTHWICK.
 PRACTICAL DELSARTISM, ELOCUTION, ORATORY,
 PHYSICAL CULTURE, PANTOMIME AND DRAMATIC ART.
 GRADUATE AND POST-GRADUATE COURSES. ARTISTIC PLATFORM WORK A SPECIALTY.
 ANNOUNCEMENT FOR '95-6.

In addition to the courses of Readings and Lectures previously announced, there will be

- I. **A Saturday Normal Class for Teachers.**
 Progressive work in Elocution and Aesthetic Gymnastics. Class opened November 9th, at 11 A. M.
- II. **A Popular Tuesday Evening Class**
 In Elocution, Oratory and Physical Culture. All instruction in the above courses will be given by the principals.
- III. **A Free Saturday Lecture Course by Genevieve Stebbins**
 Embracing the Principles and Philosophy of Expression, in Art and Literature. Commenced November 9th, at 10 A. M.

For further information, address ——— **NORMAN ASTLEY, BUSINESS MANAGER.**

Figure 8: Advertisement for the New York School of Expression, printed Werner's Magazine, 1895

A full year of study cost \$150 for Junior and Senior Students and \$200 for Post-Graduates.⁹ For those unable to attend full-time year, a course of 20 private lessons was available for \$25. Twenty private lessons with Stebbins herself in any subject cost \$100, with full-time students eligible for a 25 percent discount. No dormitories or meal stipends are listed in the school's records, so it can be assumed that residence in New York City was required during the academic year. For four weeks each summer, Stebbins offered courses in either Providence or Newport, Rhode Island, "especially planned to meet the practical needs of teachers," who could not attend classes during the regular semester (*Werner's 1893* 464). The New York School of Expression walked the line between accessible and elite. Certainly, its yearly tuition was incredibly affordable compared to most universities at the time, where tuition was typically between \$300 and \$500 a year including room and board. Offering discounted classes, summer sessions, and partial courses of study does appear to be an effort to provide more women with easier pathways to training. However, the fact remains that these prices would have been unrealistic for working-class women and many women of color at the time, not to mention the time commitment required to undertake the rigorous training. The target demographic was middle-to-upper class white women, who would go on to be the future teachers of the discipline.

Furthermore, a Delsartian education followed the liberal arts structure that was fast becoming standard in American universities. To be an accomplished actor or reader, students were expected to undertake both academic and practical courses, with theory being just as important as practice. Students read and analyzed texts before they stepped onstage to perform them. It wasn't enough to learn to speak with clear diction; a student needed to learn the

⁹ It is difficult to estimate how much these values would be in today's money. Throughout this project, I will use data from the website [CPI Inflation Calculator](#) to adjust for 2024 inflation in U.S. dollars. A full list of prices with their 2024 conversions is available in Appendix I.

anatomical parts of her voice, and how to care for her voice properly. At the New York School of Expression, the entire body and mind needed to be engaged in education. With this guiding principle, we can now examine how space, rhetoric, and performance were used within the School of Expression in ways that intertwined Delsartism with late-nineteenth century constructions of femininity.

SPATIAL CONSTRUCTIONS: THE “SPLENDID SUITE” AT CARNEGIE HALL

The vision of music director Walter Damrosch and billionaire philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie Hall opened in 1891 with the mission to make New York City the home for the United States’ artistic advancement. The building operated in two sections: The Music Hall Section, home to the New York Symphony and other ensembles, and the Apartment and School Section, which included several suites and offices for artists, music managers, private teachers, and artistic academies. Notable tenants of the Apartments included the Columbia College of Music, John Philip Sousa’s business offices, and the Metropolitan School of Fine Arts. While the cost of maintaining the facilities always exceeded the business’ earnings, Carnegie himself would simply pay off the deficit with his own money.¹⁰ Howard Russell Butler of the Music Hall Company of New York wrote in his 1896 financial report,

“Mr. Carnegie looks for no financial profits, and he has authorized the statement that, should there be any, he would not take it out, but would apply it to the maintenance and improvement of the property. The reason for the annual deficiency is found in the intrinsic nature of the major part of the property, which was designed as an educational center for music and kindred arts” (“Reports and Transactions” 87-88).

¹⁰ The 1896 financial report found a net loss of \$24,927.67, about \$911,124.14 USD today.



Figure 9: Carnegie Hall as it appeared in 1894. The New York School of Expression occupied three rooms on the eighth floor of "Studio Tower," visible in the top right corner. Courtesy of the Carnegie Hall Rose Archives.

As tenants in the Apartment and School section, the New York School of Expression was a part of this culture of artistic improvement. Because the music hall and schools were seen as beneficial to the cultural output of New York City, Stebbins' residency in the building shows that expression training was seen as valuable to artistic high society. The school's prospectus also noted that "Public Libraries and Museums of Art are within easy distance, so that pupils of The New York School of Expression enjoy unrivalled advantages connected with a thorough study of the Art of Expression" (NYSE 5). For Stebbins' students, learning their craft in such proximity to the cultural elite created a positive environment of artistic education, a community of individuals dedicated to advancing theatre's prestige.

Stebbins and her students had access to the full building's facilities, including a 3,000-seat theatre, a 1,000-seat recital hall, a 500-seat chamber music hall, and several smaller lecture

halls (*NYSE* 5). The main classrooms occupied rooms 807, 808, and 809, described in *The Keynote Magazine* as “a splendid suite of large sunny rooms...specifically fitted up with every modern convenience for this work” (“The New York School of Expression” 43). These “modern conveniences” included electric lighting throughout, indoor plumbing and restrooms, elevators, and adequate fire-prevention technology. At the time, most buildings in New York City still relied on outhouses and gas lamps; the school’s ability to provide what was then considered a comfortable, luxury learning environment for its students highlights the Delsartean’s desire to elevate the profession of acting. These actresses would not be left digging through the garbage for food, as the showboat and stock companies of decades past had done. They would train and work in safety and splendor.

This commitment carried into the construction of the studios themselves. Delsarte’s original studio had been a small parlor off his home, with space cleared on the floor for a stage. Well into the 1910s, other elocutionists followed this layout, often teaching out of their own front parlors. Previous scholars have argued that this practice points to the deliberate coding of elocution training as belonging to the domestic sphere of femininity. Even within Carnegie Hall, private teachers often furnished their rented spaces with comfortable chairs, Romantic paintings, and Oriental rugs, silently advertising that the performer’s activities would one day take place in a similarly furnished space, a private home. Stebbins, however, furnished her studios like a theatre space from the beginning. While we have no photographs of the rooms she rented, *The Keynote* provides a detailed description in their 1895 profile of the school:

“They have fitted up a handsome stage, twenty feet by ten, tastefully draped in crimson and terra cotta. It has most of the usual stage accessories, including border lights, center and side entrances, dressing rooms, etc. Upon this stage the pupils are trained in the arts

of oratory, recitation, pantomime and dramatic expression, physical culture being shown in the assembly-room” (43).

Stebbins and her colleagues did not adhere to a purely domestic construction of performance. Instead, their female students prepared for presentations before the public, in an environment that mimicked the conditions of their future profession. Whether or not the students chose to pursue professional careers, this opportunity to practice in an elevated environment indicated that domestic performance was not the only option for a Delsartean-in-training.

RHETORICAL TACTICS: *THE DELSARTE SYSTEM OF DRAMATIC EXPRESSION* (1885)

Stebbins’s first book *The Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* was the foundation for the New York School of Expression’s pedagogy. It is considered the first official publication of Delsarte’s pedagogy in the United States, compiling the French theories publicized by Arnaud and Delaumosne, the American innovations proposed by MacKaye, and Stebbins’s own theories about the relationship between gesture and emotion. Seven more editions would appear between 1885 and 1902. For the sake of consistency, the following analysis focuses exclusively on the 1885 first edition. Here I will argue that Stebbins’s unique rhetorical style applied existing feminine conventions to acting pedagogy, helping to code Delsartism as a feminine practice and philosophy.

The book served as both a guide for students and as a teaching manual. It opens with anecdotes from Stebbins’ life to establish her credibility as a teacher, then an exploration of Delsarte’s theories. It then describes Stebbins’ innovations of Decomposing Exercises, a series of gestures to prepare the body for work through muscle relaxation. This is followed by a number of

exercises demonstrating the application of the Ninefold Accord to the legs, walk, hands, arms, torso, head, eyes, and lips. The student is then instructed to implement the techniques she has learned into short scenes, or “gamuts of expression”.¹¹ The lessons conclude with more advanced theories of vocal expression and the relationship between color theory and emotion.

Each lesson begins with “Aesthetic Talk”, in which Stebbins takes on a one-on-one, colloquial dialogue with an imagined student, whom she calls “Dear Pupil.” These talks correspond with the changing of the seasons, with each lesson intended to be mastered over the course of a month. After their “talks”, Stebbins breaks down a series of exercises to express emotions through different parts of the body. Halfway through the text, Dear Pupil “writes a letter” to Stebbins informing her she cannot continue her lessons in person. Stebbins responds by sending her the exercises in shorthand. “Aesthetic Talk” resumes for the final lesson, when Stebbins instructs her student to go out into the world to show her audience what she has learned of expression.

Throughout the textbook, Dear Pupil is continuously imagined as a woman. At the beginning of Lesson IV, Stebbins writes “Good day. Will you have this bunch of golden-rod? Let me fasten it in your dress, an autumn greeting” (58). Later, when critiquing the student’s walk, she states “Like all women, you roll instead of run” (82). Throughout the book are several illustrations that feature women of various ages performing gestures according to the Ninefold Accord. Other signs are more implicit. In Lesson IV, Stebbins reviews the principles of ontology, semeiotics, and aesthetics as originally proposed by Delsarte by way of Arnaud: “The object of art, therefore, is to reproduce, by action of a superior principle (ontology) the organic signs explained by semiotics, and whose inherent fitness is estimated by aesthetics” (59). After this

¹¹ These gamuts are distinct from those that MacKaye would present on his speaking tours. While MacKaye would present a series of conflicting emotions as quickly as possible, Stebbins’ are done in dramatic context.

somewhat convoluted definition, Stebbins reimagines the idea through the language of flowers, a popular method of understanding nature among late nineteenth-century women.

“Look with me at this aster. Do you realize that the purple star is as much the result of its ‘superior principle’ as you or I am of ours?”

The spirit of a plant is its power of gathering from earth and the air dead matter, and shaping it to its chosen form. The flower is the sign, the end, the creature, that the spirit makes...What we produce is merely the form of what exists in our minds. Every stroke of the artist’s brush is made within ere it glows on the canvas. In the actor, every accent, every inflection, every gesture, is but the outer reverberation of the still small voice within” (59).

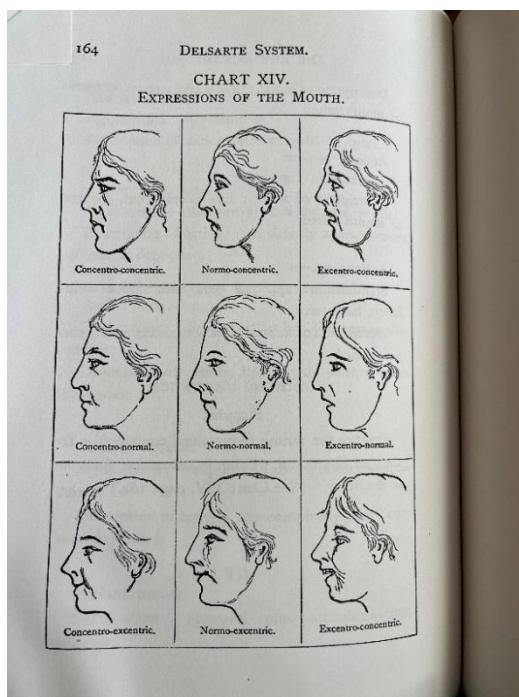


Figure 10: Illustration from *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* featuring a woman displaying emotions according to the *Ninefold Accord*.

The aster was associated with love and wisdom, as well as the heavens because of its star-like shape. By putting the language of acting in conversation with a language of womanhood,

Stebbins connects the two worldviews. Through these rhetorical tactics, women are identified as the target audience for these theories of expression.

This ideal student is also rhetorically constructed as highly educated. Throughout the text, Stebbins quotes Shakespeare liberally, alludes to biblical verses, writes in untranslated French, and references to other thinkers of her time such as George Henry Lewes and John Ruskin. The idea that a Delsarte student would already be familiar with these texts aligns with definitions of educated middle-class womanhood. In the world of the text, learning to act in the Delsarte style becomes an acceptable pursuit for middle to upper-class women. Theatre education also demanded engagement with the wider culture. In Lesson V, Stebbins hypothetically draws out several photographs of famous Greek statues.¹² She encourages Dear Pupil to study the pictures and deduce the emotional state of each figure based on the gesture alone: “See, here is a faun holding a bunch of grapes, high overhead. With upturned face he is dropping them one by one into his laughing mouth...Still he stands in marble silence. Can you tell me in what attitude? Yes, correct...that of vital repose” (71). After walking through the Ninefold Accord, Dear Pupil seems to ask a question, to which Stebbins responds, “What is it, child? You would look at the others? Seek some gallery where you will find casts of the antique, and spend a profitable hour in discovering the attitude in which each statue stands. Then go home and essay them before the glass” (72). Engaging with visual art becomes a method for the aspiring actor to see herself as a creator of culture. She will learn to embody the gestures captured by the ancients so she can translate them onto her own body for her own dramatic situations. By visiting museums or reading new books, she is acquiring a vocabulary that she can then use in her work.

¹² Later editions of Stebbins’ textbooks included these photographs, as photography became more widely accessible and printing technology improved.

Like MacKaye before her, Stebbins emphasizes intensive study to elevate the discipline of acting. It was not enough to wait for a spark of inspiration; an actor needed to train her body and mind technically, so that “genius” could manifest in the proper form. She reiterates that other disciplines practice technique, so actors ought to do the same: “Orators must study rhetoric; lawyers their codes, singers have a technique; musicians, harmony; painters, sculptors, architects—all have come compass, some guide, which does not interfere with their natural aptitude, but only increase it” (6-7). In her first lesson on Decomposing Exercises, she instructs Dear Pupil to “faithfully practice many hours a day if you wish rapid results” (11). Although she acknowledges the ephemeral inspiration of creativity, practice remains vital: “Nature’s voice must whisper to us our vocation, but study can prepare our instruments, perfect our tools” (18). In a Delsartian education, careful study becomes the key to artistic expression; with a base set of skills, genuine expression will come easily. Stebbins writes, “Your motto should be heart-work, not headwork. ‘Then why study art’s rule and formulae?’ I hear you ask. Because much of your practice will cling to you, without conscious thought” (79).

Dear Pupil is told that this commitment to study will not be without scrutiny, making practice even more vital. Stebbins was, first and foremost, preparing her students to appear in public performances, whether they be “in the pulpit, on the platform, or the stage,” and this pursuit would naturally invite criticism (79). Stebbins explains, “there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous; and if, at the end of these lessons you have not freed the channels for expression, you will simply be ridiculous, and will merit all the fun which is leveled at the mechanical mugging of so-called Delsarteans” (28). She anticipates the kinds of skeptics who would later ridicule that “mechanical mugging,” and places the responsibility on the student to prevent her artform from being degraded. “Lesson V: The Walk”, provides an example of this

philosophy in action. On an autumn day, Stebbins “takes” Dear Pupil to Madison Square to observe the passersby as a lesson in how a person’s walk can indicate her temperament. “I have been observing you intently, you unconscious,” Stebbins tells her student, “Are you brave enough to stand the fire of criticism? Your walk is full of defects” (74). The teacher’s observations prompt a discussion on grace and bearing. As they walk together along Fifth Avenue, Stebbins points out an actress, a professor, and a child with its nurse, explaining how their gates adhere to the Ninefold Accord. When they reach Central Park, Stebbins suggests a race to demonstrate the proper form for running.

“Here is a by-path, no one observing but those two black swans with crimson beaks, sailing majestically on that tree-encircled lake. Catch me, if you can... Very well; you are an apt scholar. Shall we race again? We cannot; a gray-coated policeman appears. He eyes us with suspicion. He thinks us ‘children of too large a growth’ for such games. We will go home; the sun is setting” (83).

Learning to act involves public engagement, allowing oneself to be visible to the public eye. The job of the acting teacher is to prepare the student for public appearances by creating a semi-private arena where she can become “brave enough to stand the fire of criticism.” Naysayers, particularly male ones, will always be around the corner, ready to degrade women as “children of too large a growth for such games,” but it is the duty of the Delsartean to practice hard enough to give them nothing bad to say.

By the book’s conclusion, Dear Pupil has been given the tools to undertake the challenge of expressing her “still small voice within.” She is encouraged to be active in the world around her, engage with culture and education, and express her emotions in the public eye, all without sacrificing her femininity. As Stebbins reflects on the journey her student has taken over the

course of her training, she leaves her with a call to action: “You have it now in your power to uplift your own art language. Will you do so?” (215-16) A Delsartian education has given Dear Pupil the tools to undertake that challenge, and the students at the New York School of Expression also seized that opportunity.

PERFORMANCE: 1898 GRADUATION EXERCISES

Genevieve Stebbins provided her students with ample opportunities to put theory into practice. Taking full advantage of their position at Carnegie Hall, the pupils of the New York School of Expression held several recitals throughout the school year, all open to the public. The 1898 Graduating Exercises provide a fitting example of the results of a Delsartian education under Stebbins’s guidance.

The graduation ceremony was held on Tuesday, May 17, 1898, at the Carnegie Lyceum. According to the concert program, the 1000-seat theater was designed as a space for “Readings, Lectures, Special Dramatic Performances, Amateur Dramatic Clubs, Musical and other Societies, and fashionable entertainments for all kinds,” and was equipped with “every known theatrical device,” including multiple colors of electric lights (“Graduation” 2). The program also emphasizes the theatre’s ample emergency exits and proper ventilation, making it a safe space for performers and spectators alike. As with the classrooms themselves, the New York School of Expression used the spaces available to them within Carnegie Hall to create an elevated theatrical experience for both the performers and the spectators, aligning with MacKaye and Stebbins’ vision of integrating theatre into high society. The program lists members of the School’s Junior and Senior class participating in the event. Also, students are listed as both

“Miss” and “Mrs.” indicating that marital status was not a hindrance to these women’s artistic pursuits.

Three types of performances were featured in the proceedings. The first was a hallmark of Stebbins’s pedagogy, the Drills. These exercises took the students through a range of gestures and expressions linked by a common theme. Like MacKaye’s gamuts of expression, they were designed to showcase the range of emotional expression of which an actor was capable. For Stebbins, they were also intended to strengthen the muscles and perfect balance, or “harmonic poise.” The Drills featured in the commencement exercises include the Amazon Drill, the Nymph Drill, and the Columbia Drill. In this selection, we see Stebbins’s belief that Greek mythology was the source of ideal expression, portraying women as simultaneously powerful and graceful.

The second category of pieces were elocutionary readings of short stories and poems. Each member of the senior class had the opportunity to perform a solo outside of the group drills. These recitations covered a diverse range of genres, showing the wide skill sets each performer had developed over their time at the school. Poems by Browning, Tennyson, and Longfellow were performed alongside sentimental and humor pieces featuring different dialects. The chosen stories cover a wide range of emotional states, requiring the readers to showcase their own complex emotional capabilities. The students could be both funny and heartbreaking, graceful and strong-willed, on full view for the public.

Thirdly, the graduation exercises feature two scenes from the works of William Shakespeare, performed entirely by women. A scene from *As You Like It* features Rosalind, Celia, Orlando, and Touchstone played by Miss Luella Cothran, Miss Jane Boag, Miss Ada Van Voorhis, and Miss Marguerite Baker, respectively. By contrast, a scene from *King John* features “presentations” of Constance, the Duke of Salisbury, Prince Arthur, King Philip, the Duke of

Austria all portrayed by the same actress, Miss Marguerite Baker. These actresses were trained to perform in romantic, tragic, and comedic roles, and the gender of characters did not limit an actor's ability to study them. The program also reinforces the idea that theatrical training was at the core of the school's mission as much as elocution or gymnastics. The ability of Miss Baker to perform five roles at once, four of them male-presenting, points to the extent that the New York School of Expression prioritized this kind of dedication to drama.

In this performance, the capabilities of the New York School of Expression's students are on full display. High art and popular art collide in this space. Students are in control of their bodies and emotions, having spent their educations exploring their possibilities. Under Stebbins' leadership, this group of women were prepared for careers as stage actresses and elocutionists, having had ample experiences in a diversity of genres. Moreover, the ability for women of different generations and skill sets to perform together as both students and teachers emphasizes the school's commitment to moving away from the structures once imposed by the stock company system, fostering a spirit of collaboration instead of stardom. With the presentation of the diplomas at the end of the program, the Class of 1898 now had it in their power to uplift their art language, at both the private interior and public expressive levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout her career, Stebbins would publish five more books on artistic expression and become a leading figure in the National Association of Elocutionists. Beginning with 1897 school year, the New York School of Expression moved from Carnegie Hall Studios to the Westside Branch of the Y.M.C.A. Building, 318 West 57th Street, though they frequently used the Music Hall's facilities for performances. Stebbins remained principal until she fully retired

from performing and teaching in 1907. In her later years, she and her husband traveled extensively, studying Eastern philosophical and physical health traditions (Ruyter 52). They later settled in Monterey, California, where Stebbins is listed in city records as having passed away in 1937 at the age of 79.

Throughout her life, Genevieve Stebbins' dedication to Delsarte helped to make theatrical training synonymous with a definition of Real Womanhood, a craft that was both sophisticated and explicitly for public consumption. She continued the work that Delsarte and MacKaye began, and helped define a new ideal American performer. For Stebbins, to be an actor was to be intellectual as well as emotional. The self needed to be studied as much as the text. The mind and the body were always intertwined. High art could co-exist with entertainment. Through her work, women were imagined as the System's ideal teachers, students, and audience members. At the end of *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, Stebbins wrote that "Beauty's torch must be fired in a flaming heart. True art is but the soul's BEHOLD, IT IS I" (232). The students who passed through the halls of the New York School of Expression asked the public to behold their souls, and thanks to Stebbins, their flaming hearts could stand onstage together.

Chapter 3 - “A Means, Not An End”: Anna Morgan, Her Studios, and a Model of Accessible Delsartism

“All great artists have been Delsartians – unwittingly in most instances, but nevertheless in full sympathy with the opinions he disseminated.”

– Anna Morgan, *An Hour With Delsarte*, 1889.

Delsarteans like Genevieve Stebbins made great strides in integrating the System into higher education for young women pursuing professional stage careers. As Stebbins worked along the East Coast, actor, reader, teacher, and socialite Anna Morgan (1851-1936) brought the art of expression to the Midwest. Over the course of her forty-year career, much of which she spent headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, Morgan expanded Delsartian ideology outside of university and industry settings. Morgan demystified the process of performance education, making the art of acting relevant to the daily lives of American women, regardless of their professional aspirations.

In this chapter, I first discuss Morgan’s life story, chronicled in her autobiography *My Chicago* (1918). Her career took her around the world and into contact with some of the greatest artists of her day, and her relentless pursuit of knowledge served as an inspiration to many of the young women she taught. I then look more closely at the inner workings of her private school, the Anna Morgan Studios, and how her residency in the now-iconic Fine Arts Building helped to establish Chicago as a center of artistic activity. I also examine how the accessible rhetoric of her mass-produced book *An Hour With Delsarte* (1889) spurred more interest in the movement from the general public. Finally, I review what Morgan considered the triumph of her career, the first

all-women production of *Hamlet* in the United States, and how her use of Delsarte as “a means, not an end” in her directing style contributed to the play’s critical success.

“CHICAGO’S FAVORITE READER”: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Much of what we know about Anna Morgan’s early life comes from her autobiography *My Chicago*, a reflection on her career and her immersion in Chicago arts culture. She was born in 1851 near Auburn, New York, to Allen Denion Morgan and Mary Jane Thorton. Her father was a well-off farmer and a New York State Legislator, but Morgan described her childhood as rather isolated, later writing that she “had had no preparation for a public career, had lived very quietly in Auburn and the country about it, had attended few lectures, concerts or plays” (Morgan 14). Her father died in 1876 when Morgan was 25, and her mother moved the family to Chicago the following year.¹³ While it is difficult to say how much money the family had, their residence in one of the city’s most affluent neighborhoods and the fact that Mrs. Morgan listed her occupation as “Keeping House” long after her husband’s death on census records, makes it safe to think of the Morgans as independently wealthy (Collins 110).

While she was rich, Anna was far from idle. Her older sister Marion, a visual artist, taught China painting classes, then a fashionable hobby for well-off young women, and Morgan’s first “job” was helping her schedule and organize her courses. When she grew bored of the work, a friend suggested that Morgan sign up for a dramatic reading class at the nearby Hershey School of Music. Morgan later wrote of the decision,

¹³ Census records indicated that Morgan was married for a few months during this time. She listed her marital status as divorced in 1880 and as single in 1900. Her archives contain no information about the details of her marriage.

“Why the idle remark of my friend should have made a sufficiently deep impression upon my mind to cause me to act upon her suggestion, is a psychological question I am not prepared to answer. I only recall that nothing further was said on the subject, but that nine o’clock the next morning found me in the office of the Hershey School.” (11)

In short order, Morgan began training with elocutionist Samuel Kayzer. She poured her energy into her studies, despite having never previously considered elocution as a career.

“From the departure from my home and the taking of my first lesson I seemed to have been imbued with the determination to succeed, not so much to win renown as to become independent financially and to be able to help others who might need my help. So I worked with unflagging interest and a steady determination, which was never deterred by the unnumerable obstacles which everyone who sets out on an artistic career is bound to encounter” (14).

Word of Morgan’s talents spread quickly through Chicago. Alongside her school recitals, she began performing at church pageants, women’s club meeting, and music halls around the area, making between \$5 and \$10 per reading. Billed in advertisements as “Chicago’s Favorite Reader,” Morgan later admitted “I never went outside my home without imagining that everyone was saying ‘There she comes!’ or ‘There she goes – That’s Anna Morgan!’” (21). She made her New York City debut in 1879, just two years after beginning her training. After a positive review of her performance by the eminent clergyman Dr. Robert Collyer, she performed in Boston and around New York State. An 1880 review of her hometown performance in Auburn, N.Y. praised her emotional authenticity:

“I have heard Miss Morgan with real pleasure. She does not rant and this is an unspeakably gratifying thing to say in view of so much that is heard in public readings. Grace and naturalness of manner, a voice into which can be put tenderness and tears, a quick appreciation of varying shades of thought and feeling, and a judgement that prevents the extravagance of extremes, are Miss Morgan’s marked characteristics.” (25-26)



Figure 11: Anna Morgan in 1881, in costume for her appearance with Mary Scott Siddons, a turning point in her career, originally printed in My Chicago.

Morgan’s big break came in 1880, when she attended a reading by Mrs. Mary F. Scott Siddons, one of the most famous elocutionists at the time. After the performance, Morgan found the address of Siddons’ hotel and introduced herself, despite having “never been in a hotel in my life” (Morgan 28). Siddons asked Morgan to recite some poetry for her, and was impressed by

her skills, promising her a place in her program the next time she performed in Chicago. Her chance came in 1881, when they appeared together at Central Music Hall. As Siddons exited to a standing ovation, she passed by Morgan in the wings; “I remember she kissed me and said: ‘You must give them something more’” (30). Morgan’s act, too, was met with a standing ovation. She later reflected that the performance “did secure for me immediate openings in the larger lecture courses of the country, and my fee rose from \$25 to \$100. (31).¹⁴ For the next two years, Morgan appeared regularly in concerts in both New York and Boston, deepening her engagement with the elocution community. She also toured the Midwest extensively, reciting across Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas. Morgan often toured alone, unheard of for a woman of her standing at the time. In *My Chicago*, she recalls being stranded in a station at midnight waiting for an overnight train: “For years I could not get over thinking of what might have happened, and how perilous it was for a young woman to go out on a lecture tour alone” (27). Aware of the risks, she still pursued as many opportunities to perform as she could.

In 1884, construction was completed on the Chicago Opera House, and Morgan’s former teacher Samuel Kayzer was asked to establish a conservatory within the theatre. Modeled on MacKaye and Sargent’s American Academy of Dramatic Arts, this school would provide theatrical training and a steady stream of new talent for the company. Kayzer brought on Morgan as the Head of the Dramatic Department. Teaching on the evenings and weekends, Morgan’s courses drew a wide variety of students, from young girls to older women, some with professional aspirations and some looking for a hobby.

¹⁴ A complete analysis of Morgan’s fees throughout her career adjusted for 2024 inflation can be found in Appendix II.

By the mid-1880s, MacKaye and Stebbins's work was gaining attention in educational and theatrical spaces. Like many teachers, Morgan was intrigued by the growing popularity of the Delsarte System of Expression:

“Students were flocking to New York from all over the country, standing in line eager to pay twenty dollars an hour for instruction, convinced that this ‘new method’ was a certain road to fame and fortune on the musical and dramatic stages. I was impressed with the fact that it was a grammar of expression and that it would have a great vogue, so I went down and interviewed Mr. MacKaye, secured two books, translations of Delsarte's lessons written by two of his pupils,¹⁵ and at once began to teach the Delsarte Method of Expression, with the result that large numbers were attracted to my classes.” (40)

Morgan quickly integrated Delsarte matinees into her pupils' performance curriculum, staging both pantomimes and dramatic readings and even designing her own costumes. The public took notice, with the *Chicago Tribune* referring to her as “the High Priestess of Delsarte” in 1888. The article praised her ability to shed light on a system that still seemed to many in Chicago to be mysterious and inaccessible: “[Delsarte's] rites are performed in secret. His doctrines are only revealed to the elect. Miss Morgan knows them.” Morgan was interviewed for the same story, and emphasized that the System of Expression could serve anyone, especially “women in society...more even than those who want to be actresses. It teaches them to be graceful” (“Disciples of Delsarte”).

To prove the importance of Delsartism to her colleagues, Morgan invited Frankin Sargent to the lecture on the System of Expression at the Opera House Conservatory in 1886. Sargent's

¹⁵ Based on the dating of this meeting, it is likely that Morgan was given Delaumosne's *Delsarte System of Oratory* and Stebbins' *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*.

heavy reliance on theoretical jargon and aesthetic philosophy did not resonate with the audience, and Morgan's fellow teachers did not understand her fascination with these convoluted ideas. Morgan realized that to expose to the greatest number of people to Delsarte, there needed to be a text that explained the System of "practical terms." Over the next few years, she studied the ways her students responded to her teaching, eventually compiling her notes into a textbook. With the help of her artist sister Marion, whose China painting classes indirectly led Anna to Delsarte almost twenty years prior, Morgan provided detailed, full-body sketches of her female students' expressions. The resulting book, *An Hour With Delsarte*, was published in 1889 by Lee and Shepherd, selling for \$2 a copy. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that it was next to impossible for Chicago bookshops to keep it on the shelves (Rayne 7).¹⁶ Critics praised Morgan's ability to convey Delsarte's ideas in accessible terms. The *Tribune's* review claimed "The modest title does not do it justice; it should really be called 'The Grammar of Expression,' for, although brief, it is a lucid treatise on a subject of more than mere dramatic importance... The book will help to clear away much of the confusion regarding the Delsarte idea" ("An Hour with Delsarte").

As her reputation as a teacher grew, Morgan expanded her work as a director, taking a particular interest in European realism. The psychological expressions and high emotional stakes of Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Synge, and Shaw intrigued her, and she believed it was her responsibility to bring these plays to the American public. Her casts included a mix of local actors, professional guests, and students from the Opera House Conservatory. Despite now being considered

¹⁶ According to *My Chicago*, Morgan sold the book over the course of one hectic weekend. While in New York City, she brought the draft to Appleton Publishing. After making her wait several hours, they told her they would sell the book for 50 cents a copy, which Morgan declined. She then went to Houghton Mifflin's New York Offices, but they insisted she speak to their representatives in Boston, who handled elocution publications. Morgan took an overnight ferry to Boston to keep the meeting. While waiting in the office, she ran into elocutionist Moses True Brown, then the principal of the Boston School of Oratory. He explained the Houghton Mifflin typically only published one book per year in a given genre, and that they had already purchased the rights to his own book. He advised her to head across town to Lee and Shepherd Publishing. According to Morgan, "They bought it out in the most artistic style."

historically significant, her early productions were panned by critics. The 1896 premiere of Ibsen's *The Master Builder* was mercilessly mocked, as was the 1897 premiere of Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*. Looking back on the latter, she recalled how "The newspaper men for the most part sat on the back seats and grinned, regarding both it and me as being 'queer'" (48). She did not shy away from discussing these "failures" in *My Chicago*, writing "I have dwelt at length on this, because I wish to record the lack of appreciation and encouragement I encountered from our critics on this and subsequent occasions" (45). Still, Morgan continued to push the boundaries of what a theatrical education should include. By bringing her students into contact with contemporary theatre outside of commercial melodrama, she continued the Delsarteans' legacy of elevating the art of acting.

By 1898, the Conservatory was nearing financial ruin. Morgan realized that she needed to leave the staff to preserve her own finances and reputation. She later wrote that leaving the conservatory was "a really trying hour for me," and feared she would not be able to make a living in Chicago as a reader or teacher (59). According to *My Chicago*, she had a "chance meeting" with the architect and philanthropist Charles C. Curtiss. Curtiss was in the process of renovating a former Studebaker carriage showroom, converting it into studio spaces for Chicago's performance and visual artists. After expressing her fears about having to leave for New York, Curtiss reportedly said, "We want you right here, Miss Morgan" (59). He offered her a studio and performance space on the eighth floor of what would become known as the Fine Arts Building. While her friends expressed concern that it was too close to the beginning of the school year to recruit new students, Morgan pressed on, advertising in elocution magazines and building a curriculum from scratch. She welcomed the first cohort of students to the Anna Morgan Studios in October of 1898 (59-60).

The Fine Arts Building became the center of the Little Theatre Movement, a period in Chicago history when amateur and educational theatre flourished, making the city a center for artistic development outside of New York. Morgan was at the movement's epicenter, constantly staging plays with both former and current students. One of her first major successes was the American premiere of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* in 1900. She later travelled to meet with Shaw in person, and he granted her permission to perform any plays in his repertoire. In 1903, she presented *Ceasar and Cleopatra* with a cast of all women, to Shaw's great delight; he wrote to her before the premiere, "Is my Julius Ceasar going to be created at last by a Chicago young lady! Oh Anna, Anna, how can I show my face in Chicago after this? Yours Stupended, G. Bernard Shaw" (74). Morgan continued to push artistic boundaries, staging classics with all-women casts and writing her own plays that centered contemporary women's issues. She also devoted significant energy to activism; she developed a professional relationship with activist Jane Addams, teaching and performing with the young women at Addams' Hull-House (Sozen 91).

In this abridged snapshot of Anna Morgan's life and career, we see a deliberate subversion of the ideology of separate spheres. Although she came from an upper-middle-class, privileged background that romanticized domesticity, Morgan lived an excessively public life. She took every opportunity she could to advance her own career and the reputation of her art form, accepting help from and finding community with fellow artists. She dismissed criticism from skeptics and sought out spaces to do the work she believed was important, never letting tradition or convention stand in her way. In her work at Anna Morgan Studios, she provided opportunities for her students to do the same.

THE ANNA MORGAN STUDIOS: BROAD STROKES

Morgan ran her private studios from 1898 until her retirement around 1925. From her space on the eighth floor of the Fine Arts Building, she curated an environment of consistent cultural engagement that prepared students for a life rich in expression, regardless of professional aspirations.

Morgan's school year ran from October to May, with classes four mornings per week and additional evening rehearsals for productions. Like the New York School of Expression, a typical degree program was two years, with the option to take selected courses, private lessons, or Saturday classes. Tuition rose steadily throughout the school's history, reaching \$400 a year by 1924. As part of the students' training, they were also expected to attend Morgan's lectures and reading series each Tuesday morning, which were also open to the public. Morgan designed these talks to provide students with more information about both theatre history and their current theatrical landscape, with titles such as "The Plays of Shakespeare on the American Stage," "The Stars, Their Rise and Fall," "Standbys of Melodrama," and "The Theatre of Today" (Sozen 143). Once again, based on the prices and the time commitment required for enrollment, students must be assumed to have come from relatively privileged backgrounds.

Early in her time at the Fine Arts Building, Morgan was hesitant to make theatre the center of her craft. Her primary customers were still members of the Chicago elite, and "Parents of my pupils became uneasy lest the pupils might be drawn to the stage as a career" (Morgan 68). Instead, she persistently marketed the Studios as a school of expression, designed to teach the benefits of public speaking and physical grace in both professional and personal life. Journalist Sheppard Butler wrote, "Her purpose is to inspire her pupils to a proper understanding of expression, not dramatic alone but social, not for the stage merely but for everyday life. More

than this, she teaches her pupils to *think*, and in order that they may think clearly, encourages physical as well as mental culture” (Sozen 38, emphasis mine).

While few records survive of the early days of the Studios, course schedules and catalogues from the 1910s provide a rough sketch of Morgan’s curriculum. Students were encouraged to read broadly and deeply, with courses in criticism and analysis of literature and drama prioritized. Studying both the classics and modern drama, Morgan took care to make sure her students received exposure to many different art forms. Performance curriculum also included movement, diction, and pantomime, ranging from “storytelling” classes for parlor performance to specialized courses for future platform performers. Other classes included studies in French and German, theatre history, arts history, and fiction writing. The school gymnasium operated independent of the main degree program, with classes in Swedish and Delsarte gymnastics, fencing, and dancing. Students were consistently given opportunities to put what they learned into practice at recitals and salons throughout the school year.

Suggested Class Schedule for the Graduate Course, Around 1912

Tuesday	
9:30-11:00Voice and Physical Training
11:00-12:00Miss Morgan's Readings and Talks
Wednesday	
9:30-11:00Story Telling, Conversation, and Training in Analysis, Criticism, and Intelligent and Discriminating Comment
11:00-12:00Vocal Interpretation of Shakespeare
Thursday	
9:30-11:00Rehearsal of plays; Other Rehearsals as Needed
Friday	
9:30-11:00Voice, Extemporaneous Speaking, Advanced Pantomimic Studies
11:00-12:00Practice Recital

Figure 12: Sample class schedule from the Anna Morgan Studios. From Joyce Sozen’s analysis of the Anna Morgan Scrapbooks.

Despite her earlier hesitance to continue directing, she gradually integrated theatrical performance as a course option for her students, staging monologues, duets, and eventually full productions, finding that “It in no wise disturbed other studies, but on the contrary gave them deeper and more permanent values” (Morgan 69). By the 1920s, the curriculum included courses in costume design, playwriting, property design, and lighting design.

The opportunities these students had were incredibly broad. Their artistic pursuits were constantly put in conversation with other disciplines. The mind and the body were cultivated with equal attention. While professional advancement opportunities were available and encouraged, the greatest emphasis was placed on learning for learning’s sake. Keeping with the mission of many Delsartean, theatrical training was increasingly legitimized as an artistic study, and greater emphasis was placed on students’ finding their own voices rather than purely studying past geniuses. These pedagogical approaches signify Morgan’s priorities of expanding performance education for the next generation of Chicago artists.

SPATIAL CONSTRUCTIONS: “ARTISTIC COMRADSHIP” AT THE FINE ARTS BUILDING

What would become the home of the Anna Morgan Studios was designed as a showroom for the Studebaker carriage company, at 410 S. Michigan Ave. Since its construction in 1885, the Studebaker Building had been hailed as a Chicago landmark. When the company outgrew the facilities, it was decided that the space would be converted into studios for Chicago’s growing arts community. With renovations led by Charles C. Curtiss, the building was remodeled to include art studios, sound-proof rehearsal spaces, offices, a musical hall, and a proscenium theatre. Over the course of its history, the Fine Arts Building has housed painters, sculptors,

writers, architects, musicians, activists, publishers, and, of course, acting teachers. In the spirit of transparency, the building's tenants, including Anna Morgan, frequently opened their spaces to the public. Morgan writes of these early days,

“We were all prosperous, with plenty of work to do, yet somehow always there seemed to be time to exchange visits with our co-workers and take an active interest in the work which each was doing. Visitors were frequent; almost any day we were sure to see a group of Chicago friends who were entertaining out-of-town guests by bringing them to The Fine Arts Building and its attractive studios. It was a show place in the town, a rendezvous where you were sure to see interesting people.” (61)



Figure 13: The Fine Arts Building in 1902. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum

In the Anna Morgan Studios, these rendezvous included open rehearsals, afternoon teas and evening dinners, and invited sessions to share one another's works. “There was an informality, a comradeship that is sweet to remember,” Morgan wrote later (62). Readings of new texts, discussions of the classics, and previews of upcoming dramatic performances were facilitated by

Morgan and included participation from her students. She also invited experts in the field to speak on their specialties, including Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, art theory, and stagecraft (Sozen 51-52). One reviewer praised that the Studios were “more of an eighteenth-century salon than a school of professional instruction” (Sozen 37). By giving her female students the opportunity to perform both for and within this community, Morgan placed them in direct contact with the intellectual and cultural discussions of their time.

The Studios themselves blurred the line between the public and the private. Housed in room 825, the *Chicago Tribune* described the space upon its opening:

“The woodwork is in Flemish oak, making strong outlines for the walls, which are covered with purple gray burlap, an effective background of color for the artistic pictures, delf and dainty statuary, which adorn the room. A little stage at one end of the studio is provided with a drop current, lighting facilities, and all the trappings of a stage theatre” (“Miss Morgan’s New Studio”).

Chairs were set up for performances in a way that mimicked the salons that Delsarte once held in his parlor. With an audience capacity of about 100 people, the Studios provided an intimate atmosphere that placed the students in direct contact with their audience. The school also featured a gymnasium space for calisthenics, fencing, and dancing lessons, which the *Times-Herald* describes “a spacious, light apartment, completely appointed, with a suite of dressing-rooms and lockers, and a shower bath, and has a beautiful polished floor suitable for dancing” (Sozen 33). *The Chicago Evening Post* noted that auditorium space included dining rooms for students (33). Overall, the educational spaces in the Anna Morgan Studios encouraged an intimate relationship between the students and their audiences, while still providing them with the facilities they needed to develop their craft in whatever ways they saw fit.

RHETORICAL TACTICS: *AN HOUR WITH DELSARTE* (1889)

One of Anna Morgan's greatest accomplishments was increasing people's access to Delsartian philosophy. Her book *An Hour with Delsarte* took the System of Expression from an aesthetic philosophy for dedicated scholars and actors to a practical methodology for both the stage and daily life. Morgan's rhetorical process for demystifying the System included an instance on the universality of its ideas, and her textbook's accessible rhetoric and formatting allowed the System to find new audiences.

An Hour with Delsarte was designed for mass-market appeal. It does not follow the structure of a textbook or a teaching guide, but rather something that can be read casually, in no particular order, or even in one sitting. Chapters 1 through 3 expand on the book's thesis that Delsartism can be a practical training system as much as a philosophical one. Chapters 4 through 11 focus on François Delsarte's life and the broad strokes of his philosophy, including the three divisions and the nine laws of gesture. Chapter 12 includes special instructions for public reading, and Chapter 13 provides advice and exercises for prospective teachers. Chapters 14 and 15 provide much more detailed exercises for harmonic poise and information about different positions of the head, eye, nose, and mouth. The book concludes with a reflection on the current state of staging acting. At just over 100 pages, it is a much more condensed version of the System than what Delaumosne, Arnaud, and Stebbins compiled.

Throughout the book, Morgan repeats the phrase: "Delsarte is a means, not an end." She acknowledges Delsartism has been ridiculed in the culture throughout the previous twenty years, largely because of a lack of a standard interpretation of Delsarte's theories. To Morgan, "Printed

directions for practice” like Stebbins’ are “valueless, because of their constant misinterpretation” (9). When teachers misinterpret the texts, they misinform their students, who go on to publicize incorrect ideas. The result, for Morgan, is that “the mention of [Delsarte’s] name recalls to many people only the spectacle group of expressionless girls languidly waving their arms in the air” (17). For Morgan, the answer to this problem is to rid the practice of heavy-handed theoretical jargon and instead focus on the “practical” elements, the ideas that students truly need in order to accurately express themselves in public spaces. “Doing Delsarte” is not the goal of these studies; memorizing gestures or facial expressions to be reproduced later is not the intention, as so many teachers had claimed before. Instead, learning the basics of the System could be an entry point into an emotionally fulfilling life.

Unlike the one-on-one, teacher-to-student dialogue that Stebbins adopts with Dear Pupil, Morgan keeps her imagined audience both broad and co-educational. She acknowledges that people will be coming into education with different levels of experience and familiarity, but together they could come to a conclusion about the best way to practice their craft. Early in the book, she creates a hypothetical “dialogue” between herself and a classroom full of students (“whom she addresses as “ladies and gentleman”). The teacher figure implores her students to tell her what they have come to study. She denies that they are studying acting, elocution, or even Delsarte, but instead they are studying *expression*. Through a process of conversation, trial, and error, she helps her students to create a concrete definition of expression: an outward manifestation of the inward state that signifies the presence of the soul, or “the sign of the being” (34)”. In this scenario, Morgan reinforces the idea that learning to express oneself is not an isolated activity, but rather an ongoing conversation between collaborators.

Morgan does not hesitate to acknowledge that most people practicing this system will not become professional readers, actors, or teachers, but the rhetoric of Delsartism can still be useful to them. In Chapter 12: The Voice – Reading, Morgan recounts the experience of watching someone asked to speak in public who does not have clear control over their voice and body:

“In these days of frequent gatherings, public and private, scarcely anyone may feel himself secure in being unprepared for an occasion when his shortcomings in [public speaking] may prove a source of mortification or annoyance. How pathetic sometimes is the spectacle of the person unaccustomed to ‘that sort of thing’ ...!”¹⁷ (68).

For the average upper-class woman in the 1890s, speaking in public could mean anything from a town meeting to a church service to a dinner party, and practicing Delsarte could prepare the person for this event and avoid that mortification. The body, too, was designed to be observed in public space. Poise and balance, two of the essential components of Delsartism, were vital when it came to being taken seriously by one’s peers: “It is desirable that we should cultivate an attractive habit of bearing, that the impressions we create are agreeable ones...It is an art to assert one’s self, make one’s presence felt, without seeming officious; and the few who succeed inevitably become conspicuous ornaments of society” (14). If we consider these instructions within the paradigm of Real Womanhood, Delsartism becomes an acceptable method of preparing the educated woman for life in the public eye. For Morgan’s students, the tenants of Delsartism – control, intention, and balance – are mechanisms for gaining respect within polite society. The cultivation of the self, not necessarily a work of art, is the end goal of the study, and for this reason a practical approach was her most effective method of delivery.

¹⁷ While Morgan uses the default pronoun “he” throughout the book’s narration, the fact remains that the majority of her students and her readers were women.

A practical education included simplifying much of the theoretical jargon characteristic of earlier Delsarte books and lectures. Early in the book she makes it explicit that her aim is “to discuss the study of expression at its most practical and least theoretical side” (29). While suggestions for further philosophical reading are given in footnotes, she grounds her explanations in much simpler prose. Terms like concentric, eccentric, and normal gestures are omitted, replaced with clear definitions of the emotional weight of certain gestures. In Chapter 7, when discussing the hand, she explains,

“Each of the three states of being is disclosed through the hand; it lends itself to whichever state predominates the activity, and, like the leg and the arm, indicates the condition of the being. For instance, if the fingers are folded in the palm with the thumb upright at the side of the first finger, it indicates a condition of self-possession and power; if instead of resting at the side, the thumb is pressed tightly across the second joints of the closed fingers, resolution or struggle is indicated” (43).

Rather than the Ninefold charts, she explains the philosophical reasoning with real-world examples. In her discussions of the zones of the leg, she explains, the thigh is vital zone because this is the muscle that first propels the leg forward. The lower leg is the emotive zone of balance because “the emotional natural is admirably shown in the act of kneeling, when we would express a subordination of self to the will of others” (39). Finally, the foot reflects the mental zone, reflecting the workings of the mind; for instance, “How often we detect a person’s mental state through the unconscious tapping of the foot upon the floor!” (39). By keeping the jargon minimal and the examples relevant to the experience of the reader, Morgan provides an entry point in expression training that is more accessible to a broad audience.

PERFORMANCE: *HAMLET* (1903)

To further understand how Delsarte influenced Morgan's work, I turn now to the performance that she considered the triumph of her professional career. In the spring of 1903, Morgan staged the first known all-women production of *Hamlet*, first at the Powers Theatre and then at Hull-House. With a cast composed of female students from the Anna Morgan Studios, the production serves as an example for how Delsartian education informed women's theatrical performance, disrupting conventions of femininity on the stage in the process.

Details about Morgan's *Hamlet* come largely from critical reviews of the performances, which range from admiring to bitingly condescending in tone. Many of the critics praised the actors' ability to convey the emotional depth the roles required. The *Tribune* paid special attention to 20-year-old Florence Bradley's portrayal of Hamlet, calling her interpretation of the role "entirely original."

"Her features were distraught and pallid, and her eyes burned with the luster of a great and oppressing torment. At times it seemed as if the windows of her soul dispossessed the other features and carried half the power of her rendering of the role. Her voice was strong and deep, and her enunciation rarely faulty" ("Hamlet: He's Not A Man").

The same reviewer called Miss Alice Pollack's Polonius "less pompous, but more querulous than most interpretations, he possessed a particular peevish voice, which made his annoyances all the more ridiculous." The rigorous script analysis advocated for by Delsarteans results in more personal interpretations of the script, rather than an adherence to some preconceived idea of the ideal performance. Morgan's elocutionary training combined with Delsarte's ontology resulted in powerful emotional portrayals onstage.

The line between masculinity and femininity was blurred in multiple aspects of the production. All of the women playing male characters were dressed as men, complete with trousers and beards, which was not without controversy. A critic from the *Inter Ocean* sent to cover the dress rehearsal reported that Florence Bradley's father objected to his daughter being photographed in men's clothes, insisting that she wear a long cloak to cover her body: "This, however, struck horror to the artistic hearts of the artistic maidens of Miss Morgan's studio. It would never do. Hamlet never wore cloaks" ("Camera, Not Ghost, Frightens Hamlet"). Morgan did not shy away from acknowledging the female body and emphasizing its inherent beauty, a trait that was foundational to a Delsarte education. Audiences were largely in favor of the costume choices in performance. An unknown critic, whose review Morgan saved in her scrapbooks, wrote:

"There was no fault to be found with affected modesty in the costuming of this play. The doublets were not lengthened nor the hose shortened, and I might even say that Miss Leora Moore was an especially shapely Horatio. She wore red hose and a brown doublet. Hamlet, of course, was dressed in black, and a short cloak fell carelessly behind his shoulders, making no attempt to conceal the slight "boyish" figure in black hose" (quoted in Sozen 93).

Still, reviewers were surprised by the way the performers walked the line between masculinity and femininity. The *Record-Herald* wrote of Florence Bradley's delivery,

"She breathed into [the lines] a feminine delicacy without overcasting them with the sickliness of femininity. In the philosophic speeches she adopted a measured deliberate

and intensely meditative style that could not have been more firmly indicated by a veteran player.” (quoted in Sozen 92)

Another unidentified reviewer further praised Bradley’s ability to embody masculine power and feminine grace at once:

“She enters abstractedly, a little of the growing wildness showing in her sunken eyes, which sometimes seem to be prominent and again to be sunken. Her voice is not forced, and yet has enough of the masculine quality to carry the part well...Under ordinary circumstances Miss Florence Bradley might tempt one to eloquence, but when she addresses her uncle on the stage, she displays such a masculine knowledge of the spirit that induces good round oaths, that I found myself swearing most heartily, in sympathy.”
(quoted in Sozen 93)

It is tempting to focus on the air of misogyny in this reviewer, the subtext of coding of the “masculine knowledge of the spirit” as positive and the “eloquence,” a term more associated with female performance, as negative. But these observations point to what I see as a triumph in Delsartean teaching. Looking at textbooks like Morgan’s and Stebbins’s, we see that Delsartean students were educated in the performance of both “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics, and that the ability to find balance between those traits was the mark of a proficient student. If reviewers were able to see these traits co-existing in one embodied performance, it shows that Morgan’s students were successful in their training, embracing their all the emotional nuance of their souls without adhering to binary gender roles.

Reviewers note that the multiple iterations of the production were well-received, especially by women. Like Stebbins’s matinees, Morgan’s show was predominantly attended by upper-middle-class women. The *Tribune* reported, “If it was a woman’s ‘Hamlet’ it was, by the

same token, a woman's audience. The house was packed to the doors, and the few men therein showed like inconsequential dots in the heaving sea of shirt waists, flowering hats, and other feminine frippery" ("Hamlet: He's Not A Man"). The production was extended twice, then remounted at Jane Addams's Hull-House for an audience of underprivileged women. The opportunity for women to see themselves onstage, embodying the work of Shakespeare in a way that both acknowledged and subverted popular constructions of femininity, was much sought after and embraced.



Figure 14: The cast of Hamlet. Photographed for the Chicago Tribune, 1903. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum

CONCLUSIONS

Morgan continued to teach through the 1920s, and while the date of her retirement is uncertain, various archives place it between 1924 and 1926 (Sozen 5). After her retirement, she remained an active member of Chicago women's circles, including Hull-House. She passed away on August 27, 1936, at the age of 85.

Throughout her career, Anna Morgan helped to shift the public perception of a Delsarte education. Building on the groundwork laid by Steele MacKaye and Genevieve Stebbins, Morgan's work showed the public that Delsartism was a craft anyone could practice, especially women. The risks she took in her professional life demonstrate her dedication to blurring the lines between the public and the private. Under her guidance, her students learned how a life grounded in Delsarte's philosophy could provide both creative and personal freedom through artistic expression.

Chapter 4 - “Hold Some Thought of Power”: Emily Bishop, the Chautauqua Department of Delsarte, and the Physical Culture of Expression

“Rarely...are women courageous enough to admit that they wish to discipline their bodies that they may be graceful. Why? Because bodily grace is misunderstood and its value is not appreciated...Grace is as useful as it is beautiful.”

– Emily M. Bishop, *Americanized Delsarte Culture*, 1895

By the 1890s, the Delsarte System of Expression reached peak popularity, with women across the United States teaching and performing at both the amateur and professional levels. While acting training was becoming professionalized and feminized, so too was the discipline of physical culture, a movement focused on recreation and education on physical activity to improve the health and well-being of Americans. As early as the 1850s, reformers had been advocating for an increased focus on hygiene and physiology in women’s colleges and public schools. In her 1856 treatise *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families*, Catherine Beecher stressed that ill health was a threat to “domestic happiness”: “When the wife and mother is suffering from the debility and pain of ill health, it not only ends her enjoyment of life, but a cloud of gloom settles over the whole family circle” (164). Drawing on pseudo-scientific beliefs about women’s capabilities, some physicians feared that increased physical activity for women would cause damage to their reproductive organs (Vertinsky 62). Exercise systems, therefore, needed to be adapted specifically for women’s bodies, with the goal being preparation for a domestic life focused on the care of husbands and children.

As the century progressed, new theories of physical culture emphasized a model of exercise that was more inclusive of women. What was broadly characterized as “German Gymnastics” emphasized apparatus training to build bodily strength, with women featuring prominently in illustrated guides for weight training, javelin throwing, and ring exercises. In American health lecturer Dio Lewis’ community exercise classes, students were positioned in the gymnasium so that they occupied their own individual spaces but moved through the training as a collective (Tomko 16). In the 1810s, Swedish educator Per Henrik Ling devised a system of calisthenics to improve flexibility, muscle control, balance, and proper breathing. Much like the original followers of Delsarte, Ling’s students were passionate about sharing their teacher’s theories with the world. “Swedish Gymnastics” reached the United States lecture circuit in 1885, and again like Delsarte, women were instrumental in advocating for its proliferation. The first Conference on Physical Training was held in Boston in 1889, organized primarily by women and presided over by the United States Commissioner of Education (Welch 112). Philanthropist Mary Hemenway provided crucial financial support for the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, one of the first institutions to offer training programs for (mostly female) teachers in Swedish Gymnastics (Welch 111). Normal Schools for Gymnastics sprang up around the country, and while some were co-educational many more were attended by exclusively female students (Tomko 17). Outside of the academy, physical health advocates encouraged the openings of public gymnasiums, swimming pools, and exercise parks for the middle-class to use their leisure time to improve bodily health (Tomko 10). Unlike the past advocates for domesticity, these physical education enthusiasts advocated health for health’s sake, stressing a comfort in the body that would translate to individual satisfaction.

During their respective times in Europe, Steele MacKaye and Genevieve Stebbins were both influenced by gymnastics culture, particularly Ling's Swedish system. Their innovations of Harmonic and Aesthetic Gymnastics helped place performance training in conversation with physical health, preparing the body physically to perform emotional expressions on the stage. It would be the work of Emily M. Bishop (1859-1916) that would firmly connect the Delsarte System to the physical expression of the self outside of a theatrical setting. As head of the Department of Delsarte within the Chautauqua Assembly's School of Physical Education, Bishop's writing and teaching intertwined the System of Expression with the cultural practices of the physical culture movement. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Bishop's re-imagining of the System of Expression as a tool for physical health marks a crucial shift in the movement's history. Working within an institution where rigid gender roles were frequently subverted, Bishop imagined an egalitarian space for self-expression that prepared women for lives in the public sphere of daily life rather than the stage. Through a close analysis of her gymnasium at Chautauqua, and the rhetorical tactics of her most popular book *Americanized Delsarte Culture*, I reveal that Bishop's pedagogy contained quietly radical perceptions of women's physical power and mental capabilities. Her insistence that this power be translated into societal activity demonstrates the emancipatory power of Delsarte's ideology for women at the turn of the century.

“THE EMBODIMENT OF SPIRIT”: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Unlike the previous case studies, we have very few first-person accounts of Bishop's early life. According to census records, she was born Emily “Amy” Montague Mulkin in 1859 in Forestville, New York, with her family residing in Chautauqua County by 1875 (Collins 104).

After she completed high school, she served as assistant principal of a school in Silver Creek, New York, then “gave several years of the study of Delsarte in various cities” (Livermore 86). She is listed among Genevieve Stebbins’ “notable pupils” in the first prospectus of the New York School of Expression (*NYSE* 27). In 1884, Emily married journalist Coleman E. Bishop.¹⁸ They soon relocated to the Dakota Territories, where she became the first woman elected superintendent of public schools in Rapid City, South Dakota. The couple later relocated to Washington, D.C., with Emily traveling frequently to teach. She held lecturer positions at institutions such as Drexel University and the Pratt Institute (“Lecturers” 2). From this fragmented history we see yet another picture of a woman who was dedicated to furthering her education, and passionate about educating others.

Unlike her predecessors, however, Bishop did not consider herself an actress or an elocutionist, but instead focused closely on the physical aspects of the System of Expression. She recognized that the marriage of Delsarte and physical culture could be fully completed by emphasizing the power of what she called “grace.” Bishop’s construction of grace went beyond mere beauty of movement; rather, it was about showing control over the body and ensuring gesture corresponded with emotional intention, though not necessarily in a theatrical context. In day-to-day life, Bishop argued, the semiotics of gesture and voice impacted the way women were perceived. Training in the System of Expression could prepare a woman for public life, instilling her with confidence in her movements and emotional expressions that could directly correspond with a more positive perception of the self, a goal Bishop shared with her contemporaries in the physical culture movement. What kept women from achieving this grace was what Bishop called a problem of “self-consciousness.” She argued that American women in particular were afraid to

¹⁸ Following her marriage, Emily was referred to by various names in the press. She was most often identified as Mrs. Emily M. Bishop, but occasionally would be called Mrs. C.E. Bishop or Mrs. E.M. Bishop.

take up space, constantly afraid of how their bodies were perceived by others. As a result, they buried their emotions under the guise of acceptable social conventions. The key to achieving personal freedom and public acceptance was to free the body and the mind from these self-conscious tendencies, embracing the natural emotional state and communicating it effectively through voice and gesture. Using the exercises outlined in the Delsarte System, the body and the mind would be freed for more genuine expressions of the self (“Repression: Expression”). Rather than prepare them for a long, healthy life of domesticity, Bishop’s physical Delsarte System could instill women with the confidence to take up space in the public sphere.

In 1891, Bishop returned to Chautauqua County to undertake the position that would make her a leading figure in the Delsarte movement: Principal of the Department of Delsarte at the Chautauqua Assembly’s School of Physical Education. Originally imagined as a training program for Sunday School teachers, throughout the 1880s, Chautauqua had grown into a summer-long utopia of middle-class leisure and education. The institution’s founders, educator and landscape architect Lewis Miller and Methodist Episcopal Bishop John Vincent, were both advocates of universal education (Simpson 21). By bringing together lecturers and teachers of diverse subjects for the summer season, combined with the burgeoning culture of leisure, they envisioned a community of engaged citizens who could use their education to improve themselves and society. With a mission to expand educational opportunities for the purposes of spiritual growth, Chautauqua’s values aligned perfectly with the rhetoric of Delsartism: training the mind and the body together for the overall improvement of the soul.

While men were certainly welcome in Bishop’s classes, like other Delsartians, she was adamant in her commitment to the System’s specific relevance to women’s lives. During her time at Chautauqua, she argued on the platform and in the classroom that American women could use

Delsarte's theories to rid themselves of their "self-conscious" tendencies. During her first season at Chautauqua, Bishop lectured on "a few things all women should know," including advice for how to work Delsarte's theories of gesture into every-day physical activity. According to the *Chautauqua Assembly Herald*, the institution's official magazine, the talk "was told in such a manner as to make all present desire to imitate the dexterous lady in her graceful exemplifications" ("A Few Things" 1891). In an 1896 lecture at Chautauqua titled "Health and Self-Expression", Bishop explained, "Americanized Delsarte culture reaches and beneficially affects the whole being – the nerve and muscle woman, the intellectual, thinking woman, the emotional, feeling woman; and more, it relates and adjusts this whole being to other whole beings as it aids us to honest, free self-expression." ("Health and" 1896). These assertions and validations of the whole being made Bishop's classes among the most popular at Chautauqua. Covering the Assembly for the *Wichita Daily Star*, Edith Sessions Tuffer praised the way Bishop was able to make the System of Expression even more respectable for the middle-class than actors like Stebbins had:

"From the jumble, nonsense and mysticism of Delsarte, Mrs. Bishop has brought order, beauty and grace...Those with whom the word Delsarte is synonymous with superficial veneering, an inane waving of arms, a ridiculous fashion of 'making eyes' or an outlandish mode of dress, should see Emily Bishop in her artistic gowns, that would not offend the most conservative taste, and hear her eloquently present her side of the Delsarte system" (Tuffer 6).

This conservatism, however, did not diminish Bishop's power. The same report recalled her as "one slender little woman, the embodiment of spirit, fire and dew" who "came, saw and conquered with Delsartean forces" (Tuffer 6).



Figure 15: Emily M. Bishop in a Delsartian pose displaying flexibility. Courtesy of the Chautauqua Institution Archives.

Over the course of her time at Chautauqua, Bishop continued to expand access to Delsartian ideas that could translate into everyday life. In 1896, the *Chautauqua Assembly Herald* reported that a class in voice culture had been added to the course offerings, “not so much to make public speakers as to train the voice in ordinary daily use in business and conversation” (“Editorial” 1896). Throughout her career, Bishop resisted the claim that she had invented new aspects of the System. In an 1899 interview with *Werner’s Magazine*, she explained,

“I do not claim to have ‘discovered’ anything: at most, I have but adopted some general principles to new applications. I think I was one of the first to apply Delsarte’s expression

laws and the relaxing and the rhythmical gymnastics, especially to health-seeking. Before that, these had chiefly applied to art and to dramatic expression” (“Body Responsiveness” 90-91).

By framing her work as a refocusing rather than a reinvention, Bishop firmly identified herself as a member of the Delsartian lineage, albeit not explicitly as a theatre artist. Under her leadership, Chautauqua’s Department of Delsarte became a respected institution within the physical culture movement, bringing the System into a new pedagogical framework.

THE DEPARTMENT OF DELSARTE: BROAD STROKES

Unlike Stebbins’s benefactors at Carnegie Hall or Morgan’s at the Fine Arts Building, Chautauqua’s leaders resisted associating the Assembly with theatre as an art form. Although Delsarteans had made great strides in improving public perceptions of the theatre, the religious roots of Chautauqua meant an anti-theatrical bias was still present in the institution by the time Bishop was hired. In its marketing materials, the Assembly emphasized its role as a shaper of moral sensibilities, positioning itself in direct opposition to the rampant vice of growing urban centers, of which theatre was a part (Canning 305). While programming tended to be inclusive of many different perspectives, this bias can be seen in the lectures and courses that were presented. Drama courses were offered in the Department of Literature, with the focus being analysis of Shakespeare or Greek drama, not contemporary theatre. Genevieve Stebbins herself performed at the Chautauqua Amphitheater during the 1894 season, presenting statue poses and recitations, but according to the *New York Tribune*, she was barred from performing explicitly theatrical dances because “the management did not deem it consistent with the Chautauqua idea” (“Dances Barred” 8).

That said, public performance was still a topic of intense interest at the Assembly. Platform performance and elocution remained popular among attendees, though these performances tended to center literature or poetry rather than drama. Under Bishop's leadership, however, aligning oneself with the ideas of Delsarte did not have to imply an endorsement of theatre. The *Chautauqua Assembly Herald* reported during Bishop's first season on staff, "Mrs. Coleman E. Bishop, director of the Delsarte, says that the most practical, the most essential thing concerning physical culture is the *true idea* concerning it" ("True Idea"). The way Bishop separated Delsarte from theatre altogether made the practice into an acceptable course of study in an environment of anti-theatrical bias. Rather than be associated with moral corruption of popular theatre, embracing the "true idea" of Delsarte – physical grace – could be another method of developing a healthy body, mind, and soul. Although Chautauqua offered courses in elocution, platform performance, and dramatic analysis, (housed within a School of Expression beginning in 1894) students interested specifically in Delsarte were directed to the school of Physical Education for their lessons. In the 1893 Season Advancements, for example, the entry on Elocution and Oratory courses includes a note for those interested in Delsarte training to look to the School of Physical Education, a standard of cross-references that would persist throughout the decade. Advertising also stressed the practical nature of Bishop's lessons, ensuring prospective students that these lessons would be of use to them in their daily lives, and were not only for those interested in careers in the performing arts.

Nearly 500 students completed courses with Bishop during the first year of the Department's existence. Over the course of the decade, it grew into one of the most popular departments in the Assembly. Although Bishop's curriculum changed frequently throughout her tenure, her courses remained consistent in their overall structure. The Normal School of courses

was designed for beginners – specifically “grandmothers, mothers and daughters” – taking students through the System of Expression with exercises geared toward strengthening their bodies for graceful actions in daily life. To enter the Advanced Normal School, geared toward students interested in pursuing teaching certification, applicants had to display their knowledge of human anatomy and physiology by passing a written exam. Classes were held on a weekly basis, leaving ample time for students to explore the Assembly’s other offerings. At the end of the summer, those who completed the full course load were awarded a diploma. Prices for the courses also remained relatively consistent. Admission to the grounds for the season was generally priced at \$5.00, and access to the entire suite of courses offered by the School of Physical Education could be bought for between \$30.00 and \$40.00. For those only interested in Delsarte lessons, general classes of ten 50-minute lessons were around \$5.00 and advanced classes ranged between \$5.00 and \$10.00, depending on the number of students. Private lessons with Mrs. Bishop could be purchased on an hourly basis for \$3, or as a suite of ten lessons for \$15.00. These prices were more affordable than the private institutions in major cities, and the time commitment less intensive, but still high enough that attending them was a middle-to-upper-class privilege.¹⁹

While Bishop did stage pantomimes and statue posing in her school, she did not mandate her students wearing the Grecian dresses that had become associated with the more theatrical Delsartians. Instead, ladies were required to purchase a “Costume” consisting of a white blouse and a divided skirt, which could be ordered through the Assembly catalogue. Chautauqua also advertised a brand of “dress reform corsets, waists, and braces” designed specifically for Delsarte exercises. These advertisements depicted the female body in motion, demonstrating an

¹⁹ A complete list of pricing for the Department of Delsarte with 2024 conversions can be found in Appendix III.

ease of movement that would have been impossible in the standard middle-class fashion of the day. Ease of movement was the primary objective, not evoking the aesthetics of the ancient past. Bishop was far from the first woman to advocate for a more loose-fitting garment for physical activity, but the support she received from her home institution indicates that her ideas were becoming more acceptable than Stebbins's or even Morgan's had been.

The fact that Delsarte's goals of personal expression and physical grace aligned so well with Chautauqua's values allowed the movement to become cemented as an appropriate leisure and scholarly pursuit for the American middle-class lady. Separated from an explicitly theatrical context, Bishop was able to design her curriculum as a practical system that could help women find grace of movement in their daily lives. This institutional support helped make Bishop's innovations central to the Delsarte movement well into the new century.

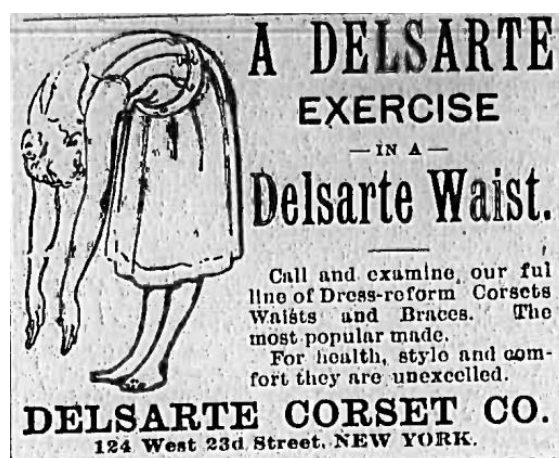


Figure 16: Advertisement in the Chautauqua Assembly Herald for corsets suitable for Delsartian movement, 1891. Courtesy of the Chautauqua Institution Archives.

SPATIAL CONSTRUCTIONS: CHALLENGING SEPARATE SPHERES IN THE GYMNASIUM

From its inception, women and men were welcomed equally to the Chautauqua Assembly. Vincent and Miller were passionate advocates of universal education, with Miller being among the earliest educators to advocate for co-education in universities, and women made up large numbers of Chautauqua's teaching staff from the beginning. Prominent women reformers including Mary Livermore, Jane Addams, and Florence Kelley were included in the lecture series, advocating openly for women's rights. Still, male writers of the era were quick to code Chautauqua as a feminine space. Famously, British writer Rudyard Kipling was disgusted with the Assembly when he visited in 1890. He disparaged the "horde of clamouring women" that greeted him, proclaiming to a friend,

"I'm awfully sorry for the girls who take it seriously. I suppose the bulk of them don't. They just have a good time. But it would be better...If they all got married instead of pumping up interest in a bric-a-brac museum and advertised lectures, and having their names in the papers. One never gets to believe in the proper destiny of woman until one sees a thousand of 'em doing something different. I don't like Chautauqua. There's something wrong with it, and I haven't time to find out where. But it is wrong" (quoted in Kilde 460)

When psychologist William James attended the 1894 season, he believed that its idealism diminished the hard-working spirit of the laboring class, urging his readers embrace the "primordial and savage" (read, masculine) aspects of human nature alongside the "charm and

ease” provided by places like Chautauqua (James 55). Leisure and self-education were coded feminine, and therefore open to judgement from a male gaze.

Despite such belittling comments, the Chautauqua Assembly in the 1890s was a place unconcerned with maintaining an ideology of separate spheres. Kilde has argued that rather than characterize Chautauqua by its “predominance of the feminine,” the Assembly was radical for the ways it disrupted the notion of a society divided between genders. In the living arrangements, which ranged from private cottages to hotel suites to fashionable tents, it was difficult to segregate based on gender in the ways middle-class homes often did. Parlor spaces and kitchens, for instance, were occupied by all genders, purely for the sake of maximizing space (Kilde 461). In the tent areas especially, people mingled freely with their neighbors, keeping intellectual discussions going long after the end of the day’s activities. Women and men also attended the diverse range of lectures together, with attendees encouraged to listen carefully to different perspectives. Living in such a fluid environment over the course of the summer allowed the Chautauqua Delsartians to learn in similarly egalitarian spaces.

While courses did take place largely indoors, as often as possible teachers took their classes outside to learn on the grassy lawns or in open-air pavilions, where the process of learning could be observed by any passersby. As part of the School of Physical Education, Emily Bishop conducted her classes in Chautauqua’s Gymnasium, completed just before the beginning of her tenure in 1891, but frequently utilized outside spaces for her lessons. She also did not isolate herself in her department, lecturing and performing across the Assembly on how health culture could apply to various disciplines. At the end of the season, her students conducted recitals and demonstrations in the famous Amphitheater for huge, co-ed crowds. Like Stebbins and Morgan, Bishop often had students accompany her when she gave lectures, ensuring the

philosophies she preached could be demonstrated by a live performer. Although the Chautauqua Delsarteans resisted an association with theatre, physical education still maintained an element of public performance well into the twentieth century.

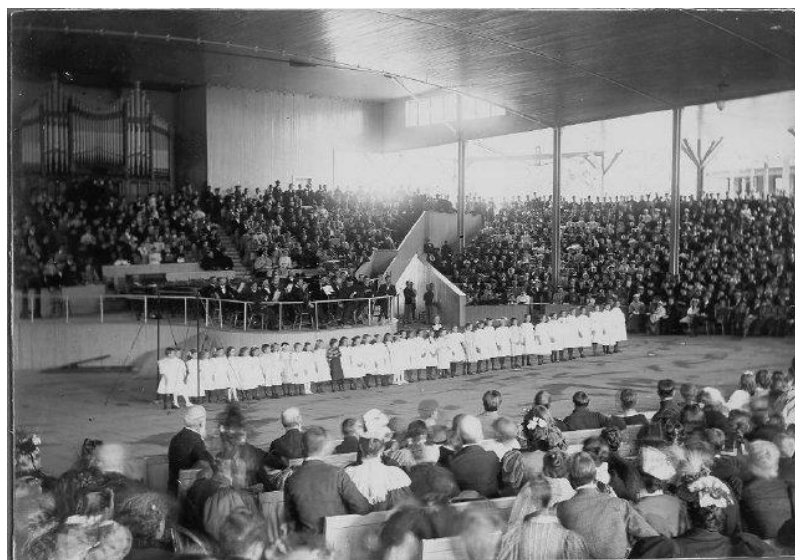


Figure 17: Young women from the School of Physical Education, dressed in Delsarte white, perform their annual exhibition in Chautauqua's famous Amphitheater, c. 1900. Courtesy of the Chautauqua Institution Archives.

RHETORICAL TACTICS: *AMERICANIZED DELSARTE CULTURE* (1891 and 1895)

Shortly after beginning her tenure at Chautauqua in 1891, Bishop published her first book, *Americanized Delsarte Culture*, marketed by the Assembly as the “whys, hows, and wherefores” of self-expression based on Bishop’s curriculum and lectures. In 1895, she published a revised edition of the book that included further contextualizing material for more general readership. *Americanized Delsarte Culture* follows a similar structure to other Delsarte manuals: an introduction asserts the book’s validity, followed by chapters on a given theme that include “lesson talks” and descriptions of various exercises. Bishop’s “Lesson Talks” are derived from discussions she led throughout her time at Chautauqua, addressed to classes of “grandmothers, mothers and daughters – with an occasional gentleman” (10). Instead of being

grouped around a body part or the Ninefold Accord, each chapter was dedicated to a specific theme, such as proper posture, breathing, walking, improving sleep, reducing anxiety, and maintaining a youthful appearance. While intended for wide readership, she also included a suggested course outline for teachers, though she emphasized that “Each teacher will, of course, modify and adapt it to meet the needs of different classes” (17). Instead of arranging her advice chronologically, Bishop made space for her readers to approach the lessons at their own pace and choose for themselves which aspects of their bodies and minds they wish to improve through their work.

Like Morgan, Bishop’s mission was to make her teaching as accessible to as many people as possible. In a preface to the 1895 edition, she explained that “all technical terminology has been avoided, and a colloquial style preferred” (10). A note in the back of the 1895 edition further described the meaning behind Bishop’s claims of an “Americanized” system:

“The first instinct of the American mind is to make practical and to populize whatever seems good and true. By Americanized Delsarte culture, then, is meant the Delsarte art of expression, so broadened, as to be of general benefit to all persons, instead of being only of special benefit to one class – artists...by making prominent the utilitarian value of this culture, it is possible to bring the ‘greatest good to the greatest number’”(199-200).

In response to inquiries made after the 1891 edition, this note also contains a brief biographical sketch of François Delsarte taken from an Encyclopedia entry, but does not mention MacKaye or Stebbins’s involvement in the System’s development. Shifting the System away from a primarily artistic mode of expression and toward this “utilitarian” model demonstrates the way the performance of Delsarte extended toward daily life for the American middle-class woman.

With Bishop's work being centered around the mission of Chautauqua, she took great pains to center Delsarte within her intellectual environment. In the same way Stebbins and Morgan centered their work within conversations around the value of art, Bishop drew inspiration from psychology, spiritual education, and social reform. Each chapter of *Americanized Delsarte Culture* begins with an epigraph from an outside source that contextualizes the lesson talk that follows. Sources she references include the typical Shakespeare, Byron, and Browning, but also (despite his dislike of her home institution) psychologist William James, editions of *Popular Science Monthly* and the *Sunday School Times*, and political thinkers like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Herbert Spencer. Not only do these choices assert Bishop's position as an educated woman and a trusted source of information, they also assume that her readers had a similar base of knowledge. Her imagined audience was educated and curious, eager to take the teachings of Chautauqua and implement them in their day-to-day lives. Delsartism was thus positioned as a cultural practice with the same legitimacy as literature, religious studies, sciences, and politics.

At a time when many still feared that vigorous social engagement would be dangerous to women's health, Bishop's rhetoric also takes a defiant stance against the ideology of separate spheres. She insists that the exercises in her book be completed "until the entire body is in a glow" (101), encouraging women to push themselves physically. In a chapter discussing exercise as a tool for keeping youthful energy, she observes:

"It is a noticeable fact that women who lead broad lives, who are actively engaged in public work – literary, social, church and reform movements – remain young longer than do those lives are 'narrowed in a narrow sphere.' This is not because of the difference in

the kind of work, but because of the difference in the thoughts back of the work” (123-124).

Healthy thought – that is, thought focused on improving the lives of others – resulted in a healthier body. Therefore, Delsarte’s principles could improve not only women’s health and intellect, but all of society’s, a driving thought behind social action. In another passage, she describes the ways women have been conditioned to fear the public displays of emotions that accompanied wider intellectual engagement:

“Why do women feel trepidation when they are asked to read a paper at a literary society, or to give a five minutes’ talk at the ‘Club’? Because they are conscious of their instruments of expression – conscious of hands, attitudes, voice, even of dress. Fear is born of this self-consciousness; they dare not do what they are capable of doing. When by self-knowledge and self-discipline, women gain habitual, easy control of their bodies, they will have achieved an important emancipation” (34-35).

She squarely places the blame for this self-consciousness on societal conventions that keep women constrained, and identifies Delsarte training as a way to break free of these restraints.

“...we [women] need to free ourselves from such bondage if we would be genuine and self-respecting...A conventionalized woman, compared with her emancipated, physically free sister, is as uninteresting as is a conventionalized flower in a dado design, compared with the natural flower growing in graceful freedom” (115).

To resist convention, Bishop suggests returning to what she calls a “natural” physical state, allowing the body to move as it wants to within these exercises rather the forcing it into assigned roles: “Nature always assists in reestablishing natural states and action, if only we give

her a chance” (94). In each exercise, Bishop puts great emphasis on the connection between the mind and the body. She explains that every action must be accompanied by a corresponding thought, and that the energy of this thought must propel the action into being. While these actions do not correspond with a dramatic situation, they still encourage women to probe their psyche for deep feelings that are then outwardly expressed. For instance, in an exercise promoting deep abdominal breaths, Bishop instructs her reader to “Hold some thought of power” before engaging the diaphragm (97). Other thoughts to hold throughout the book include tranquility, resistance, harmony, exhilaration, and dignity. By encouraging women to embody these emotions in their private work, Bishop prepares them for more public displays of these traits without self-consciousness. Such actions include everything from swaying the arms while walking, openly yawning to stretch the jaw, and taking deep breaths from the diaphragm. Within the controlled environment of the Gymnasium, women could break free of societal restrictions and return to the (feminized) natural states. Nowhere in this text does Bishop mention undertaking Delsarte training to become a better mother or wife, nor does she advocate for self-improvement to attract a romantic partner. Through Americanized Delsartism, women can find the grace and strength their own bodies and minds have to offer, readying them to take up space in public forums, not to disappear into domesticity.

CONCLUSIONS

By the dawn of the new century, the artistic tenants of the System thrived in theatre, elocution, and physical culture circles, expression firmly replacing repression as a key feature of American middle-class womanhood. Emily M. Bishop’s commitment to Delsarte as a physical culture movement allowed the System of Expression to take on a new life outside of theatre.

“Many a thought and many a decisive action that would have profited the world have been lost because of physical self-consciousness,” Bishop wrote in 1895 (34). The idea that finding comfort in the body could translate to comfort in the public sphere helped to cement Delsartism as a cultural practice for middle-class women. Whether or not they carried their lessons into public activity or were there to “simply have a good time,” as Kipling put it, the fact remains that the Chautauqua Delsarteans left the lakeside with a new vocabulary to understand their bodies and their minds, the same as their counterparts in the theatre.

Conclusions

American Delsartism would fade from theatrical training programs by the end of World War I, and the arrival of the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavski's Method acting training would be the final nail in Delsarte's coffin. However, the fact remains that for over fifty years, the Delsarte System of Expression captivated the minds of the American public, legitimizing the study and practice of acting, and for the women who preached its importance, offered a new vocabulary for understanding the self in a public space.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the United States lacked a formal culture of theatrical training. While the stock company system and apprenticeship training allowed for the success of commercial theatre companies, theatre actors were excluded from polite society, and theatre was not recognized as high art. At the same time, elocution was cemented as a respectable cultural practice, particularly for upper-middle-class white women. Schools of oratory and expression were widely successful, and the ideology of Real Womanhood encouraged female elocutionists to step outside the domestic sphere to study the art of public expression. Despite its inherent performativity, the elocution movement resisted association with the theatre.

François Delsarte's System of Expression blurred the lines of this binary. Although he trained in a conservatory environment, Delsarte found the lack of a unified performance pedagogy hindered his creative expression. Through the observation of the world around him and the careful study of different disciplines – including psychology, anatomy, visual art, philosophy, and music – he formulated the System of Expression as a method of performance training that would be a universal language for actors and vocalists. Finding a sense of harmony according to the Principles of the Trinity and the Ninefold Accord allowed performers to understand acting as

the expression of the mind, body, and soul. Although Delsarte did not live long enough to publish his theories as a single written work, the efforts of his European students to translate his work allowed his ideas to reach American audiences.

After a transformative experience in Delsarte's Course of Applied Aesthetics, Steele MacKaye became the fiercest advocate for integrating the System of Expression into acting training in the United States. Using his influence in both the theatre community and higher education, MacKaye made a passionate case for the integration of theatre into academia, holding it to the same level of prestige as elocution and oratory. His additions of Harmonic Gymnastics brought a new level of physicality to the training system, further emphasizing the important relationship between the body and the mind when it came to the expressions of the soul. As MacKaye became a fixture in the New York theatre scene and on traveling lecture circuits, the American public saw the power of the System of Expression on stages across the country.

Although men led the initial phase of Delsartism's American proliferation, it was white upper-middle-class women who carried the System of Expression forward. Delsarte's ideas of contemplating the self and engaging in critical analysis of the wider artistic culture appealed to women striving to adhere to the Ideal of Real Womanhood in the late nineteenth century. MacKaye's pitching of his movement as a social project inspired women to take up the practice, allowing them to make the improvement of acting training a way of improving the nation's artistic and moral sensibilities. Furthermore, the stage offered women a place to perform a full range of emotions in the controlled environment of the theatre, while still offering the opportunity for self-discovery. With the language of Delsarte, a generation of American women came to teach and perform a new style of acting for a largely privileged audience, disrupting the ideology of public and private spheres in the process.

Genevieve Stebbins solidified Delsartism as an upper-middle-class white women's cultural practice, replacing MacKaye as the leader of the movement in the 1880s. After an early career in the stock company system and an immersion in university culture, Stebbins was able to draw in huge crowds of women to her Delsarte matinees and her theatrical performances. Her innovations of statue posing, Greek-inspired costuming to promote ease of movement, and the public performance of Aesthetic Gymnastic exercises caught the attention of fashionable audiences; her insistence that feminine strength and grace could co-exist in public spaces made her both a popular and controversial figure. After teaching and lecturing in women's colleges and schools of expression across the country, Stebbins' decision to open the New York School of Expression at Carnegie Hall brought theatrical training into contact with an established cultural institution. The liberal arts education her female students received helped to make acting a suitable practice of the intellectual woman. Her furnishing of her studios as a theatrical, public space rather than a private, domestic one prepared her students for life in the professional world. In her textbook *The Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, Stebbins' imagined dialogue with her hypothetical "Dear Pupil" explicitly coded acting as a feminine practice, encouraging the women she trained to commit to the rigorous study of their craft. The presentations of the diverse range of theatrical abilities of students at the 1898 graduating exercises demonstrated the extent to which a Delsartian education prepared women for public engagement.

Anna Morgan continued Stebbins' work, bringing the System of Expression to an even wider audience. Her career as an elocutionist took her around the country and into key performance spaces at a time when a woman of her social standing should have relegated her to the private sphere. As an educator first in the Chicago Opera House Conservatory and later at the Anna Morgan Studios in the Fine Arts Building, Morgan made the System of Expression a core

tenant of performance training. Morgan's presence in the Chicago artistic community meant Delsartism was able to gain the financial and popular support needed for the movement to gain wider legitimacy beyond New York. In keeping access to her work open to the public, both in the construction of her studio spaces and in the accessible rhetoric of her best-selling book *An Hour with Delsarte*, Morgan helped to demystify the study of Delsarte, taking it out of purely academic and industry spaces and further into the public conscious. Although this led to the dilution of certain theoretical aspects of Delsarte's system, Morgan's ability to eloquently communicate her ideas made her female students see an opportunity to further their own studies of emotional expression. The success of her 1901 all-women production of *Hamlet* showed how an education in Delsartism could disrupt conventions of femininity in theatrical spaces.

Emily M. Bishop drew inspiration from the Physical Culture Movement, which was growing in popularity as a women's cultural practice at the same time as Delsarte's ideas, and her version of Americanized Delsarte Culture emphasized physical training to advance happiness in daily life. Working within the structure of the Chautauqua Assembly's School of Physical Education, Bishop advocated that training the body could play in women's personal emancipation. Her students did not need to aspire to be public speakers; rather, anyone interested in her version of Delsartism was welcome to express themselves rather than repress their emotions. In the middle-class utopia of Chautauqua, Bishop's students were invited to publicly perform their femininity through physical exercise, from their clothing to their outdoor classrooms. In her textbook *Americanized Delsarte Culture*, Bishop spoke frankly about her audience's bodies, encouraged students to hold thoughts of power as they moved, rid the System of technical dialogue, and provided an even more accessible path toward personal freedom of

expression. Delsarte's proliferation as a leisure practice brought even more women into the artistic tradition, largely thanks to Bishop's work.

Throughout this thesis, I have searched for the "hows" and the "whys" of American Delsartism's popularity among upper-middle-class white women in the late nineteenth century. Across its various iterations over the six decades of its prominence, practitioners of the Delsarte System of Expression pushed four distinct ideas in their educational institutions:

1. An immersion in culture, including art and literature, that demanded engagement with public life.
2. Investing one's time and money into self-improvement for the betterment of wider society through performance training.
3. Bestowing a sense of confidence and control over one's body and voice.
4. The repeated performance of these skills before a public audience.

For women looking to break from a culture of repression, studying expression within a Delsarte school could be a gateway toward professional advancement, individual autonomy, and engagement with culture and community.

The study of the Delsartians cannot end here. The scope of this project was limited to three case studies, but uncountable numbers of women took up the teaching and practice of Delsarte in the late nineteenth century. The System thrived in educational and recreational environments across the country, not just in the cultural hubs of urban centers. After their studies in large cities, many women returned to their hometowns to set up private studios, where people of all ages could study the System in private or as groups. The Utica Academy of Music in the small city of Utica, New York, for example, was led by Cora M. Wheeler, an accomplished Delsartian who served as Vice President of the National Association of Elocutionists. Her

syllabus identified Utica as an acceptable alternative to places like New York City or Chicago, indicating a desire for acting training closer to home in more rural communities (“The City” 8). Marion Wilson Kimber discusses the popularity of Delsarte in small communities in the Midwest, where local journalists praised the beauty and strength of their hometown girls performing this element of high culture (96). Hundreds of Delsarte books were published that included guidelines for how to set up Literary Circles and performances within the home community. *The Delsarte Elocutionist for 1896* includes illustrated suggestions and repertoire for a variety of community events, including Fourth of July celebrations, Christmas pageants, temperance meetings, high school graduations, and Sunday School classes. A closer study of the impact of the System of Expression on women outside of major urban centers could be a fitting addition to the integration of Delsarte into the wider story of American theatre history.

When we take the practice of the System of Expression seriously, we can also begin to analyze how deeply intertwined this performance culture was with other aspects of late-nineteenth century life. The rise of the spiritualist movement, the moralization of physical health practices, the Western fetishization of Eastern spiritual practices within theatrical performance, psychology’s integration into artistic practices, anxieties over immigration and race mixing, and women’s activities in reform movements, can all be seen in a close analysis of the work of the Delsartians. Any number of projects could be undertaken to analyze how theatrical training in the Progressive Era was intertwined with other aspects of life, and how women functioned in shaping popular culture by deciding where to place their time, energy, and money. While Delsartism was largely studied by upper-middle-class white women, inquiries could certainly be made into how this movement touched women of color and women of lower socioeconomic status. The deeper we dive into the rhetorical and performative aspects of the System, the better

we can understand how theatre functioned in conversation with other cultural and intellectual movements of the late-nineteenth century.

Toward the end of *The Delsarte System of Expression*, Genevieve Stebbins leaves her Dear Pupil with a call to action: “You now have it in your power to uplift your own art language – will you do so?” (215-216) Theatre historians can answer this call. The time has come for us to return to the archive, to grant the women who taught America to act the place they deserve in our story. The still small voice within them reverberates through theatre history, and if we take the time to listen, we might just find the wisdom in the art language they created.



GRADUATING CLASS, NEW YORK SCHOOL OF EXPRESSION, IN EASTERN TEMPLE DRILL.

Figure 18: The graduates of the 1895 summer session of the New York School of Expression, posed for an Eastern Temple Drill, photographed for Werner's Magazine.

Appendix I

New York School of Expression Cost of Attendance		
<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost 1893²⁰</i>	<i>Cost 2024²¹</i>
Full year course of study, Junior and Senior Students	\$150.00	\$5,172.10
Twenty private lessons, part time	\$25.00	\$862.02
Twenty private lessons with Genevieve Stebbins, any subject	\$100.00	\$3,448.07
Full year course of study, Artistic Post-Graduates	\$200.00	\$6,896.13
The Minor Course (part of Post-Graduate work, consisting of "practical and preparatory work" for "public platform purposes")	\$100.00	\$3,448.07
The Major/Finishing Course (part of Post-Graduate Work, includes dramatic criticism courses and "correction of all faults in Vocal or Physical Expression")	\$150.00	\$5,172.10

²⁰ All costs and descriptions of items are lifted from the 1893 Prospectus of the New York School of Expression.

²¹ All conversions calculated using the CPI Inflation Calculator found at www.in2013dollars.com, and are accurate as of March 25, 2024.

Appendix II

Anna Morgan's Fees for Performing and Teaching²²			
<i>Year</i>	<i>Event/Item</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Price Adjusted for Inflation in 2024</i>
1878	Fee for Public Recitations	\$5.00-\$10.00	\$155.16 to \$310.33
1881	Fee for Public Recitations	\$25.00	\$760.60
1881	Fee for Public Recitations (after her appearance with Mrs. Siddons)	\$100.00	\$3,042.41
1889	Copy of <i>An Hour with Delsarte</i>	\$2.00	\$67.46
1924	Tuition at Anna Morgan Studios for one year	\$400.00	\$7,259.09

²² These fees have been lifted from Anna Morgan's autobiography *My Chicago* (1918) and confirmed by Joyce Sozen in her *PhD Dissertation Anna Morgan: Reader, Teacher, and Director* (1965). All prices adjusted for inflation are current as of March 25, 2024.

Appendix III

Fees for Courses in Americanized Delsarte Culture, The Chautauqua School of Physical Education, 1896²³			
<i>Course</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Price 2024</i>
General Class	10 fifty-minute lessons	\$5.00	\$184.72
Advanced Class, 7-10 members	10 half hour lessons	\$5.00	\$184.72
Advanced Class, 4-6 members	10 half hour lessons	\$7.50	\$277.08
Advanced Class, 2-3 members	10 half hour lessons	\$10.00	\$369.44
Private lessons	1 hour each	\$3.00	\$110.83
Advanced Private lessons	10 half hour lessons	\$15.00	\$554.15
Junior Normal Course	Admission to all courses in the School of Physical Education, full season	\$30.00	\$1,108.31
Senior Normal Course	Admission to all courses in the School of Physical Education, full season, designed for advanced students	\$40.00	\$1,477.74

²³ All prices are lifted from the 1896 Chautauqua Season Advancement Notice. All adjustments for inflations are current as of March 25, 2024.

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