

# EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS IS NOT UNIVERSAL: Observations of Emotions Through the Body in the US and in Liberia

-By Tara Cariaso

*In my work as a theatre educator, I often hear that emotions are universal. Perhaps the experience of some specific emotions is universal to all humans, however, expression of emotions I found is certainly not.*

*Specifically, I noted three very clear emotional expressions that were translated very differently through Liberian women than they are by American women in theatre practice: Joy, Sorrow, and Anger.*

**Joy:** *In American women (and men, generally), Joy is a emotion that (theatrically) shows itself in the upper portion of the body, usually involving the chest moving forward, arms extended out and away from the body, and the legs being prostrate to the expression happening in the upper body. In Liberian women, however, just the opposite seemed to occur. The arms opened only slightly away from the body, and the legs spread wider open, making the base of the feet much bigger under the torso and strong like a tree's roots.*

**Sorrow:** *In American female actors, I have found that sorrow manifests in a heavy movement downwards, the face, the shoulders all pulling the upper body down. The back curves, and the chest concaves. In Liberian women actors, the expressive actor body tended to show sorrow in a state of stasis, less moving down or up, but more held an still. The face may turn downwards, but the back stayed straight and the legs went straight. The movement, or lack of movement, reminded me of one trying to hold something in, putting a strong face into the baleful force of the wind.*

**Anger:** *Finally, in the US, I find actors to address the shape of anger in one of two ways. One way is by moving forward, toward the one that has enraged them, rage itself driving them forward with eyes fixed forward and the forehead driving the rest of the face down below the gaze. There is usually asymmetry in the body, with fists in the hands, and legs bent and wide as though ready to pounce. The other way anger manifests is in an attitude of physical resign, the body held taught, compressing with the arms, held in a firm single line by the legs, face and shoulders held in. In Liberia, anger was the kind of anger expressed by each young actor with whom I worked. Not one of them expressed a forward moving rage. Interestingly, after each of these emotional states, students talked about how uncomfortable it was to make these shapes, that sharing them and holding these shapes that they had come up with was somehow not pleasant. We tried talking about why these shapes were uncomfortable, but generally the students said that they did not know why, only that it was odd.*